

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**The Rabbi Effect: The  
Perception and Impact  
of Rabbis Among  
American Jews 18-44**

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**COMMISSIONED BY**

Atra: Center For Rabbinic Innovation



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## The Rabbi Effect: The Perception and Impact of Rabbis Among American Jews 18-44

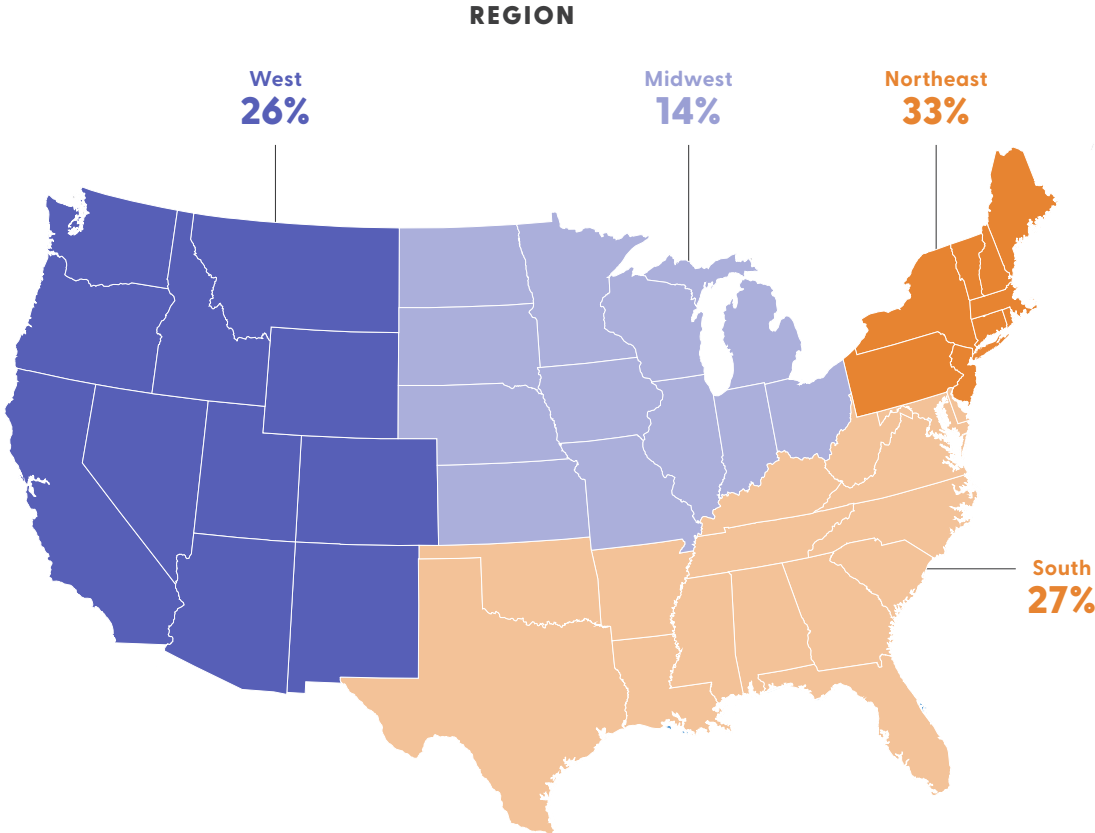
### INTRODUCTION

This research, the first of its kind in a generation, explores the impact of rabbis on Jewish young adults (ages 18-44) in the United States. This study examines their experiences with rabbis and how those experiences have influenced their connections to Judaism and Jewish communities, shaped their perceptions of rabbis, and their ideas of what a rabbi should be.

*The Perception and Impact of Rabbis Among American Jews 18-44* was commissioned by Atra: Center for Rabbinic Innovation in 2022 with support from the Jim Joseph Foundation. This study was conducted by Benenson Strategy Group (BSG) using qualitative journals and a quantitative survey.

**Atra: Center for Rabbinic Innovation** elevates the ability of rabbinic and spiritual leaders to lead with vision and effectively meet the ever-evolving needs of the Jewish people. Atra prioritizes a comprehensive research agenda to define rabbinic excellence and define the knowledge, skills, characteristics and behaviors critical for an effective rabbi and spiritual leader.

### Snapshot of the American Jews 18-44 We Surveyed



## PURPOSE

Atra conducts research regularly to better understand what the Jewish community needs from its rabbis and in turn, what leadership models and tools will help these leaders be most successful. This research informs the organization's approach to continuing education to support rabbis as well as advance the field of Jewish spiritual leadership. In an effort to build the field of applied rabbinic training, Atra set out to create a baseline understanding of how young American Jews experience rabbis and what they want in a rabbi. The goals of this inaugural study were to:

1. Develop a comprehensive picture of what “rabbi” means to American Jews aged 18–44
2. Explore young Jews’ experiences and interactions with rabbis (past and present)
3. Learn about what young Jews want from a rabbi going forward

Note that in this research, the researchers did not define the term “rabbi” for respondents but based on their responses, some associate the term with other educated clergy serving as spiritual leaders including cantors, maharats, rabbaniot, etc.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Stage 1: Online Qualitative Journals (August 2022)**

Benenson Strategy Group interviewed 41 young American Jews aged 18–44 years, representative of the Jewish young adult population nationwide for the journals. They were fielded from July 28th– August 7th, 2022. The purpose of this methodology is to allow young people to talk about their experiences, impressions and views of rabbis in an unfiltered, personal environment by responding to a series of in-depth, open-ended questions.

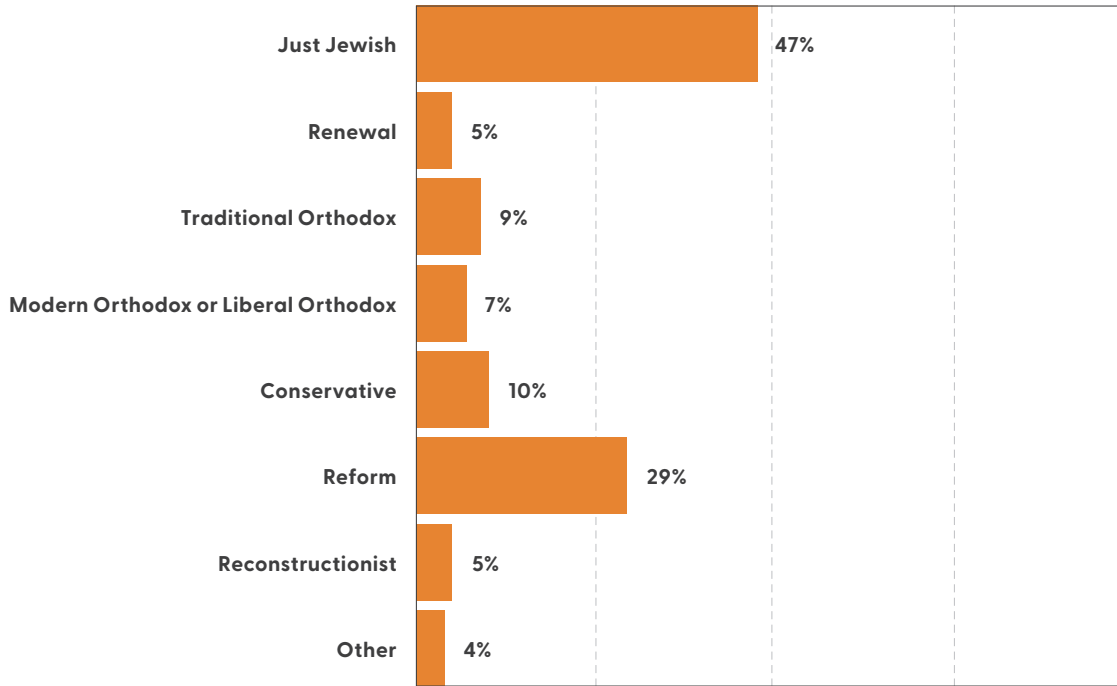
### **Stage 2: Quantitative Survey**

Benenson Strategy Group conducted a survey with n=800 Jewish Americans ages 18–44 from October 10–21, 2022. The overall margin of sampling error is  $\pm 3.5$ . It is higher among subgroups. Due to rounding, displayed answer choices may not always add up to 100. The survey was conducted online utilizing BSG's online panel vendors to reach a representative sample of our targeted audience of American Jews ages 18–44.

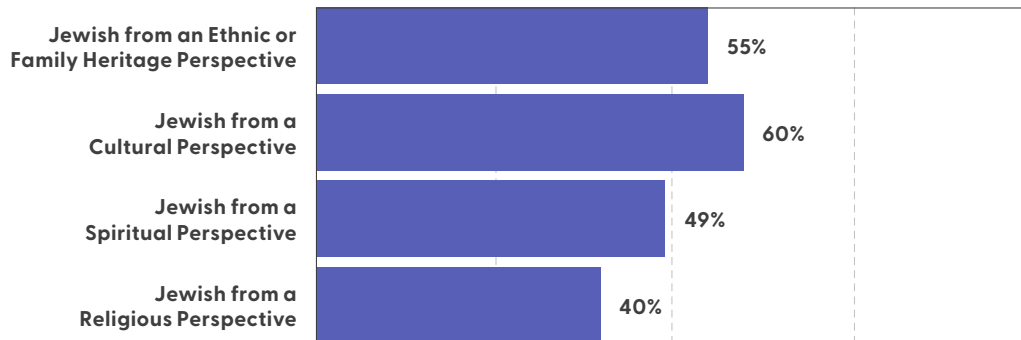
*Note:* To ensure a representative sample BSG used the 2020 Pew Jewish Americans research as the guide, in addition to other research that BSG has done among the young Jewish American population. See Appendix A for a snapshot of the sample we surveyed.

## Snapshot of the American Jews 18-44 We Surveyed

### DENOMINATION



### JEWISH IDENTITY *(multiple responses accepted)*



## OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

1. 69% of survey respondents have had an experience with a rabbi at some point and their experiences have been largely positive (47% positive, 23% mixed, 7% negative, 25% neutral). These interactions have occurred across a wide variety of occasions ranging from synagogue services and shabbat dinners to college campuses, camps, and classrooms.
  - a. Among those who have interacted with a rabbi, 69% of Orthodox, 79% of Conservative, 73% of Reform and 63% of non-denominational Jews have had a positive experience with a rabbi.
  - b. Positive experiences are largely characterized by the feeling of being accepted and heard by a rabbi who is welcoming, friendly and knowledgeable. The impact of these positive interactions cannot be overstated:
    - i. 91% said it made them feel more positively about being Jewish
    - ii. 90% said they felt more spiritually connected
    - iii. 88% said it made them more confident and comfortable being Jewish
  - c. Negative interactions are largely characterized by feeling that the rabbi was judgmental, rude or unhelpful – leaving young Jews to feel disappointed, annoyed and uncomfortable.
2. Most (64%) say that having a relationship with a rabbi is important to them currently. Only 12% of all respondents say it is not currently important and that it will not be important to them in the future to have a relationship with a rabbi.
  - a. Having a relationship with a rabbi today is more important for Orthodox (87%) and Conservative (74%) than Reform (56%) and non-denominational (66%). However, the majority of Reform (70%) and non-Denominational Jews (63%) who say it's currently not important are open to it becoming more important later in life.
3. Young American Jews want their rabbis to be accepting and knowledgeable. When describing their ideal rabbi, young Jews desire a combination of acceptance, kindness, knowledge and helpfulness. But only about half of young Jews say the rabbi they have interacted with most meets these ideals. Across denominations, the top priorities for a rabbi are acceptance of themselves or how they choose to be Jewish and “Is someone I trust.”
4. Over half of young Jews currently interact with a rabbi today (58%), but nearly half of them say it's on rare occasions – representing a large opportunity for increased engagement.
  - a. 40% of young Jews say it's hard to develop a relationship with a rabbi today. While they believe a synagogue might be the place to find a rabbi (the top two situations in which respondents currently interact with rabbis are in synagogue and in casual/social interactions at 29% each, and 53% say they expect to find their ideal rabbi in a synagogue), the synagogue is seen as a barrier (among those who say it's hard to establish a relationship with a rabbi today, 26% cite synagogue membership as being too expensive and 26% say they don't feel comfortable visiting or contacting a synagogue).

5. The respondents of this study largely feel connected to a Jewish community and their Jewish identity, and nearly half of them desire a stronger connection.
  - a. 71% of respondents feel connected to some form of Jewish community today with 1 in 3 feeling very connected.
  - b. 48% desire more connection. Of the 29% who do not currently feel connected, 1 in 3 desire more connection to Jewish community.
  - c. Feelings of connection to any type of Jewish community are high across denominations. Orthodox feel more connected (91%) than those who identify as Conservative (77%) and Reform (63%) and non-denominational (75%).
  - d. Notably, desire for more of a connection is very similar across denominations: 53% of Orthodox, 54% of Conservative, 52% of Reform and 46% of non-denominational Jews wish they had more of a connection to a Jewish community.
6. Ultimately, if young Jews can make a connection with their ideal rabbi, they believe their connection to their Judaism and the Jewish community will be strengthened and their engagement will grow. Respondents reported that if they had a relationship with their ideal rabbi they would:
  - a. Feel more connected to their Jewish identity (67%)
  - b. Feel welcome and a sense of belonging (67%)
  - c. Feel more connected to a Jewish community (66%)
  - d. Be more inclined to celebrate Jewish holidays/Shabbat (65%)

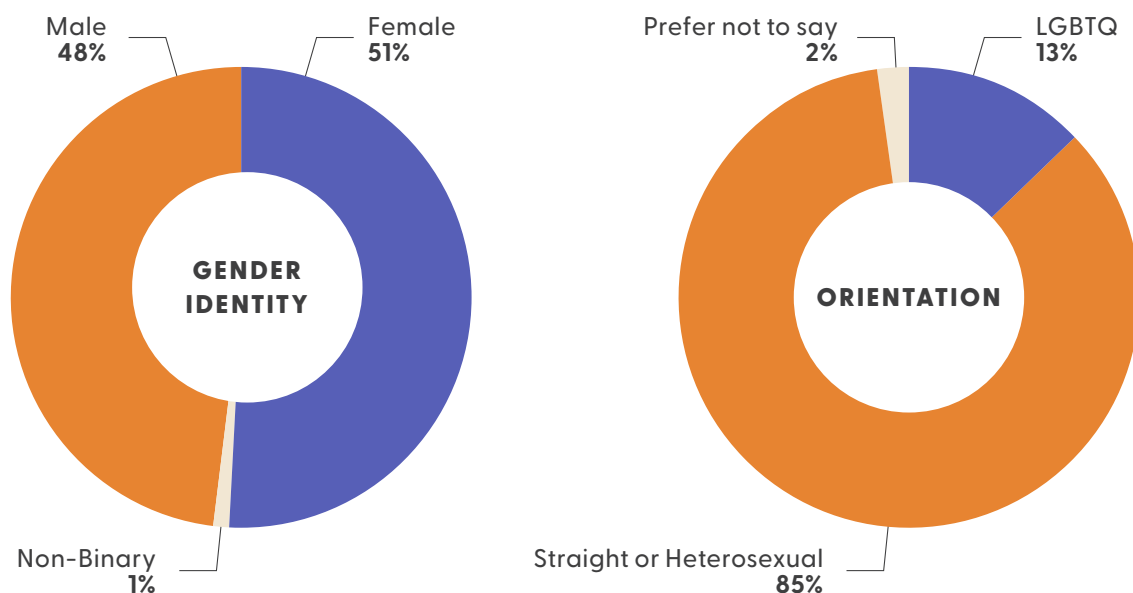
Like all research, there are limits to how much we can definitively extrapolate learnings from the population that was sampled to the general population. While every effort was made to ensure a representative sample, we recognize that additional research must be conducted so that we may better understand and refine the implications these findings might have on the field.

Atra engaged in a two-month-long field validation phase to preview the data with 150 scholars, practitioners, organizational leaders (including those in various movements, rabbinical associations, and training institutions), and philanthropic professionals before publicizing the research. This broad validation effort allowed for input and reactions as they analyzed and processed the data. The main findings from those focus groups are as follows:

1. This data affirms what many in the field have observed anecdotally - that rabbis matter - and it is encouraging to see that reflected in the data.
2. Some were surprised at the low percentage of purely negative experiences (7%).

3. Most were not surprised that what 18-44 year old American Jews want from rabbis is for them to accept them. This raised questions for further study/research:
  - a. How do rabbis and Jewish spiritual leaders demonstrate that they are accepting? How does the field identify the competencies? How do Jewish institutions adapt training to help rabbis do this? How do they recruit people with those skills?
  - b. How might rabbis grapple with the tension between the many roles they are expected to play and the importance young people appear to place on acceptance?
4. Synagogue as a barrier tracks with other research and is unsurprising. However, most of the positive experiences reported with rabbis occurred in a temple or synagogue or in an event that might occur within a temple/synagogue (b'nei mitzvah ceremony, wedding, funeral, etc.), so this suggests further study may be valuable.
5. How does this relate to the rabbinic pipeline problem? While this research is not about talent, this question has been raised among scholars, practitioners and funders.
6. Several focus groups expressed interest in learning more about how denominational affiliation affected experiences with rabbis.
7. Many people wanted to know more about the rabbis with whom the survey respondents had interacted.

### Snapshot of the American Jews 18-44 We Surveyed



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The data from the research study and learnings from focus groups will inform Atra's educational vision and strategy. This study seems to show that there is a cultural window right now where young people are interested in relationships with rabbis but do not know exactly how to access them. Given that, Atra proposes the following recommendations, which will be refined as we engage in further applied research:

1. Dramatically increase the number and variety of rabbis engaging young Jews by investing in training and resources.
  - a. Resources - Invest in start-up capital and technologies for rabbis to engage young people within institutions and beyond - microgrants, initial salaries, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software, and additional resources to support Jewish spiritual leaders to work inside, alongside and outside institutions.
  - b. Training - Provide new pre-service and in-service training for aspiring and current Jewish spiritual leaders to consistently adapt and grow their skills to reach more people as their needs continue to evolve. All Jewish spiritual leaders must learn/re-learn to:
    - i. Articulate a wise Jewish vision that centers both the call of tradition, the wisdom of Torah, and the authentic experience of the people, and then practice Jewish spiritual leadership artfully.
    - ii. Go meet the people; do not wait for people to come to you (in synagogues or other places). Learn and apply relationship-based organizing techniques to find Jews and develop new markets, in and outside of synagogue, both in and outside of lifecycle events.
    - iii. Demonstrate sensitivity and approach people with a curious and non-judgmental stance. This includes rabbis understanding the difference between acceptance, approval, and permission, as well as how these are expressed and may be perceived.
    - iv. Take risks, seek support for, and experiment with communal models that prioritize relationship-driven, rather than program/worship-driven, rabbinic work. Learn about and experiment with new business models for Jewish community that allow for this type of work.
    - v. Learn management skills and tools, as well as the knowledge to be able to work with stakeholders and volunteers, and to optimize administrative and fundraising roles to allow them to spend as much time as possible with the people they serve.
2. Map where rabbinic engagement with young people is currently occurring and identify key gaps in the market.
3. Share this learning broadly: In addition to being interested in DIY Judaism, young people believe that relationships with rabbis are critically important to their Jewish engagement.
4. Conduct future research.



## CONCLUSION

This study established a baseline and we believe it demonstrates opportunities for the Jewish communal sector to better leverage its most underutilized resource: rabbis. Contrary to the narrative that suggests that young Jews do not want to affiliate, are not interested in engaging with religious/spiritual leaders, and are only interested in peer-led Judaism, this study demonstrates that American Jews aged 18-44 enjoy interacting with and want guidance from rabbis. They hope to have access to more opportunities to build real relationships with rabbis. They want these rabbis to be both accepting and knowledgeable, so they can provide for them wisdom and guidance. They appreciate opportunities to engage with rabbis in a range of settings. Ultimately, if young Jews can make a connection with their ideal rabbi, they believe their connection to their Judaism and the Jewish community will be strengthened and their engagement will grow.



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[atrarabbis.org](http://atrarabbis.org)