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# Powerful Jewish Learning Experiences

Mixing the Personal and Collective to Make  
Powerful Jewish Learning Experiences

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# Introduction

## Background

The Jim Joseph Foundation has prioritized investment in Powerful Jewish Learning Experiences (PJLE) in its effort to enable “all Jews, their families, and their friends to lead connected, meaningful, purpose-filled lives and to make positive contributions to their communities and the world.” This commitment is advanced by signature grantees that provide powerful educational experiences to young people: BBYO, Foundation for Jewish Camp, Hillel, Birthright Israel, and Moishe House.

Over the last few years, the foundation has partnered with the team at Rosov Consulting to bring a consistent research lens to the experiences provided by these various organizations. The goal of this partnership has been: (1) to identify both the distinct and common contributions made by each organization to participants at different stages of their young lives, and (2) to identify the components of the experiences they provide that make them so powerful. We have set out to learn what special ingredients animate powerful Jewish learning experiences within the context of Jewish youth-serving organizations, Jewish overnight camps, Jewish student organizations at college, Israel experiences, and self-directed settings for emergent Jewish adults. And we have tried to identify what outcomes such experiences produce.



An ongoing component of our work has involved developing and disseminating a shared survey to current participants in programming supported by the grantees to explore in real time the outcomes they create. Another part of our work—the focus of this report—involved a series of 10 virtual focus groups with young people brought together because in the recent past they participated in some combination of the experiences supported by the signature grantees. The focus groups employed a facilitative process to tease apart the specific outcomes that alumni gained from each experience, the compounding effect of these experiences, the processes that moved people from one experience to the next, and the obstructions that might have prevented them doing so.

We wanted participants to bring some distance to their assessment and we were curious about longer-lasting traces left by these experiences. As a result, we made sure that at least a couple of years had passed since focus group participants had taken part in the last of these experiences. Most of the participants were therefore between the ages of 25 and 35.

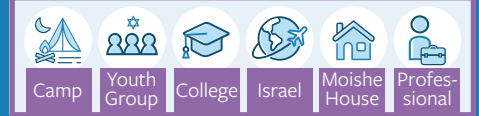
Participants were recruited with help from BBYO, Birthright and Moishe House who distributed invitations to their alumni. Members of four focus groups—22 individuals in total—had participated in programs supported by all five of the grantees; two of these focus groups were purposely designed to include individuals who today work as Jewish professionals. Another five groups included individuals with a mix of experiences with two or three of the grantees. One focus group comprised eight people who only participated in Birthright.

Focus groups ran for three hours for those who participated in all five programs, and for about 90 minutes for those who had participated in fewer. None of the participants seemed to have known one another before the start of the conversations. As a token of our appreciation, participants were provided with a \$250 voucher if they took part in a 3-hour focus group and \$150 in a 90-minute focus group.

## Who we interviewed

48 people between the ages of 25-35 who participated in the following combination of programs.

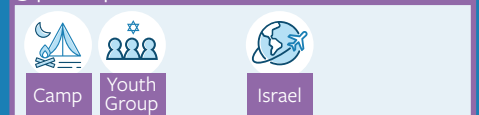
11 participants



11 participants



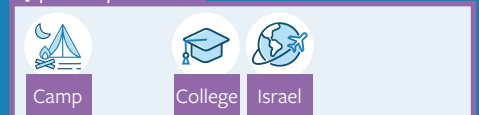
3 participants



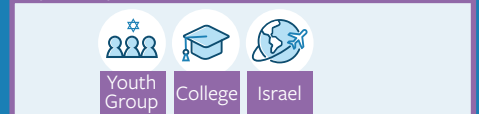
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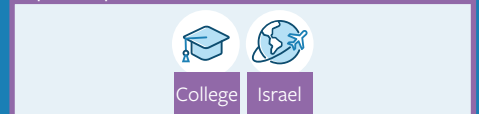
4 participants



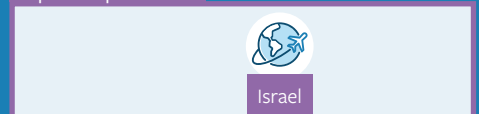
4 participants



5 participants



8 participants



# The Signature Features of Powerful Jewish Learning Experiences

Program alumni remember PJLE experiences as having deep personal significance. These moments helped young people see who they were with heightened clarity. They learned something new and important about themselves, locating themselves in relation to a larger entity—typically, the Jewish people; they sensed their lives being propelled forward, often in new directions. These experiences didn't speak to all the alumni in the same ways or with the same force, but all five experiences, without exception, were described in these terms by many.

Despite their different reference points, these experiences had deep, and often life-enhancing personal significance.

In their own words, alumni recollected



Youth  
Group

“[feeling] so fulfilled...I had a purpose in some sort of way in that time that wasn't school or wasn't what I had to do”



Camp

“a big sense of independence...getting to do things I personally never had a chance to do”



College

“[being] taught a lot for my future in terms of, for me personally, building a Jewish life and a Jewish home”



Israel

“[Gaining a] whole [new] perspective of what it was to be Jewish and to feel accepted. [It was] the first place I felt truly at home”



Moishe  
House

“finding my own way in...having a place to be and be Jewish...that completely changed my life”

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# Shared Outcomes Given **Distinct Expression**

The settings in which these powerful Jewish learning experiences occur are not simply substitutes for one another. They take place at different moments in the developmental trajectory of a young person's life and are infused by the distinct social and educational priorities associated with that developmental moment. Despite such differences, all these experiences have produced two strongly consistent outcomes, and it is striking to see how these outcomes received different expression depending on the setting that produced them.



# Shared Outcomes Given Distinct Expression

## From Finding to Designing Jewish Community

All five experiences helped participants find and become part of Jewish community in ways appropriate to their ages and stages in life.

### Participant Perspectives



Camp

At **overnight camp**, this involved experiencing a model of Jewish community that was either absent or just very different at home. The specialness of the camp community was emphasized by the physical distance of camp from home and the temporal boundedness of the camp experience during specific months of the year. These circumstances marked out what happened at camp as both different and special.

[Camp] was a very different environment to anything I'd experienced before. I would say it opened my eyes to what community could look like in a way that I really connected with very strongly... I don't think I really had a grasp on what a community was supposed to be before that.



Youth Group

The community experience created by **youth organizations** was almost the inverse. Youth organizations provided opportunities to be part of a Jewish community within the ongoing flow of life, and often in familiar physical spaces. For young people who lived in neighborhoods or attended schools where there were few other Jews, youth organizations functioned as readily accessible sanctuaries of Jewish community where they could unselfconsciously express their Jewishness.

[Youth group] gave me a sense of belonging and connection. I was very proud of my Judaism, even as a teenager. Going to public school, there weren't as many Jewish people, and the Jewish people that I did go to school with weren't as loud and proud about it, so I really felt more connected with the community that I got to see a couple times a month.



College

The community provided by **Jewish student organizations at college** (at Hillel, for most focus group participants) was different again. The Jewish communities formed at college were often the first such communities young people chose for themselves rather than having been initiated into them by parents' choices. This self-chosenness gave these experiences a depth and, often, a boundary-breaking quality that departed from norms at home.

Until college, all of my Jewish experiences were kind of chosen for me... college was the first time where I was having the opportunity to choose my own Jewish experiences and opt into those and feel what felt right for me... And it felt way more like it was mine and I had autonomy over the Jewish life I was living and it wasn't being chosen for me by my parents.



Israel

Alumni invariably remembered the community they formed thanks to **Birthright** for similar reasons, if to a different degree. Because of the great diversity of Birthright's participants, and because the program occurs in such a different Jewish context from those found in participants' own communities, this experience profoundly unsettled participants' assumptions about what Jewish community looks like, and expanded their horizons in perspective-altering ways.

The community aspect was a huge thing and the kind of diversity of perspectives and Jewish experiences and it kind of opened up a space for me that I can kind of be Jewish in my own way too and that can also be a fluctuating thing and not stationary.



Moishe House

Community at **Moishe House** is distinctive in that it was typically something that alumni described themselves as creating rather than finding. If community at Hillel was self-chosen, at Moishe House it was self-created. The expansiveness or inclusiveness of this community was not, as in the case of Birthright, an artifact of the context, it was determined by the residents themselves.

I think creating Jewish community in the way in which I want to see it. Not just seeing what's provided and choosing from what's on that platter, but having the autonomy to say this is the way that I want to see Judaism and I'm able to create that.

# Shared Outcomes Given Distinct Expression

## Personal Growth

Implicit in these different accounts of community is a developmental trajectory in which participants' horizons increasingly expanded as they gained ever more personal autonomy. This developmental feature aligns with a second outcome shared by all five experiences: by virtue of offering spaces where it was safe to fail forward, they enabled participants to develop important life skills, and grow as well-rounded individuals.

### Participant Perspectives



Camp

**Overnight camps** have long been valued for helping young people experience independence and try out a range of social skills that, as alumni reported, continued to be of value for years after.

I grew up with helicopter parents... And going to camp was a way for me to kind of learn how to be on my own and make decisions for myself and spend a summer away... [Camp] gave me much needed independence and I definitely learned a lot by being away in those summers.



Youth Group

**Youth organizations** likewise, have long been appreciated as seedbeds of leadership. As alumni made clear, these experiences enabled them to discover what's involved in taking on adult roles and leading one's peers

[Youth group] was also an introduction to leadership. I was secretary of the chapter, and so that was my first organization board experience, and that was both the best and the worst part because it highlighted areas, more areas of responsibility, outside of school and just working in committee with others to generate ideas and implement them, evaluate them.



College

**Jewish student organizations at college** took these opportunities to another level, providing young people with just-enough supporting scaffolding while intensifying the social, organizational and intellectual challenges. They helped form more confident, capable and fully-formed individuals.

I was really lucky to have...a genuine experience leading a Jewish community. We had a rabbi who I got a lot of mentorship from, and who I have a really close relationship with still. I have been in contact with her as I've developed my career and my sense of self and community



Israel

On **Birthright** the growth was more existential than technical. It invariably touched the person's identity as a Jew and not just as an increasingly capable emerging adult.

I think there was a shift for me, a quite immediate one of realizing that how much Judaism had filtered into my life and was part of my story and my family's story, even if we're not religious. And it made me feel connected to my family and connected to parts of myself in a very different and fulfilling way.



Moishe House

At **Moishe House** these existential and technical skills came together when residents learned how to build Jewish community for themselves and for their peers.

I was always a participant of Jewish programming in Jewish organizations, even in university I was never on the boards or heading anything. So [Moishe House] allowed me to see that I am able and capable to create my own Jewish spaces and cater to what people like me would like and be able to take that responsibility in my own circles that I otherwise had never been able to try or succeed in.





## **Consistent Outcomes Given Distinct Expression** Community and Individual Growth Together

This analysis has viewed community-related and personal growth outcomes separately. That is an artificial distinction. The special power of PJLE experiences is that they did not just deliver either Jewish outcomes or personal growth; both were part of the same whole. They helped young people become part of Jewish communities while growing and stretching as individuals. If one of these dimensions had been absent, the experiences would probably not have been so powerful.

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# Common but not **Universal Outcomes**

If community connection and personal growth are signature outcomes of *all* PJLE experiences, alumni indicate that other important outcomes were commonly produced although without the same force in all five settings. Three outcomes stand out in this respect, all of which have strong Jewish dimensions: acquiring Jewish cultural building blocks; valuing Jewish joy; and forming deep and lasting Jewish friendships.



# Common but not Universal Outcomes

## Acquiring Jewish Cultural Building Blocks

The experiences provided by PJLE grantees are all highly experiential. They involve learning through doing. And learning of this kind helped participants become familiar with if not proficient in basic components of Jewish culture and practice.

### Participant Perspectives



Camp

This outcome was strongly associated with spending time at **overnight camp**, in large part because the rhythm of camp runs from morning to night, and from shabbat to shabbat; it includes mealtimes, prayer times and other opportunities for learning through the performance of ritual.

All of the camp songs that you'd sing on Shabbat... you take with you for the rest of your life. And I have a son who goes to Jewish preschool now and he is singing these songs, and we sing them together in the car...I think that's where all the Birkat Hamazon stuff really started at the meals, at the tables...and being more involved in a Shabbat service, resting on Shabbat, not doing much, that's not something I really grew up with. So having the time to do really nothing, that was a new concept for me.



Youth Group

**Youth organizations**, by carving out spaces for young people to do Jewish things together, repeatedly, and sometimes over many years, had the same effect as camp. These organizations sometimes served as surrogates for the kind of learning-through-doing that can, but often does not, take place at home.

I would say that [youth group] really gave me confidence in my Judaism, and I learned about Judaism. I had friends who were Jewish but weren't really in any of these programs (not that there's anything wrong with that). I always felt like all the holidays I was able to fully participate...There was always a sense of feeling really proud to have this information so young... I think it just kind of shaped me as a Jewish person because I was able to spend my whole youth learning about it every single day.



College

When these young people got to college some saw their involvement in **Jewish student organizations** as an opportunity to experiment with new Jewish experiences, or to ask challenging questions about aspects of Jewish culture they previously took for granted. This sometimes called for a steep learning curve.

Learning about the different religious groups within Judaism, I think pushed me both to try different things and to feel less comfortable within the one that I had felt comfortable in when I never questioned it and it was the only thing I'd ever really experienced.



Israel

**Birthright** was for some alumni a moment of Jewish cultural awakening. 10 days was not long enough to enable participants to acquire the skills developed in other settings, but it was often experienced as a turning point in their Jewish lives.

I've heard of a lot of people who have a religious awakening when they go on Birthright that...they feel closer to the religion itself. That wasn't my experience. My experience was more of a spiritual cultural awakening. I've always loved history; ancient history is what I studied in college. And when I went to Israel, I discovered I had been neglecting the most fascinating, important history of all, which is our own history and birthright... And it was just such an intellectually stimulating experience for me.



Moishe House

At **Moishe House**, acquiring Jewish cultural building blocks was not just an intellectual exercise, for some it was an experience that transformed how they lived their lives.

Moishe House...was my opportunity to discover which Jewish I wanted to be. I felt so much freedom to be who I am and really live culturally Jewish cultural Judaism. So I was breathing and I was eating and I was dancing and I was interacting when having relations with other people like the way I wanted to be and not the way it was expected.

# Common but not Universal Outcomes

## Valuing Jewish Joy

Variations on the word “joy” surfaced in reflections on almost all of these experiences. As the following reflections convey, this was not just shiny gloss applied to more substantial content. It was a deep feature of some of the experiences that reset how participants thought about what it meant to be Jewish or to engage in Jewish practices.

### Participant Perspectives



At **overnight camp**, joy suffused almost every aspect of the experience, whether mundane or special, material or spiritual.

I gained the value of joyous Judaism, social connections... just having a community of people that you get to just be with, [is] just amazing. And I would say the last piece is that I was really introduced to almost it's like a utopian idea of how Judaism could be at its best, where you could both have a rowdy and amazing Shabbat experience and play basketball and swim in the lake and it was just beautiful.



In **Youth organizations**, joy was more likely to be associated with special occasions, often involving Shabbat or special convenings that brought together young people from across greater distances for intensely experienced programming.

Joyful Jewish experiences, especially around Shabbat since I did go to a Jewish day school and I did experience those things during the weekday, but never really on Shabbat.



In **student organizations at college**, joy could erupt in sometimes surprising ways, perhaps because college life can be freighted with so many stresses from which Jewish rituals provided a break.

I didn't really understand that I was a Jew until I was a 27-year-old at grad school in Texas... So the Chabad on campus did a really good job of catering to graduate students, which I really appreciated. I went to Shabbat classes, I learned how to make challah and stuff like that, which was really, really enjoyable. Something that I do now that I am married.



Fun was one of the most frequent words people used when describing their time on **Birthright**. Often, they didn't single out one particular joyful moment, but a fusion of experiences in the company of (newly made) friends.

I was just thrilled by everything...I made just amazing friends. I loved being on this. I was at a time in my life where I was making a million decisions for myself and then all of a sudden it was like 10 days and they'll tell me what to eat, when to drink, when to wake up... And we got to stay up late and laugh. And I just had a lot of fun...made Israeli friends and local friends...and it was just community. It just felt great and it was just a lot of fun.



And at **Moishe House**, as some alumni described it, experiences of joy were the result of a special brew that brought creativity and community together.

[Our Moishe house] became this beautiful garden of community. And so one of my favorite things was a monthly open mic that we did, and that just became a staple of my life and of creativity and of community. And it was profoundly joyful and has continued to be woven into other parts of my life since in so many different directions.

# Common but not Universal Outcomes

## Forming Deep and Lasting Jewish Friendships

Participating in intense, often immersive experiences in the company of age-alike peers was often what catalyzed the formation of deep friendships that frequently outlived the crucibles in which they were formed.

### Participant Perspectives



Camp

For many, **camp** friendships continued to be meaningful into adult life. Just as they could be sustained over long distances and over months apart during the years of camp, they have survived into adult life over good times and bad.

I've had these camp friends since I was about 10 to 13 in this solid group. Unfortunately, a year ago one of them passed and just the fact that everybody came together for the funeral and for shiva, even though we were all across the States, really makes me proud of the type of environment that camp set for me and my friends that we're more than just friends, we're also family and we're there at the darkest times in each other's lives.



Youth Group

**Youth organizations** have provided special spaces where young people can fully express who they are, in the company of other young Jews like themselves, forming what felt like authentic friendships.

So BBYO kind of gave me this whole separate set of friends and this group that was different from my day to day and it also created this structured time of when we saw each other with weekly chapter meetings...It gave me this thing that felt separate from the day-to-day, social messiness of high school.



College

Jewish **college students on campuses** where there were few Jewish peers form networks for mutual support that assume a family-like intensity that outlive their time at college.

Because we were such a small Jewish community...there was this immediate kinship of we're all going to be friends. We all look out for each other and to this day, they're in the small handful of people that are still close in my life, the Jewish friends I made from college.



Israel

The friendships formed on **Birthright** have another origin story. It seems to be the intensity of the Birthright experience and its throwing together of emergent adults in such a socially intense incubator that results in the forging of unusually strong interpersonal relationships.

Immediately after coming back home. I've stayed in touch to this day with many folks and we wish each other Shabbat shalom every Friday and we actually got together. So even in the short term right after the trip, we started getting together and staying in touch and building those meaningful relationships, which was awesome.



Moishe House

At **Moishe House**, it is a different feature of the context that ferments friendship. For residents, Moishe House functions as a kind of social life raft at a moment when they are emerging into adulthood and (in many instances) starting a new life in a new city. By bringing diverse people together, and tasking them with creating community with one another, they ended up forming deeply meaningful relationships.

It's so hard to build adult relationships outside of the college environment. And I only have one friend from college that lives here. Everyone else that I met and that I'm close with is from Moishe House.

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# Special Features in Each Context

As we have seen, much of what each PJLE organizations does aligns or is consistent with what the other organizations do. At the same time, each organization employs practices that are especially identified with their offerings even while they may be present to a lesser degree in other places.





## Special Features in Each Context

# Overnight Camp *Time for Exploration*

**Camp**, as already noted, is a place to stretch, to experiment and to explore new experiences, in Jewish and personal terms. This is the theme to which alumni consistently returned most often when talking about camp. They recollect experiencing joy and Jewish learning, and they celebrated the friendships formed, but it was the personal growth they experienced thanks to being given the space to explore that exceeded all other outcomes.

### Participant Perspectives

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[I was] pushing boundaries in a very safe environment. That's something that happened at my camp.

I think for me a lot of [the takeaways from camp] were a big sense of independence... [Camp] really got very different from school... It gave us a time to just do all the fun things that you don't always get to do that I personally never got a chance to do. It was a lot of new things that I saw that I'd never seen before or new experiences.





## Special Features in Each Context

### Youth Organizations

# *Sustaining a Jewish Self*

Alumni of youth-serving organizations employed powerful language to convey the identity-sustaining outcomes that came from their participation in these settings, and from being provided with spaces to be Jewish in ways that were not always possible in other parts of their teenage lives. These settings were experienced as safe havens where young people could unreservedly give expression to their Jewishness.

#### Participant Perspectives

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It kept my life very well-rounded and dynamic. It offered a welcome respite from family stuff, and it was important [as the] Jewish tile in the mosaic part of my life at that time. I had school, and I did other extracurricular activities. Having [my youth organization] ensured that Jewish community was always part of the different things, the various things that I did.

[Youth group] was just a huge contribution to my life...Growing up in Alabama, there's just not that many Jews...[and youth group] almost felt like going to college out of state where you make a new identity. There was my identity at school...and then there was a different identity. I had the chance to kind of shake the etch-y-sketch and make a new identity with a very different kind of population. It expanded my horizons. It was a group of people that all had similar values... When I reflect back on it, I think, I was so lucky to have that opportunity, as I really feel a lot more grateful now than I did then at the time.







## Special Features in Each Context

# Jewish Student Organizations at College *Exposure to Many Ways of Being Jewish*

Often, young people's horizons rapidly expand at college. Living away from family and home, they have an opportunity, if they choose, to learn about and lean into new identities, to expand their Jewish horizons, and to form new friendship groups. Alumni described how Jewish student organizations helped those who were interested conduct such explorations and how the structure of these organizations (Hillel and Jewish fraternity houses, in particular) called on participants to assume responsibility and to stretch beyond the familiar.

### Participant Perspectives

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Going to college, it kind of made me claim my Jewish identity a little bit more because I didn't just have people around me that had that same identity.

I developed a real appreciation for pluralism, understanding different denominations, and the philosophies that go behind them.

I think that I really grew up in a conservative bubble and being able to be with people who had different experiences of Judaism and observances from different movements I had never heard of one showed me how expansive Judaism is.





## Special Features in Each Context

# Israel Experience/Birthright Israel *Connecting to the Jewish Collective*

Traveling to Israel in the company of often diverse groups of peers powerfully situates young people within collective contexts that are much larger than those with which they were previously familiar. They encounter the grand themes of Jewish history, the rich diversity of the Jewish people today, and the predicaments of Jewish statehood. Many alumni experienced this as a jolting experience, one that birthed or deeply intensified a sense of Jewish peoplehood and a sense of responsibility for the Jewish collective.

### Participant Perspectives

The immediate impact of it for me was... a sense of resiliency that led for me to get here, if that makes sense... I felt more connected to my ancestors, the people who lived before me and their sense of resiliency that I could carry with me into the world of the 2020s.

My time in Israel was most impactful because it kind of got the message across to me that I needed to marry Jewish, and I needed to have a Jewish family if that's what me and my spouse decide. I was always told that I should marry Jewish, but for some reason being in Israel and seeing Israel and in the moment being there, it really hit home...I don't know, it was just something about being in Israel, being surrounded by other Jews ... I've got to keep Judaism alive!





## Special Features in Each Context

### Moishe House

# Creating a Jewish Community

Moishe House residents are responsible for creating community. Alumni recounted how within the framework of their obligations to the organization they felt empowered to learn and to live in self-designed communities that gave expression to values of Jewish pluralism and inclusion. They practiced how to build Jewish homes, gain Jewish life skills, and in doing so forged deep Jewish friendships.

#### Participant Perspectives

[It felt] really empowering [to learn] about how to build a home in a way that I find most meaningful, vibrant, and authentic to me and the values that I hold. So whether it's one where we host open mics or that our Shabbat dinners look a certain way... It helped me be in this home where I could start re-imagining and redefining what it meant to build a Jewish home on my own terms or in community with others.

I think the most satisfying is being the place where people feel like they can be their authentic selves, getting to be a part of a community where they really feel like they're contributing and it's not like we're just throwing social events. It's like they're a part of the community, they're a part of building the traditions of what we were doing. It was so important. I had friends who just got married, got engaged on our balcony. It was a community center... There's nothing better than that for me.



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# Contextual Effects

This account so far may convey a sense that PJLE experiences consistently and even unfailingly produce powerful personal and collective outcomes. In reality, as is the case in all experiential settings, such outcomes vary with the skills of those facilitating these experiences, and the interests of the individual participants.

In addition, the focus groups helped identify three contextual factors that seemed to have either intensified or weakened the outcomes produced: the size of the local Jewish community; parental input; and experience or access to other complementary Jewish educational experiences.



## Contextual Effects

# Community Effects

Repeatedly, PJLE experiences were felt as being especially formative by alumni who grew up in places where there were few other Jews, whether in their neighborhoods or their schools. When young people did not experience a critical mass of Jews anywhere else in their lives, the community-related outcomes associated with all five experiences gained heightened significance. It signaled that to be Jewish was not so strange and helped them form friendships with others who shared a similar identity and values.

### Participant Perspectives

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I grew up in a town where it was like I was the only Jew in my graduated class of 600 people, so it was nice to just be in [a youth group] surrounded by other Jews at that point in my life where I wasn't really getting that a whole lot... So, I think it was important for me just to see that there's other people close enough to my area that are also like me.

I think what I got the most from [camp] was the opportunity to be with other Jewish kids because in my hometown, where my community is, is like a hundred people. So, the only other young person of my age I knew was my sister...It was definitely a great opportunity for me to start forging Jewish friendships that before I could not have. ...I was actually embarrassed about my lack of knowledge of Judaism compared to the other kids, especially not having a Jewish education not going to Jewish school, not eating kosher at home. There was just nothing where I was ...I was sort of mad with my parents, especially my mom...my dad is not Jewish... I was like, I didn't get that.



## Contextual Effects

# Family Effects

Parents have had a sizeable influence on the outcomes experienced by PJLE alumni. They helped facilitate entry or closed off access to experiences, especially for younger teens. Many alumni recollected that they would not have attended a youth organization or camp if it had not been for parental encouragement or insistence.

Parents have been all-powerful gatekeepers even for older alumni, most commonly in relation to learning about opportunities such as Birthright or Moishe House. In the case of Birthright, they were described as both enabling and disrupting its possible impacts.

Families, more broadly, have helped sustain or intensify the outcomes produced by these experiences. They have the potential to sustain the commitments young people take on or simply ensure there is continuity between what happens outside the home and what happens at home. The home may sometimes be the more powerful force, and the PJLE experience adds a further push or a different expression to the same energies.

### Participant Perspectives

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I was pushed gently by my parents to go to one event. I was bribed. I was like, if you go to one event you will, I forgot what it was, get an ice cream or something... Looking back, I was like, I hated doing this. I hated going to youth group when all my friends were out doing other things. But I think at that moment in time, having that easy connection as a shy child really helped me build a little confidence in socializing.

I think I'm a very independent person and I truly think it's because, for lack of a better word, my parents shipped me away [to camp] at nine years old. But I loved being shipped away at nine years old and I really was able to just learn about who I am as a person. It really shaped my life and how it's okay to be alone because I really just think the independence is invaluable, that you can learn at those types of camps.

So my parents were kind of against me going [on Birthright] because they were scared about violence, and I said, no, I'm going to go. It'll be fine. Our itinerary had to be changed because of threats in Jerusalem. That same day, there was a mass shooting in my town five miles from my home. 10 people were killed. So it was really challenging, I think, to be there in a place that some of my friends and family were afraid of and then to have a shooting happen [back home].

The things about Jewish family and being in that environment is that things are reinforced at home and are lifted up...I would probably say just the small little traditions and the holidays and how we celebrate them. I think that had the biggest impact. Passover, Seders, they're very intimate experiences and they're always different, but it's always the same story...The holidays really did help me connect as well with my Judaism growing up for sure.

## Contextual Effects

# Complementary Experiences

If the family home was often cited for its contribution to the trajectories set in motion or accelerated by PJLE experiences, some alumni mentioned other institutions that played a complementary and even catalytic role in their lives. For example, a few of the focus group participants attended Jewish schools for some part of their childhood years, and, when they did so, they invariably reported how they contributed to the Jewish journeys they followed.

Less expected, given contemporary perceptions of it, a few of the alumni also mentioned the contribution made by a rich synagogue experience at various points in their lives, providing a launching pad to different PJLE experiences or reinforcing what they contributed.

### Participant Perspectives

I would say my day school experience was the most impactful. It's hard to disentangle it from the other aspects of my Jewish life and upbringing, but I feel that I gained an appreciation for building something that's both intensive and immersive and also over a long duration of time, creating a continued Jewish culture, society and living, paired with meaning and educational content. I, for myself, saw that that was transformative.

For me, before camp, I went to Sunday and Hebrew school at my synagogue, and I think that those were the beginnings of communal Jewish experiences for me outside of my home...Just being Jewish with other people together. I was in the junior choir and we also did plays together, and I went to a summer camp at my synagogue before I went to summer camp away. It was a day camp. So I think things in my temple, to be with other Jewish people was really wonderful.



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# A Work in Progress

This analysis might set up an expectation that the alumni we talked with lead their lives today as highly engaged Jewish emergent adults. Having participated in such a wide range of positive and powerful Jewish experiences, it is easy to assume they have become participants in and producers of Jewish life.





# A Work in Progress

## Lives in Flux

It is striking to see the degree to which, in their twenties and thirties, the Jewish lives of these young people are still in flux (as one alum put it) and how the Jewish intensity of their lives continues to ebb and flow. Without doubt, the PJLE experiences provided them with rich Jewish social and cultural resources, and those resources have been valuable at critical moments in their lives. They have kept many of their friends from those early experiences, and they have maintained a Jewish center of gravity even when they've lacked external supports. One might say that PJLE experiences have set them up for life.

At the same time, the disruptions created by altered professional circumstances, changes in their family status, and the geographic migrations often associated with these shifts, has meant that many have had to build and rebuild their Jewish lives. Few are fully set in their ways—vivid confirmation if ever for the contemporary relevance of emergent adulthood as a sociological construct. Some, it seems, are also wrestling with the question of what kind of Jewish life they want to lead; they certainly don't want to follow someone else's script. PJLE experiences have opened up possible pathways for them but have not fixed the trajectory of their lives.

### Participant Perspectives

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I just moved and I have a new job now...so I'm figuring out my life here. Everything's kind of in flux right now...I worked at a Jewish hospital for four years prior to this, and that...was something that was part of my every day, the fact that it was a Jewish hospital... My husband was the treasurer of AEPi when he was in college. I feel like that my strongest Jewish organization at this point is AEPi because all of his friends are from AEPi. Every year we have four AEPi Jewish weddings.

The communities that I picked up from college and then camp are very much still in my life. Especially with the camp one... Very little of what we do is explicitly a Jewish activity, but because our connection is rooted in Jewish summer camp, I think that it sort of shades a lot of our interactions, holidays with friends and family. And I recently started being active a little bit in a small local synagogue around me, but previously had not really been involved in a synagogue for a little while.

From the end of college to now has been kind of a slow move away from the Jewish religion, but also along with that Jewish culture... I've gotten to a point where I'm very uncomfortable with Jewish religion, where I guess I would say I actively avoid it...I'm now seeing how that plays into the next part of my life...In the past few months, it has become more of a point of tension in my family where my mom wants to take the older [child] to "tot shabbat," and I feel like, at least where I am, I'm like, I don't think I'm comfortable with, I don't think that's something I want.

Right now, we just joined the JCC because I'm due [to have a child] in April, so we're hoping that we get in...We both went to a Jewish daycare growing up and JCC and all of that. And my parents are extremely involved in the community within JCC and the Federation, so I eventually want to do that and sit on boards and all of that. But I'm still just working and I'm not doing that yet... We're still shopping around synagogues. I grew up Conservative, my husband grew up Reform. We're kind of seeing what our options are and where some of our friends end up. So we don't belong to a synagogue yet, but we will, when our kid needs to go to Hebrew school, especially since October 7th. ...My husband's gotten very into Challah making, so we really have brought on the traditions as best as we can, but that's about it.

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# Missing bridges

With PJLE experiences functioning as milestones along the life course of teens and young adults, we have been curious about the extent to which pathways led from one experience to the next. Repeatedly, we asked focus group participants what and who prompted them to participate in specific experiences. We made a point of asking those who participated in multiple experience whether any paths ran between different programs—say from an Israel experience to some form of organizational participation at home and vice versa.

Such pathways were rare in this sample of 48 people. We know that some of the organizations whose alumni participated in this study, such as Birthright and Hillel, have close, even symbiotic, relationships, but very few of the alumni with whom we spoke recollected an educator encouraging them or making them aware of a different program experience. Peers or family members, especially older siblings, more frequently served as connectors in this way; a friend made in one context (whether a youth organization or Birthright) recommended a different experience (a particular camp or Moishe House). This was surprising. With these organizations playing such complementary roles for one another, the lack of bridges between them is surely a significant missed opportunity.



# Conclusion

It has been a privilege to talk with young adults about moments in their lives that were deeply meaningful and personally formative for them. None of the focus group participants knew one another before these conversations, and yet they moved quickly to talking about personal and often emotionally significant matters. It seems their shared experiences enabled them to trust the other participants in this conversation.

This dynamic underlines a central finding of the study: the extent to which the experiences provided in each setting were aligned, creating a similar potent mix of Jewish community and personal growth. This interplay between personal and collective seems essential to the power of what the Jim Joseph Foundation calls PJLE (Powerful Jewish Learning Experiences). At the same time, each setting undoubtedly possessed its own signature strengths and opportunities; they were neither duplicates of one another nor were they identical variations on the same theme along an extended developmental trajectory.

Those individuals who participated in all five of these experiences gained something new at each stop along the way; this was a case of where more was truly more. Each experience added something distinct along with other outcomes that were generically familiar. It is surely unfortunate that most of these experiences are not better interconnected with one another in ways that would enable more young people to experience the best of what Jewish education and Jewish community building has to offer.



Thank you to the organizations who provided photos:

**BBYO, Foundation for Jewish Camp, Hillel International, Birthright Israel, Moishe House**