



# Rethinking the Rabbi

Findings from qualitative research conducted in January and February 2023 on behalf of



# Research Objectives

The overarching objective of this study is to discover what disaffected and unaffiliated Jewish people need or want in a rabbi, even among those for whom the idea of connecting with a rabbi seems far-fetched.

## Specific goals:

- Continue the work begun by Worthy Strategy Group in last year's Broadening the Circle research among unmapped Jewish people;
- Reconsider the role of rabbis in Jewish identity, infrastructure, spirituality and leadership;
- Begin to sketch new rabbi archetypes that resonate with disaffected and unaffiliated Jewish people;
- Identify "third spaces" where Jewish people might encounter these new rabbi archetypes.

# Methodology

In January and February of 2023, Hart Research conducted 20 in-depth-interviews among people who met the following criteria:

1. Ages 18 to 34
2. Currently identify or formerly identified as Jewish
3. No current connection with a formal Jewish institution such as a synagogue, Jewish federation, or Hillel
4. Quotas were applied to whether respondents were ever affiliated with a formal Jewish institution, and if so, their reason for disconnecting.

# Methodology

## Unaffiliated

**Nine interviews** were conducted among individuals who currently identify as Jewish but have never been formally affiliated with a Jewish institution.

## Disconnected

**Eight interviews** were conducted among people who currently identify as Jewish and were previously affiliated with a Jewish institution but drifted away from formal affiliation over time.

## Disaffected

**Three interviews** were conducted among individuals who previously identified as Jewish and were previously affiliated with a Jewish institution, but who made a conscious decision to disaffiliate.

# Methodology

Each respondent received these three prompts prior to the interview and was instructed to spend 30 minutes before the interview looking for pictures that conveyed or represented each prompt.

1. Select three or four images that depict **the kind of person you would like to turn to when you are looking for guidance, wisdom, assurance, and/or comfort, or are wrestling with larger life questions**. Do not include images of the actual people in your life. Select images of 1) people that you do not know personally, 2) people from throughout history, or 3) characters from films, TV, books, etc.
2. Select two or three images that illustrate **what being Jewish means to you**, regardless of whether you personally think of yourself as Jewish.
3. Select two or three images that portray **rabbis and the role they play**. Remember, we are not simply looking for pictures of rabbis. We are looking for images that convey important qualities, traits, or characteristics that rabbis embody, and the role they play.

Respondents submitted their pictures at least one day before the interview.

Interviews were conducted virtually and lasted 60 to 90 minutes.

# Interpreting Qualitative Research Findings



## Exploratory Research

This research is qualitative and was designed to explore in detail the experiences, feelings, and opinions of young Jewish people who are disconnected from Jewish life, culture and faith.

In this report, we share the feelings and experiences that emerged as themes from the 20 interviews we conducted.



Although we should exercise caution in making broad generalizations to the full universe of young Jewish people who are not connected to Jewish life, the takeaways presented here give voice to the nature and meaning of the experiences and feelings of these young people and provide important direction for steps to reengage them in Jewish life and culture.

## 20 Individual In-depth Interviews





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# Summary of Findings

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# If the goal is to connect these respondents with Judaism, the solution needs to be broader than a reimagined rabbi.

**WHO?** Rabbis are viewed as too out of touch to make connections. Respondents are looking for someone more accessible and relatable.

**WHERE?** Synagogues are not the right place to make connections. Respondents worry about being judged for not knowing the rules or looking the part.

**WHEN?** Respondents expect their communities to be available for connection 24/7, not just a few hours a week.

**WHY?** Respondents are interested in connections based on their values and the issues they are passionate about. Some are interested in spiritual connections; connection focused on religion is unlikely.

# For these young Jewish people, any opportunity to connect must meet three criteria:

1

**A relatable, modern experience**—Everything about the current synagogue experience, from the physical settings, to the people attending and the language, feels stuck in the past. They want an experience grounded in the present.

2

**An inclusive experience**—They want a place where they can come as they are, without fear of judgment for their appearance or familiarity with rituals.

3

**An on-going experience**—Synagogue services are episodic. They want on-going connections.

# *A relatable, modern experience...*

- Respondents are willing to connect with Jewish life on issues with relevance to today, both those that directly impact Jewish people and those that affect our broader society.
- Centuries ago, rabbis were at the forefront of society's most pressing issues. Today, rabbis are seen as absent from conversations that are important to these young people.
- They are looking for guidance and wisdom on social justice issues, identity questions, and navigating the modern world. Lessons from the past play a role, but can only go so far.

# ***An inclusive experience***

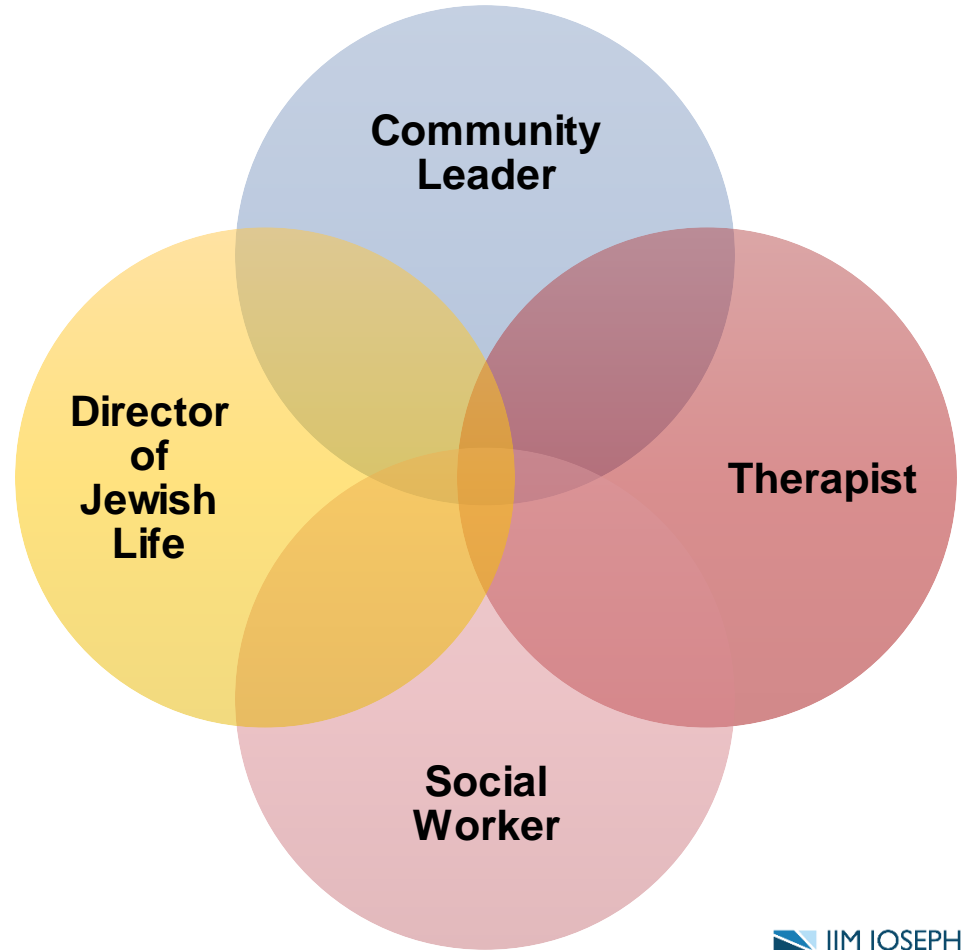
- Inclusion, access and representation are top-of-mind, everyday issues for these young respondents.
- They want to feel welcome as they are, and they want that for others as well.
- They are looking for someone who embodies inclusion, who demonstrates through their actions that everyone is welcome in the community they create.
- They want someone who will fight for inclusion on behalf of others.

# *An ongoing experience*

- Synagogues offer a predictable schedule for meetings, events, and holidays, but these respondents don't lead predictable lives.
- They are accustomed to on-demand services, whether it's food delivery, entertainment or health care.
- They want an experience with a Jewish community that mimics their experience in other parts of their lives.



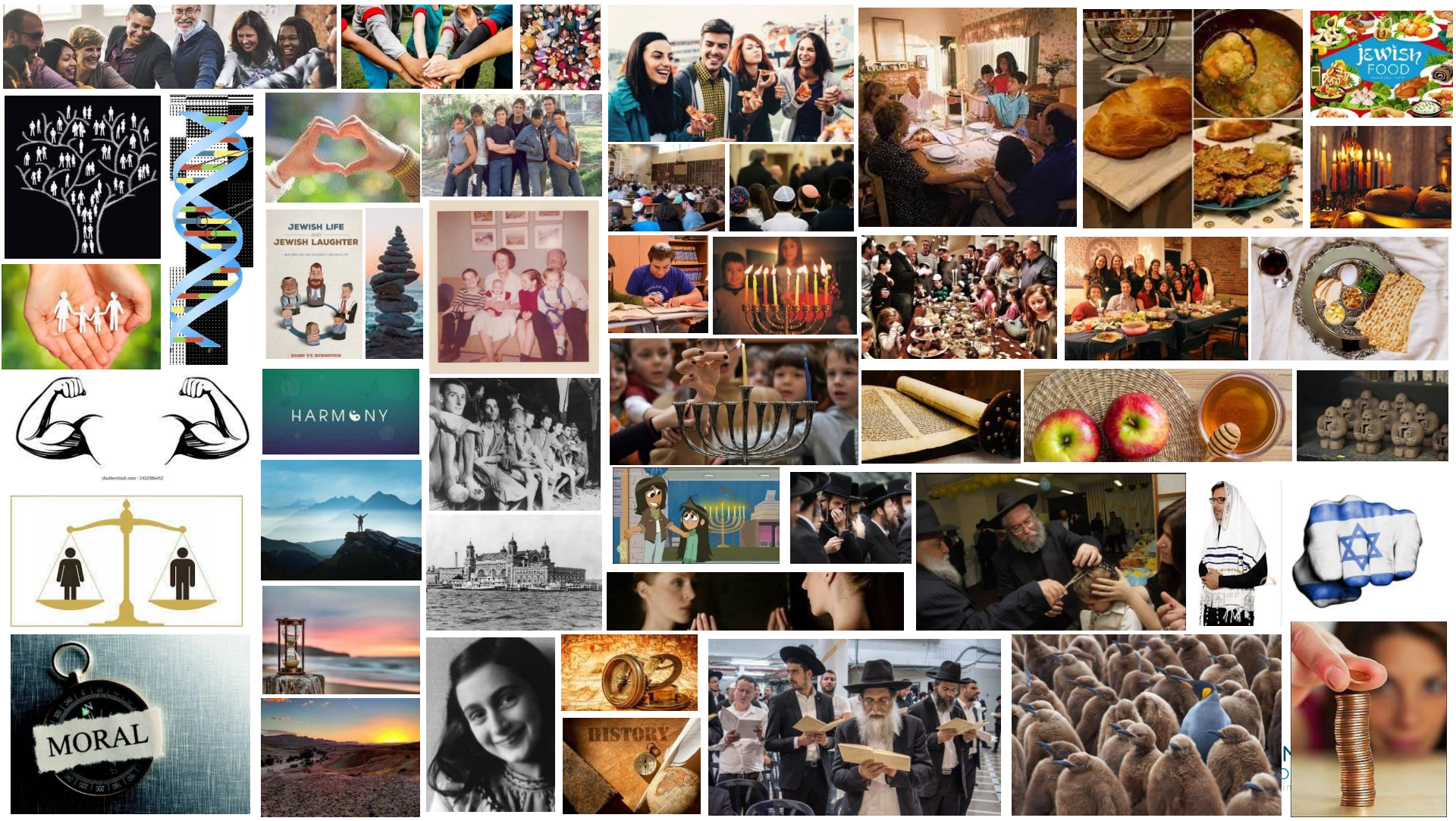
**When thinking about the shape a "new" rabbi might take, respondents offer several models.**



# **Jewish Identity**



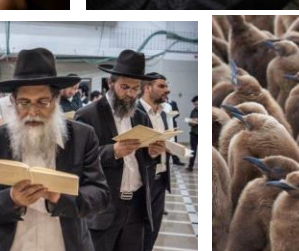
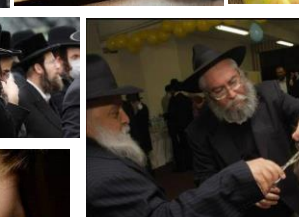
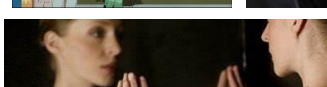
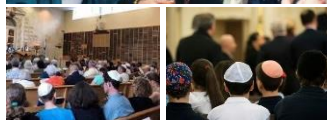
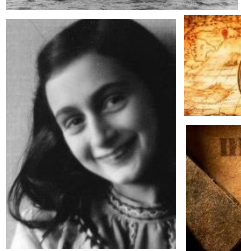
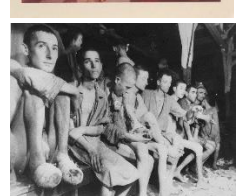
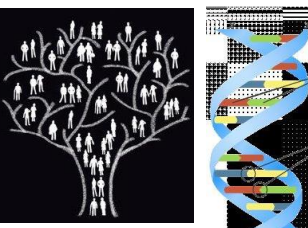
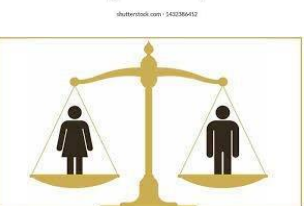




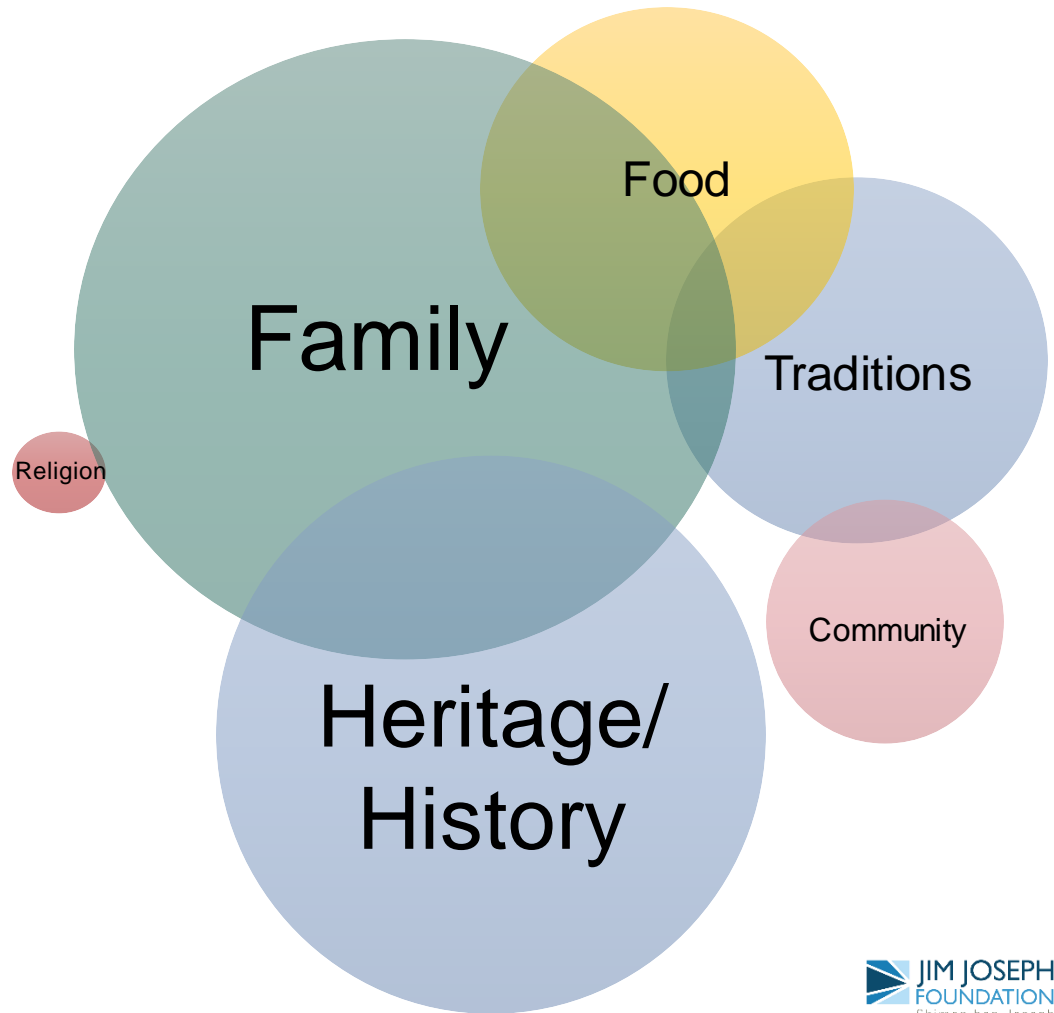
JEWISH LIFE  
AND  
JEWISH LAUGHTER  
SARAH V. ROBINSON

HARMONY

HISTORY



**Jewish identity  
is a web of  
intersecting  
factors.**



# Family and Jewish heritage and history are the anchors of Jewish identity for most.

- If you are born Jewish, you will *a/ways* be Jewish, regardless of whether you fully engage in the culture, community, and/or practice the faith.
- The history of Jewish persecution creates a sense of duty to identify as Jewish.
  - For some, it serves as a sign of Jewish strength and resilience.
  - Ongoing hate and discrimination against Jews creates fear among some to identify as Jewish, but also reinforces their resolve.



# *In Their Own Words: If You're Born Jewish, You're Always Jewish.*

“

“Where do I come from? And like, who are my people? So that's always been an aspect of Judaism, that's been very interesting to me is sort of our history.”

“

“If my cousins would come over, we'd meet them, and they were not practicing. Sometimes I'd say ‘oh, they're not Jewish’ to my mom. And she would freak out on me and say, ‘if you're born Jewish, you're always Jewish.’ It doesn't matter what you do or don't do. So that's very much resonated in my life, and I am Jewish, I always will be Jewish. If I have children, they will be as well.”

“

“Nowadays, it's just safer not to let people know you're Jewish.”

# Jewish family traditions and food have positive associations with Jewish life.

Participants who have a connection to Jewish life or community speak fondly of gatherings centered around family, food, and Jewish traditions, such as family seders and lighting the menorah.



# *In Their Own Words: Connections Centered on Food, Family, and Traditions*



“Everyone feels close to each other, because they know they're all lighting the menorah at the same time, or they're all eating apples at the same time.”



“While I said that I'm not really religious, I did grow up Jewish. I'm still identified as it, my family's Jewish, we celebrate all the Jewish holidays, I even have a Hebrew name. So, I feel like because I do participate in rituals, and that you know, my family is Jewish, that I am still Jewish.”

# Very few see Jewish community or Jewish faith as part of their current Jewish identity.

- While many have past connections to Jewish community, those ties are mostly severed.
  - Past connections to Jewish community are rooted in things like attending Jewish school and summer camp.
- If and when religious aspects are volunteered, such as attending services, prayer, and Torah/Bible study, it is almost universally in reference to the past.
- For many, the religious aspects of Jewish life are at best not interesting, and at worst, a turn-off.

# ***In Their Own Words: As they aged, it was harder to create the community they once had as a child.***



“I grew up in a religious background. But then, as I grew older, I had the cynicism and doubt took place because I was seeing how it was either used to, you know, as a bludgeon or as a tool to hurt people.”



“So, I did like how open it was, um, I think I had a lot of fun learning about, like, some of the Jewish culture when I was a kid. But, like, as an adult, and I think maybe, like middle school or high school, and especially when I went off to college, I didn't really think about Hanukkah...”



# **Spirituality & Religion**

The image features a diagonal line running from the bottom-left towards the top-right. This line is bordered by a thin, light blue strip. The area above and to the left of this strip is white, while the area below and to the right is a dark, navy blue. The text "Spirituality & Religion" is centered in the white area.

# For many, spiritually is a broad term describing a relationship with god, nature, or humanity.



“For me, like, the definition of spirituality, if you want to put it in different words, would be their self-awareness, mindfulness, consciousness.”



“For me, spirituality transcends beyond just religion. Spirituality can mean just feeling connected to other things as well. Spirituality gives me a sense of purpose and comfort.”

# Religion, however, has a much more specific connotation.



“A religious person is someone who goes to synagogue all the time, follows the 'rules,' follows the Torah. They take that very seriously. And they celebrate all the holidays the traditional way and do XYZ the traditional way.”



“Religion is more focused on God with a capital G, or Gods depending on the practice and rituals that are specifically around God or faith.”

# When rules, rituals, or hierarchy are applied to spirituality, it becomes religion.



“Spiritual is knowing that you're walking through life and there's something greater than yourself, and being religious is getting bogged down with the details of a specific community because they say their rules are the right ones.”



“The biggest thing is [that] religion has a more concrete set of rules, a set of this, a set of that, customs, traditions, rituals. Spirituality is more free, a little bit more up for interpretation. Religion is a lot more organized, a lot more specific, and a lot more do's and don'ts.”

# Spirituality and Religion

Some respondents believe that a person can be spiritual without being religious, but feel it is less likely to find someone who is religious but not spiritual.

These respondents, as a group, were more likely to identify as spiritual than as religious. But several don't consider themselves either.

For most, neither spirituality nor religion is tied to their Jewish identity.



# **Connecting with Jewish Institutions**

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# Reasons vary for disconnecting from formal Jewish life.

- Roughly half of the respondents never had a formal connection to a Jewish institution.
  - Some grew up in families with one Jewish parent, or parents who themselves had only loose connections to Jewish institutions.
  - Others only recently learned of Jewish ancestry through DNA tests.
- Many respondents drifted away from Jewish institutions over time because they moved or are no longer connected to the people who grounded them in Jewish community, such as parents or grandparents.

# For some, the reasons for disconnecting from formal Jewish life are complicated.

*Examples include:*

- A negative or traumatic life event that made them question the existence of God
- Negative experiences with questioning or challenging the religion
- Aspects of Jewish life not making sense in the modern world, such as keeping kosher or the prohibition of carrying on the Sabbath
- Aspects of Jewish life in conflict with their personal values, such as the treatment of women in the faith or positions related to Israel



# Many respondents feel they don't deserve, or haven't earned, the right/privilege of belonging to a Jewish community.

*They believe there are certain expectations they don't—or don't want to—meet, such as:*

- Not growing up sufficiently "Jewish"
- Missing important milestones like a bar/bat mitzvah
- Being insufficiently devout, or non-practicing
- Not having studied the Torah or knowing Hebrew
- The financial cost of being a “good Jew”
- Obligations for conservative dress and appearance

# *In Their Own Words: Not Looking the Part*



“If everyone's kind of waiting outside a synagogue, waiting to go in, it's just a bunch of people kind of dressed the same. And maybe I don't want to dress like that. Maybe I want to hear what the rabbi has to say, and maybe see if I can relate that to what I believe in now and see if I could just kind of, like, piece some stories together and translate things differently now that I'm older. But now I feel like if I don't wear a yarmulke, I'm gonna get looked at weird. Or, like, tattoos. I have lots of tattoos.”

# In some cases, respondents fear judgement from within the Jewish community if they try to reconnect.



“I'm just like, I haven't been doing that much. I know, there's not gonna be any judgment. But in my head, I think I would feel a little like, out of body. Like, if I was to be sitting in a synagogue or attending something, I would feel 'othered' in some way. Because I would be like, I didn't do any of this. I don't really participate in this. I don't really know about this.”



“I don't go back [home] very often. I mean, I gotta do certain things I don't necessarily want to do, and everyone knows that I'm not religious. So, you get these looks, right? I mean, if I went back there and I dressed the part, then everyone's happy, but I do still get a little looks and little whispers and I know they talk about me.”

# Others feel that beyond their shared Jewish identity, they don't have a connection with people who are more active participants in Jewish life.

- Respondents view people who regularly attend synagogue or actively participate with other Jewish institutions as older, more devout, and more observant than "average" Jewish people.
- This limits respondents' motivation to become more active in Jewish life because they have little in common with those who are.

# When asked about the possibility of connecting, or reconnecting, with a Jewish institution, many say it's not a priority in their lives.

- For these individuals, there is no conscious choice involved.
- They have the information they would need to join a Jewish community or institution. It's not about having a guide, information, or an invitation.
- Several say they can see themselves connecting in the future if it is important to a partner or if they have kids, but it's simply not something they're interested in at this time.

# *In Their Own Words:* Reconnecting for a Partner or Children



“Well, I mean, now that I'm a mom, I think a little bit more about, traditions that we've had over my lifetime, and what I want to pass on to my daughter. And the importance of carrying that on; making sure even though I'm not what I consider to be religious, that she knows where she came from.”

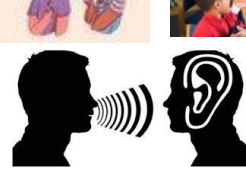
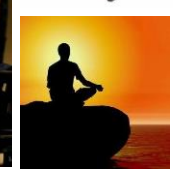
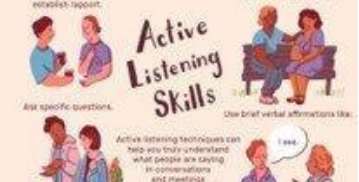
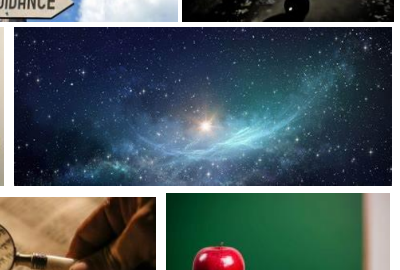
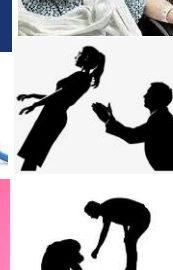
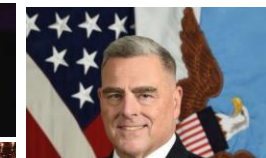


“I would probably have to marry someone who's involved with it for me to be active. Or if I had a child, and both of us were like, ‘We're gonna raise them Jewish.’”

# **Rabbis and Their Role in Jewish Communities**









# There is no pre-existing personal connection with rabbis, even among those who grew up attending synagogue.

- Few people mention a rabbi by name.
- Rabbis are perceived as more of an institution than an individual.
- This goes a long way toward explaining why respondents have a hard time imagining the role differently, and some are disinclined to alter it.
- Even when pushed to consider alternative roles for a rabbi, most respondents assume the traditional rabbi will continue to exist in addition to any new model.

# *In Their Own Words: Connecting with Rabbis*



“There's just... this wall between us because, you know, it's always been like them just leading services. I've never really talked to a rabbi so much like one-on-one to get to know them and really see their personality. It has been so formalized all the time.”



“When I think of a rabbi, I just think of some untouchable human that's perfect and amazing. They're not someone I would want to connect with. If I want to connect with someone, it's got to be someone that we both understand each other. We both can go out to coffee, have dinners together, hang out together.”

# Few respondents have any connection with a rabbi beyond very traditional religious experiences.

- Many view the rabbi's primary purpose as to arbitrate and enforce religious rules.
- In a way, rabbis are—by design—what makes synagogue a religious rather than a spiritual experience.
- This is exactly the dynamic many respondents resist—rules and rituals imposed on individual spirituality and identity.

# *In Their Own Words:* Rabbis as Rule Enforcers



“A rabbi is not there to give you comfort or advice. They are there to tell you how to follow the rules. Correct? Because they're not my friends. Right? I wouldn't go to them to get comfort or advice. I mean, I would go to them for advice on rules.”



“If my parents would go ask a rabbi a question, it would be something like, ‘okay, is this toothpaste appropriate to use on Shabbat?’ So, there's more like, following, following the Torah: ‘Do these laws...?’ ‘Is this appropriate?’”

# Rabbis are seen as old, unapproachable, and monolithic.

- The rabbi people imagine is almost always male and old.
- The old, male rabbi archetype is so strong, most respondents struggle to see past it to any other version of a rabbi.
- Rabbis are seen as the same regardless of where you encounter them—they look the same, dress the same, and have the same demeanor.
- Several respondents contrast rabbis with modern Christian pastors who are seen as younger, more diverse, and more welcoming.

# In Their Own Words: Out of Touch



“They’re just in a totally different realm than I am. That I would have never liked go chat with them. If I wanted to speak to someone that it would be their wives, and even then, it would be questionable.”



“I feel like they’re always men, so it’d be nice to see more women in the synagogue, because every time that I went there, I was like surrounded by men, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but, you know, as a woman, I like to see more women.”



“The Rabbi should be a bit more open to everything that’s going on in the world, like, culture-wise. I think that’d be the most important for me, because I do think that they would offer good wisdom, they have a good head on their shoulders, but it’s just being a bit more in-the-know.”



“I’ve also been to a church before, and it seems like the pastors are easier to talk to. Whereas, like, the rabbis, typically, the ones I’ve been to is, like, very, very old. So, it’s hard to get advice from them without feeling like, ‘oh, they’re judging me.’”

# Although not something they want or need in their own lives, respondents see value in rabbis' traditional roles.

- Respondents want to know that rabbis will continue to study and interpret religious texts.
- Preserving Jewish history is critically important, and rabbis are viewed as responsible for preserving Jewish religious history.
- And although respondents do not want rules imposed on their own Jewish experience, they want to know that rabbis will continue to consider what is, and is not, consistent with Jewish religious rules.





**Sources of Comfort,  
Wisdom, Guidance &  
Reassurance**



Florence Nightingale

Dr. Queen Latifah

"It is impossible to rightly govern a nation without God and the Bible."  
—George Washington  
Happy 4th of July!

Stone

# Respondents are looking for sources of guidance, wisdom, and comfort that fall into several buckets, with some falling into multiple buckets.

- Straight-talker, tells you the unvarnished truth, but non-judgmental
- Wisdom, experience, nurturing
- Honesty, strong moral character
- Humor
- **Important: While family figures are mentioned frequently when these sources in real life are personified, rabbis are not a part of the conversation, nor is a focus on religion.**



# Looking for: Non-judgmental, straight-talkers



“

“It's all about the other person sitting across the couch from them, and really getting to know them and having a genuine, intense conversation. I've seen her cry; I've seen her cackle and fall over with laughter, and I think she appears to be a real person and not a figurehead, which, again, I think sort of goes into that, when you're going to someone for advice.”

“

“I trust her judgment. I think she has really good taste in books. When it comes to interviews, she's very level-headed and she seems very, just intellectual and smart in the way that she answers questions. She's not in the spotlight doing anything crazy, ever. She's usually praised for her work. So, I feel like I would trust someone like her.”

# Looking for: Humor



“

“She's like my dream grandmother. So funny, so bright, and so humorous. Could make the worst day seem awesome, seem tolerable.”



“

“Mel Brooks. Speaking of funny, he is one of my favorite comedians. It's just, he's hysterical. I still watch his movies; they've aged quite well. And this one is a lot less deep. It's just, I really like Mel Brooks because of his comedy. And he's someone that I think I feel like you can't be sad and talk to Mel Brooks, you will probably be laughing within a few minutes. He has a great way of representing a faith that I am a lot more familiar with— Judaism, in his work, in a way that is a little irreverent, but not sacrilegious.”

# Looking for: Wisdom, experience, nurturing



“When her character appears, she knows Cinderella and she is able to point out specific things about Cinderella. That almost immediately make her trustworthy, or like, ‘I know you; I know your history; I know what you're feeling.’”



“She cares a lot about, like, women and a lot about, like, education. And seems like she also has very good intentions.”



“She’s just always full of words of wisdom to lead a better life, like, ‘keep on laughing,’ and ‘it’s about your outlook on life that matters.’ And she just feels like someone that I could trust, and I really admire her because she would always fight for what’s right, whether that be women’s rights or civil rights or animal rights.”



“He always had, you know, very wise words to say about whatever was going on at the moment. He was very, like trustworthy, and he had a lot of perspective that the children in the series didn't really have. So, I would definitely turn to him for advice.”



“Someone who's almost just, like, full of wisdom, like they've lived a lot longer than you, they seem a lot more experienced, a lot, and more so to be able to go to them and have them offer you any type of advice, whether it's coming from them, or they've asked me to look, like, deeper into yourself.”

**Motherly and kind, yet strong and capable, a grandmother-like association with comfort and assurance.**

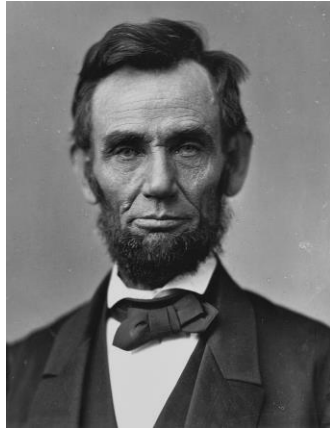






**A powerful, but benevolent expert; a mentor to push them to their full potential.**

***Looking for:***  
**honesty; strong  
moral character**



# Respondents drew on examples of people who challenged and acted against injustice in their socio-political context.

“

“He helped lead African Americans and also leading people and showing them a kind of righteousness. Being able to know that human beings are human beings, and they shouldn't be separated by race, or their background or anything.”

“

“Gone out of their way to, to make a change in something that they're not necessarily personally affected by, which I think is important.”

“

“Someone who holds a lot of kindness and compassion, but also someone who's a great leader and can inspire others to follow in their footsteps for the good of humanity. He also encapsulates someone who's experienced a lot in life and has still decided to do kind, generous, and good things for the world.”

# **Rabbis Reimagined**

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# Reimagining rabbis was challenging for most respondents.

- It's possible that by grounding the conversations in conventional rabbis, we limited respondents' imaginations.
- Many respondents don't want to "cheapen" the rabbi by making them something more mainstream.
- Respondents assume there will always be a role for rabbis as they are today—scholars and prayer leaders.
- For the most part, people assumed traditional rabbis would still exist, and the exercise was about something new, in addition to rabbis.
- They are looking for something entirely different—more accessible, less authority.

# At this point in their lives, getting most of these respondents into a synagogue is an out-of-reach goal.

- However, many would be willing to meet in between—for example, at a community center or an event.
- Respondents would like to connect with someone *in own their community*, rather than connecting with someone in a formal Jewish community.
- This could be a rabbi getting involved in social justice efforts that are not specific to the Jewish community, or just being open to meeting with people like them at coffee houses, or other places where the rabbi might seem more approachable and out of the strictly religious context.



# Casting a New Die

Connecting these young people with a Jewish community or institution will require breaking the traditional rabbi/synagogue model.

Impressions of rabbis and synagogues are too calcified in respondents' minds.

Even if changing those impressions was possible, many respondents reject the notion that the institutions should be replaced.

They want something entirely new that adds to what already exists, that feels relevant to their lives.





# These young people are clear in what they want from a new model of rabbis—and likewise, clear on what they don't want.

- Respondents want someone who is relevant to them and their concerns, bringing a Jewish perspective and values to the larger community first.
- They are less interested primarily in qualities that are singularly focused on roles they more closely connect with traditional religion and Judaism.



*Respondents picked from among 22 qualities as to which they would want a reimagined rabbi to embody.*