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# S3K REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

S3K Reports are periodic publications of the S3K Synagogue Studies Institute on topics in Jewish congregational studies. S3K Reports synthesize key findings from recent research, offer new analyses of contemporary issues, and give useful insight into synagogue life. An ad hoc editorial committee of clergy and other congregational leaders working in the field reviews each S3K Report prior to publication.

We encourage clergy, educators, researchers, and communal leaders to use S3K Reports as they implement their own creative strategies for building vital and compelling congregations for the future of the Jewish people.

**The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of Synagogue 3000. Responsibility for the research and findings in this report rests solely with its author(s).**

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*Tobin Belzer and Donald E. Miller*

## Synagogues That Get It: How Jewish Congregations are Engaging Young Adults

### Summary

- Today, most individuals in their twenties and early thirties have no congregational affiliations. Most congregations — which once had the capacity to serve the needs of individuals throughout their lives — have been slow to adapt effectively to the changing needs of contemporary young adults. Congregations in the minority (i.e. those with vibrant young adult populations) are valuable sites for the qualitative investigation of the changing nature of religious identity.
- Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish congregations that are successfully attracting young adults take similar approaches to engaging members of this population. Likewise, young adults of each faith who are interested in congregational affiliation share similar motivations, needs, and desires. Similarities among young congregants in these four faith traditions far outweigh the differences.
- In general, and in the study described here, congregations that are successfully attracting young adults are far from uniform. Congregations large and small, innovative and traditional, old and new are engaging young adults in a variety of ways. The characteristics of the fifteen Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim congregations in the project on which this report is based vary considerably by geography, size, date founded, budget, and theological approach.
- Young adult populations in the congregations studied have differing relationships with their larger synagogue communities: they are in the majority, integrated into an intergenerational congregation, or represent a distinct sub-group within a large congregation. The thriving young adult communities within each of these very different congregations highlight the fact that there is no single formula, but numerous opportunities for successfully engaging members of this population.
- The young adults in this study are not participating in congregational life out of a sense of familial or religious obligation. Nor are they focused on transmitting Jewish identities to their children (which few have). Instead, their active involvement is focused on their current realities and interests: what matters to them now. For many, their primary expression of Jewish identity occurs within the congregational community.

## THE S3K SYNAGOGUE STUDIES INSTITUTE

The S3K Synagogue Studies Institute works with scholars, clergy, and communal leaders to promote greater understanding of Jewish congregational life and to increase the value and stature of Synagogue Studies as a key field for academic research and seminary education. The Institute identifies key trends, convenes conversations around topics of common concern, promotes collaborative research, and disseminates important new knowledge to leaders in congregations as well as academic, communal, and philanthropic institutions.

The Institute is supported by two important groups. The Synagogue Studies Academy is a network of distinguished thought leaders, researchers, and academics who are doing pioneering work in the field. Members of the Academy work with the S3K team to develop the research agenda, participate in Institute-sponsored panels at major academic conferences, and lead Institute-sponsored research projects. The Synagogue Studies Advisory Board, comprised of key academic and communal leaders, provides advocacy to support the field of synagogue studies.

- Affiliation is a conscious choice these young adults make continuously. They decide how often to attend and how much to participate. They choose how much of the belief system to accept and how much ritual observance to practice. They balance their individual authority with their identity as members of a community and within a religious tradition. They seek communities with both flexibility and structure, enabling them to establish their personal boundaries. While respecting the religious standards of their congregations, many take pride in making their own choices based on personal factors such as level of knowledge, peer group, and religious upbringing.
- The congregations in this study are making a concerted effort to understand and engage young adults by proactively addressing young adults' multifaceted interests in religion. Churches, mosques, and synagogues are responding to young adults' need to be met where they are, their desire to feel that their presence is valued, and their interest in being emotionally affected. They are fostering young adults' sense of ownership in the synagogue, and attempting to strike a theoretical and practical balance between particularism and universalism.

## Introduction

Among Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, and Jews alike, there is a growing concern about the transmission of religious memory, practice, and tradition to the next generation. Religious and community leaders across faiths are witnessing the seeming absence of an entire age cohort from organized religious life. Today, the majority of individuals in their twenties and early thirties have no congregational affiliations; their affiliation rate is lower than that of any other age group. Most congregations, which once had the capacity to serve the needs of individuals throughout their lives, have been slow to adapt effectively to the changing needs of contemporary young adults.

*Religious and community leaders across faiths are witnessing the seeming absence of an entire age cohort from organized religious life.*

Scholars of American Jewry have begun to approach the examination of Jewish young adults in creative ways. Drs. Ari Y. Kelman and Steven M.

Cohen (2005) looked beyond the walls of the synagogue to explore alternative modes of participation among young adults in their qualitative examination of Jewish cultural events in New York. A 2006 study prepared by Ukeles Associates, Inc., "Young Jewish Adults in the United States Today," includes the data from the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey, six Jewish community studies conducted by Ukeles Associates, and the responses to the American Jewish Committee's Annual Surveys of American Jewish Opinion. Pollsters Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research produced two widely publicized pieces for REBOOT (2005, 2006) about religious identity among Jews aged eighteen to twenty-five. Using multiple methods, these studies elucidate young adult Jews' expressions of contemporary Jewish identity.<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, young adults' Jewish identities are similar to those in previous generations. The source of authority for most young adult Jews, as for the moderately affiliated Jews described in Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen's book, *The Jew Within* (2000), is the "sovereign self." Members of both populations express ambivalence toward the organizations, institutions, commitments, and norms that constitute Jewish life. The quest for Jewish meaning remains compelling to individuals across generations.

Young adult Jews' distinctions from previous generations are in concert with qualities they share with American young adults in general. Young adults today tend

<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive annotated bibliography of research on young American Jewish adults is included in Ukeles et al. (2006).

### S3K REPORTS

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to be more social and politically liberal than their baby boomer parents (Pew Research Center, 2007). They are increasingly tolerant of difference and more pluralistic in their thinking. They are getting married and having children later than young adults twenty years ago. Religious affiliation is less important to the majority of young people today than in previous generations.

## Exceptions to the Rule

The current study explores the experiences and attitudes of young adults who are unlike the majority, namely, those who are actively participating in congregational life. Over the course of one year, a multi-faith research team visited congregations that are also the exceptions to the rule; the Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish congregations profiled in this study have vibrant young adult populations. Both congregants and congregations are the focus of investigation in this research project.

Our research was designed in large part to serve congregational leaders who are both concerned by the lack of organizational affiliation among young adults and interested in engaging members of this population. The characteristics of the congregations in this study vary considerably. Representing four faith traditions and multiple geographic locations, the congregations also differ in terms of size, date founded, budget, and theological approach. Additionally, the young adult populations in the synagogues studied are

situated within the larger congregations in a variety of ways: some are in the majority, others are integrated into an intergenerational congregation, and still others represent a distinct sub-group within a large congregation. The lessons learned at these highly successful (and relatively distinctive) congregations can translate into practical suggestions about engaging young adults in congregations large and small, innovative and traditional, old and new.

## The Synagogues

This article focuses on the findings related to Jewish congregations and their young adult congregants. Congregations that are successfully attracting young adults are far from uniform. The synagogues chosen for this research—in Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago—fall along the spectrum of Jewish religious movements, from Reform to Modern Orthodox. The thriving young adult communities within each of these very different Jewish settings demonstrate that there is no single formula, but rather numerous opportunities, for successfully engaging young adults.

The young adult population at Steven S. Wise Temple (SSWT) is a thriving sub-community within a large, wealthy Reform congregation in Bel Air, California. With a large annual budget and a magnetic young staff person, SSWT's "W Group" typically attracts thirty to forty people to its bi-monthly programs. Congregation B'nai Jeshurun (BJ), in New York's predominantly Jewish Upper West Side, is known

### About the "Congregations That Get It" Project

The project, "Congregations that Get It," is based at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California. Funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc., it was conducted under the direction of Donald E. Miller, in cooperation with Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies, and the Omar Ibn Al Khattab Foundation.

Tobin Belzer, Richard Flory, Brie Loskota, and Nadia Roumani make up the multi-faith research team who undertook the original research on which this article is based. Over the course of one year, the research team visited congregations in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Washington, D.C., urban areas where large populations of each religious faith have strong representation. Through exploratory conversations with young adults, religious leaders, and professionals working in religious institutions in each city, the team chose congregations within each religious tradition that represent a broad theological spectrum, from conservative to progressive. Each congregation also was chosen for the intergenerational participation of its members. Based on qualitative interviews and participant observation, the team constructed profiles of Christian (Protestant and Catholic), Jewish, and Muslim congregations.

The make-up of the research team reflects the three faith traditions, in order to benefit from insider perspectives as well as to enable outsiders to identify issues possibly overlooked by insiders. The team spent several weeks collecting data at each of fifteen congregations, ultimately conducting approximately one hundred interviews with congregational leaders, lay leaders, and young adults. In many instances, the entire research team undertook the congregational visits and interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded and many were videotaped, as were aspects of congregational life, including religious services and young adult programs.

The team's collaboratively written article, "Congregations That Get It: Understanding Religious Identity in the Next Generation," appears in *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Heft 2006). It highlights the similarities and difference among and between individuals and congregations across the four faith traditions. A previous version of some of the findings reported here was published by STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal) in "Congregations that Get It: Understanding Jewish Identities in the Next Generation" (Belzer 2005).

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for spirited Shabbat services that attract an intergenerational crowd of hundreds on Friday nights.<sup>2</sup> At BJ, the normally staid worship service that is characteristic of so many American synagogues is infused with the energy of a live musical ensemble, rhythmic drumming, ecstatic dance, and charismatic rabbis whose sermons emphasize social justice. At Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel (ASBI) in a gentrified Chicago neighborhood, young adults make up the majority population in their Modern Orthodox synagogue.<sup>3</sup> Every Friday night, after services led by a highly respected young rabbi, the congregants host Shabbat dinners in their homes, conscientiously ensuring that each of the fifty or so attendees has a place to dine.

Individuals at each congregation express their Jewish identities through a variety of actions. Young adults across denominations spoke about the importance of attending religious services, performing home-based rituals, participating in volunteer opportunities, engaging in social events, pursuing education, and cultivating personal relationships with peers and congregational leaders. Consistent with Steven M. Cohen's findings (2006), the relative importance that individuals bestow on these activities tends to vary by denomination.

The majority of congregants at ASBI described their lives as centered around their synagogue community. They spoke about the role of God in their daily lives.

Community members seek opportunities to focus on their personal religious commitments in a communal context. Most attend religious services on both Friday evenings and Saturday mornings and regularly have Shabbat meals together. They maintain Jewish dietary restrictions and follow behavioral laws and customs in their daily lives according to a widely accepted community standard. Some also attend classes and lectures, participate in volunteer opportunities, and are members of committees. Most of the young adults in this community are newly married couples, although there is also a small group of single people. Almost every congregant lives within walking distance of the synagogue because traditional Jewish law forbids travel on Shabbat.

At BJ, large numbers of young adults attend Friday evening services regularly, while far fewer participate on Saturday mornings. Many independently gather to share Shabbat meals. Once a month, more than five hundred people attend a "Singles Oneg," a mixer with refreshments, following the Friday evening service. This event tends to attract a slightly older crowd (i.e. in their forties and fifties), and was described by multiple interview participants as having "a meat market vibe." Although the young adult program has a mailing list of more than six hundred and fifty people, the size of the consistently active core community of young adults is much smaller: approximately thirty individuals regularly take part in volunteer opportunities, enroll in classes, and serve on committees. Members of this core group spoke of the importance of their relationships with the congregational leaders. They have initiated a monthly gathering with one of the synagogue's three rabbis. These individuals spoke about the importance of finding God in their lives. Some young

*Young adults across denominations spoke about the importance of attending religious services, performing home-based rituals, participating in volunteer opportunities, engaging in social events, pursuing education, and cultivating personal relationships with peers and congregational leaders.*

<sup>2</sup> Hazzan Ari Priven of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun is a member of the S3K Leadership Network, which is not connected with this independent study.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Asher Lopatin of Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel is a member of the S3K Leadership Network, which is not connected with this independent study.

*Young adults at each congregation feel empowered to assert their ideas and make them manifest.*

adults live close to the synagogue, while others travel a great distance to attend.

Religiosity is not a priority for many of the members of SSWT's W Group. During the interviews and at events, neither God nor religious practices typically emerged as topics of interest or concern. These young

adults celebrate Shabbat sporadically, and few adhere to dietary laws. Because of the location of the synagogue and the nature of traffic in Los Angeles, the Friday evening service at 6:30 p.m. is virtually impossible for working young adults to attend and very few do. Yet, some young congregants drive as far as forty miles to participate in other W Group events.

Instead of prayer, the emphasis of the group is on socializing and community building. Young adults show their commitment by taking on leadership roles within an elaborate organization of boards and committees. Every month, the group offers at least three events: a cocktail party at a fashionable bar, an opportunity to volunteer, and an educational program. Organizers always make it a point to invite both single and married people; they are apprehensive about gaining a reputation as a "singles group."

Young adults at each congregation feel empowered to assert their ideas and make them manifest. At SSWT, young congregants formed an education committee, designed a learning series called "Everything You Never Learned at Hebrew School," and found a teacher for the course. At ASBI, two groups initiated alternative worship services: one experiments with emerging forms of Orthodox feminist practices, and the other is more traditional than the main service at ASBI. At BJ, an informal group of young people organized and formed an affinity group, which meets monthly for social and educational purposes.

Each of the three congregations intentionally focuses on helping young adults feel welcome. At each event organized by SSWT's W Group, committee members volunteer for the responsibility of welcoming and integrating prospective members. At BJ, new members are assigned mentors who help to integrate them into the community. After religious services at ASBI, new people are encouraged to return to members' homes for Shabbat meals.

## Young Adult Congregants

Across religious denominations, young Jews who affiliate with synagogues are actively thinking about how to make their lives meaningful and have turned to synagogues for that purpose. The narratives that emerged as young Jews described their multiple motivations for engaging in synagogue life corroborate the findings of Bethamie Horowitz, in her landmark study of Jewish identity: "Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity" (2000). Like the subjects of Horowitz's research, the young Jews (and also Muslims, Protestants, and Catholics) in this study continually adapt and reinvent their identities.

*Across religious denominations, young Jews who affiliate with synagogues are actively thinking about how to make their lives meaningful and have turned to synagogues for that purpose.*

Interview respondents contextualized their congregational involvement as a part of their ongoing journeys. Some described previous negative Jewish educational, social, or religious experiences, which still color their perceptions about Jewish organizations in general. Most

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remain wary of the hierarchical, bureaucratic, political, and fiscal aspects of synagogue life. Many people described the financial aspects of religious life with distaste. Before they become a part of their current congregations, some young adults said they felt alienated by the style and approach of religious leaders. Most religious leaders, they reported, do not care whether they are involved, except if they are able to make a financial contribution. Despite these misgivings, these young adults do not reject synagogue affiliations outright like so many of their peers. Instead, the young adults interviewed purposefully seek congregations where they feel comfortable.

Young adults in the study do not participate in congregational life out of a sense of familial or religious obligation. Nor are they focused on transmitting Jewish identities to their children (which few have). Instead, their active involvement is focused on their current realities and interests: what matters to them now. The following narratives typify how

multiple paths lead to congregational affiliation.

*Young adults... do not participate in congregational life out of a sense of familial or religious obligation.*

Rachel (a pseudonym; all names have been changed) was extremely active in her Jewish youth group throughout high school, and continued her

involvement during college by taking on leadership roles in both Jewish and Zionist organizations on campus. She has been to Israel many times, both with her family and on

youth-oriented trips. After graduating from college, Rachel traveled to India, where she spent time at an ashram. She awoke every morning with the other devotees, meditated, and listened to the teachings of the swami. Though it was Rachel's first time in India, the experience felt familiar; it reminded her of the time she had spent in Israel. She loved being a part of a community where religious underpinnings imbued every aspect of daily life. Learning from the swami filled her with the same awe and wonder she had felt learning with her rabbi years earlier. From that experience, Rachel awakened to the universality of the search for the Divine. She returned from India feeling a responsibility to cultivate her relationship with God by pursuing her Jewish path. Back in New York City, Rachel became an active member of a vibrant Conservative-style congregation.

Lori grew up in a Conservative synagogue, but ended her Jewish involvement after her bat mitzvah. When her marriage to a non-Jewish man ended, she felt lost and alone. She was eager to reinvent herself, and decided it was time to reclaim her Jewish identity. She found a community of young adults at a Reform congregation with whom she clicked instantly. Now Lori considers herself a "super Jew." She is a leader in that community, serves as chair of the programming committee, and regularly has Shabbat dinners with her new friends.

Aaron has always chosen to surround himself with Jewish community. He attended an Orthodox day school, took on leadership roles in his Conservative youth group, and gradu-

### Examples from Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant Congregations That Get It

The **Islamic Center of America (ICA)** in Dearborn, Michigan, hosts the Young Muslim Association (YMA), which focuses on developing the spiritual identities of young adults. Approximately two hundred of them typically attend the YMA program on Friday evenings. The event begins with the *Maghrib* (sundown) prayer followed by a lecture from forty-two year-old Imam Sayed Hassan al-Qazwini. After the lecture, there is an open group discussion. Occasionally, during the Friday program, an individual will make a brief presentation on issues related to work, activism, or religious experience. During one Friday session for example, a young woman discussed her experience interning in a congressional office on Capitol Hill. The session always closes with the evening prayer, *Isha*. Following the prayers, chairs are cleared away and the lecture hall is transformed back into a gymnasium. Many of the male participants linger for a game of basketball.

**St. Monica Parish Community** in Santa Monica, California, provides learning opportunities directed specifically to young congregants' needs, backgrounds, and interests. A variety of learning opportunities are provided for congregants, ranging from spiritual retreats to discussions such as "Finding Jesus in the Movies." After mass on a typical Sunday evening, there are as many as five different activities, each oriented to various interests among the young congregants, and all oriented toward engaging young congregants with issues of faith and life.

Members of "Connection," the young adult group at **Marble Collegiate Church** in New York City, organize various social, spiritual, and social service-oriented events. They gather to clean up a city park or distribute food at city shelters. Other activities include canoeing, apple picking, and swing dancing. For members' spiritual growth, book groups, retreats, meditation services, and Bible studies are offered. Following the Sunday morning service, a discussion called "Bagels and Bible" centers on themes from the sermon and includes a wide-ranging discussion. The staff minister and participants deal with every question and comment openly and non-judgmentally. After the discussion, many of the young congregants leave together and continue to connect over lunch.

ated from a Jewish university. When he returned to his hometown after law school, Aaron realized that he no longer felt connected with the synagogue where he had grown up. A friend introduced him to a dynamic modern Orthodox congregation, where he now feels at home.

## Making Choices

Young congregants have chosen communal involvement purposefully and thoughtfully. They decide how often to attend and how much to participate. They

*Many [young Jews] make a point of avoiding denominational labels, which, they explained, obscures rather than clarifies their identities.*

choose how much of the belief system to accept and how much ritual to practice. They choose how to balance their individual autonomy with their identity as members of a community and within a religious tradition. They seek communities with both flexibility and structure, enabling them to establish their personal boundaries.

While they respect the religious standards of their congregations, many take pride in making their own choices based on personal factors such as level of knowledge, peer group, and religious upbringing.

For many, their primary expression of Jewish identity occurs within the congregational community. In this way, young congregants significantly differ from the moderately affiliated Jews in the Cohen and Eisen study, who are most comfortable constructing Jewish meaning in the private sphere. Young congregants seek congregations where they can be “authentic” and “express themselves fully.” They are not interested in congregational involvement that includes playing a role or having their behavior on display.

Young adults do not want to feel judged about their choices; they do not measure their Jewish identity based on the extent of their religious practice or knowledge. “I don’t care what you are eating, I care about what you think,” a congregant from BJ asserted. She continued: “I’m much more interested in how you are treating people and *what it means* to you to eat [rather] than *what you eat*.”

Notably, despite their specific congregational affiliations, young Jews were not necessarily choosing to align themselves with specific denominations. Many make a point of avoiding denominational labels, which, they explained, obscures rather than clarifies their identities. A woman at ASBI exemplified the sentiments that many others expressed with these words:

*What am I? Am I Orthodox? Conservadox? Whatever. I’m Jewish. I want people to feel comfortable expressing their Jewishness however they feel comfortable. My friends express their Judaism across a spectrum.*

These young adults have come of age in an increasingly pluralistic and global society. They have little patience for anyone who tries to lionize one path above others. They are put off by inter- and intra-religious judgment and competition. Many see denominational distinctions as a source of divisiveness. “Infighting is ruining the religion,” a congregant from SSWT remarked. “At college,” he continued, “I felt judged by Orthodox and Conservative Jews who looked down on me for being Reform ...my mom converted to Judaism and people judged me for that, too.”

*“I don’t care what you are eating, I care about what you think...”*

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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DONALD E. MILLER, PhD, is the Executive Director of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture, as well as Firestone Professor of Religion, at the University of Southern California, where he teaches religion and sociology. He is the author or editor of seven books, including *Armenia: Portraits of Survival and Hope* (University of California Press, 2003), *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (University of California Press, 1993), *GenX Religion* (Routledge, 2000), *Reinventing American Protestantism* (University of California Press, 1997), *Homeless Families: The Struggle for Dignity* (University of Illinois Press, 1993), *Writing and Research in Religious Studies* (Prentice Hall, 1992), and *The Case for Liberal Christianity* (Harper & Row, 1981). With Tetsunao Yamamori, he has recently completed a book on global Pentecostalism that is based on extensive field research in twenty developing countries. His current research focuses on faith-based non-governmental organizations in Rwanda, Tanzania, and Armenia.

The authors wish to thank the Lilly Endowment, Inc., and the University of Southern California for their generous support of the “Congregations That Get It” project.

Young adults' choice of congregations rarely is an ideological or theological decision. When becoming members, they are more likely to choose a local community than commit to a larger movement or denomination. They tend to make such choices based on a number of factors such as interpersonal relationships, worship style, geographic location, opportunities for involvement and accessibility of leadership.

Once they decide to affiliate with a congregation, their commitment is strong and active. Young adults are critical of the “show up and watch” style of synagogue participation, which they feel is a waste of time. “I want to be with people who really want to be there, who think it’s fun and not an obligation but a desire or choice,” a young woman from BJ said. A SSWT congregant explained, “I became a leader because this is something I really wanted to put my energy toward.”

*“I want to be with people who really want to be there, who think it’s fun and not an obligation but a desire or choice...”*

While they are committed to their congregation in particular, they remain ambivalent about their membership in the Jewish community at

large. Many young adults think that Jewish organizational programming for their age cohort is frequently aimed at ensuring that they find others Jews to marry. The ubiquity of singles events has sent a strong message that unmarried young adults are not valued community members until they are married to other Jews. Young adults expressed their belief that most communal leaders are more interested in the quantity of people who show up and the amount of money raised, than in the quality of the Jewish experience. Based on her positive experience at BJ, a young woman offered the following suggestion:

*There are better ways to engage young people ...when you show [young adults] that it is in their self-interest to explore spirituality and make clear how the tradition is vibrant and alive and relevant to your life on a daily basis, ...that is the way to bring people in.*

The young adults interviewed value exposure to people of other faiths and do not want to feel cloistered from the outside world. They have acquaintances, co-workers, friends, and even family members who are not Jewish. They want opportunities to share their spiritual interests with people of different faiths. Young adults also appreciate an open acknowledgement of the existence of individual differences such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. Many have discovered that through the articulation of similarities and differences, they deepen their Jewish identities. A woman at BJ explained: “Religions are all different paths to the same

goal—a relationship to God.” She regularly meditates with a community of Jewish and non-Jewish “seekers,” because “questing with non-Jews challenges [her] to think.” Some described how their curiosity and interest in their Jewish identity was sparked by their secular education and exposure to other religions and other forms of spirituality.

*[Young adults] are interested in finding holiness in the world in general, not only within the context of their religion.*

Jewish experiences are not confined or compartmentalized to congregational life. Young adults described having religious experiences in numerous ways: through prayer, through work, through relationships with peers, and through social justice. They are interested in finding holiness in the world in general, not only within the context of their religion. Many young adults said that they do not believe that organized religion is the only way to access God or experience spirituality. Each individual interviewed acknowledged that there are many ways to lead a Jewish life. While they have chosen to engage with a particular congregation, young congregants do not feel as though they, or their peers, have found “The Way.” Instead, they believe they have found a way that works for them right now.

### Lessons Learned<sup>4</sup>

Young adults across faiths have more in common than not regarding their motivations, needs, and desires surrounding congregational engagement. Likewise, congregations across faiths are using similar approaches to engage young adults. Fundamentally, these congregations are making a concerted effort to understand and engage young adults. The following broad lessons emerged from analyses of Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish congregants and congregations:

1. YOUNG ADULTS WANT TO FEEL THAT THEIR PRESENCE IS VALUED. Those who are interested in congregational life are aware that they are exceptional — they know that the majority of young adults are not interested in religious affiliation. As such, those who participate want to be acknowledged for their unusual commitment and interest. Every congregation studied recognizes that young adults make an important contribution to congregational life. Many young congregants appreciate their rabbi’s attention and interest in them. “The rabbi sets a welcoming tone,” a woman from ASBI said. “He encourages people to talk to him and his house is always open.”

Young congregants expressed the value of having a physical space within the congregation for young adult programs and the importance of having specifically designated

<sup>4</sup> See also Belzer et al. 2006.

funding. Some congregations in this study underwrite the activities of the young adult group as a way to acknowledge the importance of continuity based on the participation of the next generation. Some congregations have reduced fees for activities and memberships as a way to ensure that they turn no one away for lack of funds.

Funding a charismatic young person, whose role is dedicated to cultivating community, is a very effective way to acknowledge and engage young adults. Many congregations have a staff person hired specifically to coordinate young adult programming. According to a congregant at SSWT, “[the W Group] really took off when they hired a staff person who is cool ...that people can relate to and trust.”

2. YOUNG ADULTS WANT A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP IN THEIR CONGREGATIONS. They value opportunities to assume leadership roles within their peer group and welcome chances to move into leadership roles in the larger congregation. “It’s about giving people a way to get involved without it being about donating money,” a congregant from BJ asserted. While they comfortably seek guidance from the elders in the community, they appreciate the responsibility and autonomy to determine their group’s future. Congregations engender a sense of ownership by enabling young congregants to create and plan their own events. “I love that [our] group is evolving according to what people want,” a congregant at SSWT said. Some synagogues make leadership positions available to young congregants both within their peer group and within the larger congregation. Leaders frequently praise active participants for their contributions and encourage them to continue being involved. Most of the congregations also purposefully hire young congregants to serve as staff members and educators as a way to engage them in numerous aspects of congregational life.

3. YOUNG ADULTS’ INTERESTS IN RELIGION ARE MULTIFACETED. Interpersonal connections play a very strong role in young adults’ desire to affiliate as members of a particular congregation. Relationship building is a fundamental aspect of young

*Relationship building is a fundamental aspect of young adults’ congregational experience.*

adults’ congregational experience. Within every congregation in this study, participants said they want to associate with people who express and explore their religious identities in similar ways. They use email, email distribution lists and websites to coordinate their face-to-face connections. Rather than replace actual community, modern technology facilitates their in-person connections.

For some, engagement reflects the desire to belong to a community. “It’s not necessarily about God” a woman from

*“It’s not necessarily about God... It’s about the friends and community.”*

ASBI said. “It’s about the friends and community.” Some want to develop professional and social networks. Many young adults are looking for emotional support and guidance. Often, single young adults participate in congregations with the hope of meeting a spouse. Despite that, most actively deplore and avoid specifically “singles” oriented events, even when they are single and looking.

Some young adult congregants wish to deepen their relationship with God. Others want to learn how to increase their ritual observance. Still others approach religion through the intellectual study of Jewish history or religious canon. Many value the opportunity to effect social change with a group of people who share their values. Some congregants seek a space for creative religious expression through music, art, writing, or dance. A congregant from BJ explained: “Judaism is more than text. It’s about culture and food and music and art and Torah.”

Young adult congregants value opportunities to learn. Individuals explained that they do not have a strong foundation of education about Judaism, especially with regard to religious texts and liturgy. Congregants at each synagogue expressed their sense of being less knowledgeable than their peers. A congregant at ASBI articulated a widely expressed sentiment: “I felt intimidated because I didn’t have the knowledge base

*“Judaism is more than text. It’s about culture and food and music and art and Torah.”*

...I’m a very competent person, and I didn’t want to not know.” All three congregations offer multiple learning opportunities for people at varying knowledge levels. Young adults respond enthusiastically to knowledgeable teachers with whom they share mutual respect and who do not speak to them in an excessively dogmatic or condescending manner.

The congregations examined offer multiple points of entry, and in doing so they create numerous arenas for young congregants to reflect upon and articulate their own religious identities. “People aren’t going to be interested in everything, that’s why a variety of events is important,” a congregant from SSWT asserted. Many congregations organize affinity groups so that young congregants can find like-minded peers. Each one offers opportunities where young adults can sometimes engage as participants and other times take on the responsibilities of leading.

4. YOUNG ADULTS THRIVE WHEN THEY ARE “MET WHERE THEY ARE.” They do not want to feel judged for their level of religious practice or knowledge. When they do not have a strong base of knowledge, they do not want to feel ashamed. Some

## Join the Conversation

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said that they were not interested in debating the minute details of observance or tradition, which they asserted is often implicitly about judging others. Instead, they want to approach religious practice focused on meaning and intention. They appreciate opportunities to learn.

The young adults interviewed acknowledged that their level of interest and participation in synagogue life is ever changing. They tend not to measure the strength of their religious identity based on the extent of their religious practice or knowledge. A woman from BJ commented that she needs “to take a break from religion and spirituality sometimes.” While respecting the religious standards of the congregation and their religion at large, many take pride in making their own choices based on personal factors such as their level of personal knowledge, peer group behavior, and their religious upbringing. Each of the congregations effectively takes into account young adults’ differing commitments to religious observance and levels of religious education.

*Many young adults look to congregational elders as role models whom they wish to emulate.*

5. **YOUNG ADULTS WELCOME OPPORTUNITIES TO HAVE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES.** They want to feel moved by music, connection to their history, and a sense of cultural heritage. Congregants described their positive reaction to worship services in which the leaders created space that enabled them to be affected. A young man from SSWT explained, “At services, there is something that happens there, I don’t know what it is ...I can’t explain the calm that comes over me.” They spoke of the importance of feeling like a participant, rather than an audience member. “I don’t like having someone else pray for me,” a man from ASBI asserted. Both peer and clergy led services effectively engaged the young adults interviewed.

Congregational leaders who are accessible and engaging are especially attractive to young adults. Many young adults look to congregational elders as role models whom they wish to emulate. Some turn to religious leaders for personal and religious guidance. They seek leaders who show genuine interest in them as individuals. A congregant from BJ appreciated how the rabbi “never makes you feel like she has somewhere else to be.” Like all congregational attendees, young adults want to be greeted and to feel welcomed.

*Across faiths, young adults are seeking religious relevance in their daily lives.*

Across faiths, young adults are seeking religious relevance in their daily lives. In their congregations, they want an environment that encourages questioning and provides learning opportunities. They want an accessible atmosphere that is consistent with the religious standards of the congregation. They desire honest discussion and appreciate when topics are relevant to their daily lives. “It’s about introspection ...it’s simultaneously taking time to look inside yourself and beyond yourself,” an ASBI congregant explained.

6. **YOUNG ADULTS RESPOND TO A THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL BALANCE BETWEEN PARTICULARISM AND UNIVERSALISM.** Every individual interviewed acknowledged that there are many ways to believe in God and to live a religious life. “Judaism is great, but other religions are great too,” a woman from SSWT asserted. Young adults appreciate when leaders and members refrain from disparaging other religious traditions and denominations. At the same time, they are attracted to congregations where they are free to think critically and analytically. “I think that there are various ways to access God,” said one woman from BJ, “but I think it’s best done in community.”

## Helping Your Congregation Get It<sup>5</sup>

The following suggestions are based on actual approaches used by congregations across faiths:

1. TO SHOW THAT YOUNG CONGREGANTS' PRESENCE IS VALUED:
  - a. Facilitate regular intergenerational communication between congregational members, staff, and leadership.
  - b. Regularly and frequently appreciate active young lay leaders.
  - c. Underwrite the activities of the group as a way to acknowledge the importance of young congregants' participation.
2. TO ENGENDER A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP:
  - a. Enable young congregants to create and plan their own events.
  - b. Create leadership positions for young congregants both within their peer group and within the larger congregation.
  - c. Organize committees that are lay-led by young congregants.
3. TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOUNG CONGREGANTS' INTERESTS IN RELIGION ARE MULTIFACETED:
  - a. Offer multiple points of entry: social, educational, spiritual, cultural, emotional, and theological.
  - b. Create multiple arenas for young congregants to reflect upon and articulate their own religious identities.
  - c. Organize affinity groups so that young congregants can find like-minded peers.
4. TO MEET YOUNG CONGREGANTS WHERE THEY ARE:
  - a. Offer learning opportunities directed specifically to young congregants.
  - b. Reduce fee structure so that participation is financially viable.
  - c. Explore and explain the congregations' theological framework through a learning process that is open to questioning.
5. TO PRODUCE AN AFFECTIVE, OR EMOTIONAL, EXPERIENCE:
  - a. Religious leaders should cultivate an atmosphere during services that enables young congregants to be participants instead of audience members.
  - b. Leadership should be accessible and charismatic.
  - c. Fund a charismatic and young staff person who can cultivate of a community of young congregants.
6. TO CREATE BALANCE BETWEEN THE PARTICULAR AND THE UNIVERSAL:
  - a. Focus on the thoughtful transmission of the theology and tradition of the particular congregation, not on theological debates (especially those that disparage other religious traditions or denominations).
  - b. Create an atmosphere that is self-consciously open and analytical: acknowledging the existence of individual differences such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation.
  - c. Facilitate interfaith and interdenominational exchange.

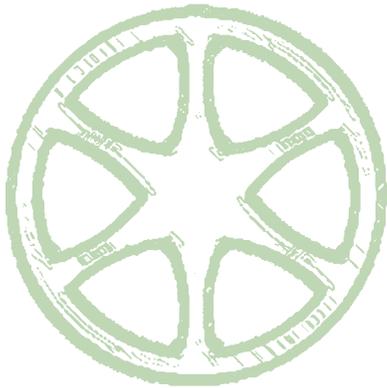
<sup>5</sup> See also Belzer et al. 2004, Belzer 2005.

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S3K is a catalyst for excellence, empowering congregations and communities to create synagogues that are sacred and vital centers of Jewish life.

S3K believes that synagogues are the best way to enrich and sustain the Jewish people. Our work is focused on providing the leadership, knowledge and expertise to help Jewish sacred communities succeed in their missions to be spiritual centers that inspire, uplift and transform each individual who passes through their doors.

S3K has two main vehicles to accomplish its mission: a Leadership Network consisting of visionary clergy, artists, lay leaders and educators and a Synagogue Studies Institute consisting of the leading thinkers in congregational studies, from the Jewish world and beyond.

The S3K process - innovation, conversation, collaboration, and transformation - is a simple but effective framework for furthering the work of our brain trust to catalyze change in Jewish spiritual communities. We connect practitioners and scholars in order to close the feedback loop between research and progress. And, most importantly, we seek long-term systemic change – to transform the face of Jewish congregational life in the 21st century.

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