



USCJ-RA Research Report about Young Adults with OneTable: Overview for Synagogue and Movement Leaders

Introduction

In 2022, the RA-USCJ Joint Innovation Fund invested in a research project with [OneTable](#) to learn about the behaviors and attitudes of Conservative Jewish young adults to inform and prompt conversation about our Movement's engagement strategies and pilots with this population. Since OneTable's inception in 2015 they have reached over 175,000 unique participants in 470 cities through peer-hosted Shabbat meals. Their "young adult" participants are defined as people between the ages of 21-39ish.

How to use this document

This overview document highlights essential take-aways from OneTable's research report delivered to us in December 2022; the report was informed by both a quantitative study (survey) and focus groups. Noteworthy quotes from the report are included in this document to capture key gleanings from the research. At the end of each topic area, you will find questions USCJ developed that can be used to prompt conversation and dialogue in your community. Please note that indented, italicized text represents direct quotes from survey participants.

About the survey participants

"The survey was fielded to OneTable participants who attended a OneTable meal (as a host or guest) and who also identified themselves as somehow connected to Conservative Judaism. This included listing activities like attending Camp Ramah and Schechter schools, as well as participating in USY. Additionally, we expanded the group to contain anyone who, on their OneTable host application, shared they grew up often or always celebrating Shabbat and today, as adults, identified as 'Just Jewish.'" The average age of respondents to this survey was 27.

This overview is broken down into two main sections: [Building On Our Strengths](#) and [Exploring Key Findings with Questions](#).

Building On Our Strengths

Our survey participants feel nostalgic about the Conservative Movement: Overall, most participants shared a deep sense of nostalgia about Conservative Judaism in their youth. For some, those were camp memories, participating in USY, or the style of prayer in Conservative Judaism. They are also deeply committed to traditions and rituals of Conservative Judaism they were steeped in as children or teens.

98% want to raise Jewish children: Of those who participated in the survey, 82% intend on being parents or are parents already, indicating a strong commitment to Jewish continuity. We intentionally did not offer a definition of what "raising Jewish children" means.

Personal relationships with clergy/mentors are relevant and matter: “54%, have a positive, worthwhile relationship with a Jewish mentor. One-third of respondents have had a one-on-one meeting with a rabbi or spiritual mentor in the past year and 42% are looking to meet one-on-one with a rabbi or spiritual mentor in the coming year.”

Participants are interested in a range of experiences that are both traditional and contemporary: “When asked ‘which aspects of Jewish experiences are important to you?’ respondents answered (in ranking order): holiday celebrations, Shabbat meals, family traditions, social time with other Jewish people, and community events. Following this, respondents shared that Jewish music/art/culture, communal prayer services, and social justice/advocacy were high ranking.” There also was a strong interest in learning about marriage and charity/philanthropy from a Jewish perspective.

Our young adults compared favorably to their peers in the Pew Research Center’s study: On questions around a sense of belonging to the Jewish people and caring about Israel as part of being Jewish, young adults in our research reported stronger results than people of similar age in the Pew study, but not as strongly as people all ages who self-identified as Conservative in the Pew study.

“In sum, this group of Conservative Movement affiliated young adults feel a great deal of connection to the Jewish people. They are still associating themselves as connected to the Jewish people and also finding new and authentic ways to create a Jewish identity that is meaningful to them. More than half are either just as or more religious as when they were raised and an additional 14% shared they’re differently religiously observant from how they were raised. This group is also connected to Jewish community - 70% shared they feel connected to an existing Jewish community.”

EXPLORING KEY FINDINGS WITH QUESTIONS

Jews of Color, LGBTQIA+, and individuals with disabilities were under-represented: “...Zero Jews of color participated in the survey and 14% identified as LGBTQIA+, whereas compared against the OneTable Impact Survey, 20% of Conservative affiliated respondents identified as Jews of Color and 24% as LGBTQIA+.” Only 12% total identified as having a physical disability or being neurodivergent, which is much lower than percentages across the continent. Given this, we should have expected higher participation from all these audiences, leading us to ask...

1. What might be the reasons why people who identify as a Jew of Color and/or LGBTQIA+ did not participate in a survey sponsored by the Conservative Movement?
2. What might this underrepresentation tell us about how historically marginalized communities feel about sharing their experiences with our Movement?
3. What can we do to reach Movement-connected young adults who identify as Jews of Color and/or LGBTQIA+ to find out more about their opinions and behaviors related to Jewish experience and the Conservative Movement?

Sentiments vary about Israel: Overall, feelings and sentiments towards Israel leaned in a positive direction. However, while the majority of respondents said that Israel is either an important OR essential part of their Jewish identity, they still had nuanced feelings:

- 80% care about Israel as a place where many Jews live

- 70% have concerns about Israeli policies towards Palestinians
- 63% believe Jews' right to self-determination is realized through the State of Israel
- 60% selected they have concerns about Israeli policies regarding religious pluralism

"I wish there was better convos about Israel/Palestine. I am a Zionist and also very much pro Palestine and it is hard to find that sort of community."

Given the complexity of feelings about Israel that we see in the data from our younger adults', we should ask...

1. How can we change the paradigm for discussing Israel so it isn't a binary conversation?
2. What can we do to create a more open environment for people to safely express their opinions about different aspects related to Israel including the State, the land, the government, the people, the Palestinians' circumstances, and Zionism?
3. What shifts should we make in our messaging about Israel to North American audiences?

Finances are sometimes a barrier – primarily for parents of young children: Contrary to the assumption that single/coupled young adults don't have the financial means to participate in Synagogue/Jewish life, "73% said that finances are not a barrier to participation." However, for new parents/parents with young children (11% of survey respondents), more stated that finances are a barrier to participation leading us to wonder....

1. What new financial models could we pilot to minimize financial barriers for parents or individuals who are single or partnered?
2. What new program and engagement models can we trial for parents so they can connect, participate, and contribute to our communities without substantial financial investment?
3. If finances are only a barrier for 27% of the participants (many of whom are single or partnered without children), what other barriers may be preventing them from participating in synagogue communities?

A noteworthy percentage (14%) do not identify as Ashkenazi: Although the majority of our survey participants identify as Ashkenazi (described as following Jewish customs of Central and Eastern Europe), we should keep front of mind the importance of embracing cultural and ethnic diversity in our outreach, curricula, religious experiences, and communal gatherings. Given the importance of demonstrating inclusivity of different customs and traditions, we should ask...

1. Since many of our communities typically default to an Ashkenzi lens or customs, what could we do to diversify approaches or perspectives to be more inclusive?
2. What do Jews of other backgrounds say they need to feel seen as equals in our communities?
3. How can we partner with people to bring in new customs?
4. What might be the barriers in our communities that prevent people who identify as Ashkenazi from welcoming new traditions that feel different from what they believe is normative?

Clergy and our communities openly embracing interfaith couples matters: "63% of respondents are in a relationship/partnered and most (76%) of those in a relationship are with someone who identifies as Jewish. For 80% of respondents it is important to have a partner who identifies as Jewish. For those who shared they were in interfaith relationships, most are looking for support or resources around sharing Jewish ideas, values, and practices with their partner. Many could use resources

around helping their partner's family feel included in Jewish experiences, raising Jewish children with parents of different faiths, and finding more accepting/affirming spaces in the Jewish community.”

“For those in interfaith relationships, the nuances of what their spouse can/can't do doesn't usually come as a surprise to them. Some state they knew what they signed up for, and accepted it. And some turn to other more flexible sects of Judaism so their entire family can be included. For those who grew up interfaith in the focus groups, there wasn't much of a difference between how they associate with Conservative Judaism, and how others do.”

“In a dream world I would love to see the Conservative Movement wholeheartedly honor and respect same-sex marriages, interfaith marriages, and interracial marriages. and I understand it's not helpful for a movement to be a complete monolith, but to come out more publicly and be more welcoming in that way...”

“I would like to have more Jewish friends to talk about having a non-Jewish partner whom I plan to spend my life with. Guidance or couples to look up to would be helpful”

With almost a quarter of our partnered respondents currently being in interfaith relationships, we should ask ourselves – as organizations, as synagogues, and as a Movement...

1. What next steps should each synagogue take to foster genuinely inclusive, welcoming environments for couples in interfaith relationships and their immediate or extended families?
2. How can we shift conversation in our Movement toward [broadly] embracing communal, pastoral and lifecycle inclusion rather than [primarily] debate about changes to officiation standards?
3. What partnerships could our Movement explore so interfaith couples can feel part of Conservative communities and supported by Movement clergy even when they are referred outside the Movement for officiation services?

Conservative style prayer still resonates, but other streams of Judaism feel more relevant:

“The overall sentiment is still positive towards Conservative Judaism. Specifically, participants prefer the Conservative style of prayer/synagogue. “However, some have gravitated towards the more progressive mindsets of Reform/Reconstructionist synagogues, or the openness of places like Chabad, and the lower commitment of alternative models. Some have also gravitated towards Jewish social justice groups with a specific purpose. While most people are still most comfortable with Conservative traditions, they're also turned off by some of the Movement's beliefs/rules/practices around egalitarianism, kashrut, and others.”

“Ideologically, culturally and socially, I don't feel like I resonate with the Conservative Movement anymore. But I still have all these memories and associations with how I relate to Judaism and my Jewish identity. That is, for better, for worse, it is the Conservative Movement.”

Given the desire for more progressive, accepting, low-barrier and justice-oriented spaces, we should consider...

1. What ways might we inadvertently be communicating rigidity or judgment that make young adults feel we are not accepting, progressive, or justice-oriented? Who in our communities may be communicating these messages – members, lay leaders, professionals, clergy, others? How can we become more self-aware?

2. How can we better communicate with young adults about our Movement's social justice efforts and engage them directly in justice work?
3. How might we expand our communities beyond our current membership models so young adults can connect with the aspects of Jewish life, community, and mentor relationships that matter to them without expectations or pressures to become paying members or long-term community members?

Social justice is a critical part of their Judaism: "From the focus group findings, we see that some participants perceive the Conservative Movement as not as involved in social justice as some other sects of Judaism. 42% shared social justice is one of the most important aspects of Jewish experiences. Similarly, 40% attended social justice events/rallies in the past year and an even larger percentage, 49%, would like to attend a social justice event or rally in the coming year. Finally, 41% would be interested in learning more about social justice from a Jewish perspective."

"I wouldn't say that I've been turned away from the Conservative Movement. And again I feel most comfortable, both religiously, observantly, and liturgically, but where I feel turned a little bit uncomfortable with the Conservative Movement is its role in seeing involvement in social justice. And so that's something that makes me a little disappointed."

Given the strong intersection between social justice and Jewish expression for young adults, we wonder...

1. How can we bring young adults into our Movement's social justice work?
2. What resources and opportunities do young adult audiences need from our Movement to support their social justice efforts and priorities?
3. How can we better elevate social justice work championed by the Conservative/Masorti Social Justice Commission so young adults see this as a Movement priority?

People seek more support in their journeys to parenting and raising children: A theme that emerged (both among parents and those who want to be parents) was a desire for more support around conception and children. These ranged from respondents wanting to plan newborn rituals to the idea of having a bris for their son. Almost every response from parents to "What was a hard life transition or celebratory moment in your life where you would have valued more support from the Jewish community?" was around parenting and children.

"When I was in the process of trying to become a parent, I was supported by my family/friends who are Jewish, but there weren't Jewish communal resources readily available to support my fertility journey and the in-between space of wanting to be a parent but not being one yet."

With a strong response from those who are parents indicating a need for more support from the Jewish community, we ask:

1. What resources and relationships can we extend to those trying to conceive?
2. How can we find out from parents who have pursued adoption, surrogacy, or fertility treatments how the Jewish community can specifically be supportive to them in their journeys?
3. How can we offer connection and support to people in their journeys toward parenting within or beyond the synagogue?
4. What can we learn about meaningful engagement from relationships we build with parents of young children who are not synagogue members?

Young adults seek more support when experiencing life transitions: Participants expressed a desire for more support around life transitions. “For those who did share about moments where they would have valued more support, the key themes are: moving (15%), college (10%), death (9%), career (7%), wedding (7%), having a baby (6%), and post-college (6%).”

Below are a few stand-out comments from participants:

“The transition between college and independent adult life in a new city was a time when I felt I couldn’t quite find the right Jewish community.”

“when I was ill in the hospital, it was difficult to find a rabbi and kosher food.”

“I will likely be engaged soon. It is daunting going into planning a wedding without any personal relationship with a Rabbi.”

“getting engaged was a celebratory moment, but I didn’t know how to mark it Jewishly.”

“I am going through a dark time in terms of my faith in humanity. At moments like these, my father or grandfather might have spoken to a seasoned rabbi they knew and gotten some straight talk, but I don’t know any rabbis like that anymore.”

1. How can we anticipate young adults’ needs before they encounter them?
2. What ways can young adults reliably find and mingle with Jewish community as they move to new places during their early college and professional careers?

Personal relationships that resonate, matter: While the majority feel connected to an existing Jewish community, nearly 25% would like to connect to Jewish community and haven’t found their place. Half of this group said they do not currently have a positive relationship with a Rabbi, Cantor, or other mentor, but would like to have one. Interestingly one third of this specific group are in Interfaith relationships. Additionally, this group is unaffiliated with synagogues at higher rates than the larger group, leading us to ask...

1. How do we make more time available for our Movement’s clergy or other Jewish mentors to connect with young adults regardless of their membership or previous participation?
2. How can our Movement’s rabbis, cantors, and educators build relationships that resonate in order to meet the life needs of young adults?
3. Are there other clergy, lay leaders, or community members that can connect with young adults, in place of busy clergy?

Resonant experiences shape their Jewish experiences: When asked specifically about Jewish programming and organizations respondents have been involved in, they shared, in ranking order, OneTable, synagogue, Moishe House, and JCC. Additionally, many programs directly strengthened participants’ Jewish identity in college, but overwhelmingly Hillel (77%) was a key program, and Birthright Israel was a close second (41%).

“When asked in the focus groups about how the Conservative Movement can be more relevant in their lives today, many went right to the idea of synagogue. Many don’t feel Conservative synagogue life is geared toward them right now, but that they may feel more comfortable at a different phase of life/down the line.” Given that young adults desire experiences and relationships that are personally meaningful for them in the life stage they are in, how might we...

1. inspire the nostalgia they feel from their childhood?
2. expand holiday, Shabbat, and social events outside of synagogue spaces and conventional membership definitions?
3. develop more travel, Jewish learning, and volunteer service programs with young adults?
4. make connections among peers who are geographically close with similar backgrounds and feelings about the Conservative Movement?
5. provide alumni lists to reconnect people that were previously involved in the Conservative Movement?
6. offer support and resources to young adults by partnering more closely with other programs and organizations meeting that population’s needs (e.g. Hillel, OneTable, Birthright, MoisheHouse)?

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

USCJ and the RA are committed to exploring new paradigms for engaging Gen Y and Gen Z. We are beginning to trial innovative approaches to relationship-building and engagement that resonate with this audience. We invite your partnership and leave you with a telling statement from one of the survey participants that surfaced several of key themes we are exploring in our pilots:

“Please less gatekeeping from the Conservative Movement -- create better inclusion policies for Jews from multifaith households (even if they are not Jewish or their father is not Jewish). Make meaningful morally-resonant statements and action on issues of social justice that go beyond learning. Don’t rely on Israel for our cultural offerings, invest in programs that create authentic diasporic Jewish culture.”