

THE CONGREGATIONS OF WESTCHESTER



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INTRODUCTION

The Westchester Congregation Study was initiated and sponsored by UJA-Federation of New York through the Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal (CoJIR) and its Synagogues for the Future initiative. The primary purpose of the study was to learn about the Jewish identities and connections of synagogue members. Common wisdom holds that strong congregations build strong communities and, indeed, there is much evidence from NJPS 2000 that synagogue members are the bedrock of the Jewish community. In the process of learning about synagogue members, we inevitably also learned about the institution—the role that the synagogue plays in people’s lives and the themes that strengthen or undermine that role.

Method

There is a story to this study that, in itself, reveals much about the congregations of Westchester. We begin with a brief telling...

Recruiting Synagogues

In 2001, 21 congregations in Westchester began work with Synagogue 2000 (S2K). Sponsored by UJA-Federation of New York, the project is a three-year intervention aimed at revitalizing synagogues, reinvigorating their prayer and their learning, and deepening their sense of community.¹ In the current study, we wanted to be certain to include congregations that were participating in S2K and those that were not.

Our first step was to recruit congregations, a task that proved more difficult than originally imagined. Our plan was to develop a sample of S2K and non-S2K congregations that were matched by size and denomination. To that end, in January 2003 the presidents and rabbis of 24 carefully selected synagogues (12 S2K and 12 non-S2K) were invited to join the study. The next month, an informational meeting was held for representatives of these synagogues. The meeting was followed by personal emails, letters, and telephone calls.

We were convinced that the offer was irresistible: The Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, with its technical expertise and experience in congregational research, would conduct a survey of a random sample of the synagogues’ members. The synagogues would receive a full feedback report with their own results and the report of the community-wide data—an opportunity to learn about themselves and to place themselves in the context of the wider community. UJA-Federation of New York would provide follow-up consultation based on the survey findings—an opportunity to put the data to good use. All of this would come to them at no cost, a gift of federation.

To participate, congregations needed to meet four requirements: the agreement of the rabbi and the board, the appointment of a contact person to work with the research team,

¹ For more information about Synagogue 2000, see the S2K website at S2K.org.

permission for Brandeis University to use the membership list for sampling, and an openness to receiving and sharing the results. Several of the synagogues, particularly the non-S2K ones, found these requirements difficult or impossible to meet.

The recruitment stage of the study lasted into Summer 2003 with every attempt being made to address these difficulties. Two synagogues had concerns with the content of the questionnaire. To gain their participation, we customized the core instrument by adding and eliminating items to suit their particular needs. More common were concerns about releasing the membership list and about contacting members who might prefer not to be included. In the year in which the no-call registry was one of Congress's most bi-partisan and popular measures, this reaction may be a sign of the times. To address the concern, Brandeis University provided assurances of its non-disclosure policy and encouraged the synagogues to give their members an opportunity to "opt out" of the survey. Several synagogues circulated a letter announcing the study and giving their members the option to have their names removed from any lists sent to Brandeis. In every instance, only a few people asked to be excluded from the study. The highest number of exclusions was 25, but this comes from one of the largest synagogues and represents a mere 3% of its total membership.

In the end, 16 synagogues joined the study—11 S2K synagogues and 5 non-S2K. The breakout by denomination and size is seen in Table 1.

The difficulty of the cultivation stage reveals something about the character of congregations. Some are distrustful of outside agencies. Some do not value data and/or fear what the data might tell them. Some do not want to "bother" their members with what might be seen as an invasion of privacy. And some feel that information gathering merely adds to their workload and distracts them from more important synagogue matters.

There are several plausible explanations for our greater success with the S2K synagogues. For one, Synagogue 2000's screening process may have worked well, selecting those places that were more open to learning and experimentation. Just as they were open to the possibilities of Synagogue 2000 so, too, were they open to the opportunity presented by the research. Alternatively, through their work with S2K, these congregations may have learned the value of opening up their process and listening to their members. Or, through their participation in the S2K Team Survey, they may have seen the usefulness of objective data.² It is also possible that through their involvement in S2K, these congregations have developed a closer relationship with UJA-Federation of New York and have come to greater appreciation for the role that the community might play in strengthening the synagogues in Westchester. The study may have been seen as another positive element in that relationship.

² Sales, A. (November 2002). *S2K Westchester—Findings from the Team Survey: A Report to UJA-Federation of New York*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University.

Table 1: Participating Synagogues

	S2K Congregations (Membership Units)	Non-S2K Congregations (Membership Units)
<i>Reform</i>		
	Sinai Free Synagogue (243)	
	Temple Beth Abraham (437)	
	Scarsdale Synagogue-Tremont Temple (497)	Temple Israel of Northern Westchester (671)
	Larchmont Temple (755)	Temple Israel of New Rochelle (722)
	Westchester Reform Temple (1195)	
<i>Conservative</i>		
		Greenburgh Hebrew Center (331)
	Shaarei Tikvah (226)	Congregation Kneses Tifereth Israel (331)
	Jewish Community Center of Harrison (455)	
	Congregation Sons of Israel (587)	Westchester Jewish Center (582)
	Beth El Synagogue Center (943)	
<i>Orthodox</i>		
	Hebrew Institute of White Plains (257)	
<i>Unaffiliated</i>		
	Pleasantville Community Synagogue (191)	

Sampling Members

The next step of the research involved drawing a random sample of 150 households from the membership lists of each congregation. Lists were randomized and then a sample of households was drawn.³ Individuals to receive the survey were selected in such a way that half of the surveys were sent to men and half to women.

³ In the Synagogue 2000 congregations, the S2K team members were eliminated from the list before randomization and selection. Team members had been surveyed in the prior year as part of the S2K research. We therefore built in the possibility of comparing the views of team members with those of the congregation at large.

Administering the Survey

As each congregation came on board, we administered its survey. Data collection thus extended from May through September 2003. Surveys were distributed via the web, mail, email, and/or fax. Where email addresses were available, participants were notified via email that they had been selected. Within a few days, they were sent a unique link into a secure website for their individual survey. Most of the congregations, however, have no email lists. And those that do have incomplete lists that are not linked to the general membership list. As a result, most participants were notified via postcard that they had been selected. A mail survey and return envelope were sent within a week of this notification.

Non-respondents were contacted multiple times via mail, email, and telephone. Over the several months of data collection, close to 2,000 telephone calls were made. Through this effort we learned some of the reasons for non-response. A few people were no longer members of the synagogue but their names had not, as yet, been removed from the list. Some maintain a membership but no longer live in the area. Having no real contact with the synagogue, they felt that their responses would not be relevant. A few are members of more than one synagogue and answered for their “primary” membership (which was not one of the synagogues in the study). Because the sample was drawn randomly, it included several elderly members, some of whom were in nursing homes or were homebound and unable to complete the survey. A few people wrote us letters about their lives, trying to explain why they could not fit themselves into the categories of the survey. Some are simply not active members of the congregation and did not feel qualified to participate. Although we explained that their views were particularly important and that the survey was as much about them as it was about the synagogue, the inactive members were especially hard to reach. Finally, there were those—the majority of non-respondents—who do not believe in surveys or would not take the time to participate.

In any event, follow-up efforts succeeded in increasing the response rate to an acceptable level. The final sample includes 1,294 members in the 16 congregations. The overall response rate of 54% gives us good confidence that the results of the survey are reliable.

Overview of Themes

Most of the items on the survey were based on a three- or five-point scale on which respondents indicated their level of agreement/disagreement or their level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with various aspects of their personal, synagogue, and communal experience. We also wanted to know what was on people’s minds and in their hearts. To this end, we asked two open-ended questions: “What aspects of Judaism, Jewish life, or the Jewish community bring you the greatest joy?” and “What aspects are of concern to you, worry you, turn you off, or disappoint you?” Over 1,000 people wrote in responses to each of these questions. Their comments were content analyzed and sorted into categories. Some respondents commented on more than one aspect, producing a final tally of some 1,600 positive comments and some 1,200 negative comments.

Sources of Jewish Joy

As seen in Table 2, the key to people’s Jewish joy resides in personal and familial practices centered in the home. These experiences appear to be filled with good feelings and memories and they are often connected to the joy of transmitting Judaism to one’s children and grandchildren.

Table 2: Comments on Sources of Jewish Joy

	<i>Number of Comments</i>
Personal and Familial Judaism Lifecycle events, holidays, and Shabbat; family and Jewish home	444
Synagogue, services, and spirituality	263
Tradition and Heritage	179
Jewish Connections	158
Jewish Identification Jewish identity and Jewish life; peoplehood; Jewish pride	152
Transmission to the next generation	137
Learning and growing	106
Jewish communal institutions and organizations	72
Israel	70
Miscellaneous	26
TOTAL	1607

Another 48 individuals wrote in “none” in response to the question about Jewish joys. There were those who said that they “do not look to Judaism for joy and therefore cannot select a particular aspect.” Or the child of Holocaust survivors who explained, “My feelings towards being Jewish are very much connected to this aspect—although this does not provide joy!” Or the secular Jew who wrote, “I am an atheist, so prayer and the like hold no joy or meaning for me.” These comments are a reminder of the complexity within the ranks of the affiliated population.

Sources of Jewish Concern

A much larger number (n=198) wrote in the word “none” to the companion question about Jewish concerns and worries, indicating an overall positive view of the Jewish world. These respondents stand in contrast to the others, who offered over a thousand comments on concerns, worries, disappointments, and turnoffs (Table 3). Notably, the top concerns of the affiliated population—Jewish continuity and Israel--very much match those of the organized Jewish community and its agencies. It is also notable that, just as the central source of joy is personal and familial, the key sources of concern are communal.

Table 3: Sources of Jewish Concern, Worry, Disappointment

	<i>Number of Comments</i>
Continuity Intermarriage and assimilation; apathy and diminishment of practice and feeling	295
Divisiveness in Judaism	170
Israel	162
Synagogue Sense of community, leadership, politics	145
Prayer, services, spirituality	136
Cost of Jewish life	99
Anti-Semitism	95
Relationship to other communities	62
Community inclusiveness and cooperation	45
Miscellaneous	28
TOTAL	1237

Outline of the Report

This report is organized into four sections: SELF, SYNAGOGUE, COMMUNITY, and FUTURE. The organization mirrors the core theme of the survey results: For most people, the further from the self, the less intense their experience of Judaism. Synagogue members most powerfully experience their Judaism at home and less so in the Jewish community and its institutions. Respondents express the greatest satisfaction with their home observances, somewhat less satisfaction with their involvement in synagogue life, and the least satisfaction with their participation in the wider Jewish community. They most commonly cite a blend of home, holiday, friends and family as the source of their greatest Jewish joy. And they most often refer to communal issues as the sources of their Jewish concern, worry or disappointment. These distinctions are evidenced in their views of the future, as well. Greatest worries concern Jewish continuity, which respondents see being threatened by intermarriage, assimilation, apathy, and ignorance. At the same time, one of the great joys is in transmitting Judaism to one's children and thus being a link between the generations of one's own family.

Each of the four sections of this report presents the results of both quantitative and qualitative analyzes. Taken together, they draw a consistent and richly-detailed portrait of the members of the Jewish congregations of Westchester.

SELF

This section describes the members of the Westchester congregations in terms of their demographic characteristics, their relationship to the synagogue, and their Jewish identities. Insight into their identities comes from quantitative survey data as well as from written comments on the aspects of Judaism, Jewish life, and the Jewish community that bring them the greatest joy.

Composition of the Membership

Data on respondents' demographic characteristics describe the composition of Westchester's synagogues and they provide important contextual information for the survey results.

Gender

Despite the fact that the survey was sent to an equal number of men and women, the sample disproportionately represents females (64%). Not only did women more often respond to the surveys sent to them but, on occasion, women filled out the questionnaire addressed to their husband.

Age

Synagogue members' average age is 56, and, as seen in Table 4, synagogue membership is largely dominated by the Baby Boomers. Also apparent in the table is the drop-off in membership that occurs as individuals and their families age.

Table 4: Age of Synagogue Members

	<i>Percent</i>
20s-30s	9
40s	32
50s	25
60s	13
70s	13
80s	6
90s	1

Jewish Background

The vast majority of participants are Jews by birth (96%). A small number are converts to Judaism (2%) and an equally small number are non-Jews (2%).

Their backgrounds are highly varied. As seen in Table 5, 71% were raised in the largest Jewish denominations—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Another 15% were raised in secular Jewish households or those that were nominally Jewish. 3% were raised Christian. Notably, only three people were raised in mixed Jewish-Christian households,

a sign of the times in which they were raised and, perhaps, an indication of the effect of background on affiliation. The question about religious upbringing allowed people to check all that apply. Some 10% placed their childhood household into more than one Jewish category, often in disparate parts of the Jewish world.

Table 5: Religion Growing Up

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Orthodox	163	13
Conservative	497	40
Reform	231	19
Reconstructionist	6	<1
secular-just Jewish	183	15
Christian	39	3
Other	17	1
none	12	1
mixed denominations/religions ⁴	102	8
TOTAL	1250	100

Just over 40% are currently affiliated with a synagogue that is the same denomination in which they were raised.⁵ The other 58% have switched denominations, at least as measured by their affiliation choices. As seen in Table 6, the highest rate of adherence to denomination of origin is among those raised Reform; the lowest rate is among those raised Orthodox. These findings are consistent with the national data from NJPS 2000.⁶

Table 6: Denomination Switching in the Three Major Movements

Current Affiliation	Domination Growing Up		
	<i>Orthodox</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Reform</i>
Orthodox	25	4	1
Conservative	50	59	25
Reform	25	37	73
TOTAL	100%	100%	99%

Marriage and Family

The great majority of synagogue members are married or in a committed relationship (Table 7). It is rare in the Westchester synagogues to find single people who have never--or not as yet--married. These synagogues are simply not places for singles.

⁴ Mixed includes: Orthodox-Conservative (28), Orthodox-Reform (5), Orthodox-secular (9), Conservative-Reform (12), Conservative-Reconstructionist (3), Conservative-secular (23), Reform-Reconstructionist (1), Reform-secular (18), and Christian-Jewish (3). Our coding accounts only for the first two categories selected. A few people (n=14) checked three or four responses.

⁵ Calculation excludes those who indicated a mixed denomination household growing up.

⁶ NJPS 2000 estimates a retention rate of 38% for Orthodox, 49% for Conservative, and 64% for Reform. NJPS and Westchester measures are not strictly comparable as the national data are based on self-identification and include both affiliated and unaffiliated Jews.

Table 7: Marital Status

	<i>Percent</i>
married	84
committed relationship	2
divorced	5
widowed	8
never married	1

Of those who are married or in a committed relationship, 85% are in inmarried families where both partners are Jews by birth. Another 5% are in conversionary families where one or both partners are converts to Judaism. The intermarriage rate among synagogue members is 10%. This rate varies substantially by synagogue. In three of the synagogues, no intermarried families appeared in our sample. In the other synagogues, the rate ranges from 1% to 29%. Nonetheless, the overall rate of 10% is less than half the intermarriage rate found in the Jewish Community Study of New York and well below the national figures on intermarriage. As we know from the Community Study, Jews in intermarried households have low affiliation rates. Their minimal representation in the congregation sample is consistent with the Jewish community survey data.

Given the high marriage rate and the family-centered nature of synagogues, it is not surprising that almost everyone in the study has children. Table 8 shows the age of the youngest child. We looked specifically at this child on the assumption that the youngest child most strongly determines the developmental stage of the family.

Table 8: Age of Youngest Child

	<i>Percent</i>
newborn – 5	13
6 - 18 years old	42
19 or older	42
no children	3

Relationship to the Synagogue

On average, people have been members of the synagogue for almost 16 years, an indication of a degree of stability in affiliation (Table 9). The fact that 11% have joined within the past couple of years also indicates the continuing addition of new families to the synagogues' membership rolls.⁷

Table 9: Years Member of This Synagogue

Number of Years	<i>Percent</i>
2 or less	11
2½ to 5	22
5½ to 10	20

⁷ It is not possible from this study to determine whether this represents an overall growth in membership as we have no data on how many people disaffiliated during this time period.

11 to 20	20
21 or more	27

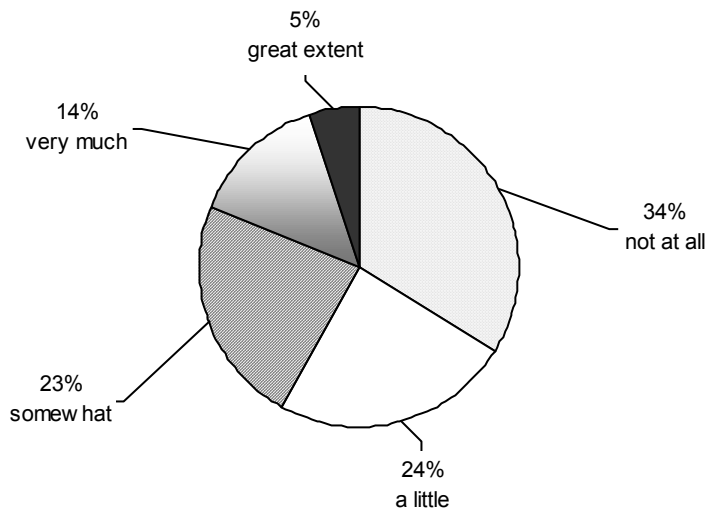
Most people joined the synagogue when they were in their 30s or 40s, a time when they were actively raising their families and, we assume, had a need to educate their children. It is also clear from these results that if the synagogue does not capture someone by the time they are in their 50s, they are unlikely to win them to membership beyond that point. (See Table 10.)

Table 10: Age When First Joined This Synagogue

	<i>Percent</i>
birth to 19	2
20s	7
30s	49
40s	30
50s	6
60s	3
70s	3
80s-90s	1

One-fourth of the respondents are current or past members of the synagogue board. It is possible that leaders were more inclined to complete the survey and that leadership is thus over-represented in the sample. As seen in Figure 1, however, the sample does include people with various orientations to the “active core,” defined as the people who fill the sanctuary on a regular basis, attend classes, and come to synagogue activities.

Figure 1: Extent Consider Self a Member of the Congregation’s “Active Core”

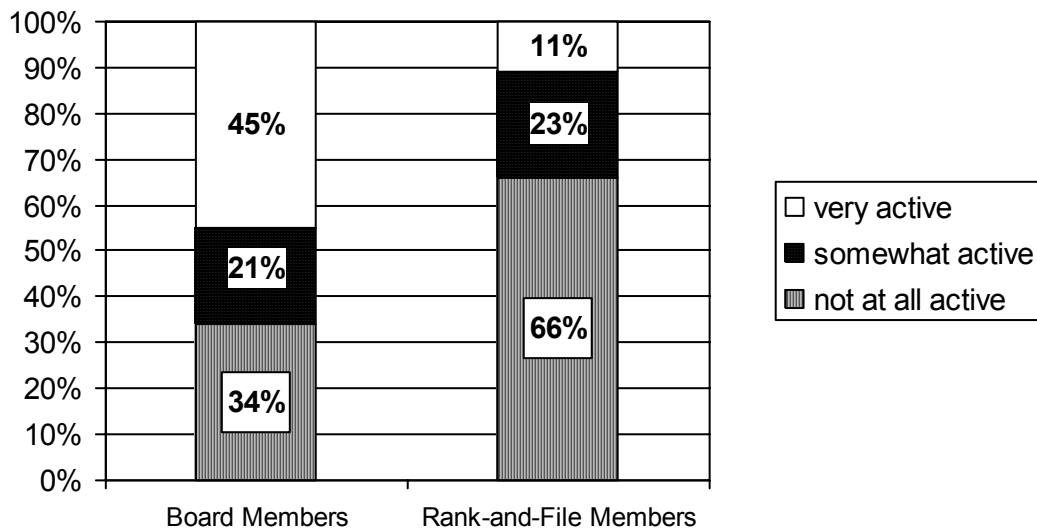


The relationship between leadership and the active core is as we would predict: In every synagogue (except one), those who have ascended to leadership positions are significantly more likely to be part of the active core than are those who have not taken on such responsibility.

Still, the correlation is imperfect leading to an important observation: Fewer than half of current and past board members are highly active members. (See Figure 2.) There are several possible explanations for this finding: In selecting board members, synagogues may disregard level of involvement as a criterion and instead choose people with financial resources or professional expertise. Or perhaps synagogues do not expect or require board members to attend services, study, or participate in other synagogue activities. Or perhaps the time board members are willing devote to the synagogue is consumed by the hours they give to governance. They may view their service on the board as an alternative to other forms of participation. And/or perhaps board members burn out.

For the purposes of the research, the mix of active and inactive members, leaders and rank-and-file members allows us to test for differences in experiences and opinions among those with different positions within the congregation.

Figure 2: Active Core by Position in the Synagogue



Jewish Identity

This section describes congregants' Jewish identities. It includes their expression of positive affect toward being Jewish, their approaches to Judaism, their satisfaction with Jewish life, and the core elements of the Jewish experience that bring them joy.

Jewish Identification -- #5 Source of Joy (152 comments)

In response to the question about sources of Jewish joy, a number of people wrote about their Jewish identities. To be sure, this category is not the largest, but it does present the positive view of being Jewish. The survey did not explicitly ask about pride in being Jewish, sense of Jewish peoplehood, or importance placed on being Jewish. Nonetheless, these feelings are prevalent, and we suspect that they may underlie many of the other comments in the survey. If people did not care so much about being Jews, they would not be so troubled by what they perceive to be the negative aspects of Jewish life and community.

Jewish Identity and Life. A number of people simply expressed their affection for Judaism and described the essential nature of their Jewish identity. A few wrote "All!" or "Everything about being Jewish brings me joy" or "I just enjoy being Jewish." "I love being Jewish" begins one comment. "I embrace my Judaism and am proud of my ability to raise my daughter with a strong sense of Judaism" begins a second. "Judaism pervades my life, my relationships, my intellectual interests and my work" begins a third. Jewish religion and life has given these respondents "fulfillment over the years"; it brings them "joy," "pride," and "comfort,"; it gives them "a sense of survival and longevity."

For example, one respondent wrote, "I love being Jewish, having a Jewish home, Jewish family life. We are proud to be Jews in a community with a large population of Jews. We love our synagogue and extended family here..." Another said, "It gives me great joy just to be Jewish so that most communal events at temple or traditional celebrations at home and with friends and family are my favorite times." A convert to Judaism said, "I am a Jew by choice and keeping a Jewish home and life is a joy."

Judaism is key to these individuals' lives and Jewish identity is central to their sense of self. "My Judaism is extremely important to my life," wrote one. Being Jewish is "a central part of my identity," wrote another. "It's the whole belief in who and what you are, what you stand for," wrote a third.

For a few, the joy resides in "knowing that I am Jewish, feeling Jewish" and not in particular Jewish actions. These individuals wrote about strong Jewish sentiments but were careful to note that they were not practicing Jews or they were not active in the community or in their synagogue. For example, one said, "Obviously, my religion is a private experience for me and brings me joy and pride. Organized religion—while I do attend—seems to be low on my list." Another wrote, "Knowing where I fit in society. I am Jewish and proud to be whether I practice or not."

A few comments capture the gestalt of being Jewish--the joy in the totality of the experience. The following comment illustrates well the aggregation of experiences that create a sense of Jewish joy:

“Discovering, in middle age, the beauty and wisdom and joy of Judaism. Learning Hebrew at 51 years of age. Finding a welcoming and warm synagogue with friendly, humble, ‘regular’ people and clergy. Lighting the Shabbat candles as my mother taught me. Finding that Shabbat is one of the greatest ideas ever! Watching kids run into Hebrew school, seeing their parents bring them there. Being happy to be a Jew, a member of a tribe, a part of a long history of an ethical, moral and steadfast religion.”

Peoplehood. A number of other respondents wrote about Jewish peoplehood, understood both synchronically (a bond with Jews around the world today) and diachronically (connections to ancestors and to Jewish history). Some people put these two elements together, such as the person who wrote: “The feeling of belonging to a people and a tradition that has lasted for so many, many years, and that brings us together with common elements of prayer, tradition, culture and customs no matter where you are in the world.”

There are those who wrote about “being part of a 5,000 plus year history and culture,” “the feeling that I am part of an unbroken heritage,” the joy of “following traditions from thousands of years ago.” And there are those who described the historical connection in familial terms. They wrote about how their Judaism makes them a “link in a chain,” connects them to their “roots,” or ties them to parents or family members now deceased. Here is just one example of this sentiment:

“The connection that Judaism brings to my family. The celebration of holidays allows me to pass on the traditions of my family. For my family it was a struggle to be Jewish and the fact that ritual items, recipes and Jewish melodies have remained within the family is a source of great pride to me. I have an Elijah’s cup that was carried from Vilna to Rhodesia to New York.”

And finally there are those that wrote about their “common bond” with other Jews. “I have a feeling of being part of a larger family, the members of which all generally care about the well-being of the group at large. It is a wonderful thing to travel the world and be welcome into shuls and homes as an honored guest.” A few are impressed with the worldwide connection among practicing Jews. For example, one respondent wrote, “I like being a Jew and celebrating holidays and knowing that all around the world other Jews are sharing that experience.”

Regardless of the writer’s particular emphasis, the essence of these comments is that there is joy in “the sense of belonging to something larger and more enduring than myself.”

Pride in Jewish Accomplishments. Thematically linked with the preceding comments are those that express pride in Jewish accomplishments and “the contributions to society made by talented Jews in all fields of endeavor.” “Pride in the collective accomplishment and ethical development of Jewish peoples and Jewish way of life,” wrote one. “I’m proud of our history and our contributions to society,” wrote another. “Success of Jews as educators, artists, etc. and the knowledge that their Jewish heritage and culture contributes to this success,” wrote a third. Others mentioned pride in Jewish morality, ethics, generosity, and philanthropy along with Jews’ accomplishments in science, business, scholarship, social activism, and performing arts.

Approaches to Judaism

The survey asked respondents to rate the importance of various approaches to Judaism to their personal Jewish identities. As seen in Table 11, core to most people’s Jewish identity is leading an ethical and moral life. This is followed by the celebration of the Jewish holidays.

Affiliation, in both senses of the word, is in the mid-range of the table. Both synagogue membership and social connections to other Jews are central to the Jewish identities of almost two-thirds of the sample. The others, it should be noted are in the middle of the scale; few say that these are of little importance.

At the bottom of the list are the more traditional elements of Jewish life--keeping a Jewish home, attending services, and engaging in Jewish study.

Table 11: Importance of Elements of Jewish Identity

	%		
	<i>very little</i>	<i>somewhat</i>	<i>very much</i>
leading an ethical and moral life	1	9	89
celebrating the Jewish holidays	1	20	78
being a member of a synagogue	5	29	66
having social connections with other Jews	5	32	64
caring about Israel	6	32	62
helping those in need	4	39	57
keeping a Jewish home	13	39	48
attending prayer services	18	55	27
engaging in Jewish study	28	48	24

With only two exceptions, all of the items in this table differ significantly by synagogue denomination. In every case, the more traditional the synagogue, the more important the Jewish value. Given that there is only one Orthodox congregation in our sample, results

are presented only for members of the Reform and Conservative congregations (Table 12).

There are no differences by denomination with regard to the “goodness factors”-- leading an ethical and moral life and helping others in need. These two items may speak more of a universal value as opposed to a particular Jewish value and, perhaps, for this reason do not produce differences by denominational affiliation.

Table 12: Elements of Jewish Identity by Denomination (Significant Items Only)⁸

	% Very Important	
	<i>Reform</i> (n=565)	<i>Conservative</i> (n=557)
celebrating the Jewish holidays	75	82
being a member of a synagogue	61	72
having social connections with other Jews	56	70
caring about Israel	52	69
keeping a Jewish home	35	58
attending prayer services	21	28
engaging in Jewish study	19	28

Satisfaction with Jewish Life

The survey asked respondents how satisfied they are with the extent and quality of their Jewish lives. People who are satisfied with the status quo, it should be noted, often have little motivation to change. Dissatisfaction can thus be a precursor to change.

The results, shown in Table 13, reveal a clear differential between synagogue participation and home observance. Respondents are generally more satisfied with their personal, home practices of Judaism than with their communal participation (their participation in the congregational community, in prayer and ritual, and in synagogue activities).

The greatest *dissatisfaction* is with Judaic knowledge. At least one in four respondents is dissatisfied with the extent and quality of his/her knowledge. The majority (65%) feel that their synagogue has sufficient offerings to serve their needs and interests with regard to Jewish learning. And even more feel that there are adequate opportunities for Jewish adult learning in Westchester more generally (77%). Moreover, asked about the aspect of the synagogue that most needs changing, few people (10%) checked off educational programming. Indeed, satisfaction with one’s Judaic knowledge is weakly correlated with educational opportunities in the synagogue and not at all correlated with these other variables or with the importance of adult education to one’s membership in the congregation. It seems that members do not hold the synagogue or the community responsible for their low levels of achievement.

⁸ p<.001 for all items.

Table 13: Satisfaction with Extent and Quality of Jewish Life

	%		
	<i>Dissatisfied</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Satisfied</i>
Personal			
Jewish observance at home	10	25	65
Judaic knowledge	27	20	53
Synagogue			
participation in synagogue prayer and ritual	16	36	48
contact with other members of the congregation	19	33	48
involvement in synagogue activities	16	40	45
Communal			
connection to the Westchester Jewish community	15	44	41

Holidays and Family -- #1 Source of Joy (444 comments)

Comments on the survey provide valuable insight into the meaning of the numbers. The largest number of comments, by far, focus on celebration of holidays, lifecycle events, and Jewish home and family life. Indeed, over one fourth of the comments are about the personal or familial experience of Judaism. These comments are a cluster of lifecycle events/holidays, home, family/friends—a troika that carries joy and good feelings. The interplay of these elements is seen in comments such as, “My greatest joy is sitting around the table on Jewish holidays with all my children and grandchildren.”

The preponderance of such comments may be an artifact of the word “joy” in the question. The holidays and lifecycle events are, after all, designed for *oneg*. But the comments are also consistent with the reality of people’s Jewish lives. As noted above, Jewish home observance is the greatest source of satisfaction to people, exceeding any satisfaction they get from their involvement in the synagogue or in the community. And celebrating the Jewish holidays is of top importance to people’s identities as Jews, second only to leading an ethical life. The number of comments on this topic seems to reflect accurately the nature of people’s Jewish identities and practices.

The celebration of holidays and of lifecycle events is inevitably linked with the joy of transmitting Judaism to one’s children. “The greatest joy that one can experience,” wrote one respondent, “is the family religious celebration with kids, whether it is a Simchat Torah parade, Purim carnival, or Shabbat singing and dancing on Friday night.” Another attributed the greatest joy to “the focus on family and the joy of gathering together to celebrate Jewish holidays and mitzvahs with my family. The importance of family along with celebration of the Jewish holidays is what I hope to instill in my children so that they also go through life with the warm feeling that this ‘sense of community, sense of belonging’ gives to each member of the family.”

Comments referring specifically to Shabbat were relatively rare compared with those referring to the *chaggim* and lifecycle events. Nonetheless, those who included Shabbat

in their answer find joy in Shabbat dinner, time with family and friends, and the simple but beautiful rituals of “lighting candles and blessing my children on Shabbat.” Several people expressly described their Sabbath as a home celebration. What can be seen in these data are the recurrent themes of the centrality of family and the joy of sharing Judaism with children:

“Home, friends, synagogue community. Especially at home on Shabbat, we celebrate it Friday nights very simply by lighting candles, tablecloth, special food, flowers, clean house, no TV or radio, try to refrain from bringing the cares of work or the world home. We play games after dinner, sing and often have friends for coffee and dessert (both Jewish and non). Synagogue community has the potential and is growing more important in our lives, but home is where the core is.”

“Family celebrations, particularly Friday night Shabbat dinner. It is our most constant family time together, and there is something very special to me about hearing my 2 and 4 year old children being able to recite the blessings.”

“I like the family-centeredness of Jewish celebrations and holidays. Celebrating Shabbat every Friday night is a great ending to the week for the whole family. All the holidays are also an excuse to get the extended family together. We’ve even taken to building a sukkah every year for fun and to give the kids something tangible to connect to the holiday. While going to services is important, I love the home rituals best.”

In addition to this cluster around Shabbat, holidays and lifecycle events with family and friends, are specific mentions of family and home. Cited here is the joy of “maintaining a Jewish home,” “keeping a kosher home,” “bringing Jewish tradition into my home and into my family’s life.” Also cited are “family togetherness” and “raising a Jewish family in a Jewish household.”

Tradition and Heritage -- #3 Source of Joy (179 comments)

The survey was so focused on the congregation and the community, our twin concerns, that we did not include questions about Jewish culture and Yiddishkeit. Respondents’ comments serve as a corrective to this omission. The #3 source of joy comes from Jewish religious and cultural traditions and heritage. This runs the gamut from Yiddish and Jewish culture (theater, art, music and literature), to morals, ethics, *tzedakah*, and commitment to social causes, to love of learning and education, to Jewish wisdom, Jewish humor, and Jewish food. “I’m proud of my Jewish heritage,” one respondent wrote. “I love the aspects of Jewish culture that emphasize learning, family, creative expression and critical thought.” Wrote another, “I love being Jewish. I love the connection to Jewish history, culture and social action. Jews have always been ‘givers’ and the meaning behind ‘*mitzvah*’ is very powerful to me.”

For some, the traditions hold special emotional sway because they are “the traditions of my parents,” and evoke childhood memories. One woman explained: “The cultural parts of Judaism, e.g. the Hebrew language and the music and dance, and all the ethics and history that I learned in Sunday school (Reform) are what made me feel Jewish as a child. Those memories are what still mostly make me feel Jewish today.”

These traditions also resonate with the nonreligious or secular respondents. For example, one person wrote: “I enjoy the cultural, ethnic, and ethical elements of Judaism as a source of identity; however, I am pretty much nonreligious when it comes to prayer, ritual, strong belief in God, etc. It is something I feel strange, and even slightly guilty about, but I’m just not into it.” Another, referring to “Jewish tradition, history, culture, and music” said, “I am a secular Jew. I take pride in my Jewish heritage--from the Bible’s stress on human rights as in the prohibition to work on the Sabbath, which extends even to slaves, to the wonderful richness and complexity of the King David stories or the poetry of the Psalms, to Jewish contributions to modern life.”

Jewish Connections -- #4 Source of Joy (158 comments)

The quantitative measure on the survey showed that connections to other Jews is an important, albeit secondary aspect of Jewish identity, important to about two-thirds of the respondents. Similarly, in the comments Jewish connections show up as the #4 source of joy.

Being Jewish enmeshes people in Jewish social networks, in organizations, and in a Jewish community. In their comments, people mention connections through their children’s day school community, a Rosh Chodesh women’s group, a group of families that regularly get together for Shabbat dinner, or simply “eating lox with friends.” The data are replete with mention of “sense of community,” “feeling of belonging and acceptance,” “friendships,” “socializing,” and “sharing life experiences with other Jews.”

Respondents take pleasure in “being part of the larger Jewish community,” and “enjoy the feeling of community among Jews in Westchester.” They find joy in “socializing with others and celebrating together; supporting each other in times of need.” They feel a special bond and level of comfort with their Jewish friends. When in need, they have experienced the community’s “concern” and “warm support and ritual caring.” As one person expressed it, “the interconnectedness of the Jewish community is a great thing. We share each other’s simchas and comfort those who suffered loss.” Again, we offer just a sampling of comments to give a flavor of how community and connection provide a constant source of joy.

“Socializing with other Jews--I feel a comfort level that I don’t have with others-- I guess it’s a kinship.”

“Sharing holidays with family and friends as well as celebrations: birth, naming, bar/bat mitzvah and weddings as well as being helpful in times of death or illness; attending a funeral, paying a shiva call or visiting someone in the hospital. The

feeling of community when attending a service at the synagogue is very meaningful and brings comfort and joy.”

“I did not grow up observant and do not have firm beliefs in many things we do in our home or at shul. Yet I find it to be a rich upbringing. I love the community aspect of our life, the feeling that there is family in a place where we have no real family.”

“Being a person that converted to Judaism, I’m very well accepted among the Jews and I’m always amazed by how close the community is. They (we) all care about each other very much.”

“I love it when Jewish people come together, whether it’s to celebrate a holiday, rejoice on the Sabbath or just hang out. I like being with ‘my own’ people.”

“The greatest joy for me leading a Jewish life in a Jewish community is feeling part of a huge family. To feel like you belong is very important to me...”

Learning and Growing -- #7 Source of Joy (106 comments)

The quantitative data tell us that people are least satisfied with their Judaic knowledge and find Jewish study to be least important to their Jewish identities. Still, we must not forget that there is a range in the data. One-fourth do find study to be important and the comments make clear that some people find joy in Jewish education and Jewish learning. Respondents in this category, the #7 source of joy as judged by frequency of comments, mention studying Torah, learning Hebrew, taking university classes, reading books, traveling, and taking part in various study groups. “Learning the meaning behind Jewish traditions and observances brings me the most joy,” wrote one respondent. “I enjoy exploring the texts with [the rabbi] and seeing how they are still relevant to today’s society,” wrote another. “Increasing my knowledge of Jewish laws and customs,” wrote a third, “giving more attention to observance in my personal life.” For some, joy resides in the possibility of learning more: “Knowing there is much more to Judaism than I currently know or practice and looking forward to learning and practicing in the future.” And it is in the intention to learn: “It is my goal to have a Jewish kosher home, bring Torah into daily life, and increase my self-growth through Torah learning and reading Jewish texts...”

SYNAGOGUE

In this section, we shift focus from the individual to the synagogue. Included here is information on the elements of synagogue life that give meaning to people’s membership, members’ views of prayer services, and their views of the congregational community--its ability to support people and give them a sense of belonging.

Meaning of Membership

Synagogues are complex institutions with regard to their mission, program, and membership. Beyond a certain size, they are best understood as an aggregate of loosely interconnected sub-communities or networks—the school families, the minyan regulars, the sisterhood volunteers, and so on. It is thus possible for each person to engage in synagogue life to a different extent and in different ways. Respondents were asked to indicate how important each of 14 aspects of synagogue life were in giving meaning to their membership in the congregation. Because of the distribution of results, the full set of findings, as reported in Table 14, is arranged in descending order by mean.

Table 14: Elements that Give Meaning to Synagogue Membership

	Mean	% Important		
	(1-3)	Not At All	Somewhat	Extremely
High Holiday services	2.75	3	19	78
Lifecycle events (e.g., baby naming, <i>bar/t mitzvah</i> , <i>yahrzeit</i>)	2.61	6	26	68
Other holiday celebrations (e.g., <i>Sukkot</i> , Purim, Passover)	2.27	11	51	37
Children’s education: preschool, nursery or religious school	2.18	33	15	52
Family activities at the synagogue	2.00	28	45	28
Social and cultural activities at the synagogue	2.00	22	57	21
Adult education or Torah study	1.91	32	46	22
Volunteer or social action projects sponsored by the synagogue	1.90	28	56	17
Youth group or other youth activities	1.90	40	31	30
Caring for or receiving care from other members	1.85	36	45	19
Daily <i>minyan</i> and/or weekly <i>Shabbat</i> services	1.82	42	34	24

Board or committee work	1.59	56	30	13
Sisterhood or Brotherhood	1.52	57	35	9
Volunteer work within the synagogue (e.g., working in the library, gift shop, school)	1.51	58	33	9

At the top of the list are High Holiday services and lifecycle events, a finding consistent with the results of the qualitative analysis reported above.

Synagogues often refer to their core mission in terms of the traditional triumvirate of Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut hasidim*. Importantly, these same elements—labeled in the survey as study, prayer, caring and social action--appear low on the list. Interestingly, asked what in their congregation most needs to be enhanced or improved, very few people said educational programming (10%), prayer services (12%), support for congregants in need (5%) or volunteerism and social action efforts (5%). Not only are they not particularly important to people but people are happy to leave them as they are.

Denominational Differences

A number of these items cut across denomination. The importance of family activities, social and cultural activities, adult education and Torah study, social action projects, and youth activities is similar in the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox synagogues. So, too, is the importance of areas that are relevant to only a small portion of the membership; namely, board, committee, and volunteer work in the synagogue.

Differences, however, emerge in the domains of synagogue life related to worship, *chesed*, and children’s education. As compared with those in Reform and Conservative congregations, members of the Orthodox synagogue place greater importance on Shabbat and the *chaggim* and a relatively lighter emphasis on children’s education and its culmination in the bar/t mitzvah celebration.

While these results may be related to the traditional nature of the Orthodox setting, it is difficult to explain denominational differences in the importance of caring relationships. Indeed, it appears that being in a caring community is at least twice as important in the Orthodox synagogue as in the Conservative and Reform synagogues. We questioned whether the small size of the Orthodox congregation in the sample influenced these results. However, when data are analyzed by synagogue size, no significant difference emerges on this item. Caring plays a larger role in the Orthodox setting than it does elsewhere, regardless of the size of the synagogue.

Family Differences

As a family matures, the meaning of membership changes in predictable ways. We divided the sample into three segments: the preschool families (youngest child newborn

through age 5), the school families (youngest child 6 through 18 years old) and the empty nesters (youngest child 19 or older).

Results match commonsense predictions. The three patterns of change are seen in Table 15. First, as families age, children’s education, family and youth activities, and the celebration of holidays like Sukkot and Purim take on less importance. Lifecycle events and synagogue volunteer projects produce a different pattern: Their importance is comparatively lower in the preschool and later years but peaks during the school years. Finally, High Holidays, adult education, and involvement in Sisterhood and Brotherhood take on greater importance when children are grown and, presumably, have left home.

In general, then, as the children grow up, the parents’ own connection to the congregation matures and adult activities take on greater importance than child- or family-centered activities. However, it is important to note that, with the exception of High Holiday services, nothing in the offerings of the congregation reaches the same heights of importance to members as did their children’s education, family activities, and lifecycle events during the years when they were raising their families. In short, when the children are gone, there is a drop-off in the meaning of membership for the parents.

Table 15: Elements that Give Meaning to Synagogue Membership by Stage of Family Life (Significant Items Only)⁹

	% Extremely Important		
	<i>Pre-school child</i> (n=162)	<i>School-age child</i> (n=512)	<i>Grown child</i> (n=516)
Children’s education	77	68	32
Holiday celebration	47	39	33
Family activities	58	33	14
Youth activities	38	36	22
Lifecycle events	68	77	61
Synagogue volunteer projects ¹⁰	17	18	16
High Holidays	73	74	84
Adult education or Torah study	16	18	27
Sisterhood or Brotherhood	5	6	14

The Orthodox families do not follow the same pattern, perhaps because of their use of day schools to educate their children: 75% of those in the Orthodox congregation sent or are sending their youngest child to a Jewish day school (versus 30% of the Conservative members, and 10% of the Reform members). The importance of youth activities falls off sharply for these members once their child reaches school-age presumably because this need is met elsewhere in the community. As well, children’s education plays a minimal

⁹ p<.001 for all items.

¹⁰ The difference on this item is more clearly seen in those responding “not at all.” Only 22% of those with school-age children say that the volunteer projects lend *no* meaning to their membership. This compares favorably with 26% of the preschool parents and 35% of the parents of grown children who so rate the importance of these projects to their synagogue membership.

part in the parent’s synagogue connection (approximately 10% say it is extremely important to their membership) just as the importance of holiday celebrations plays a major part across the age groups (approximately 60%). Only one Orthodox synagogue is in our sample and the number of respondents from that institution is low. It is not possible to know if this is common to the Orthodox community or to the offerings and priorities of the particular congregation in the study.

Services and Spirituality

For almost 70% of the respondents, the synagogue’s approach to prayer and ritual was “very” or “extremely” important in their affiliation choice. Only 8% said that it was not at all or only a little important to them. The others were in the middle. We asked respondents whether or not their synagogue has sufficiently diverse approaches to prayer to serve their own needs and interests. Just over half (54%) say that, “to a great extent” the synagogue offers the variety that they feel is needed. (15% say not.) 65% say that the prayer services do, in fact, fulfill their spiritual needs. (17% say they do not). And 60% say that the congregation helps members explore their relationship with God. (12% say it does not). These are remarkable responses given that only about one in four say that daily or weekly services are important in giving meaning to their membership in the congregation or that attending services is important to their identity as Jews. In both instances services are, in fact, one of the least important aspects.

These numbers, however, do not hold up when we ask about the specific impact of services. Respondents were asked to reflect on the most recent time that they had attended services at their synagogue and to rate the quality of the experience. As seen in Table 16, synagogues do a good job of creating an atmosphere in which people feel welcomed. They are less successful, however, in creating an experience that is personally relevant and touches people on an emotional level. Indeed, one in four say that the service hardly moved them at all. Services, we might say, succeed as social and community events but not as religious or spiritual experiences.

Table 16: Experience at Services

Most recent service attended was...	%		
	<i>not at all/ a little</i>	<i>somewhat</i>	<i>very much/ extremely</i>
warmly welcoming	14	22	64
personally relevant	19	35	46
emotional or inspirational	24	33	43

There is no statistical difference among synagogues or between S2K and non-S2K synagogues with regard to the personal relevance of services. Synagogues do, however, vary significantly with regard to how welcoming their services are and there does seem to be a slight advantage to the S2K synagogues on this measure. They also vary significantly with regard to how inspirational their services are. But the issue here is more acute: In every congregation, the ratings of inspiration are substantially lower than the ratings of warmth, differing in some instances by as much as 30 percentage points. And

in only three synagogues do more than half of the congregants have an emotional experience at services. Two of these are S2K synagogues and one is a non-S2K synagogue. The best read on these data, perhaps, is that there is more work to be done.

Attendance at Services

Overall, 38% of the synagogue members attend services at least once a month; 43% attend occasionally throughout the year; 19% attend either not at all or a couple of times during the year, most likely on the High Holidays.

We were curious about the characteristics that distinguish the regulars from the occasional or non-attenders. Men attend more often than do women; current and past board members attend more often than non-leaders; those in more traditional synagogues attend more frequently than those in more liberal synagogues.

The more often people attend services, the more satisfied they are with their participation in synagogue prayer and ritual (Table 17). There are some who come infrequently and are satisfied with that level of participation and thus are probably not amenable to change. Rather, synagogues should target those who are neutral or dissatisfied with their relatively infrequent attendance. Overall, this would be close to 42% of the total sample, a significant opportunity.

With only three exceptions, every item in the survey differs significantly by attendance at services. That is, congregations are essentially comprised of three groups: the regular, the occasional, and the non-attenders. Members in each group have a different experience in the synagogue. They view the institution and their role in it differently. And they have a different relationship to their Judaism. Regardless of denomination, the regular attendees are the most likely to say that attending services is extremely important in giving meaning to their membership and to their identity as Jews; the non-attenders are the least likely to say so.

Table 17: Attendance at Synagogue: Frequency by Satisfaction

Satisfaction with Participation in Synagogue Prayer and Ritual	%		
	Attendance at Services in Past Year		
	<i>1-3 times (n=240)</i>	<i>4-11 times (n=547)</i>	<i>monthly or more (n=472)</i>
dissatisfied	20	20	10
neutral	60	42	18
satisfied	20	38	72
TOTAL	100	100	100

Table 18 shows items related to prayer for a sense of how distinct the three groups are. When we look at these data, of course, we can question the direction of causality. Do these people come more often because they derive meaning from the worship experience? Or does their frequent attendance lead them to a higher appreciation for what the

synagogue has to offer? Most likely the relationship bidirectional with the two mutually reinforcing each other leading to an upward (or downward) spiral.

Table 18: Prayer Services by Frequency of Attendance

	%		
	<i>Non-attendees</i>	<i>Occasional attendees</i>	<i>Regulars</i>
Membership and identity			
synagogue’s approach to prayer very important in choice of this particular synagogue	54	66	79
services are very important in giving meaning to membership	4	10	50
attending prayer services is very important to identity as a Jew	9	12	53
Recent experience at services was...			
personally relevant	29	44	57
emotional or inspirational	29	43	50
warmly welcoming	43	64	74
Overall assessment			
prayer services here fulfill spiritual needs	42	64	78

When we look at the data by attendance at services and control for denomination we find that these differences hold in both the Reform and Conservative synagogues, with a particularly heightened effect in the Reform congregations. The three groups are not well distinguished in the one Orthodox synagogue in our sample.

Services and Spirituality -- #2 Source of Joy (263 comments)

Despite the relatively low numerical rating given to the inspirational quality of services, the #2 source of joy is rooted in the synagogue and in spirituality. Many people, most obviously from the ranks of the “regulars,” wrote about attending synagogue services on Shabbat, during the week, and on the holidays. These comments it should be noted, cut across all 16 congregations in the study. Embedded within these comments are also sincere praise for the synagogues. Each of the following comments was selected from a different synagogue:

“[Synagogue] is a place to be proud of. The clergy is phenomenal, religious services are inspired, and generally every experience there is very satisfying. For the first 15 years of our membership, we were active participants—from that come friends, familiarity, and a great comfort level. Any lessening of that community feeling is not the temple’s fault, but strictly ours for not being very active any longer.”

“Creativity in services and observances. Relevance of services to our lives today.”

“The music at services is enjoyable, but that’s not why I attend. I attend to reinforce in myself Judaism’s ethics and its commitment to the sanities of human existence. I enjoy knowing there are many others who feel the same.”

“The incredible temple to which I belong with its evolving dedication to Judaism and to the congregation it serves. Being a part of a temple that strives for holiness for all of us and that at times lifts me up when it hardly seems possible. I love the music, the prayers, and being in a place where I feel safe to live, love and cry. We have the most wonderful clergy and lay leaders.”

“[Synagogue] brings positive Jewish messages to me and my family. I want my children to have a positive Jewish experience while they are young. I am greatly blessed to have found a temple like [synagogue].”

“We have derived great joy from Judaism as we have learned more and become more observant. Whether this would have happened had we not become part of the [synagogue] community, I don’t really know. I do know that our lives are enhanced by being part of this community. We are regular Shabbat attendees and can no longer imagine our lives without going to shul every Shabbat. This too provides a sense of belonging and spirituality.”

Other respondents expressed similar sentiments but in the language of prayer and spirituality. They spoke about “going to shul,” “participating in prayer,” “meaningful and inspiring worship,” “the peaceful feeling upon entering the synagogue,” “moments during services when the ‘outside’ world seems far away and calm serenity is all around” and “the union between people and God.”

One person finds joy in the fact that he “can go to a synagogue and feel that it is a peaceful place for thinking and connecting on a spiritual level.” Another finds joy in attending Friday night services. “This service,” the respondent wrote, “gives me the opportunity to review the past week and take into account my life, to give me strength and fortitude, to proceed each week with a new awakening.” For still another, merely “knowing that I have a positive relationship with God gives me joy and comfort. Passing that on to my children gives me joy.”

Services and Spirituality -- #5 Source of Disappointment (136 comments)

References to services as a source of joy outnumber references to services as a disappointment two to one. Nonetheless, a number of people expressed negative feelings about services and spirituality, the #5 source of concern expressed in the survey. Key to these comments is the “distinct lack of spirituality in services”: “There is plenty of ritual and prayer, but I am missing a sense of the transcendental—a sense of connecting to something less grounded in custom. This may be a personal problem—not at all reflective of my temple. But, I think our services lack *any* springboard to spiritual connection, and to me this is a problem.”

The services are “on automatic” and “there is no attempt to keep them interesting and alive.” Services are “too long.” They are “tedious,” “very tired and repetitive.” The prayers are “archaic and meaningless,” “dated, sexist,” and irrelevant to today’s world. There are “significant hurdles” to participation in prayer (e.g., a steep “learning curve”) and prayer leaders seem unable to “bring in those with no or little background.” The cantor performs and it is difficult for congregants to participate in song. There is too much Hebrew and not enough English. “Services...have little meaning in their rote repetition of ancient prayers in a language I do not understand.” The pace is too fast with little regard to *kavanah* and reflection. Traditional aspects of temple life are “not heartfelt—just empty ritual.” High Holidays are a “fashion show, a gossip mill, a loud distracting gathering of people.” In sum, services are “uninspiring.”

People are disappointed that they cannot find inspiration at services. “Often it feels that Judaism does not take care of my spiritual needs.” “If I could connect to Shabbat services,” one Conservative member wrote, “it could bring me back. I have tried by attending, taking courses, discussion, but I don’t feel engaged to God. The services and sermon don’t help *me* connect. It is a big regret.” The concern about this situation is genuine:

“I feel that the services are too long and boring; the older congregants as well as the younger congregants dislike coming. There has to be a way, in today’s world, to touch the congregation, pray together, and make it a positive experience. It seems that everyone is looking at their watches, shuffling in their seats because the service is dragging. I want the service to interest me and others, that we will come back because we want to, not have to; possibly shorter service; more English. We are losing Jews to interfaith marriages, disinterest in religion, etc. Each day we have a congregation filled with young families. I’d like to keep them interested and active.”

In addition, there are a few who would like their synagogue or their movement to be more or less traditional. Some dislike changes in liturgy and ritual that they have experienced in their congregation. They are turned off by changes in the melodies to traditional prayers, by their Reform congregation’s introduction of prayer shawls, or by the Conservative movement’s “strict adherence to ritual without opening up to other ways of prayer, service and facility.” They comment on their congregation’s move towards Classical Reform (“i.e., yarmulkes not being worn by clergy and choirs—makes me feel more like church”), on the trend of the Reform movement toward conservatism, and on their Conservative congregation’s shift to a more Orthodox stance.

There are a few who do not blame the synagogue or the movement but accept personal responsibility. They say that they are on the periphery of the congregation or do not join in services or derive meaning from them because of their own shortcomings, beliefs, or personal situation. Some lack education: “poorly educated and little time to study due to fulltime work and family” and “not knowing Hebrew” were common explanations. Some lack spiritual interest or generally feel “spiritually alienated.” “I am not a very religious person. The concept of prayer isn’t one that I’m overly comfortable with,” wrote one. “I

am not an observant Jew at this time,” said another, “meaning I don’t spend a lot of time in synagogue and I don’t like it when I feel I am being judged because of that.” “I just don’t believe in God—don’t like services that recite that God was our salvation in every generation. Rings hollow after the Holocaust,” wrote a third. “I don’t feel very comfortable in synagogue since I don’t read Hebrew and don’t believe in God. So services are not something I generally look forward to,” wrote yet another.

A few find themselves in personal circumstances that remove them from the congregation--caring for a husband with Alzheimer’s, busy with life. “Need to find more time. Life is *so* busy,” wrote one. “Concerned with all Jewish activities--just a bit too old (94½) to do much” wrote another.

It is important to note that comments about prayer, services, and spirituality came from every synagogue—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and unaffiliated, both S2K and non-S2K. Given the quantitative data and the number of both positive and negative comments on this topic, it is clear that services work for some but not for others. No one movement and no one program has created a prayer service that touches all of the members of the congregation.

Synagogue Community

The majority of synagogue members choose a synagogue because of the sense of community they feel there. And an equal number do feel a sense of belonging. Although most people would not describe their congregation as “family,” they do find that people in the congregation care for each other in times of need and share in each others’ joy and happy events (Table 19).

Table 19: Sense of Community

	%
Members care for each other in times of need and share in each others’ joy and happy events.	72
Sense of community very important in choice of this synagogue	65
Feel part of the community formed by this congregation	64
Friendships very important in choice of this synagogue	57
Congregation feels like a large, close-knit family	47

Not surprisingly, all of these items differ significantly by people’s level of involvement in the synagogue. The more individuals consider themselves to be a part of the active core of the congregation, the more they feel a part of the congregational community and the more supportive they judge that community to be. For example, 37% of those on the periphery say that the congregation feels like “family” while 57% of those in the mid-group, and 67% of those in the highly active group do.

Some people have overlapping social networks. They join the synagogue because of friendships they have with other members there (57%) and they report that some of their closest friends are members of the congregation (Table 20). The presence of close

personal friendships in the congregation is highly correlated with all of these items concerned with community.

Table 20: Number of Five Closest Friends Who are Also Members of the Synagogue

	%
none	28
1 or 2	38
3 or 4	24
all	10

Synagogues apparently succeed in terms of caring and sharing. Where they fail is in making use of the skills and talents that the members bring with them into this setting. Only 34% agree that the synagogue makes good use of their skills and abilities; 25% disagree. The number one correlate of this item is whether or not the person feels part of the congregational community: The more integrated someone is in the congregation, the more they feel that their skills are put to good use, and visa-versa. The second highest correlate is the adequacy of leadership opportunities. That is, the more adequate the leadership opportunities, the more the person feels that his/her talents are put to good use in the congregation. Note, however, that respondents were asked to rate the adequacy of program offerings with regard to worship, learning, social action, and leadership. Leadership opportunities received the lowest ratings.

The issue, however, is not merely about leadership. Many people do not want to be leaders per se. Of those in the sample who have not previously served on the synagogue board, only 5% are very interested in a leadership position; 14% are somewhat interested; and the vast majority (81%) are not at all or only a little interested. Rather, these members want to be able to bring their “gifts” to the synagogue and to have them valued. The data suggest that congregations that provide ample opportunities for leadership are also places that know how to use people’s talents and skills, whether these are applied to leadership or to some other role in the synagogue.

Sense of community is key to the synagogue experience. And it is the number one aspect of the synagogue that people say most needs enhancement or improvement. Respondents were offered a list of possible aspects of synagogue life that need changing. One out of four gave their vote to sense of community, far and away the most common response (Table 21).

Table 21: Areas Most in Need of Enhancement or Improvement

	<i>% of Total Respondents</i>
sense of community	24
prayer services	12
educational programming	10
volunteerism or social action efforts	5
support for congregants in need	5

Synagogue -- #4 Source of Concern (145 comments)

The #4 area of concern, as measured by the number of comments written, is the synagogue--its sense of community, its leadership, and its politics.

People talk about the “lack of community” in the congregation, the “unfriendliness of most congregants,” the “cliques” formed by longtime members to the exclusion of newcomers, and the “unstated caste system.” In some places committees appear to be controlled by certain members who make it difficult for others to volunteer or become involved. Those with non-Jewish spouses feel left out as do newcomers, middle-aged and older members, and those who live outside the synagogue’s geographic catchment area. In some instances, people attribute the lack of community to the size of the congregation. The following were selected as an illustration of many of these comments:

“Our congregation is made up of many young active congregants—and they have great support for each other. However, the older person, 60+, who is still active and involved is very much left out especially if you are widowed. No one invites the senior to Shabbat dinner or other home functions that other congregants are invited to. This saddens me—as everyone will be old or older some day.”

“So few friends of mine and people my age (50s with teenage children) attend services. So it discourages me from attending—I feel like I have no one to sit with if I go by myself. (My husband isn’t Jewish and doesn’t like to attend regularly).”

“I am disappointed about the lack of true community at my synagogue. I feel that the culture is dominated by different factions of social groups. Because of its size...it has become difficult, for me at least, to feel in any way that I am part of a ‘family’ there, despite the fact that I am very active.”

In addition, there are complaints about synagogue leadership, both lay and professional. These, however, diminish in comparison to the number of comments about synagogue politics and the operation of the synagogue. People complain that meetings are “too numerous and unpleasant”; there is “way too much *ego*, politics and self-serving behavior,” and “too many personal agendas.” There is “factionalism,” “infighting,” “bickering,” “petty arguments,” “hostility,” “lack of civility,” “power plays,” “rigidity,” and “dysfunction.” “Policies, procedures are not well thought out before being instituted by ‘fiat’ by a small group of leaders who seem not to want the opinions, thoughts or input of others.” The result of all of the “political nonsense and synagogue politics” is that it is “not rewarding to be on boards—only takes away from the spiritual possibilities.”

As with most categories, it is important to keep in mind that these comments come from members of every congregation in the study. No one congregation has the lock on synagogue politics; none completely escapes this reality.

Synagogue “Box Scores”

A look at synagogue “box scores” offers clear insight into the relative strengths of the congregations of Westchester. These scores represent the number of congregations, of the 16 in the study, in which a clear majority of respondents (60% or more) give the synagogue a high rating. As seen in Table 22, Westchester has a number of congregations that excel at building community, somewhat fewer that succeed at programming, and even fewer that have meaningful prayer services. None has yet figured out how to make use of its members’ talents.

Table 22: Box Scores

	<i>Number of Synagogues (out of 16)</i>
Sense of Community	
Members care for each other in times of need and share in each other’s joy.	14
Members feel part of the congregational community.	12
Services are warmly welcoming.	10
Programming	
Adequate opportunities for Jewish learning	10
Adequate opportunities for volunteerism or social action	10
Adequate leadership opportunities	6
Prayer Services	
Services are personally relevant.	1
Services are emotional or inspirational.	1
Human Resources	
Synagogue makes good use of individuals’ skills and abilities.	0

It should be noted that the congregations that do not appear in this table are not in the middle or low category of responses. Rather, on every one of these items, there is no agreement among respondents—some give the congregation high marks, some give low marks, some rate the congregation in the middle. Without a clear majority view, we are best off concluding that the synagogues are serving some congregants well and leaving others behind.

COMMUNITY

As noted elsewhere, 41% of the congregation members are satisfied with their connection to the Jewish community of Westchester; 15% are dissatisfied. People are less satisfied with their ties to the community than they are with their Jewish observance at home (65% satisfied) or with their participation in synagogue life (~54% satisfied). This finding supports the core theme of the research—the centrality of the personal and the familial to Jewish life and identity.

Relationship to Jewish Institutions

We calculated the ratio of time spent volunteering for Jewish versus non-Jewish organizations and the donation of money to Jewish versus non-Jewish causes. As seen in Table 23, synagogue members put in more volunteer time to non-Jewish causes and organizations but they give the bulk of their charitable contributions to Jewish causes.

Table 23: Time and Money to Jewish versus Non-Jewish Causes

Charitable Contributions	
give more money to non-Jewish causes	24%
give equally to Jewish and non-Jewish causes	19%
give more money to Jewish causes	57%
Volunteerism ¹¹	
volunteer more time to non-Jewish causes	53%
volunteer equally to Jewish and non-Jewish causes	12%
volunteer more time to Jewish causes	35%

It is important to note that most people (59%) do not volunteer for Jewish organizations or causes at all and another 13% volunteer one hour a week or less. At the high end of the scale are the 2% for whom Jewish volunteerism is like a part-time job. These individuals spend ten hours a week or more contributing their time to various organizations and causes in the Jewish community.

We asked about people's relationship to institutions in the Jewish community of Westchester. Respondents were asked to check the various ways, if any, that they relate to the institution: financial (contribute money or pay dues, tuition, fees); active involvement (use facilities or services, volunteer, etc.); leadership (serve on the board or committees). Some 25% report no relationship to any of these institutions. That is, one out of four synagogue members pays dues to the congregation but appears to have no other formal ties to the local Jewish community.

Of those who do have a relationship, about one in three are connected to just one institution. The others show the more familiar pattern of multiple involvements. (See Table 24.)

¹¹ 42% do not volunteer at all; and some people failed to answer one question or the other. Data are thus based on the 565 respondents for whom valid calculations are possible.

Table 24: Points of Connection

	<i>% with Financial, Active, and/or Leadership Involvement</i>
Jewish organizations	52
Jewish federation	37
JCC/YMHA	29
Jewish preschool, nursery school, or day school	27
Jewish summer camp	18
Jewish social service agency	17

Few people, it is worth noting, are connected through leadership roles or active involvement. Rather the bulk of the task of connecting people to community is achieved through financial contributions, membership fees, and tuition. Of those that have any type of connection at all, 60% contribute to Jewish organizations, 43% contribute to Federation, 26% pay membership dues at the JCC, and 24% pay Jewish school tuitions.

People may contribute to Federation but they are not necessarily familiar with the agency’s work. Overall, about one-third of the respondents are very familiar with UJA-Federation’s work; one-third are somewhat familiar; and one-third are not at all or only a little familiar with it. Even of the financial contributors, only 55% are very familiar with the agency’s work. The Westchester Jewish Conference fares even worse: Only 8% are very familiar with it. The vast majority (72%) say that they are “not at all” or only “a little” familiar with it.

More importantly, perhaps, most synagogue members do not feel that UJA-Federations’ programs and services have an impact on their lives (Table 25).

Table 25: Personal Impact of UJA-Federation Programs

	<i>Not at all/ A little</i>	<i>Somewhat/ Very much</i>	<i>Don’t know</i>
Extent to which UJA-Federation programs and services have an impact on your life	68	21	11

Jewish Institutions -- #8 Source of Joy (72 Comments)

Although it appears low on the list, a few respondents did mention the community’s institutions as one of their sources of joy. They appreciate the “strength of leadership,” the “community spirit,” the “increase in day school education,” the “strength of Jewish communal organizations.” As one person summed it up: “Community and organizations offer feeling of oneness and pride in Jewishness.” For others in this category, joy comes from active participation in these organizations and in community events and activities. They mention the joy they derive from charitable giving, volunteering, and contributing to social action projects. And they mention the pleasure they get from social and cultural events sponsored by the community.

Internal Community Relations

We asked also about communication and cooperation among synagogues and between synagogues and other agencies and organizations in the Jewish community. Many people do not feel qualified to judge these relationships. Some believe that there is good cooperation among synagogues; slightly fewer believe such cooperation exists between synagogues and other agencies (Table 26).

Table 26: Relationships within the Jewish Community

	<i>Not at all/ A little</i>	<i>Somewhat/ Very much</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
Good communication and cooperation among the Westchester synagogues	14	40	46
Good communication and cooperation between synagogues and other Jewish agencies and organizations in Westchester	12	32	56
Tensions between Jews of different denominations in Westchester	39	22	40

Sources of Concern

We conclude this section with a return to the comments written on the survey in response to the question about what in Judaism, Jewish life and the Jewish community turns people off. Communal issues dominate these negative comments. Whereas joy is most often experienced around the personal and the familial aspects Jewish life, concerns, worries and disappointments most often come from the major issues facing the community. The number one source of concern (discussed in the final section of this report) is Jewish continuity. The next most commonly cited sources of concern are divisiveness in the community and Israel.

Divisiveness in Judaism -- #2 Source of Concern (170 comments)

Despite the quantitative results above, the #2 source of concern, as judged by the number of comments, is divisiveness in the Jewish community—“the ways Jews can be judgmental of each other and each other’s congregations and ways of worshipping”; “different groups of Jews being so sure that their way is the right way and not being able to accept others for what they are or believe.” It appears that those who do hold a negative opinion, hold it strongly.

People express concern over “factionalism among Reform, Conservative and Orthodox” and over “the rivalry,” “tensions and anger,” “in-fighting” and “discord” among the denominations. Most of these comments refer to the divide between “observant” and “non-observant” Jews. The lack of respect, friendliness, tolerance, community, and cooperation between groups is labeled a “crisis.” As one person wrote: “There are the obvious threats from outside the community in anti-Semitism and terror, but of more personal concern is the polarization of the Orthodox from the rest of the Jewish world.

This phenomenon is a division of the Jewish world when we need cohesiveness. There must be an attempt by the Orthodox to respect other Jews even if they do not agree with their form of practicing Judaism.”

There is a sense that the Orthodox “look down, frown upon and don’t accept any of the practices or denominations of Judaism.” Here, for example, is how three people expressed these feelings:

“The aspect of the Jewish community that disappoints me is the negative attitude shown to less religious Jews by more religious Jews, *especially* in Westchester county. It is extremely unappealing to me to be looked down upon or to be considered ‘less Jewish’ because of people’s levels of observance. I want my children to feel comfortable being Conservative Jews and to not be turned off entirely from taking part in Jewish celebrations or rituals, that I hope will be integral to their lives for years to come.”

“The sense of ‘us vs. them’ within Judaism. The Orthodox disdain for the Reform or Conservative movements, the fact that my 31+ year marriage would be not legal in Israel because I am married in the Reform movement bothers me a great deal. I am proud to be Jewish and boldly say so if asked. But I have more problems with other Jews than non-Jews.”

“I resent the division in my community between Reform Jews (me) and the Conservative and Orthodox Jews. I feel I am judged as a weak or fake Jew because I don’t observe Shabbat, keep kosher, etc. I also find that the Conservative and Orthodox Jews in our neighborhood are very insular and seem to have no interest in including us in their social circle. I worry a great deal about the ‘Jewish image’ being tarnished to non-Jews because of the violence and fighting in Israel. I feel sad when I see how religion can cause division and conflict, even amongst people of the same religion.”

Also in this category are a number of statements expressing concern about “extremism,” the “rightwing trend” of Orthodoxy, “religious zealotry,” “fundamentalism,” “ghetto mentality,” “too strict adherence to dogma,” and ultra-Orthodox practice that is seen as “bigoted, antifeminist, and ignorant.”

Israel -- #9 Source of Joy (70 comments) and #3 Source of Concern (162 comments)

About one-third of the synagogue members in our study have never been to Israel, one-third have been only once, and one-third have been two times or more.

Israel is mentioned as a source of joy by a relatively small number of people (70 comments). The survival and well-being of the State, connection to Israel, visits to Israel, and Israel activism are all sources of pride and joy. There is “pride in Israel,” “identity with and concern for Israel,” and “growing connection and love of Israel.” Most of the Israel-related comments are brief but seem to agree with the person who elaborated as

follows: “The joy of Judaism is that we as a people have survived despite the hatred toward our people. The ultimate joy is Israel and the fact that we have a Jewish state.”

Israel is more frequently mentioned as a source of concern (162 comments) and, indeed, it is the #3 concern among the affiliated population. Negative comments about Israel outnumber positive comments more than two to one although in some cases the same person mentioned Israel in response to both questions. For some individuals, Israel is both their greatest joy and their greatest concern.

The comments about Israel cover every viewpoint. Many, of course, are worried about Israel’s safety, security, future, and survival. For example, “I am very upset and concerned about peace in Israel,” one respondent said. “It seems like a hopeless situation and I don’t feel the Palestinians or Jews will ever be able to achieve peace by themselves.” The sense that “peace will never come to Israel” is repeated more than once.

Others’ concern arises from their opposition to current events in the Middle East. “I am not a Zionist,” wrote one person. “I am deeply disturbed with *any* occupation of settlements, and if it doesn’t stop, no contributions ever will go to Israeli causes.” Another said that his greatest concern was “the inability of the State of Israel to grant the Palestinian people a true and dignified existence, including withdrawal of West Bank settlements which forms a fundamental issue for the Palestinian cause.” A few people are “embarrassed by Israel,” disappointed and turned off by Israeli actions. They are concerned about the discrepancies between politics in Israel and Jewish teachings. “I feel Israel has lost its moral bearing in its treatment of the Palestinians,” one person wrote. “I thought we treasured life more than land.” But then he continues, “I also would love to visit Israel again. It was very special to me the one time I went. But I cannot justify taking my children to such a dangerous place and I want them to go very much.”

Beyond that, there are some who are primarily concerned about Jews’ “blind,” “mindless,” “uncritical” defense of Israel and “knee jerk support of everything done by the Israel government.” One person, for example, is turned off by “obsession with Israel, obsession with Israel always being right, and never doing anything wrong.” And there are others who hold the opposite position: “Many Jews actually are swayed by the nonsense ranted in the NY Times and other media outlets on the injustices the Israelis lay on the Palestinians. Jews need to stick together and remember our past heritage.” Those in the latter camp are concerned about “anti-Israeli sentiment among Jews (especially unaffiliated Jews).”

There are those who are worried about “the weakening connection” of American Jews, and their children, to Israel. They say that there is “not enough identity or concern for Israel.” There is disappointment: “that my four children will not experience the love and passion for Israel that my generation does. I do not know whether there will be youth trips, family trips or congregational trips to Israel in the foreseeable future.” There is concern: “Lack of understanding by many Jews in my community of the difficulty our brothers in Israel are having... Sometimes our rabbi will give a sermon on *halacha* when all I can think about is how many Jews just died in Israel after a recent terror attack...”

And there is impatience: “American Jews are sitting idle while Israel is bombed daily. A former co-worker died in the Hebrew University bombing. It is difficult to stay silent.”

Some are primarily concerned about “the world at large vis-à-vis Israel” and how the political situation in Israel “threatens the world’s view of Jews.” They see a “lack of comprehension of others outside Jewish religion concerning the plight of Israel and Jews throughout the world...misinformation in the press and media.” They are concerned about the “gulf between the Jews and the rest of the world” and the isolation of the Jewish community. A few see Israel as the source of divisiveness at home. They are upset “by the reliance on one’s perceptions of Israel as a litmus test regarding devotion as a Jew” and “the feeling that criticizing Israel makes you less of a Jew.”

Cost of Jewish Life -- #6 Source of Concern (99 comments)

We noted above that financial contributions are the most prevalent way in which people are connected to the Jewish community. It is not surprising, then, that money shows up as a source of concern. Some wrote about the high cost of Jewish life. Included in these remarks are concerns about synagogue dues, Jewish education, and kosher food. The concern is particularly directed at young adults and young families:

“The synagogue expenses to us are getting very high. I am now more than ever looking at expenses and see that the temple’s cost to me for High Holidays, Hebrew school, activities, security, bar mitzvah prep, dues is hitting \$5,000 a year and that is just the bare minimum. If I want to do the annual dinner dance and other fundraising events it is an additional cost, so in many cases this past year we have not participated in the over and above. We volunteer our services but many of the events that require an additional fee we unfortunately have not participated in.”

“The future of Judaism in my opinion is in jeopardy because of the ‘*high cost of being Jewish.*’ With temple dues soaring, it is becoming *unaffordable.* Young families are expected to save for college, save for retirement and keep a roof over their heads—plus pay hefty temple dues and religious school fees. Intermarried people may be more apt to choose Judaism if it weren’t *so* expensive. Church costs what you can donate—free religious school. Temple is expensive, with most congregants dropping out after their child’s b’nai mitzvah. This is the Real Threat.”

Others wrote about the “relentless pressure to donate money” and the “dominance and favoring of those with most money.” One person wrote, “The biggest turn off about Jewish life, especially regarding membership to a synagogue, is that it always seems to be about dollars and cents. Everything is based on if you’ve paid your dues and if you are in good standing. I always feel it’s all about money and it’s more like a business than anything else and this is an extreme turnoff to me.”

Coupled with the distaste for the emphasis on money and fundraising are negative feelings about the materialism in Westchester and in American society at large. There is concern with “ostentation in synagogues,” “conspicuous materialism,” and people turning their children into “obnoxious, spoiled, selfish jerks.” For some, the materialism is most clearly manifest in the elaborate bar mitzvah celebrations that “have lost the meaning of the occasion.” “Bar and bat mitzvah services are more about the party and less about religious meaning. The ostentatious spending is out of control.”

Anti-Semitism -- #7 Source of Concern (95 comments)

Anti-Semitism shows up only 7th on the list of concerns, perhaps a sign of the times. Most of the comments in this category are brief, referring to both local and global anti-Semitism: “I am very concerned with the clear rise of anti-Semitism both here and abroad. I am distressed by the profusion of ‘Jewish jokes’ distributed on the Internet.”

Relationship to Other Communities -- #8 Source of Concern (62 comments)

The greatest concerns for a few people have to do with relationships with other religious groups and with the general community. On the one hand, they mention non-Jewish organizations’ offering extracurricular activities on Shabbat or Jewish holidays. On the other hand, they note their synagogue’s “lack of commitment to the immediate community” and the “tendency of Jews to turn inward, to become isolated.” “I believe,” wrote one, “that too many congregants in Jewish temples care just about Jews and not other ethnic groups. They seem to take the attitude ‘Jews need to take care of Jews and let other groups take care of their own kind like we take care of ours.’”

Others criticize Jewish behaviors. This includes everything from gossip, to “mistreating the community during crowded services by parking on people’s lawns,” to unethical behavior in business. It is disappointing to people when, for example, “synagogue leaders often turn out to be as immoral and unethical as the rest of modern society.” It includes, as well, “excessive ethnocentrism and attitude of superiority,” “the collective and elitist view of Jewish people in which an inability to view others as equal has fostered anti-Jewish sentiment.”

Community -- #9 Source of Concern (45 comments)

Lastly, there are those who are disappointed by the lack of inclusiveness of the Jewish community with regard to interfaith marriages, converts, gays and bisexuals, “racially diverse children,” single-parent families and others leading an alternative lifestyle. Some comment on the difficulty of making social connections for their children and themselves. “There is no interest,” an older respondent said, “in helping mature adults meet one another socially, particularly single seniors. I am very disappointed that the temples and JCCs do not care at all about this problem which is acute.” And still others comment on the organized Jewish community and the lack of cooperation among synagogues and other organizations.

FUTURE

We end the report with a look at the future—congregants’ views on the future of their synagogue, on the future of the Jewish community, and on the future of their own families.

Future of the Synagogue

Two-thirds say that they are excited about the future of their congregation; only 13% say they are not. There is, however, a range: At one end is a synagogue where only 46% have such optimism; at the other end is a synagogue where 76% do. Four of the five most optimistic places are S2K congregations; three of them are in the Reform movement. Still, it is hard to judge whether or not their status contributes to the membership’s feelings about the future or whether these feelings come from the unique history and culture of the particular congregation.

Most people believe that their congregation is willing to try new things (72%) and they find that the current pace of change in the synagogue is just about right (66%). Notably, however, one-fourth find the pace of change too slow. There is no difference between the S2K and non-S2K congregations on these two items.

The survey was administered in Spring-Summer 2003. As of that time, S2K had apparently not been well publicized nor moved beyond the S2K team. Very few people were aware of the work of the team, understood the goals and purpose of the initiative, or felt that it would make a difference in the synagogue. And even fewer people were very interested in being in a group similar to the S2K team. (See Table 27.)

Table 27: Reactions to S2K Within S2K Congregations

	%		
	<i>not at all/ a little</i>	<i>somewhat</i>	<i>very much/ great extent</i>
aware of the S2K team’s work in the congregation	61	26	13
understand the goals and purpose of S2K	64	23	13
believe S2K will make a difference	53	32	15
would like to be in a group similar to the S2K team	76	16	9

Ironically, there is somewhat greater awareness of synagogue change efforts in those congregations that are not part of S2K. Here one-fifth of the membership is aware of synagogue renewal projects taking place in the community and a third would like to see such a project in their own synagogue. It appears that there may be some ground for the expansion of such efforts (Table 28).

Table 28: Reactions to Synagogue Change Projects Within Non-S2K Congregations

	<i>not at all/ a little</i>	<i>somewhat</i>	<i>very much/ great extent</i>
aware of projects in the community aimed at synagogue renewal or transformation	54	25	21
would like to see such projects in own synagogue	35	31	35

In both the S2K and non-S2K synagogues, these items differ significantly by position: Leaders have greater awareness and understanding of the synagogue change projects than do rank-and-file members (Table 29). Interestingly, however, there is no difference in their interest in being a part of a group like the S2K team.

Table 29: Reactions to Synagogue Change Projects by Position

	%	
	<i>Board Members</i>	<i>Rank and File Members</i>
S2K Congregations		
aware of the S2K team’s work in the congregation ***	26	9
understand the goals and purpose of S2K ***	27	8
believe S2K will make a difference **	22	13
would like to be in a group similar to the S2K team ^(ns)	10	8
Non-S2K Congregations		
aware of projects in the community aimed at synagogue renewal or transformation ***	32	17
would like to see such projects in own synagogue ***	48	29
*** p<.000 ** p<.01 (ns) non-significant difference		

The Next Generation

The survey asked respondents about the Jewish preparation of their children and the choices they had made to provide Jewish education and Jewish experiences for them. In their comments, participants wrote a great deal about their own children but they also expressed grave concern over the transmission of Judaism to the next generation writ large.

Jewish Experiences for Children

The survey asked respondents to indicate the Jewish experiences that their youngest child has had or is likely to have in the future. The list included life events (naming, bar/t mitzvah celebration), formal education (day school, supplemental school), and informal education (youth group, camp, Israel trip). Results are shown in Table 30.

Table 30: Children’s Jewish Experiences By Age

Youngest child has had or is likely to have...	%			
	<i>Pre-school child</i> (n=162)	<i>School-age child</i> (n=512)	<i>Grown child</i> (n=516)	<i>OVER-ALL</i> (n=1190)
Hebrew or Yiddish name	95	96	94	95
bar/t mitzvah celebration	96	97	91	94
supplemental Jewish religious school	79	88	84	85
Jewish youth group	60	60	68	64
Jewish summer camp	55	47	54	51
Israel trip	39	32	41	37
Jewish day school	36	19	25	24

Certain experiences in the Jewish community are normative and the great majority of families assure that their children have them—Jewish naming, bar and bat mitzvah celebrations, and attendance at Sunday and/or afternoon religious school.

Informal Jewish educational experiences, however, are less certain. Many are or will be touched by youth group but only about half will experience Jewish summer camp and only about one-third will travel to Israel on a youth trip.

We expected a cohort effect—a trend across the three age groups we studied. But as seen above, there is little variation in the numbers aside from a dip in summer camp, Israel trip, and day school for those whose youngest child is currently between 6 and 18 years of age. It also appears that the next cohort coming along (those who are now infants, toddlers, and preschoolers) will be more likely than others to attend a Jewish day school.

In addition to looking at what they intend to do, we looked at the percentages saying “don’t know.” Like undecided voters in the election, these parents may be open to the possibility of these experiences but not convinced. The highest numbers in this category concern informal Jewish education--youth trips to Israel (54%), youth group (36%) and summer camp (29%). Interestingly, even when their child is small, parents already know that s/he will have a bar or bat mitzvah (only 2% don’t know) and that s/he will attend religious school or a Jewish day school (7% and 16% respectively don’t know). The family commitment to formal education seems well established; the commitment to informal Jewish education, however, appears less certain.

There is a strong denominational distinction in these choices for children’s Jewish experiences. There are no differences in terms of the most common experiences (naming, bar/t mitzvah), but for the others, the more traditional the affiliation, the more likely the child is to engage in Jewish activities. The only exception is supplemental school, as almost all of the Reform families rely on these schools for the education of their children. Given that there is just one Orthodox congregation in our sample, Table 31 presents data for Reform and Conservative members only.

Table 31: Children’s Experiences by Denomination (Significant Items Only)

	%	
	<i>Reform (n=536)</i>	<i>Conservative (n=516)</i>
supplemental Jewish religious school	92	82
Jewish youth group	59	68
Jewish summer camp	42	59
Israel trip	30	42
Jewish day school	13	30

Continuity -- #1 Source of Concern (295 comments)

The #1 concern of Westchester congregants is Jewish continuity and the future of the Jewish community. Respondents spoke of continuity in different regards: intermarriage, assimilation, apathy, and the diminishment of commitment. These comments, it should be noted, came from members in every synagogue in the study--Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and unaffiliated.

Many of these comments mentioned either “intermarriage,” “assimilation,” the “secularization of Jews,” or the “decline in the number of Jews.” These tended to be short comments with little elaboration. “I am deeply concerned about the Jewish intermarriage rate and what it indicates about the future of Judaism,” wrote one respondent. “I am distressed by the high percentage of Jewish people who marry outside the religion and ‘drop’ their Jewish identity,” said another. “#1 problem is assimilation,” wrote a third. “Most people around us are becoming less observant as time goes on. Much less of a priority on finding a Jewish spouse.”

Others referred to the “lack of observance,” “lack of religious feeling,” “lack of interest,” “lack of commitment,” “disaffection of the younger generation,” “apathy,” “cynicism,” and “laziness in the general community that threatens the maintenance of the tradition and the continued strength of the organized religious movement.” People worry when their “friends say that being Jewish doesn’t really matter to them,” and they are concerned about “Jews who have no interest in and no connection to Judaism.” One person said, “Most Jews are not involved, nor care nor know much about Judaism, Israel and recent history of Israel...” Another respondent wrote, “Too many people believe that being a secular Jew is enough. There is not a great level of observance among our friends. Therefore, the kids don’t understand and experience the customs and traditions of Judaism.” And yet another person wrote, “The apathy of Jewish adults, highly educated secularly but woefully ignorant Jewishly, disappoints and worries me. They have, unfortunately, isolated themselves from commitment to Jewish study—it’s the same few faces which show up while the majority remain uninvolved.”

Respondents are particularly concerned about the younger generation—those who are not going to Hebrew school, not getting educated, “not being taught the importance of keeping a Jewish identity.” “The younger generation does not have the same sense of belonging to the Jewish community,” observed one respondent. “I am concerned that

teenagers do not feel a strong tie to Judaism or Jewish life, especially since traveling to Israel has become dangerous,” said another. “We must make a major effort to involve our younger people (ages preschool to 40) in every aspect of our religion, belonging, giving, supporting and participating, so that the future of our people is secure and continuing,” concluded a third.

Also included in this category are concerns about the number of people who are not joining synagogues, the number who are disaffiliating, and the number of members who fail to attend or participate in synagogue services and activities. Here is just one example of the comments about apathy in the synagogue: “Lack of affiliation of so many people, intermarriage and lack of involvement of high school, college age and single young adults in Jewish life and synagogue attendance. Also apathy among so many members leaving others to do most of the work in running the synagogue.”

Some place the blame on “Jewish illiteracy” and the “lack of knowledge among Jews in terms of Jewish learning and Jewish history.” They note children’s distaste for Hebrew school which “is becoming more of a ‘chore’ and is turning our youngsters off.” There is criticism of the supplementary school curriculum. “Jewish education through high school is not challenging/inspiring to children; children are turned off; teachers are not up to par.” The concern is not only that pupils are not inspired but that they do not learn: “Seeing many of my children’s Jewish friends who have very little knowledge of Jewish heritage and culture, despite attending religious school classes.” Most would probably agree with the person who said, “After-school Hebrew schools be better able to engage the students and have them develop a love of Jewish learning; less rote-teaching and more in-depth examination is needed.” According to another respondent, “to learn by rote is not to learn by heart or with love in one’s heart for Hebrew and one’s heritage.”

Respondents are concerned about excess pressure around bar/bat mitzvah, the post-bar/t mitzvah drop-off, lack of participation in youth groups, limited participation/attendance at Shabbat services, and the inability of the synagogue to keep teens involved in Jewish life. The issues are summarized in the following comment:

“Services are long and don’t get everyone involved, so essentially they are quite boring. The kids don’t want to go to services so the role of Shabbat/prayer/synagogue is being diminished with every generation. Most Jewish children I know do not have the connection with Israel that my kids have or that I had at the same age. Increasingly difficult to educate children in Hebrew school since we are competing with hundreds of more interesting activities. And their parents do not have the same commitment to Jewish education so it becomes very secondary or tertiary in their lives.”

Transmission of Judaism #6 Source of Joy (137 comments)

The concern about Jewish continuity at the community level is offset, in part, by the great joy, at the personal level, in transmitting Judaism to one’s own children. Parents and grandparents take joy in teaching their children and being an example to them, watching

them attend Hebrew school and participate in programs, and “seeing my children learn and practice our very noble traditions.” Respondents wrote about “reading Bible stories to my children,” “attending family services with my children,” “watching my children embrace Judaism by choice, no coercion,” and “experiencing Judaism/holidays/community life with my children.” The joy extends from seeing their children become involved in Jewish activities, to their learning to read Hebrew, to hearing them sing Jewish songs. For one, “the greatest joy derived from Jewish life is seeing my children becoming active and learned participants in Jewish activities, religious services and youth groups.” For another, “having my children understand that compassion, caring and understanding make you a good Jew. Seeing my son read Hebrew and having him enjoy it.” And for yet another the joy comes “when I see my children participate in a ceremony at a young age reading Hebrew and also when they sing Jewish songs in the shower that they learned at summer camp.”

We know that children are important in the Jewish identities of adults. People often are motivated to join a synagogue for their children’s benefit. And half of those in our study say that, at the present time, their child’s education is extremely important in giving meaning to their membership in the congregation. One might suspect an element of pediatric Judaism in the data, the person for example who admitted that “most of my Jewish life is carried out for the sake of my children.” Still, even this statement turns out not to be a simple story. “My own ‘Jewish life’ ended with the death of my father when I was 8 years old,” she explains. “I think it would have helped me greatly to have continued with a Jewish life after such a terrible loss.” In the aggregate, the comments in this category leave the reader with a sense, not of a child-focused Judaism, but rather of the genuine joy that many people feel knowing that they are a successful link between the generations: “The greatest joy is to perpetuate the traditions of our families. Lighting Shabbat candles, observing Passover seders, fasting and observing rituals as a family connect us to our past and create traditions for the future generations to follow.”

What also undercuts the interpretation of these data as pediatric Judaism is the number of respondents who are older adults—grandparents and even great grandparents observing how their children (and their children’s children) are raising their families. Here, for instance, is how one of the elders expressed his Jewish joy: “The aspect of continuity--the bris of my great grandson, the Passover table, even if no one has the patience to spend more than 15 minutes with the haggadah--that is joy.”

The following excerpts were selected to give a flavor of the totality. What is remarkable in these comments is the diversity among the respondents—a non-Jew raising Jewish children, a child of survivors, a child of immigrant parents, an adult who never had the chance for Jewish education as a child, a non-observant Jew, a spiritual Jew. Within this diversity, however, is the common joy of watching and facilitating the transmission of Judaism to the next generation.

“I am the first Jew in two generations since my grandparents converted to Christianity in the post Holocaust era. I feel a personal sense of victory in defeating the fear the Nazi regime instilled in my ancestors. I began practicing on

my own because I find peace and happiness in Jewish prayer. It is simply in my blood. My greatest joy has come from raising Jewish children who feel at home in temple, and who have little sense of my transition. It is not easy to join Jewish life as an adult. For years I felt that the temple had a rhythm and dance and I was deaf. I have worked hard at becoming comfortable. Seeing my children pray, read Hebrew and choose to participate in youth groups has been my greatest joy.”

“As a child of Holocaust survivor, the continued safety of world Jewry is very important, as is raising my children to be Jewish.”

“I know and respect the basic tenets of Judaism. I am not highly observant but I want my children to know and be proud of their heritage. (I do get tears in my eyes when I see them learning Jewish songs, etc.) I was the child of Jewish European immigrants, so synagogue or no synagogue--it was clear that we were Jewish. I hope that my children also identify as Jews and wish to participate in and perpetuate their religion.”

“Recently my daughter became a bat mitzvah at the temple. It is nice to know that she has a Jewish identity because it will, hopefully, remain with her for life. It was a wonderful experience for me to watch her prepare for this occasion, since I never experienced it myself.”

“The aspect of Jewish life that brings me the greatest joy is watching my children learn about the rituals and history of Judaism. I was not given any formal Jewish education, and I feel that if I had a strong religious background, it could have helped me during difficult times, i.e., the deaths of my parents. The fact that my children are learning all aspects of Judaism and are preparing the bat mitzvah means a lot to me. I am hoping that this knowledge and the comfort and familiarity of the religion will come in handy for them in their everyday lives, and they can draw upon what they have learned and what they know.”

“I have always been a spiritual person and my Jewish identity has always been extremely important to me. Having children has strengthened both of these feelings. It is very important to me that my children also feel a very strong Jewish identity as well as develop a love for Israel and the Jewish people.”

“As a non-Jew married to a Jew, raising two Jewish children, I feel it is very important for the family to attend services together and for the children to know one religion (rather than receive mixed-messages from two). Therefore, what brings me the greatest joy is seeing my girls become part of a religious community.”

“My greatest joy comes in the fact that Judaism is the one true religion. Seeing my son become a bar mitzvah was a wonderful part of my life. All the traditions and holidays that I grew up with and passing them on to my children will give me

great joy.... Hoping to see my daughter get married in my synagogue will make me completely happy about being Jewish.”

CONCLUSION

The Westchester Congregation Survey provides a portrait of synagogue members and insight into their views of the synagogue and the community. Because of the rigor with which the sample was developed, we are confident that the survey results represent well the membership of the 16 synagogues that participated in the study.

Overview of Findings

The following is a brief summary of research findings with regard to Jewish identity, synagogue membership, the synagogue community, and the Westchester Jewish community.

Jewish Identity

Findings about identity are consistent with current notions about how American Jews enact their Jewishness. For the vast majority of synagogue members, leading an ethical and moral life is of key importance to their Jewish identity. Substantially fewer grant such importance to the more traditional elements of Jewish practice—maintaining a Jewish home, attending prayer services, and engaging in Jewish study. It appears that universalistic values predominate while specifically Jewish behaviors are less valued.

It also appears that people are most strongly touched by a personal or familial Judaism. As seen in the survey comments, respondents most often have a positive emotional reaction to home celebrations with family and friends, and they less often find such joy in their synagogue or communal experiences. Results suggest that American Jews may have their own version of “Bowling Alone.”

For most, Jewish learning plays a secondary or minimal role in Jewish identity and an equally small role in giving meaning to synagogue membership. At the same time, their Judaic knowledge is the realm of their greatest dissatisfaction. We do not know the actual level of knowledge that people have. We know only that whatever the level, it is not as high as they would like for themselves. We also know that the dissatisfaction is unrelated to the adequacy of educational opportunities offered by the synagogue or the community. It is, therefore, most likely an outcome of busy modern lives that permit little time for study.

Synagogue Membership

Some of the findings confirm commonsense notions about affiliation. For one, it is clear that congregations are largely comprised of married people, in their 40s and 50s, with children. That most joined when their children were school age is in keeping with the general observation that people affiliate in order to provide for their children’s Jewish education.

The composition of membership is intertwined with that of leadership. Our random sample of the 16 congregations yielded only four congregants in their 20s. None of them had as yet served in a leadership position. Of the 107 members in their 30s, only 11% had ever served on the board. Power and leadership is in the hands of the middle-aged, a situation which may contribute to the sense of the synagogue as a setting not intended for singles or young adults. Moreover, the skew in the affiliated population means that synagogues are hard pressed to develop the next generation of leaders.

Synagogue workers often speak of concentric circles of members, some holding a central place in the congregation and others being more peripheral. The data make clear that there are, in fact, three distinct groups in Reform and Conservative congregations--the regular, occasional, and non-attenders. Members in each of these groups have vastly different experiences in and perceptions of the synagogue. Not surprisingly, the more active someone is, the more positive his/her experience. These two factors are probably mutually reinforcing. That is, the more often people attend services, the more they become integrated into the life of the congregation. The more integrated they are, the more likely they are to attend services. The result is a spiral of engagement.

Linked to these concentric circles is the question of human resources, the survey item that produced the lowest rating. Synagogues generally fail to make good use of their members' skills and abilities. They do not inventory the talents that their members bring to them nor do they know how to match these to the synagogue's needs. They need processes for the intake of new members, for finding out who their members are and what they would like to offer to the community, and for hooking people into the life of the congregation, not through mass programs but through individualized in-reach.

Synagogue Community

Synagogues have, by and large, been successful in creating congregational communities. The majority of members chose their particular synagogue because of the sense of community that they feel there. Most agree that the members of their congregation care for each other in times of need and share in each others' joy. Community is so central to the synagogue experience that it is the number one area in which members call for improvement or enhancement. There is not, it should be noted, the same call for improvements to prayer, education, social action projects, or support for those in need.

The synagogue succeeds as a communal enterprise but not as a religious or spiritual one. Given 11 elements that might give meaning to synagogue membership, daily minyan and/or weekly Shabbat services appear at the very bottom of the list. When people come to services, they feel warmly welcomed. They do not, however, find the services to be particularly relevant or inspiring. Still the majority of respondents say that the synagogue fulfills their spiritual needs. The only logical conclusion is that the size of their needs is small.

Westchester Jewish Community

Finally, the survey points out two challenges for the Westchester Jewish community. For one, over half of the synagogue members give more of their volunteer time to non-Jewish organizations than they do to Jewish ones. A similar number contribute more money to Jewish causes than to non-Jewish causes. Money—dues, tuition, and charitable contributions—is the primary means by which people are connected to the Jewish community (more than being an active participant, a recipient of services, or a leader). The relationship thus tends to be formal, businesslike. Such an arrangement carries the danger of creating a community in name only, one that lacks the “social glue” of personal contact and social interactions.

Moreover, after the dual threats of intermarriage and assimilation, the next most common source of concern for Westchester’s synagogue members has to do with divisiveness within the Jewish community, most often defined as inter-denominational tensions. This divisiveness, which is mentioned more often than Israel and more often than anti-Semitism, represents a potential fraying of the fabric of the community.

One Good Question Deserves Another

Designed as a descriptive study, the Westchester Congregation Study both reveals major trends in the affiliated community and shows the variance within this population. Although not designed as policy or planning research, it nevertheless raises issues worthy of consideration by synagogues and the organized Jewish community. The survey answered many questions, but it also leaves us with the following:

- “Being a good person” (a universalistic value) and celebrating the Jewish holidays (an occasional practice) are the most important elements of Jewish identity; least important are keeping a Jewish home, attending services, and engaging in Jewish study. What can synagogues do to raise the importance of regular Jewish practices in the lives of their members?
- About one in four synagogue members are dissatisfied with their current level of Judaic knowledge. This dissatisfaction is unrelated to the adequacy of existing programs but rather appears to be a sign of busy lives and low priority given to adult learning. What can synagogues and the community do to raise the value placed on Jewish study and to create educational opportunities that more readily fit into people’s lives?
- Synagogues serve a particular segment of the Jewish community. What must they do to become true multi-generational institutions that include singles, young adults in their 20s and 30s, older adults, and the elderly?
- People who attend services with more regularity and who are closer to the center of the active core of the congregation have significantly different experiences in the synagogue than do those who hold more peripheral positions. What can synagogues

do to expand the size of their active core, to make better use of the talents that their members bring to them, and to build on the mutually reinforcing links between participation in synagogue life and feelings about the congregation?

- Synagogues succeed at building communities in which people feel warmly welcomed and cared for. What must they do to also become religious centers, in which prayer experiences speak to people and help attach them to God?
- The Westchester Jewish community appears strong and its members feel pride in their Judaism and in their community. At the same time, the relationship to the community is often a financial one. And many are troubled by divisions within the community. What must be done to develop a community of active participation and not just check-writing, to include every Jew under the community “tent,” and to create a successfully pluralist Jewish community?

We hope that the research will stimulate discussion and inform planning and action, and that these, in turn, will help to bring the great joy that people experience in their private Jewish lives to the Jewish public arena, as well.