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ABOUT THE REPORT

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

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

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

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Steven M. Cohen

Members and Motives: Who Joins American Jewish Congregations and Why

Summary

- *In general:* At any given moment, about 40% of American Jewish adults belong to synagogues in the United States. Many more have been members at one time or another, either as children or as adults. As a group, members of congregations are far more active in all areas of Jewish life than non-members – in part because more committed Jews join synagogues, and in part because synagogues help Jews grow and become involved in other ways.
- *Denominations differ:* Denominational affiliation is a strong predictor for synagogue membership, how often they attend services, how involved they are in Jewish life generally and how important Judaism is to them personally. Of all Orthodox Jews, 89% belong to congregations, while 63% of Conservative Jews and 52% of Reform Jews are synagogue members. 61% of Orthodox Jews attend services at least monthly, while the numbers for Conservative and Reform are 33% and 22% respectively. 86% of Orthodox congregants say being Jewish is very important, as compared with 73% of Conservative Jews, and 57% of Reform Jews.
- *Demographics differ:* Sizes of congregations and average age of membership vary by movement. Orthodox synagogues have the smallest average membership; and Reform congregations the largest. More strikingly, each movement has very different demographic characteristics. In general, members of Orthodox synagogues are by far the youngest; Conservative oldest; Reform in the middle. Of the liberal movements, Reform is the most active in promoting new congregations that attract young families in new areas of settlement. Reconstructionist congregations have the largest number of members who are non-Jews.
- *Motivation differs:* More than the others, the Orthodox exhibit a life-long commitment to synagogue membership. Conservative Jews largely start their period of congregational membership with marriage and children, but retain their affiliation past the Bar/Bat Mitzvah of their children in part to experience belonging and community in their later years with other “empty nester” Jews. In the Reform Movement, members tend more frequently to leave after their children reach Bar/Bat Mitzvah age.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

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

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

Mindful of their own diverse perspectives, the members of the Synagogue Advisory Board and Academy encourage an ongoing responsible conversation that includes multiple, even conflicting, views on Jewish congregational life. Membership in the Advisory Board and the Academy therefore does not imply any member's endorsement of or support for any particular view or opinion expressed in this or any other Institute publication.

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- *In-marriage/Inter-marriage differs:* Analysis reveals different patterns among three sorts of married couples: the in-married (both spouses are born Jews), the conversionary in-married (one member has converted to Judaism), and the mixed married (one spouse remains non-Jewish). In-married couples comprise almost 72% of the married families in the three major denominations. Conversionary in-married couples comprise 12% of the families among major denomination congregants. Mixed married couples amount to almost 17% of today's congregants in Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform synagogues combined.
- *Level of involvement differs:* There is a clear gradient of involvement in Jewish life associated with denominational affiliation, from Orthodoxy (with the highest level of engagement) to Conservative to Reform (with the lowest). In part, this may be because the various movements attract different types of Jews and in part because congregations shape and socialize Jews differently. The differences point to larger differences in denominational style, feel, and norms.
- *Challenges differ:* In short, rabbis and leaders in Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist congregations certainly face some common challenges. But just as certainly, they lead very different constituencies, with different conceptions of Judaism, and different motivations for joining and remaining connected with congregations. More useful than judging one movement's success at the expense of others' is taking into account more fully the specific constituencies that each denomination serves, the particular challenges each faces, and the cultural resources and spiritual capital their congregant bring to their communities.

Introduction

At any given moment, about 40% of American Jewish adults belong to Jewish congregations in the United States. Many more have been members at one time or another, either as children or as adults. As a group, members of congregations are far more active in all areas of Jewish life than non-members – in part because more committed Jews join synagogues, and in part because synagogues help Jews grow and express their Jewish commitment.

Understanding the who and the why of congregational membership, then, is of obvious importance not only to congregational leaders, rabbis, and denominations, but to all concerned with the strength and vitality of American Jewry.

So, who are the people who do join synagogues? Why do these people join? When in their lives do they join? Conversely, who declines to pay congregational dues? Why do some leave, and others stay?

With all the talk about the rise of post- or trans-denominationalism in American Judaism, one might think that the answers to these questions are relatively uniform across the major denominations, or at least among Conservatism and Reform, as well as the numerically small Reconstructionist movement. Many observers recognize that Orthodoxy has retained, or even sharpened, its distinctiveness from other denominations over time. At the same time, many believe that the ideological and stylistic differences separating the other denominations have diminished to the point where the denominations are hardly distinguishable from one another. To the extent that denominational boundaries have blurred, they are alleged to have blurred among denominations outside of Orthodoxy. If so, then members of the non-Orthodox denominations – in the aggregate – should think, feel, and behave pretty much the same.

Is this true? Do the denominations outside of Orthodoxy genuinely resemble one

As a group, members of congregations are far more active in all areas of Jewish life than non-members...

another? In particular, are they indeed similar with respect to who joins their respective movement's congregations and their reasons for doing so? To address these questions, this brief paper examines patterns of congregational belonging among

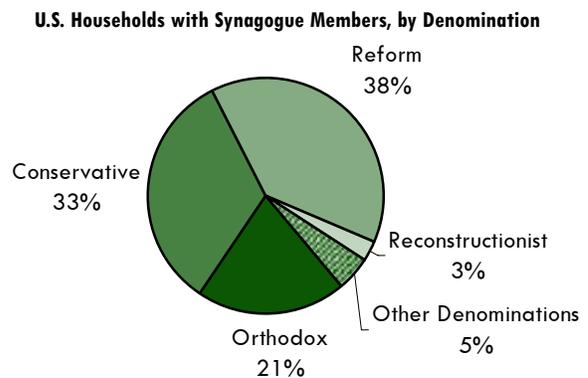
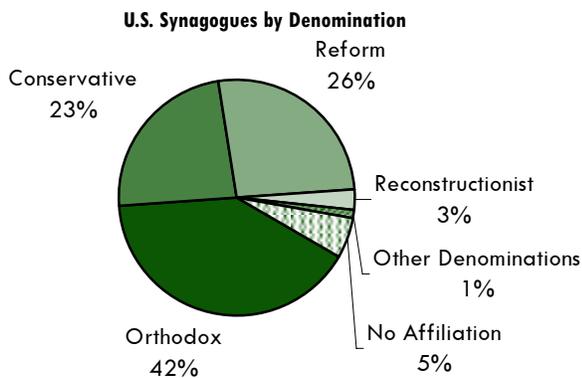
By exploring who joins congregations affiliated with each denomination, we can indirectly infer their motives for joining, setting the stage for thinking of better ways to recruit and retain congregational members.

Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jews, with attention, where feasible to Reconstructionist Jews as well. The analysis draws upon the National Jewish Population Study of 2000-01 (sponsored by United Jewish Communities), with its 4,523 Jewish respondents. By exploring who joins congregations affiliated with each denomination, we can indirectly infer their motives for joining, setting the stage for thinking of better ways to recruit and retain congregational members. To be clear, the NJPS, constructed to answer many questions, cannot fully address all the questions posed above; but it can provide some suggestive evidence to inform and frame how we think about congregational membership and denominational variation.

U.S. Synagogue Membership by Denomination

As a preliminary matter, we note the distribution of households and their members in each of the denominations. We note that the Reform movement, with 348,000 households is the most numerous, followed in turned by Conservative congregants (295,000) and Orthodox households (183,000). A far smaller number of households (24,000) belong to Reconstructionist synagogues. (All estimates are approximate, and given the likely under-estimate of the total American Jewish population by the NJPS, the denominational figures also probably under-estimate the respective numbers for each denomination.)

By our best calculations, the mean number of Jewish households in Reform temples is 350, as compared with 340 in Conservative congregations, 240 in Reconstructionist congregations, and 120 in Orthodox synagogues. These figures are calculated by dividing the total number of Jewish households in each movement by the total number of congregations identified with each movement, as compiled in a recent census of the 3,700 American congregations (Schwartz, et al., 2002). Of the 3,690 Jewish congregations in the United States whose denominational affiliation is known, Orthodox synagogues account for 41% of all U.S.



Jewish congregations, followed by Reform with 26% of synagogues. Moreover, 23% of U.S. synagogues are Conservative, and 3% are Reconstructionist. The Orthodox count contains a large number of very small synagogues, which may artificially depress the mean number of households for Orthodoxy.

Orthodox households are larger, have more children, and consist of relatively more Jewish members than those of the other denominations. Conservative households have relatively few children. Reform households contain the largest number of non-Jewish members, while Reconstructionist households report the largest proportion of household members who are non-Jews.

With these considerations in mind, we estimate about 761,000 Jews in Reform congregations (853,000 people altogether); 653,000 Jews (710,000 Jews and non-Jews all together) in Conservative congregations; 567,000 Jews (and 589,000 total) in Orthodox congregations; and 50,000 Jews (and 10,000 non-Jews) in Reconstructionist congregations. With respect to children, the Orthodox report the largest number of all denominations, with 224,000 children, followed in turn by Reform (195,000), Conservative (147,000), and Reconstructionist (15,000).

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Denominational Demographics: Young Orthodox, Elderly Conservatives, and Middle-aged Reform

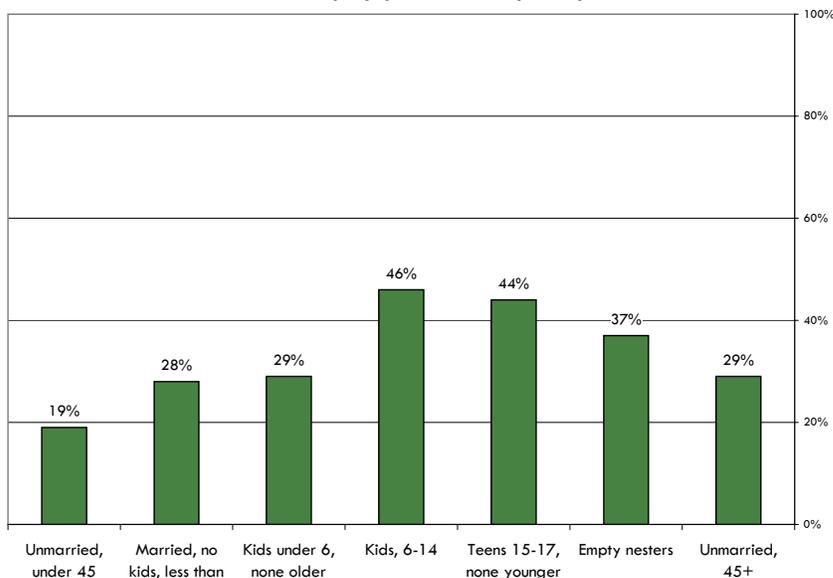
Congregational membership rises and falls over the life cycle. Of those American Jewish households where the responding adult is under 35, 25% affiliate with congregations. This figure compares with 32% of those 35-44, and 37% of those 45-54, the peak years for congregational belonging.

These age variations are driven by the initial rise and subsequent fall in membership associated with the “typical” family life cycle. Among the unmarried who are under age 45, just 19% belong to congregations; among young couples, 28% belong; and of families with children in elementary school, 46% join congregations. (The latter figure, for families with school-age children, would be higher if it were restricted to in-married families. Of all married couples where both spouses were born Jewish, both with and without children home, 60% belong to a congregation at any given moment, as contrasted with just 14% of mixed married couples.) Clearly, the presence of school-age children impels Jews to join synagogues, just as children motivate Christian parents to join churches. Since school-age children emerge largely in the middle years and then leave the scene for college or other destinations somewhat later, congregational belonging reaches its highest level in those years.

AGE	PROPORTION WHO ARE SYNAGOGUE MEMBERS
Under 35	25%
35-44	32%
45-54	37%
55-64	34%
65-74	34%
75+	36%

Notwithstanding these general patterns characterizing the Jewish population overall, the major denominations certainly differ with respect to their distributions by age and family life cycle. As we shall see, only Reform Jews clearly exhibit the child-driven model of synagogue affiliation.

Households with Synagogue Members, by Family Status



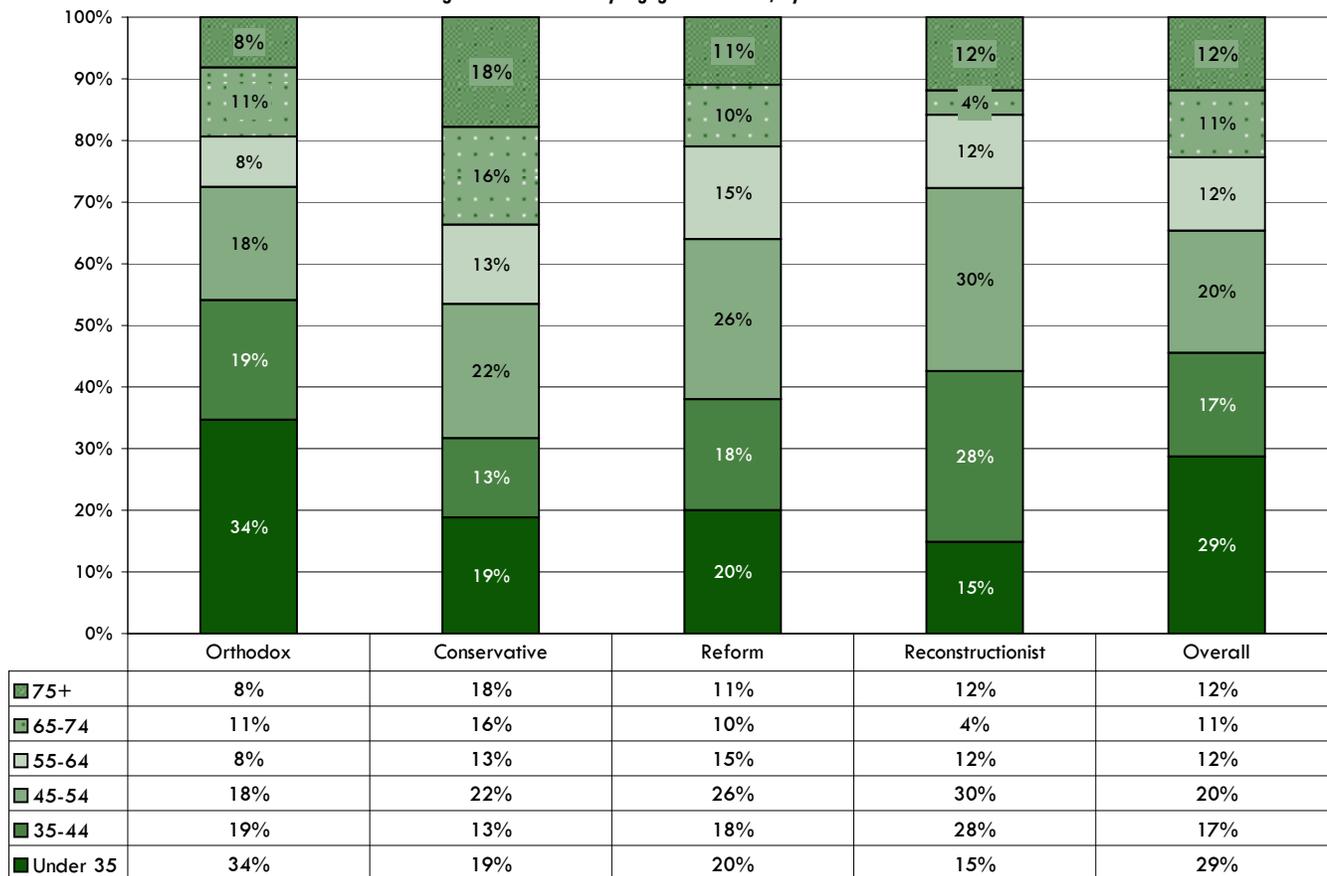
Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews tend to be concentrated numerically at different points with respect to their age, and with respect to their family status, which, of course, is closely tied to their age. In broad strokes, the Orthodox are young, the

Conservative rather elderly, and the Reform in between the two, concentrated in the middle-age.

To elaborate, and starting with the Orthodox, the Orthodox distributions are notable for their many members under the age of 35. A few decades ago, we used to think of the Orthodox (largely immigrant Jews) as old and dying. Today we find that they are young and vital, the youngest of all three major denominations. In fact, in Orthodox synagogues, a third (34%) of the adults is younger than 35, a proportion far higher than that found in non-Orthodox congregations. While most (54%) Orthodox Jewish adults are under the age of 45, just a third (34%) of Conservative congregants are as young.

One reason Orthodox congregants are so young is that they marry younger than non-Orthodox Jews and they bear children younger – and bear more of them (all of which promote congregational belonging). In addition, Orthodox Jews show a greater tendency than other Jews to join synagogues even without children in the household. Indeed, as many as a quarter (25%) of

Age Distribution of Synagogue Members, by Denomination



Orthodox member “units” is both under age 45 and has no children at home. This figure compares with just 16% of Conservative congregations and 20% of Reform congregations. In essence, this statistic is saying that, less than other denominations, Orthodox Jews under 45 don’t “need” children to find a reason to join a synagogue.

The Conservative congregations ...are the oldest movement by far. A third of Conservative family units is age 65 and over, far more than among their Orthodox or Reform counterparts.

The Conservative congregations, in contrast, are the oldest movement by far. A third (34%) of Conservative family units is age 65 and over, far more than among their Orthodox (20%) or Reform (21%) counterparts. These age distributions are also reflected in the types of families that belong to Conservative congregations. More than the other two major denominations, Conservative congregants are made up of adults age 45 and over who are “empty nesters” (33% of the families in such congregations) or who are single older adults, largely widows and widowers (24% of Conservative family units). In all, these two categories of older, childless homes comprise 57% of Conservative families, compared with 47% of Reform families and just 35% of Orthodox family units.

We may speculate as to why the Conservative movement is so demographically “top-heavy” with such a large proportion of older members and, as we saw earlier, such a small proportion of children. These patterns are consistent with the oft-noted long-term decline in the number of Conservative Jews, and portend further declines in the years ahead. On one level, the decline

A METHODOLOGICAL NOTE:

The NJPS questionnaire asked respondents to state whether they belonged to a synagogue and, if so, to provide its denominational affiliation. For this analysis, somewhat ambiguous answers on the survey (“traditional,” “Conservative- Reform,” etc.) were recoded into the major denominational categories according to the extent to which their incumbents’ ritual behavior resembled the behavior of the unambiguous groups.

Hardly any respondents provided non-denominational answers, precluding a separate analysis of non- or trans-denominational synagogue members. Only a small number identified as Reconstructionist, allowing only the most general inferences on this numerically small denomination.

In all instances, the unit of analysis is the household, rather than the individual. The levels of congregational belonging are higher when computed for Jewish individuals (40%) than when computed for Jewish households. This difference emerges because households with many Jewish individuals (e.g., in-married couples with three Jewish children) are far more likely to belong to congregations than are households with few Jewish individuals (e.g., intermarried Jews raising their children as non-Jews).

of Conservative numbers reflects its earlier prominence as the “ethnic church” of American Jewry (first noted by sociologist, Marshall Sklare who saw a resemblance between Conservative congregations and Protestant and Catholic churches that drew their congregants primarily from those with a common ethnic ancestry). As the ethnic dimension to American Jewish identities declined, so too did the denomination that most closely reflected it.

The Reform movement has been especially energetic in supporting newer congregations in places of recent Jewish settlement...

On another level, Conservatism has been losing some of its more observant and better educated young adults to Orthodoxy and to trans-denomination or non-denominational start-up congregations. Many of these erstwhile Conservative Jews express frustration with the style of worship and the level of commitment and learning among mainstream Conservative congregants. At the same time, the

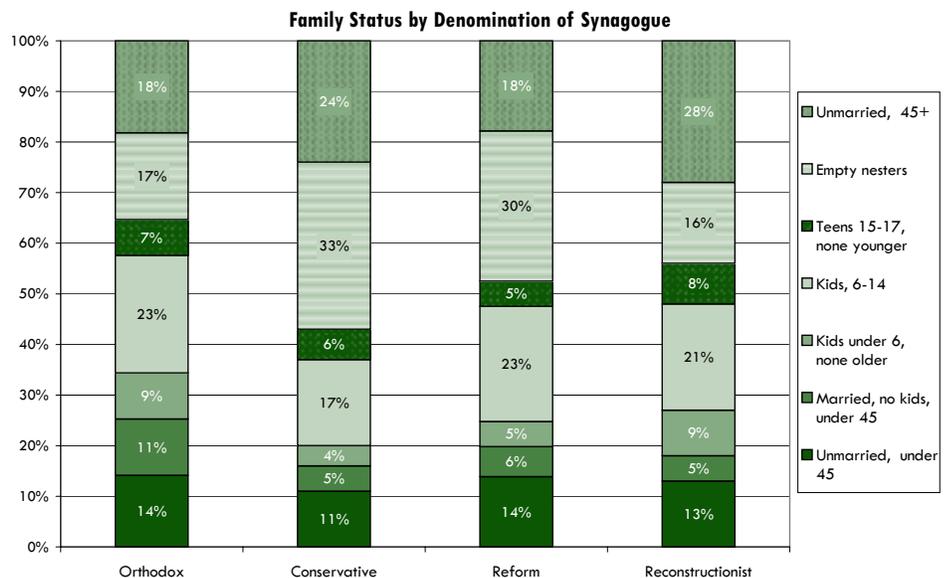
Reform movement has been especially energetic in supporting newer congregations in places of recent Jewish settlement, drawing away potential younger adult congregants from considering Conservative affiliation.

The Reform age and family life cycle profiles are also distinctive. Whereas the Orthodox cluster in the younger years, and the Conservative congregants cluster in the older years, the Reform congregations lead in relative terms in the middle years, that is, between the ages 45 and 64. In this age range are found 41% of Reform family units, compared with 35% of Conservative families and just 27% of Orthodox families.

The family life cycle distributions contain some clues as to why Reform congregants are disproportionately middle-aged. Observers surmise that many Reform families join temples primarily for the purpose of preparing their children for Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Soon after the celebration, the thinking goes, many erstwhile Reform families leave the temple. To what extent do the results comport with such a view?

The Reform Post-B’nai Mitzvah Gap

To address this issue, we focus on the relative proportion of two types of families: those with children 6-14 years old and those with children 15-17 with none younger. The former are families whose reasons for belonging to a congregation include, in part, the training of their children for Bar/Bat Mitzvah. In contrast, families with children 15-17



constitute families where Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation cannot serve as a prime motivation for congregational belonging. If Reform Jews drop out more than others, then we should find relatively fewer post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah families (i.e., those whose children are 15-17) in Reform temples than in, say, Conservative synagogues.

Of Conservative families with children 6-14 and 15-17 years old, it turns out that 26% are in the latter, “post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah” category. In other words, for every 74 families in Conservative synagogues where the children are 6-14, there are 26 families with older children only, 15-17.

For the Reform movement, the presence of the post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah families is indeed far less frequent. Only 18% of Reform families with children fall into that older category. In Reform temples, on average, 82 families have children 6-14 and only 18 have children 15-17.

Reform Jews, far more than Conservative Jews, drop out of their congregations after the Bar/Bat Mitzvah of their youngest child.

The clear implication here is that Reform Jews, far more than Conservative Jews, drop out of their congregations after the Bar/Bat Mitzvah of their youngest child. We do not know how many Conservative families stay affiliated after the Bar/Bat Mitzvah of their youngest children. But, in using the Conservative statistics as a way of inferring the Reform retention or dropout rates, we need to make an assumption of the Conservative retention rate. If we were to assume that 100% of the Conservative families retain their membership in the late adolescent years, then by implication from the family distributions, just 65% of Reform families do so.

This estimate would imply a Reform dropout rate of 35%. However, since not all Conservative families do in fact remain members of their synagogues, one must assume that the Reform dropout rate is even higher than 35%.

The small number of Reconstructionist respondents report age and family stage distributions that bear similarities with those found among Reform congregants. Like Reform, they concentrate rather heavily in the 45-54 year old age range, as well as among those with school-age children.

In short, from the age and family life cycle distributions, we obtain glimpses of the different mix of motivations that bring Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews to affiliate with their respective congregations. More than the others, the Orthodox exhibit a life-long commitment to synagogue membership. It seems that Conservative Jews largely start their period of congregational membership with marriage and children, but retain their affiliation past the Bar/Bat Mitzvah of their children in part to experience belonging and community in their later years with other “empty nester” Jews. Only in the Reform movement do we find evidence of a strong child-centered pattern of congregational belonging, but even here, only a minority (albeit a substantial one) joins primarily for Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and leaves when that task is completed. Further denominational differences can be observed with respect to patterns of marriage.

MARRIAGE STATUS	PROPORTION WHO ARE SYNAGOGUE MEMBERS
In-married	60%
Conversionary in-married	48%
Intermarried	14%
Overall	38%

The In-married, Mixed Married, and Converts: Some Sharp Variations

Three sorts of married Jewish couples exhibit very different patterns of Jewish engagement: the in-married, the conversionary in-married, and the mixed married. Although Jewish religious law makes little distinction between converts and Jews by birth, sociological analysis reveals different patterns among Jews by birth married to one another (“in-married”) and Jews married to Jews by choice (the “conversionary in-married”). The in-married (or, to be precise, the born-Jewish in-married) consist of couples where both spouses were raised as Jews and identify as such today. These comprise almost 72% of the married families in the three major denominations. Next are the conversionary in-married (or “conversionary” for short). These consist of couples where both identify as Jews, but where one or both converted or switched to Jewish identity during their lives. These comprise 12% of the families among major denomination congregants. Finally, we have the mixed married, that is, one Jew and one non-Jew. They amount to almost 17% of today’s congregants in Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform synagogues combined.

As one can readily imagine, the distributions of these three types of households are far from uniform. In moving from Orthodox, to Conservative, to Reform congregations, that is, from more “traditional” to more “progressive” varieties of Judaism,

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we find several shifts in the proportions of married couples found in each of the three categories:

- Decreasing proportions of in-married couples (90% of Orthodox couples, 79% of Conservative couples, and 57% of Reform couples, respectively);
- Increasing proportions of conversionary couples (5%, 10%, and 17% in Orthodox, Conservative and Reform congregations, respectively);
- Increasing proportions of mixed married couples (5%, 12%, and 26% in Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform congregations, respectively);
- Among couples who initially intermarried (born Jew married to born non-Jew), we find, by denomination, decreasing rates of post-wedding conversion to Judaism by the non-Jewish spouse, from 50% in Orthodox shuls to 46% in Conservative synagogues and 39% in Reform temples.

This last observation requires some explanation. "Out-married couples" refer to all couples where at least one party was not raised Jewish. They consist of two sub-categories: the conversionary and the mixed married couples. In the former, that a conversion has taken place turning a mixed marriage into an in-marriage, but in the latter, the mixed married, no conversion has taken place, so that the mixed marriage remains a mixed marriage.

...the more traditional the denomination, the more that initially out-married couples (born-Jews and their non-Jewish partners) will feel prepared for the non-Jew to convert.

Of all out-married affiliated couples, in Orthodox congregations, the number of conversionary marriages equals the number of mixed married. As a result, one half (50%) or all out-married couples in Orthodox shuls are conversionary couples. In Conservative congregations, the mixed married only slightly outnumber the conversionary marriages, producing a conversionary rate of 46%. In Reform

congregations the mixed married more heavily outnumber the conversionary couples, generating a comparable rate of 39% in Reform temples.

Several implications flow from this shifting balance between conversionary and mixed married couples. One inference we can make is that the more traditional the denomination, the more that initially out-married couples (born-Jews and their non-Jewish partners) will feel prepared for the non-Jew to convert. Previous research has determined that when out-marriages take place, the non-Jewish partner's chances of converting rise with stronger commitment and Jewish education on the part of the Jewish partner. Another implication is that the mixed married are more frequently drawn to the less traditional congregations, or alternatively, feel less than totally welcomed in the more traditional branches of American Judaism.

Notwithstanding the relatively small number of mixed married couples in Orthodox congregations, the presence of any such couples in Orthodox shuls (almost 5%) certainly runs counter to our contemporary images of Orthodoxy. Why should any intermarried Jews join an Orthodox synagogue and why should any

Why should any intermarried Jews join an Orthodox synagogue and why should any Orthodox synagogue accept intermarried Jews as members? It turns out that both sides of this relationship are somewhat more fluid than they might otherwise appear.

Orthodox synagogue accept intermarried Jews as members? It turns out that both sides of this relationship are somewhat more fluid than they might otherwise appear. While Orthodoxy has indeed become more traditional and demanding of higher levels of observance in recent years, nevertheless a minority of members remains within Orthodox congregations who in one way or another behave in significant ways that run contrary to Orthodox norms. Not all Orthodox congregants keep kosher or observe the Sabbath in traditional ways. The Orthodox mixed married are one more such group that runs contrary to enunciated norms of Orthodoxy.

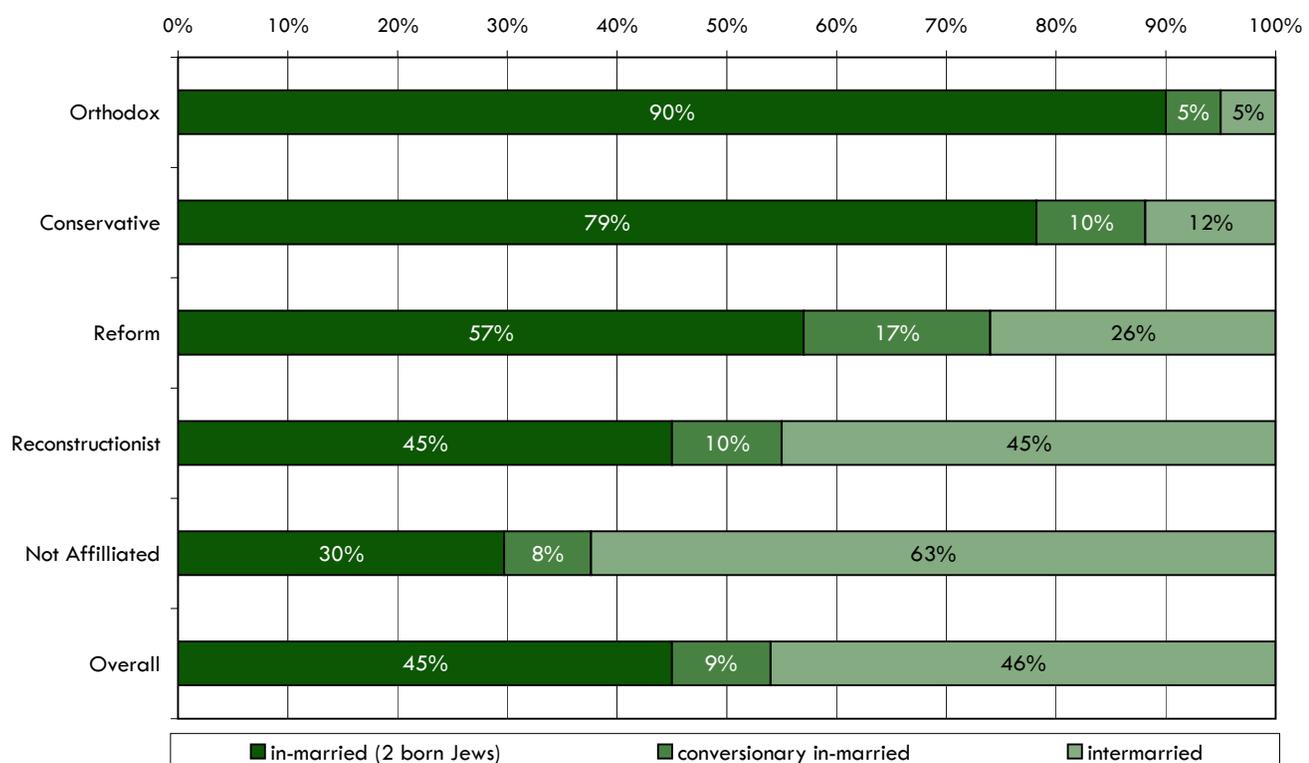
At the other end of the traditional-progressive spectrum, in Reform congregations, one must be impressed with the notably large number among married couples where at least one spouse was raised outside of Judaism. In fact, in 43% of Reform couples, either a husband or a wife did not have a Jewish childhood and has hardly any Jewish parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins. Some have converted, by now, to Judaism. But the presence of such a large number with non-Jewish childhood memories and family ties undoubtedly presents distinctive challenges – and opportunities – to Reform leadership.

Of all Orthodox Jews, 89% belong to congregations. For Conservative and Reform Jews, the comparable rates are 63% and 52%, respectively.

Another way to look at these results is to extend the analysis beyond congregational members to embrace the entire constituency associated with the major movements. For these purposes, we classify people by denomination in terms of their congregations' affiliation, if they are members, or in terms of their self-declared identities if they are not members.

We find highly varying rates of membership, moving from high to low, consistent with denominational traditionalism. Of all Orthodox Jews, 89% belong to congregations. For Conservative and Reform Jews, the comparable rates are 63% and 52%, respectively. In part these differences can be explained by the lower rates of intermarriage in the more traditional denominations. At the same time, the denominations vary even with respect to the in-married alone: 95% for the Orthodox in-married, 71% for the Conservative, and just 60% among in-married Reform Jews. While the denomination's affiliation rates differ markedly for the in-married, they are relatively uniform among conversionary and mixed married couples. Thus, in all three denominations, about three quarters of the conversionary couples are synagogue members. And, in Conservative and Reform mixed marriages, only a third now belongs to a congregation (the Orthodox rate is slightly higher). Whether Conservative or Reform, conversion is associated with more than a doubling of the affiliation rate, testifying both to the sincerity of converts, and the policy interest of organized Jewry in promoting conversion.

Intermarriage Status for Married Households by Denomination of Synagogue



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To round out the picture, in this NJPS sample, a higher proportion of Reconstructionist couples are intermarried (more than any other denomination) and a comparably smaller number of families are in-married (fewer than any other denomination). In light of the small number of Reconstructionist interviews in the survey, the accuracy of these results as a portrayal of the Reconstructionist movement remains uncertain.

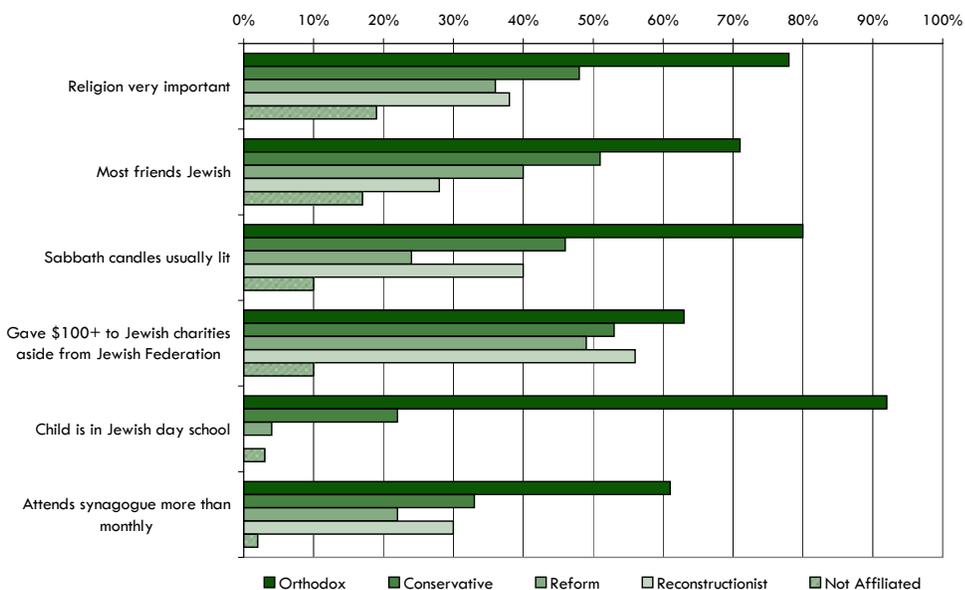
With respect to the larger denominations, the sharp variations in distributions of in-married, conversionary married, and mixed married speak to profound inter-denominational differences in norms, boundaries, and cultures. The Orthodox, not surprisingly, emerge as most committed to the in-marriage norm. Not only do they produce the fewest intermarriages (as other research shows), but, as we see here, intermarried families hardly find Orthodox shuls attractive, even as a few do, in fact, find their way there.

Less intuitively obvious, perhaps, are the major differences in marriage distributions between Conservative and Reform congregations. Only a small minority of Conservative couples is inter-married, and an almost equally small number are homes where a born-Jew and convert are married. In contrast, Reform congregations are home to very large minorities of couples where one spouse was not born Jewish (and the proportions with a spouse of non-Jewish origins are even larger among younger couples than among the Reform congregations at large). This distinctive distribution by type of marriage both reflects and lends a very different character to Conservative and Reform congregations, manifest in differences in expressions of Jewish engagement, as we see presently.

A Clear Denominational Gradient in Jewish Engagement: From Orthodox to Conservative to Reform

With all the difference in age, family configuration, and religious origins among the denominations, we are not surprised to learn of significant differences among the denominations in Jewish engagement levels as well. Not only are Orthodox Jews different from all the rest, as one might expect, but even Conservative and Reform Jews differ from each other, further undercutting the argument that no serious denominational differences persist outside of Orthodoxy.

Indicators of Jewish Engagement by Denomination of Synagogue Membership



S3K REPORTS

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On all measures – all – we find the same pattern: A denominational gradient in which Orthodox Jews outscore Conservative Jews, and where both outscore Reform Jews.

These conclusions emerge from an examination of denominational differences in a representative and diverse range of indicators of Jewish engagement, embracing friends, rituals, communal involvement, and attitudes. On all measures – all – we find the same pattern: A denominational gradient in which Orthodox Jews outscore Conservative Jews, and where both outscore Reform Jews. The proportion of those with mostly Jewish friends, for example, runs from 71% to 51% to 40%. The number attending services monthly or more often slides from 61% to 33% to 22%. The proportion currently sending their children to day school (a figure lower than the number whose children ever attended day school) reveals especially pronounced differences: 92% for the Orthodox, 22% for Conservative families, and 4% for Reform congregants.

Clearly, being Jewish is more important to Orthodox Jews (on average) than it is to Conservative Jews (on average) than it is to Reform Jews (on average). How do we know? Among other reasons, they say so. When asked how important being Jewish is to them, 86% of Orthodox congregants say very important, as compared with 73% of Conservative Jews, and just 57% of Reform Jews. A parallel question on the importance of religion produces the same gradient: 78%, 48%, and 36%. Reconstructionists more closely resemble Reform Jews than any others on these Jewish engagement levels. All of this is to say that the denominations serve very different constituencies, with different levels of Jewish cultural and social capital. The challenge, for each, is to maximize Jewish engagement above and beyond what one might expect based upon the pre-existing levels of knowledge, commitment, and connection.

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Summary and Conclusions

This brief review of denominational variations in age, family stage, intermarriage, and Jewish engagement highlights deep and enduring differences in denominationally linked motivation, styles, and cultures. The denominations' constituencies vary considerably in many respects, in part because they attract different types of Jews and in part because congregation shape and socialize Jews differently.

The traditionalism and the high levels of Jewish engagement among the Orthodox are readily apparent. They join synagogues earlier in their adulthood, both in terms of age and family stage, than do members of other denominations. They score higher than others on all conventional measures of Jewish engagement available in the NJPS, including measures that are certainly endorsed by all major movements (e.g., going to services, seeing being Jewish as very important, and marrying a Jew). Being Jewishly involved for the Orthodox is more of a life-long and all-embracing commitment. Certainly, such highly committed Jews are found among Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist individuals as well, but they emerge in smaller number.

The same sorts of issues that differentiate the Orthodox from the others also differentiate (albeit to a lesser extent) Conservative from Reform Jews. For example, hardly any Reform Jews send their children to day schools, while a significant number, albeit certainly a minority, of Conservative Jews does so. Another profound difference is in the number of families with spouses raised outside of Judaism. Proportionately, twice as many such families belong to Reform as contrasted with Conservative congregations. In addition, the relative absence of families with teen-age children in Reform congregations demonstrates that a large minority of Reform congregants with younger children joins primarily to prepare them for Bar/Bat Mitzvah. These illustrative and significant differences, and others, point to larger differences in style, feel, norms and boundaries in the two movements.

In short, rabbis and leaders in Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist congregations certainly face some common challenges. But just as certainly, they lead very different constituencies, with different conceptions of Judaism, and different motivations for joining and remaining connected with congregations. Those who are critical of leaders of one or another synagogue or denomination (and there are a few such critics in Jewish life) ought to take into account their constituencies – the types of Jews they serve and attract, and the cultural resources or spiritual capital these congregants bring to the congregation.

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About Synagogue 3000 (S3K)

Synagogue 3000 is a catalyst for excellence, empowering congregations and communities to create synagogues that are sacred and vital centers of Jewish life.

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

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

The S3K process - innovation, conversation, collaboration, and transformation - is a simple but effective framework for furthering the work of our brain trust to catalyze change in Jewish spiritual communities. We connect practitioners and scholars in order to close the feedback loop between research and progress. And, most importantly, we seek long-term systemic change: no less than to transform the face of Jewish congregational life in the 21st century.

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