

Jewish Rockland 2015:

The Landscape of the Rockland County Board of Rabbis Community

Final Report

March 30, 2015

David Elcott, Ph. D., B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform and
Taub Professor of Practice, NYU Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service
and

Stuart Himmelfarb, MBA, MA, B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform and
Senior Fellow, NYU Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service



Background

B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform worked with the Jewish Federation of Rockland County to explore the local Jewish synagogue community landscape (exclusive of Orthodox synagogues).

The stated goal of this study at the outset was to better understand what has, is and will be happening with synagogue life in Rockland County, and consider ways to engage or re-engage congregants and stem what may well be signs of growing interest in departure.

This issue is complex and challenging to study for a variety of reasons:

1. Relationships with one's synagogue and especially the decision to stay or depart can ignite deep emotional responses that inhibit getting open, candid information about reasons for synagogue-related actions, especially departure.
2. Given the population shifts that show that the average age of Jews in counties such as Rockland aligns with the Baby Boomer demographic, our synagogues now depend on Boomer and empty-nester membership to remain viable.
3. As Boomers become empty nesters, they face new opportunities for encore careers, travel, learning, volunteer service and more. In many cases, these opportunities exist outside Jewish life and community and may well compete against what the synagogue and Jewish community have to offer.
4. What's more, for those facing economic challenges that can accompany aging, remaining full members of synagogues might be out of reach.
5. The landscape in which people make complex decisions like these is complicated and dynamic—thereby adding to the challenge. Online access to information and connections enable people to graze among a wide range of episodic activities across the landscape, some Jewish, others not. Often, the services, connections and information previously provided by institutions like synagogues and JCC's, and by people like teachers and rabbis, can now be found easily and sometimes more authoritatively online. This means that the competition for people's interest and attention has intensified, as has the urgency of being front-and-center, relevant, current and compelling. This is true not only in Jewish life, but more broadly in the American cultural and media landscape.

We recognize, therefore, that this project in Rockland County takes place against a backdrop of dramatic change in the local and national Jewish communities—and in society at large. Changes brought about by new technologies, shifting allegiances, media vehicles and interests, new models, and economic turmoil affect all that we do.

The goal of this project, then, is to secure accurate insights from local respondents and to place them into a larger context. In so doing, the Rockland community can more accurately assess its needs, options and resources—and collaboratively and creatively chart a course forward that strengthens Jewish life and revitalizes parts of the organized community.

Project Components

The project included the following components:

1. **Synagogue Research and Data** – the first step was a limited survey fielded online only among the leadership of eleven selected synagogues throughout Rockland to ascertain membership levels and trends as seen by each synagogue’s professional and/or volunteer leadership. This was fielded in October 30-November 10, 2014, and 26 responses were gathered from the eleven local congregations.
2. **Initial Convening, November 12, 2014**—The B3 team facilitated an initial “convening” of stakeholders to engage them in the synagogue research and plans for a broader study as thought leaders and critics while also presenting a national-scope overview of the demographic and cultural issues facing American Jewry. This helped ensure that the research was as focused and productive as possible. Another goal of this session was to expand awareness of the project components and enhance the likelihood of broader and continuing cooperation and participation.
3. **Survey Two—Attitudes, Activities and Behaviors**—we then fielded a survey among the Rockland Jewish population accessible through Federation, and synagogue and JCC lists. We captured information about synagogue life, affiliation and the future plans especially of empty nesters. A key sub-segment of the sample was former members who did not have current plans to rejoin a synagogue. This hard-to-reach group could actually offer insights into a much larger segment of the total Jewish population, i.e., those not currently affiliated with synagogues. The opportunity to explore why they left their synagogue also offered insights into potential issues among “at-risk” current members of congregations.
4. **Second Convening—Presentation of Survey Results and Brainstorming Discussion, February 5, 2015**. The core advisory team as well as those who have participated in the convenings—and any others deemed significant to the widest conversation—were assembled to review the results of the second survey. The goal of the discussion was to review key findings and insights, and then review their implications for strengthening synagogue participation and programs. We hope that this stage of the project helped inspire and equip communal leaders to develop new initiatives and strategies to pursue on their own or collaboratively.
5. **This Final Report** is the last step in the project and is intended to be shared widely among all the stakeholders. It includes the data and our analyses as well as a set of

recommendations that emerged from the convenings and our other research and developmental work.

Key Findings

This project combines insights from the general culture and national Jewish community with research results generated in Rockland County. As we continue our work across the region and country, we are struck by the similarities in issues. The challenge we face—which this project addresses—is to carefully combine general insights with the unique attributes, history, culture and resources of a local community.

The General Landscape—The Stakes

Our general insights are drawn from our work exploring Baby Boomer engagement in Jewish life. Even though this project examines the full landscape in Rockland County, it turns out that Boomers make up the largest segment of the Rockland synagogue population—in the second survey, 51% of respondents were born between 1946-1964, reflecting the reality that the synagogue population skews older. As a result, we provide insights into the landscape affecting Boomers nationwide but believe these are applicable to other age cohorts as well.

Boomers represent the largest age cohort of an aging American Jewish community in which the median age matches that of the youngest Boomer. If only a small percentage of Boomers, whose fidelity to particular identities or institutions has historically been fickle, abandons the institutions of the Jewish community or Jewish life in general, we will lose significant talent and financial resources. In the same ways that funders and institutions have focused attention and programs on young Jewish adults and families, we need to expand efforts to other cohorts as well if the Jewish community is to stay vital and inclusive.

Key Supporting Assumptions

Boomers are the emerging wave of American born, educated, financially and socially integrated professionals that will be the future Jewish community. They are now at a pivot—their needs and attitudes are changing and new lifestyle choices are emerging. Many are ending midlife careers and searching for new pursuits (including encore careers in public service). These issues have been addressed in books, including *Encore* and *The Big Shift* by Marc Freedman; and by David Elcott in his national study of Jewish Boomers in 2009 presented in his monograph, *Baby Boomers, Public Service and Minority Communities: A Case Study of the Jewish Community in the United States*. They were more recently explored in B3's Elcott and Himmelfarb 2014 study

entitled *Generations & Re-Generation: Engagement and Fidelity in 21st Century American Jewish Life*. (These reports can be found on our website at b3platform.org.)

We live in a new landscape. This affects individuals and the organizations that seek to engage and serve them.

We recognize the need for a fresh look at how organizations can collaborate especially given the fact that Boomers might not be looking for “traditional” membership or affiliation with organizations. Instead, they might seek specific, targeted, temporary connections. This requires a change in how we communicate, reach out to new participants, and measure success, and requires fresh thinking.

Many Baby Boomers—including Jewish Baby Boomers—are engaged in an unprecedented search for meaning and activities as they face a new life stage: the twenty or so years in between mid-life and eventual, traditional retirement. While some Boomers might follow the previous generation’s path of retiring in their Sixties and moving to a retirement area, many others are eagerly looking ahead to a time of activity, encore careers, travel, learning and purpose. We believe this applies to many residents of Rockland County and surrounding areas.

While we recognize that this does not apply to all, many Jewish Boomers (and Boomers in general) are the recipients of the greatest influx of wealth in history which will enable many of them to undertake many new activities going forward. This also means that they could be a major source of philanthropic support within the Jewish community—or a best-missed chance. It is clear that faithful Jewish Boomer engagement will not happen without genuine, relevant, timely engagement in local Jewish life.

Our research confirms that a significant percentage of Jewish Boomers are vulnerable – while many are prepared to engage with the organized Jewish community, they will turn to whatever and whoever offers them the most meaningful, timely, accessible, relevant and engaging volunteer opportunities, resources and guidance.

Our research, matched by numerous other surveys, also indicates a significant level of dissatisfaction with many of the institutions of Jewish life as currently constructed. In a society characterized by episodic affiliations and grazing among many short-term involvements, the trend is away from deeper, more long-lasting connections to institutions. It is important to note that this trend toward episodic affiliation is not limited to synagogues or JCC’s or the Jewish community. It is a national trend that affects other faith communities and other kinds of institutions, e.g., operas and theater companies who find fewer patrons interested in

subscribing and more looking simply for a single ticket. Long term relationships are difficult to construct in this setting; instead, expectations and tactics need to be tailored to a new kind of connection in which someone shows up because they're interested, for now, and then might not reappear for months, if at all. This means that membership is a daunting goal in this landscape; instead, connection and communication might be more appropriate, i.e., embarking on a relationship that's open ended and free form. Fee for service has replaced membership in theory and in fact. These realities represent a major change from the traditional synagogue/JCC membership model, but it must be dealt with as more and more people follow these patterns.

Boomers are the first generation that experienced little anti-Semitism in their lives in America nor were they alive to witness the Shoah and the birth of Israel. Their educational and professional trajectories distinguish them from preceding generations and seem to have set a model of how Jewish Americans balance their identities as Jews and Americans. Thus, finding models of engagement for Boomers has the significant added benefit of providing potential pathways to engage the generations that follow. This is a key issue in B3's mission, i.e., to couple Boomer engagement with intergenerational connections where it makes sense.

Boomer attitudes and self-image, based on a deep and abiding sense of youthfulness and increasing involvement in the digital world of the web and social media mean that Boomers resemble the *succeeding* generational cohorts of Millennials and Gen X-ers more than the preceding group. Put differently, the notion of a Generation Gap emerged as Boomers went through their twenties and thirties, reflecting a dramatic change from the World War II and Depression generation. This indicates significant potential for inter-generational collaboration as Boomers connect in new ways to Jewish life and bring along their kids...and grandkids.

Given the expected health and longevity of Boomers, they offer decades of constructive engagement, both participatory and financial, to the Jewish community. They are the wealthiest Jewish age cohort in history, an envied asset we cannot afford to lose. While the Jewish community can be proud of its services for those who are ill or in need of care, e.g., through homes for the aged, assisted living, adult day care and counselling services, there are very few efforts to understand and capture those who are healthy, energetic and raring to explore whatever lies ahead for them. We view these choices are similar to those faced by twentysomethings: fifty and sixty plus Boomers are figuring out what to do with their skills and interests, who they want to spend their lives with and what they now think about ultimate issues of meaning and mortality. For young people, countless programs try to present peak experiences and Jewish options; Boomers need the same choices with slight adaptation to thirty years later.

Another aspect of Jewish life that parallels the larger non-Jewish landscape is the rise of the “nones”, the term used by Pew to connote the adoption of general, non-specific labels to describe one’s religious identity. In the Jewish community, “just Jewish” is rising in its popularity as a self-description of one’s Jewish identification. “Culturally Jewish” is another option. What is declining is the use of traditional denominational labels like Reform, Conservative, etc. The same thing is occurring in the Christian community. The significance of this development is that people are encouraged in our current cultural landscape to be a party of one, to cobble together their own identity drawing from a wide variety of readily available options and resources to define who they are. In their study, *A Portrait of American Jews*, Pew’s authors summed this up succinctly: “Americans as a whole—not just Jews—increasingly eschew any religious affiliation.” Alan Cooperman, Pew’s deputy director, went further: “Older Jews are Jews by religion. Younger Jews are Jews of no religion.” We would add, yes, but they are still Jews! We just need to understand how this plays out, what being a Jew (or a *Just-Jew*) means in terms of actions, activities and beliefs.

In the face of these major and daunting trends, mid-size and smaller local Jewish communities often do not own the expertise, and financial and personnel resources to meet the critical collaborative convening, outreach and programmatic demands to provide successful engagement efforts even as they might be increasingly recognizing the need. As one mid-size Federation president lamented to us, “we need to practice triage and may just take Boomers as a loss.” The alternative? Engaging a number of active cohorts in Jewish life, in a revitalized Jewish communal setting that understands that success is measured by connections and return visits, however far apart, rather than by long term memberships.

The Rockland Landscape

The Synagogue Leaders Survey fielded between October 30 and November 10, 2014, provided an initial portrait of Jewish life in Rockland from the perspective of leaders at 11 synagogues. The goal was to capture membership trends and to better understand factors that might affect people’s decisions to stay at or leave synagogues. While the small sample means these results are not projectable to the larger Rockland Jewish population, the survey does provide expert insights into this region.

Detailed findings are attached as Appendix I. Key findings included:

- A pattern of membership declines across most of the synagogues, especially compared to five or ten years ago, in some cases by more than 50%.
- Groups that appear to be increasing in the membership (or, perhaps, the share of membership they represent) include families with younger children (e.g., pre-school age) and empty nesters; this latter group aligns primarily with Baby Boomers (those

currently 51-66 years old) but could include some Gen X-ers (those between 35-50); both of these groups were mentioned by 38%.

- Groups that are decreasing in terms of membership include younger people/singles (48%), young couples (i.e., without children; 38%), families (children between pre-school and b'nai mitzvah age; 48%) and families whose children are post b'nai mitzvah (57%, the highest incidence.)
- When someone leaves, all synagogues report efforts to get in touch by phone (95%), email (55%) or in-person (25%).
- The three major reasons synagogue leaders give for peoples' departure include relocation (74%), children completing b'nai mitzvah (57%) and a change in financial status (52%).
- 56% report offering programs for empty nesters, 65% for seniors and 24% for people without partners.
- 82% report sponsoring volunteer programs including 50% who collaborate with other congregations, 57% with the federation, 64% with other Jewish organizations and 79% with non-Jewish organizations.
- Of those offering volunteer programs, one in five (21%) work primarily in the Jewish community and seven in ten work in a combination of the Jewish and general communities.
- Asked a range of statements about how members might feel about their congregations, most responses indicated strong feelings of attachment, including 81% agreeing strongly that "clergy try to get to know people", 75% that "members feel cared for by clergy" and nearly six in ten that "members feel loyalty to the clergy".
- According to the overwhelming majority of synagogue leaders, members remain members for a variety of reasons, including that their friends belong (100%), they want a place to worship (94%), they believe Jews need to belong to a community (88%) and they want a place for their children to get a Jewish education (88%). Other reasons were also mentioned by strong majorities.
- Asked why some members leave, the two most frequently mentioned reasons (both 76%) were cost and children completing b'nai mitzvah. 53% mentioned a loss of meaning for the members and a similar share mentioned that their friends have left.
- The participating congregations were split between Conservative (63%) and Reform (36%).

Many of the findings in this first survey aligned with expectations at the outset of this project, i.e., that people leave congregations due to cost and after their children complete their b'nai mitzvah. Perceptions among synagogue leaders imply confidence that most current congregants have a positive view of the congregation and clergy. Many congregations report having programs in place to appeal to empty nesters and seniors, and to reach out to departing members.

The larger population survey was fielded via email between December 3, 2014, and January 19, 2015. Of the 1,138 total responses, 906 were complete and 753 of them (83%) were current synagogue members. Another 109 respondents (12% of completes) reported that they were former synagogue members who do not plan to re-join. This latter group was a difficult group to find but they are crucial to the insights sought in the survey. While we were pleased to locate and receive responses from more than 100 of these people, it is appropriate to note that that is a small sample and that some caution should be exercised in interpreting their responses. It should also be noted that the sampling strategy used—outbound emails to members of local organizations and the federation list—means that people who left synagogues because they relocated outside of Rockland County were not likely to be reached by the emails or included in the sample.

Key findings of the population survey are summarized below; more detailed findings are in Appendix II.

General findings—synagogue members:

The sample skews older, reflecting the accuracy of the synagogue leaders survey in terms of the current membership base. Among current members 51% are Boomers (born 1946-1964); 28% are older (i.e., the WWII or Greatest Generation) and 21% are younger, primarily Gen X-ers born 1965-1980.

As is true in other surveys, the respondents skew female (65%) and married (80%; 6% separated/divorced; 8% widowed). They are long term Rockland residents—76% have lived in the county for more than 20 years and only 7% report any possible plans of moving away. More than eight in ten describe their Jewish identity in terms of traditional denominational labels—55% Conservative and 28% Reform; only a handful use a less traditional label like “Just Jewish”. See Question 5.) In keeping with other studies, they are active volunteers--37% did so through their synagogue; 29% through other organization; and 82% ready for more, even if they did not volunteer in the past year.

Finally, only 5% report that someone in their household is not Jewish, an incidence lower than we expected. Nearly three quarters (71%) are empty nesters.

General Findings—Former Synagogue Members

The former synagogue members who indicated they were not interested in re-joining represent about 12% of the sample. This was a crucial group as we sought to better understand the issues

that led to their departure and, perhaps, to uncover the issues that might put current members at risk of leaving.

As with the larger group of current members, this segment skews older—55% are Boomers; 30% are older, i.e., born before 1946; and 15% were Gen X-ers, born after 1964. The group also skews female (68%) and married/living with a partner (62%); another 17% said they were separated/divorced and 13% are widowed.

Former members are also long term Rockland County residents: 83% have lived here for more than 20 years. About one in seven report any plans of moving out of Rockland and another 18% said they were unsure—while still low, moving plans were higher here than among current members (7% mentioned plans.)

Only one half of former members describe themselves as Conservative (27%) or Reform (24%) while 48% use a less traditional, non-denominational label (e.g., “just Jewish”—23%).

As with the current members, these former members are active volunteers but not through a synagogue. One in four volunteer through other organizations and 79% say they are ready to volunteer even if they didn’t volunteer in the past year.

One in ten former members indicates that someone in their household is not Jewish and three quarters are empty nesters, similar to the current members.

Major Issues Explored—The Landscape

It is important to ascertain the impact of the larger cultural landscape on people’s decisions whether and how to connect to Jewish life, institutions and community. This survey tapped into a number of dimensions of this issue, highlighting a series of trends that generally work against connections and facilitate a more self-designed, self-defined Jewish identity.

- **Q. 10. I prefer not to commit to being involved with organizations on any long term basis; I just get involved when or if I am interested.**

This question taps into a particularly important trend, i.e., that we live in a time of episodic engagement, facilitated by social media, in which membership, ongoing participation and joining might be losing their appeal. Not surprisingly, nearly six in ten current synagogue members strongly disagreed with this statement—these are the remaining “joiners”. However, one third of former members strongly agreed and another 35% somewhat agreed, providing a solid endorsement of the emerging practice of grazing among pursuits, moving from one episodic interest to another without any longer-term commitment. This trend has affected institutions from synagogue and JCC’s to theaters and opera companies. What’s more, the emergence and omnipresence of social media sites and web resources to facilitate direct

awareness of events and other pursuits when people are interested mean that it is not necessary to do anything more than sign up for emails or simply Google an interest in order to find out when and where something is occurring. This is of course radically different from an earlier era when one needed to join an institution for a sense of connection and for access to information and events.

Q10: Agree/Disagree—Is This the Key Issue?

I prefer not to commit to being involved with organizations on any long term basis; I just get involved when or if I am interested	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Strongly agree	8	28
Somewhat agree	17	39
Somewhat disagree	16	14
Strongly disagree	57	16
No opinion	2	4

8

- **Q. 20-21. Organizational and JCC membership.**

Questions 20-21 deal with membership in Jewish organizations and the JCC. Interestingly, former members are less likely to report that they belong to any Jewish organizations compared to current members but this is not the case for the JCC where the results are similar between the two groups.

Former synagogue members are also more likely to say they ended any membership in Jewish organizations or that they never belonged to a Jewish organization compared to current members. In this case, diminished interest in belonging appears clear and consistent. However, when it comes to the JCC, former and current synagogue members are equally likely to be current JCC members or never to have been JCC members; differences emerge in terms of being former members *not interested* in re-joining (more likely among former synagogue members) and being non-members who would *consider* joining (more likely among current synagogue members.)

This difference between organizational membership and JCC membership could reflect the impact of the latter’s role, visibility and positioning in the Rockland community. These results should bode well for the JCC’s prospects to reach out to and attract new members.

Q20: Membership

Jewish organization	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Currently a member	49	25
Was a member; not interested in re-joining	7	18
Never been a member	32	44
Have not been a member but would consider joining	11	13

20

Q21: Membership

JCC	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Currently a member	44	42
Was a member; not interested in re-joining	15	21
Never been a member	24	26
Have not been a member but would consider joining	17	11

21

- **Q. 10. I feel I can get all the Jewish involvement I want without belonging to a synagogue**

This question captures another important insight about those who leave synagogue membership: they still feel that they can maintain their Jewish lives and connections in a way that they are happy and comfortable with. Two thirds of former members agree strongly (21%) or somewhat (44%) with this statement compared to nearly two thirds of current members (65%) who strongly disagree.

Q10: Agree/Disagree—As Choices Proliferate

I feel I can get all the Jewish involvement I want without belonging to a synagogue	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Strongly agree	2	21
Somewhat agree	9	44
Somewhat disagree	23	20
Strongly disagree	65	12
No opinion	1	4

9

- **Q. 10. I feel I can get all the Jewish involvement I want with my family and friends.**

This related question provides similar results as the previous question. It captures the informal ways people get their Jewish connections through family and friends, and presumably do not need formal connections to or through institutions.

Q10: Agree/Disagree

I feel I can get all the Jewish involvement I want with my family and friends	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)	Former/ Less Trad Labels (%)
Strongly agree	4	17	20
Somewhat agree	13	36	46
Somewhat disagree	30	32	22
Strongly disagree	51	13	7
No opinion	2	3	7

10

- **Q. 18. Importance to respondent of “being Jewish”.**

Not surprisingly, virtually every synagogue member attests to the importance to them of being Jewish—91% say “very” and another 9% say “somewhat”. It is important to note that, while not at those levels, the overwhelming majority of former members attest to the importance to them of being Jewish—73% very, 25% somewhat. Thus, departure from formal synagogue membership does not indicate a dramatic loss of importance of being Jewish.

Q18: Importance

Being Jewish	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Very	91	73
Somewhat	9	25
Not Very	<1	2
Not at All	-	-

36

- **Q. 18. Importance to respondent of “being part of the Jewish people”.**

Being part of the Jewish people is also very important to both former (77%) and current (86%) members of synagogues.

Q18: Importance

Being part of the Jewish people	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Very	86	77
Somewhat	12	21
Not Very	1	3
Not at All	<1	-

40

The net result of these questions is to clarify an important realization that cancelling one’s synagogue membership does not mean leaving one’s Jewish identity or connections. In fact, people can, as stated, find many ways to feel connected to being Jewish—including some that are informal, personal and episodic and do not involve traditional affiliations or institutions. It is important for synagogue leaders, both volunteer and professional, to grasp the impact of these trends because we believe they are ascendant in the current landscape. Truly understanding and accepting this trend can then affect the way we communicate with former members and non-members. There appears to be minimal appeal of the idea of wooing members by offering long term connections. Many people are just not in the market for that arrangement. Instead, what they might be looking for is a connection that’s flexible and is in tune with their more informal, episodic interests.

- **Q. 18. Importance to respondent of “being part of my local Jewish community”.**

This question uncovers a potential downside of the trend noted above, i.e., that people who leave their synagogue and connect to their Jewishness in more informal and episodic ways also have a diminished connection to the idea of Jewish community. Asked about the importance to them of being part of their local Jewish community, more than three quarters of current members responded “very” compared to only 30% of former members. Another 55% of former members provided a more tepid response, “somewhat important” and 14% said “not very important”.

This result is similar to a question in Pew’s *A Portrait of American Jews* (2013) in which only 28% of respondents indicated that being part of a Jewish community was essential part of what being Jewish means to them.

This should be of great concern to those who work to strengthen Jewish life and community. As people grow more comfortable with pursuing their Jewish connections in informal, episodic ways that might not include their local community, the ties that have traditionally linked Jews locally and worldwide could weaken. This adds to the imperative that new ways be found that can connect former and non-members to their local community in ways that appeal to them and have a chance at success. In this way, synagogues and other institutions can provide a re-entry point to Jewish communal life.

Q18: Importance

Being part of my local Jewish community	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Very	77	30
Somewhat	21	55
Not Very	2	14
Not at All	<1	1

37

Connecting Children’s Life Stages to Leaving the Synagogue

One of the bedrock assumptions in the project was that cost and the completion of b’nai mitzvah celebrations were key contributors to the decision to leave a synagogue. That appears to be the case, but it is also apparent to us that the decision to leave one’s synagogue reflects a “weighted average” of a number of key factors, surely including these two, but extending to personal stake, connections to clergy and to other congregants, and the accumulated effect of the trend to episodic versus long term affiliation. This complexity is not surprising for what is surely not a simple, impulsive decision.

Comparing children’s ages and residences reveals only a slightly higher likelihood that former members are more likely to be empty nesters. Among current members, 28% report having post-high school children not living at home (presumably at college) and 43% report having children but none live at home; among former members, the incidence is 22% and 53% respectively.

Differences emerge in terms of the presence of younger children: 38% of current members have children living at home who are high school age or younger and another 14% have children at home who are post high school; among former members, only 19% and 16%, respectively, report the presence of children at home.

This fits our expectations but does demonstrate that completing b'nai mitzvah celebrations is not an automatic cause for exit, as current members' responses indicate. Clearly, more factors come into play causing exits or, at least, the risk of imminent exit from the synagogue.

Q14: Children at Home?

Do you have any children?	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Age 5 or younger	8	5
Age 6-13	17	6
Age 14-high school	13	8
Post high school but at home	14	16
Post high school but not at home	28	22
Have children but none at home	43	53
Do not have children	4	6

13

- **Q. 15. Children's participation in Jewish activities and experiences.**

This question compares current and former members' responses regarding their children's participation in a number of Jewish experiences, including camp, youth groups and Birthright.

In every case but Birthright and non-Jewish summer camps, children of current members are more likely to participate in Jewish activities than those of former members. Given the presumption that Jewish summer camp and other teen activities have long term positive effects on later Jewish engagement, this question reveals the possible longer term impact of parents departure from synagogue life—or, more broadly, of the cumulative factors that cause them to pull back from connections that include synagogue membership. The role of Birthright in offering a way for former members' children to experience a post-high school, post-b'nai mitzvah Jewish experience is also clear from these findings.

Q15: Children's Jewish Experiences

All or some of my children attended/participated	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Jewish sponsored camp	41	37
Non-Jewish sponsored camp	55	67
Jewish youth group at synagogue	64	53
Birthright trip	35	36
Israel trip with another group	39	25

14

- **Q. 17. Children's participation in other Jewish activities and experiences.**

A subsequent question examined children's participation in other activities including b'nai mitzvah, educational programs and college programs. In all cases but actual b'nai mitzvah, the children of current members were more likely to participate in these Jewish post b'nai mitzvah programs.

Q17: Children's Other Jewish Activities

All or some attended/participated	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Bar/Bat mitzvah	86	84
Jewish confirmation	36	30
Post-bar/bat mitzvah educational program	62	40
Jewish activities in college	62	53

15

A follow up question about parents' Jewish experiences when younger shows that current members are somewhat more likely to have participated in Jewish summer camp and other teen and high school Jewish activities.

Q15: Parent's Jewish Experiences

I attended/participated	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Jewish sponsored camp	40	29
Non-Jewish sponsored camp	43	37
Jewish youth group at synagogue	40	36
Birthright trip	-	-
Israel trip with another group	32	29

15

- **Q. 6. Past Two Year Activities.**

A list of different activities provides another way to distinguish between current and former synagogue members and perhaps gain insight into the ways the latter group participates in Jewish life.

Not surprisingly, current members are far more likely to report that they participated in the past two years in a Shabbat meal, Jewish learning, High Holiday services, gaining access to Jewish content online or in print and volunteering through their synagogue.

Where the two groups converge is the incidence of volunteering through other organizations. This provides an insight into the ongoing interest among former members in volunteering and suggests that including them in synagogue-based volunteer programs is one way to possibly rebuild a connection.

It is also worth noting that sizable numbers of former members are interested in gaining access to Jewish content, especially online, and in attending High Holiday services. This is consistent with our insight that for many former members, ending one’s membership in a synagogue does not mean a complete break from Jewish ideas, activities and contact.

Q6: Past 2 Year Activities

Done Often	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Shabbat meal	41	12
Jewish learning/text study	26	6
High Holiday services	93	32
Jewish info online	59	41
Jewish info in print	40	24
Volunteer at/thru synagogue	37	7
Volunteer thru other organization	29	25

25

-
- **Q. 18. Importance of Children Marrying Someone Jewish**

This question and the next examine differences between current and former members in terms of the importance they place on their children marrying someone Jewish and having Jewish children.

Who their child marries is clearly of more concern to current members, among whom seven in ten (69%) say in-marriage is very important compared to 37% of former members. Tellingly, nearly one in five (18%) of former members say this is not very important and another 5% say it is not at all important.

Q18: Importance

That my child(ren) marries someone Jewish	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Very	69	37
Somewhat	24	40
Not Very	4	18
Not at All	2	5

41

- **Q. 18. Importance of Having Jewish Grandchildren**

Current members also place greater importance on having Jewish grandchildren than do former members, but the difference is much less pronounced. Eight in ten (79%) current members say this is very important compared to more than half (52%) of former members. Among the latter group, one in ten (11%) say it is not very important and 3% say it is not at all important, lower than similar responses to the question regarding marriage.

Q18: Importance

That I have Jewish grandchildren	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Very	79	52
Somewhat	15	34
Not Very	3	11
Not at All	2	3

42

- **Q. 7. Past Year Volunteering and Interest in Future Volunteering**

A follow up question looked more closely at volunteering, this time in the past year. It also explored interest in future volunteer activities. The result was confirmation of the serious incidence of volunteering in the past and interest in future involvement across a number of types of volunteer engagement, including one-time projects, ongoing programs and serving on a committee. Not surprisingly, interest falls off for longer term programs (12 weeks or more) but is still substantial.

Incidence of past volunteering is higher among current synagogue members but former members who have not volunteered in the past year report strong interest in doing so.

This question reinforces the appeal of volunteer engagement throughout the Jewish community, whether among those who still belong to synagogues or those who have left. Interest in longer term projects (18% of current members, 15% of former) is consistent with other studies, especially of Baby Boomers. This should encourage program planners throughout the Jewish community to think broadly about the scope of volunteer efforts—it is likely that many people will respond.

Q7: Past Year Volunteering

Among Current Members	Did & Would Repeat	Did & Won't Repeat	Didn't Do But Would	Didn't Do; Wouldn't
One time program	55	7	27	11
Regular, ongoing program	45	8	22	24
Committee or task force	51	8	17	24
Long term, immersive (12 weeks+)	7	2	11	80

27

Q7: Past Year Volunteering

Among Former Members	Did & Would Repeat	Did & Won't Repeat	Didn't Do But Would	Didn't Do; Wouldn't
One time program	38	7	41	15
Regular, ongoing program	31	6	26	38
Committee or task force	32	9	17	42
Long term, immersive (12 weeks+)	7	2	8	84

28

- **Q. 8. Are They Volunteering to Primarily Serve Other Jews or Is This Not Important?**

Respondents were presented with two statements: “I prefer service that primarily helps other Jews” and “It is not important whether I primarily help Jews or non-Jews.”

We have found this question to be very instructive in a number of studies as we compare those who are more active in Jewish life and institutions to those who are less active or connected. As seen in the table, current members are more likely to express agreement with the first statement—22% agree strongly and 27% somewhat—compared to 18% and 14% respectively among former members. Another 46% of current members agree with the second statement compared to 58% of former members.

This offers insight into differences in priorities. For current members—and, as we have seen elsewhere, those in leadership positions in Jewish organizations and institutions—there is a higher likelihood of focusing volunteer efforts within the Jewish community. For former members, there is no such preference. This is a difference between a more parochial benefit and a more universal benefit.

Our conclusion is that attention needs to be paid in communications, mission statements and in volunteer program design to the trade-off between these two directions. While one would applaud any volunteer effort benefiting those in need, it is clear that a more expansive, universal target will appeal more to those, like former members, who are less connected to institutions.

**Q8: When volunteering,
I prefer service that primarily helps other Jews OR it is not
important whether I primarily help Jews or non-Jews**

	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Strongly agree with first statement	22	18
Somewhat agree with first statement	27	14
Somewhat agree with second statement	25	27
Strongly agree with second statement	21	31
Don't agree with either	5	9

Why People Stay

- **Q. 29. For Current Members: What Keeps You as a Member?**

When asked what keeps them as members of their synagogue, strong majorities indicated that Jews need to belong to a community (83%), it is important to them (76%) and they want a place to worship (75%), a response that seems to tie to the two previous reasons. In this case, the synagogue has strong personal meaning to its members and represents a critical element in connecting to the Jewish community. Other reasons, while important, do not rise to this level.

Q29: Current Members—Why Stay?

What keeps you as a member? (indicate all that apply)	Current (%)
Jews need to belong to a community	83
It is important to me	76
I want a place to worship	75
My family has always belonged to a synagogue	56
To get High Holiday tickets	41
It is important to my spouse/partner	40
There will come a time when we need a rabbi	40
I want a place to provide my children with a Jewish education	35
My friends belong	32

1

When a similar question was asked of the synagogue leaders, the reasons were similar in terms of the high ranking of community and worship but they reserved the highest response for connections to friends—a unanimous reason. Other reasons, such as providing a place to give their children a Jewish education, were more likely to be cited compared to the rank and file. This is most telling in the mention of friends—100% by leaders and 32% by the rank and file.

**FROM THE FALL SURVEY:
Why Current Members Stay**
(Q. 17)

	<u>%</u>
Their friends belong	100
They want a place to worship and observe Jewish holidays	94
They believe Jews need to belong to a community	88
They want a place to provide their children with a Jewish education	88
They want a place to provide their children with bar/bat mitzvah prep	82
It is an important part of their and their family's lives	82
Their family has always belonged to a synagogue	76

34

Why People Leave

A key goal of this survey is to explore why people leave synagogues. What follows is a series of questions that break this issue into components. The first is the most obvious: aversion to paying dues. This was a consensus item in the synagogue survey and in our conversations. The ultimate question is whether this issue alone is a deal-breaker, or if it can be overcome.

- **Q. 10. Agreement with the statement “I do not want to pay dues to a synagogue.”**

Nearly six in ten current members of synagogues strongly disagree with this statement, revealing a strong commitment to their congregation that strongly overcomes any desire to be free of dues. Another one in five disagree “somewhat” and 19% agree either strongly or somewhat. In this case, this means that nearly four in ten current members are not able to provide a strong statement of disagreement and nearly one in five actually agree. These could be “at-risk” congregants who, for now, remain members but who have some degree of concern about paying dues. As mentioned in our presentations, “somewhat” disagree in this context needs to be viewed as tepid support, at best, and, of more concern, as an indication of some discontent.

Not surprisingly, former members overwhelmingly agree with the statement—half strongly and another 30% somewhat. Fewer than one in five disagree.

Q10: Agree/Disagree

I do not want to pay dues to a synagogue	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Strongly agree	5	49
Somewhat agree	14	30
Somewhat disagree	20	10
Strongly disagree	57	7
No opinion	4	5

32

-
- **Q. 10. Agreement with the statement “Once my children have completed their religious education and bar/bat mitzvah, I no longer need a synagogue.”**

This post b’nai mitzvah reason for leaving a synagogue was another of the consensus items before the study. However, as the table indicates, it was not agreed to by a majority of former members—in fact, more disagreed (51%) than agreed (40%).

Among the current members, 17% give a response that falls short of strong disagreement. These members, who could still have pre b’nai mitzvah children, could also be at-risk for considering leaving once the celebrations are over.

Q10: Agree/Disagree

Once my children have completed their religious education and bar/bat mitzvah, I no longer need a synagogue	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Strongly agree	1	12
Somewhat agree	5	28
Somewhat disagree	11	31
Strongly disagree	79	20
No opinion	4	9

35

- **Q. 23/34. Incidence of Having Close Friends in the Congregation**

This question begins to look beyond dues and b’nai mitzvah to other issues that contribute to leaving a synagogue. In this case, reported incidence of having close friends in the synagogue is higher among current members, among whom 38% have many and 49% have some compared to only 16% and 64% respectively among former members. Based on this, more current members feel surrounded by friends in their synagogue, a dimension that makes their personal connection stronger compared to former members, among whom one in five (19%) report having no close friends there.

Q23/34: Close Friends in Congregation

	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
None	13	19
Some	49	64
Many	38	16

43

- **Q. 25/36. Agreement that “Clergy Make/Made an Effort to Get to Know People in the Congregation”**

Current members are more than twice as likely as former members to strongly agree with this statement (69%-31%); conversely, nearly one third of former members somewhat (16%) and strongly (15%) disagree, revealing the salience of the perception of clergy to this group.

In the synagogue leaders survey (results below), as noted earlier, there was a range of statements about how members might feel about their congregations. Most responses indicated *strong* feelings of attachment, including 81% agreeing strongly that “clergy try to get to know people”, 75% that “members feel cared for by clergy” and nearly six in ten that “members feel loyalty to the clergy”. This aligns with the current members’ responses but at a bit higher level. This is an indication of an issue that we have identified elsewhere, i.e., that leaders’ perceptions might differ from—and be more positive than—those of rank and file members and, in this case, former members. While not surprising, it is a reminder that the messages communicated to the rank and file and to former members should be designed with care and with the target audiences in mind to be sure they do not reflect only the attitudes, priorities, feelings and perspectives of those in positions of leadership.

Q25/36: Agree/Disagree

Clergy make/made an effort to get to know people in the congregation	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Strongly agree	69	31
Somewhat agree	22	39
Somewhat disagree	6	16
Strongly disagree	2	15
No opinion	1	-

45

- **Q. 25/36. Agreement that “When Needed, I have Felt Cared for by Our Clergy”**

Consistent with the previous question, former members disagree with this question—in this case, nearly half disagree (25% somewhat and 21% strongly). Among current members, 64% agree strongly, somewhat less than the incidence mentioned by the synagogue leaders (75%).

Q25/36: Agree/Disagree

When needed I (have) felt cared for by our clergy	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Strongly agree	64	16
Somewhat agree	23	28
Somewhat disagree	5	25
Strongly disagree	3	21
No opinion	6	10

46

- **Q. 25/36. “My Synagogue was Responsive to My and My Family’s Needs”**

This statement prompts even more of a disparity between current and former members. Among the former, more than half (52%) agree strongly and another 30% agree somewhat that their synagogue is responsive to their needs; in contrast only 6% of former members agree strongly and 32% agree somewhat. The majority of former members (58%) disagreed with the statement (32% somewhat and 26% strongly) that the synagogue was responsive to their needs. This highlights the strong feeling among former members of distance from the synagogue, i.e., that it was not responsive to them. Coupled with concerns about the clergy and a lack of a high amount of close friends, these issues can combine and result in a decision to leave. These are part of the array of issues uncovered beyond dues and the completion of b’nai mitzvah that lead to a break with one’s synagogue.

Q25/36: Agree/Disagree

My synagogue is/was responsive to my and my family’s needs	Current Members (%)	Former Members (%)
Strongly agree	52	6
Somewhat agree	30	32
Somewhat disagree	9	32
Strongly disagree	4	26
No opinion	5	4

49

For comparison, here are the results from the synagogue leaders survey:

**FROM THE FALL SURVEY:
Agreement with Statements About Congregation
(Q. 16)**

	Agree Strongly %	Agree Somewhat %	Disagree Somewhat %	Disagree Strongly %
Clergy try to get to know people	81	19	0	0
Members feel cared for by clergy	75	25	0	0
Members feel cared for by fellow congregants	53	47	0	0
Clergy try to engage children or teens	81	13	0	0
Members feel loyalty	59	35	6	0
Members loyal to clergy	59	29	0	0
Synagogue responds to members’ needs	41	59	0	0

30

- **Q. 30. Whether Current Members have Considered Leaving and Why**

Before exploring the specific reasons former members gave for leaving their synagogue, we can review how current members responded to a question about whether they would consider leaving. While a solid majority (55%) said they have never considered leaving, this means that 45% have in some way thought about it. These are the at-risk congregants.

Asked why they considered leaving, the most frequent response, not surprisingly, was cost—25% said it was getting too expensive. The second ranking reason (17%) was that they do not feel a personal connection. About one in ten say they do not agree with what is going on at the synagogue and a similar number indicate a loss in meaning.

These responses and the others given should prompt careful analysis by synagogue leaders and perhaps encourage them to consider the need for retention strategies in addition to new member efforts.

Q30: Current Members—Consider Leaving?	Current (%)
Have never considered leaving the synagogue	55
It is getting too expensive	25
I don't feel a personal connection there	17
I don't agree with what is going on at the synagogue	11
It is not as meaningful as it once was	10
I am not happy with the services and rituals	9
We are considering relocating	8
My friends have left	8
I want to try another synagogue	7
As I have gotten older, I don't think it meets my needs	6
My children have all been Bar or Bat Mitzvah	6

- **Q. 32. Three Reasons Former Members Left Their Synagogue**

The two top reasons former members gave for leaving their synagogue were lack of connection with clergy (47%) and unhappiness with the synagogue administration (40%). It is worth noting that this differs from the synagogue leaders survey. We believe the second reason reflects a general dissatisfaction with their dealings with officials at the synagogue. This could touch on

financial dealings if, for example, they had approached the synagogue for dues relief. While only one third mention a change in financial status, we do not believe this diminishes the role of dues expense in the decision. Instead, we reiterate our observation that the decision is more multi-faceted and relates to other components of the synagogue experience as well.

It is worth noting that nearly one third mention the completion of b’nai mitzvah celebrations—again, this is an important factor, but not exclusively so. In fact, it is not as important as other reasons noted here.

Q. 32 Which of the following are the three main reasons you left your synagogue?	Former Members (%)
Lack of connection with clergy	47
Unhappiness with synagogue administration	40
Change in financial status	33
Change in children’s status—Bar/Bat Mitzvahs over	30
Policy/ritual issue (interfaith marriage, spouse status...)	19
Change in children’s status—none living at home full time	11
Change in marital status (separation, divorce)	8
Relocating	8

36

- **Q. 33. Impact of Finances on Former Members**

To explore the impact of finances, we addressed the issue in a separate question that asked if financial cost prevented former members from four different Jewish communal activities. More than eight in ten (83%) reported that finances prevented them from belonging to a synagogue. Half that amount said finances kept them from joining the JCC (41%), 17% said it prevented a trip to Israel for a household member and 12% said it prevented them sending a child to day school. This question provides an important reminder of the pervasiveness of financial concerns affecting Jewish life but, again, we do not believe this tells the whole story or captures the scope of the issues contributing to these decisions.

Q33: Former Members—Impact of Finances

Did financial cost prevent you from doing any of the following?	Former Members (%)
Belonging to a synagogue	83
Belonging to a JCC	41
Sending a household member to Israel	17
Sending a child to a full time Jewish day school	12

39

- **Q. 31. Did Anyone from the Synagogue Get in Touch with Former Members?**

Finally, this is an important question that captures the difference between former members’ responses and experiences, and the responses by synagogue leaders. This question captures a potential explanation for former members indicating they are not interested in re-joining.

Two thirds of former members report that no one got in touch with them when they left their synagogue. One quarter said they got a telephone call, 4% were visited in person and 13% got a letter or email.

In contrast, synagogue leaders unanimously reported that they have a program to connect with former members that 95% get in touch by phone, 25% in person and 55% by letter or email.

Q31: Former Members—Who Got in Touch?

When you left your synagogue, did anyone get in touch with you?	Former Members (%)
Yes, by phone	25
Yes, in-person	4
Yes, by letter/email	13
No, no one got in touch	66

60

FROM THE FALL SURVEY:

Actions Take When a Family Leaves Congregation

(Q.6)

	<u>%</u>
Yes, we get in touch with departing members by phone	95
Yes, we get in touch with departing members in-person	25
Yes, we get in touch with departing members by letter / email	55
No, we do not have a formal process	0

61

Conclusions and Recommendations

Deciding to leave one’s synagogue or, in fact, to reduce or even eliminate one’s connections to Jewish life is complicated and multifaceted. Those who want to strengthen Jewish life and the institutions that serve the Jewish community face a daunting challenge of dealing with a complex decision made in a complicated, dynamic landscape. What’s more, they face an array of issues that can range from “fixable” to “out of their control.”

The gap we identified between the views of synagogue leaders and their current and former rank and file members means that an added challenge has emerged: there is a disconnect separating leaders and those who may consider exit – or already have done so. The wide gap separating the views of leaders from those who are peripheral or outside the orbit of the synagogue may be surprising to leaders. It is clear that the “insiders” who feel at home with the language, programs, experiences and relationships that the synagogue offers feel close to the center and their identity is firmly based in the synagogue whatever their personal practice. Yet synagogues tend to speak only to that ever-shrinking core. It is crucial that communications, programs and mission statements be based on a broader reading of people’s goals, interests, priorities and willingness to be connected. Without this, there is a chance that the target audience of participation-building efforts will not be attracted or interested. This requires creativity and some possible risk taking as financially challenged synagogues try to expand their communities.

The appearance of at-risk congregants adds to the challenge facing synagogue leaders. Coupling these attitudes or inclinations with the completion of rites of passage like b’nai mitzvah means

that synagogues face additional potential departures. Efforts to connect, to communicate and to create programs thus require attention to this reality as well.

Facing these reasons to consider leaving—or to resist re-joining—synagogues need to examine bold approaches. We have seen that departure from the synagogue does not automatically signal a severing of ties to or interest in Jewish life. Patterns and connections change, and people shift how they use their time. The door, then, is not closed completely and efforts at reconnecting are warranted and potentially promising.

It is our hope that this report and the issues in the Rockland County landscape that it addresses can help guide the development of new programs and initiatives. Better understanding of former members and of current members who might be at-risk should combine to add urgency to these initiatives.

Finally, we suggest a few ideas for consideration based on new practices and programs we have heard about:

- **Para-Rabbinic positions**—enlist a cadre of people to train to serve the congregation and beyond; this is an excellent “encore” career position for Boomers ending their midlife careers and searching for something meaningful and challenging to do
- Lead **volunteer coalitions**; become a center of activism for the community—both Jewish and general. Respondents expressed significant interest in different kinds of volunteer engagement. These projects offer an ideal way to encourage former members to reconnect with synagogues and other Jewish institutions—with no strings attached. The federation can lead the way and serve as a clearing-house/convener for volunteer initiatives, reaching out to organizations elsewhere in Rockland County, both inter-faith and secular.
- **Social initiatives**—help people make friends. Current members are far more likely than former members to report that they have friends in the congregation. Programs that build social connections will benefit the synagogue and strengthen personal ties of members. This goes beyond the important task of welcoming people at services or other programs and could include more in-depth connections like placing or inviting different congregants to Shabbat dinners at other members’ homes. The various home-meal groups could re-convene at the synagogue for a larger group activity or celebration.
- **Inter-generational projects**—move beyond drop-off/pick-up. Programs are needed that connect parents to the religious school both before and after b’nai mitzvah celebrations. Encourage parents to teach special sessions and topics. Provide talks or study sessions

during classes to keep them nearby (and help prepare them for holidays or discussions of topics with their kids.)

- **Shake up the model**—would you consider trying a voluntary dues strategy? Free High Holiday tickets? These can be risky and unsettling, but they also project a clear image that things are changing at the synagogue—and could encourage people to take another look at connecting.
- **Use new language** for your mission and other communications

Appendix

I **Synagogue Leaders Survey** results in tabular form

Questionnaire

B3 PowerPoint presentation

II **Survey Results: The Landscape of the Rockland County Board of Rabbis Community** results in tabular form (for synagogue members and for former members)

Questionnaire

B3 PowerPoint presentation

