

The Impact of Jewish Education and an “Israel Experience” on the Jewish Identity of American Jewish Youth

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Introduction

The contribution of Jewish education to Jewish identity is the subject of debate among scholars. Steven M. Cohen,¹ for example, has challenged the conclusions of two earlier researchers, Geoffrey Bock² and Harold Himmelfarb,³ that part-time Jewish education is no better than none, and perhaps even worse, in terms of its impact upon Jewish identity. Cohen's findings are that part-time Jewish education does have a positive influence on its alumni, especially with regard to religious practice, though it has a somewhat lesser influence on levels of community affiliation and none upon friendship patterns. These relationships became stronger, Cohen found, when denomination, gender, home background and the number of hours of education were controlled for.

The primary goal of the present analysis is not to settle this scholarly debate but rather to go beyond it by examining two basic issues: First, the circumstances under which Jewish education (both part-time and day school) has an impact on Jewish identification; and second, the role of a visit to Israel as an independent factor making its own unique contribution to Jewish identity *beyond* both denomination and Jewish schooling.

Research Focus and Methodology

The first part of this present study is based on data derived from the 1985 Demographic Study of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston (CJP), which surveyed 1,446 Jewish adults over the age of 18.⁴ In order to eliminate the confounding effects of age and generation, the analysis presented here deals only with respondents under the age of 35, thus holding these variables constant. An additional reason for the age cutoff is that personal experience of Israel, the major focus of this paper, became a major option for diaspora youth only after the Six-Day War.⁵

In contrast with other studies, those who gave no response to questions about Jewish education, rather than being excluded from the analysis, were regarded as not having received any Jewish education. However, Orthodox respondents *were* excluded from this analysis, on two grounds. First, the subsample of Orthodox Jews under the age of 35 consisted of only eleven cases—far too small a sample for parametric analysis, especially when one wants to control for gender. Second, the use of “Jewish religious practice” as an index of Jewish identity becomes almost tautologous in the case of Orthodox respondents. Following these exclusions, the final sample consisted of 559 Jewish adults aged 18–35, of whom 47 percent were men and 53 percent women.

The data analyzed here are cross-sectional, which limits our ability to establish conclusively causal relationships. Nevertheless, the statistical methods utilized are sufficiently discriminating to establish the relative weights of the factors being analyzed. For the purposes of our study, Jewish education was divided into four types: none; Sunday school; afternoon school; and day school, with respondents classified according to the most intensive type that they had ever received as children. Visit to Israel was recorded by means of a simple dichotomous variable, namely, had the respondents ever visited Israel or not. Finally, as is common among sociologists of Jewish life, two different indexes of Jewish identification were employed, one measuring Jewish religious practice and the other, Jewish community affiliation.

Jewish Education and Jewish Identification

In Steven Cohen’s 1988 study, it was found that women generally had less formal Jewish education than men, that those with more intensive Jewish education scored higher on the Jewish identity indexes than those with less education—though to a significant degree such differences paralleled those of home environment and parental observance—and that Jewish education had a more powerful impact on Jewish religious practice than on Jewish communal affiliation. Afternoon school graduates, as a whole, did not score higher on Jewish identity than those with no Jewish education at all. However, when men and women were analyzed separately and when controls were introduced for parental background, Cohen found that afternoon school alumni had higher scores on measures of Jewish identity than those with no Jewish education.⁶ These conclusions will now be critically reexamined, controlling for gender and respondents’ denomination, the latter a reasonably reliable surrogate for other background variables not contained in the CJP data, such as the level of religious observance and ritual practice in the parental homes of the respondents.

Among Boston respondents under the age of 35, the incidence of Jewish education itself is, overall, somewhat influenced by gender differentiation, with men generally manifesting higher rates of attendance than women (Table 1). However, while gender differentiation is not significant for the Conservative Jews in this sample, it is very significant for Reform Jews and somewhat significant for the nonreligious.

Among the Conservative, men and women report nearly the same rates of atten-

Table 1. Jewish Education by Denomination and Gender

Jewish Education	Conservative (N = 168)			Reform (N = 237)			Nonreligious (N = 135)			All (N = 540)
	All	M	W	All	M	W	All	M	W	
None	4	1	5	17	11	23	31	24	36	16
Sunday school	10	14	7	22	12	32	20	18	19	18
Afternoon school	72	70	74	58	74	43	48	57	43	60
Day school	15	15	14	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	6
Total (%) ^a	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
	Chi Sq. = NS			Chi Sq. = 24.73; D.F. = 3; p < .001			Chi Sq. = NS			

^aTotals here and elsewhere may not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

dance for afternoon and day schools, though the rate of Sunday school attendance is somewhat higher for men (14 percent) than for women (7 percent). For Reform Jews, in contrast, the rate for more intensive afternoon school attendance (day school rates were too low in the sample to be computed) was significantly higher among the men than among the women (74 vs. 43 percent). Gender differentiation was also significant in the rate of Sunday school attendance. Here, however, Reform men showed a lower rate of attendance than did the women (12 vs. 32 percent). Similarly, a higher percentage of Reform women reported receiving no Jewish education at all (23 percent, compared with 11 percent of the Reform men). Among the nonreligious, the rate of attendance at Sunday school was virtually the same for men and women (18 and 19 percent, respectively); however, men were more likely than women to attend afternoon school (57 vs. 43 percent), while women were more likely than men to report having no Jewish education (36 vs. 24 percent).

The results in Table 1 clearly point to denominational differences in addition to gender differences. As previously noted, denomination is being used here as the major independent variable serving as surrogate for home and other background variables not available in the Boston data set.⁷ Such a research strategy is further warranted by the relationship between home background as reflected in the denominational affiliation of the respondents' parents and their own denominational affiliation, as shown in Table 2.

While the Boston data do not allow sufficient room for detailed parametric analysis, Table 2 suggests that a high proportion of the parents of Conservative respondents are themselves Conservative (80 percent), to which might be added the 10 percent of children of Orthodox parents. Among the Reform, only two-thirds have Reform parents, with most recruits coming from the Conservative movement. Finally, among the nonreligious, only one-third report having nonreligious parents, though just under 50 percent claim to have Reform parents and another 21 percent report Conservative parentage.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Denomination of Respondents' Parents, by Respondents' Denomination

Parent's Denomination	Respondents' Denomination					
	Conservative		Reform		Nonreligious	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Orthodox	11	10	4	1	1	5
Conservative	81	78	25	26	22	22
Reform	4	8	64	65	46	45
Nonreligious	1	1	3	5	28	23
Other	3	3	4	3	3	5
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100
N =	(165)	(164)	(242)	(241)	(139)	(140)

These figures reflect both considerable intergenerational denominational continuity, on the one hand, and noticeable intergenerational denominational change, on the other hand. Overwhelmingly, the direction of denominational change is "down" the denominational rank order—from Orthodox to Conservative to Reform to nonreligious with very little "upward" movement. In general, any analysis of the degree of variance within denominations with regard to religious practice must take intergenerational denominational change into account. This is somewhat complicated by the absence of background data about the denominational auspices under which the respondents received their Jewish education, of whatever type. If the schooling was within the framework of the parents' denominational affiliation, the effect of intergenerational denominational change might be to heighten rather than weaken the lasting effects of Jewish education, if any, because those who changed denomination received their education in a more highly identified denominational framework. Nevertheless, the impact of denominational change may, in fact, be in the opposite direction—toward the modal pattern of the current denomination rather than that of the respondents' parents.

In addition to level of Jewish education, the Boston survey also measured respondents' Jewish religious practices and level of Jewish community affiliation. (These two indexes, it will be recalled, are used to define the level of Jewish identification.) Tables 3 and 4 show the results, analyzed by denomination.

Table 3, a religious practice index, consists of a constellation of standard ritual practice items that are common to previous studies. The findings shown here are similar to the data reported by others, including Cohen,⁸ with the most frequently performed rituals being Passover seder (78 percent), Hanukah candles (73 percent) and Yom Kippur fast (59 percent). Having a mezuzah is less common (40 percent), and kashruth observance (11 percent and 13 percent) and synagogue attendance of at least once a month (10 percent) are low. As might be predicted, for all of these items Conservative Jews have the highest rates of performance, followed by Reform Jews with a lower, but median, score and then by nonreligious Jews.

Table 3. Jewish Religious Practice Index, by Denomination

	All		Conservative		Reform		Nonreligious	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Seder	77.5	559	90.3	171	81.0	248	55.7	140
Separate dishes	10.6	555	27.6	170	1.8	247	5.6	138
Kosher meat only	12.7	552	28.8	171	5.6	247	5.3	135
Hanukah candles	73.0	557	92.6	171	79.7	246	37.1	140
Shabbat candles	12.9	553	29.9	171	7.0	242	2.5	140
Mezuzah	40.3	559	74.5	171	33.4	248	10.7	140
(No) Xmas tree	77.8	557	90.4	171	74.2	246	68.7	140
Yom Kippur fast	59.4	557	90.5	171	57.6	246	24.5	140
Attend synagogue at least once a month	9.6	559	19.5	171	6.4	248	2.9	140

Index reliability = .74

Table 4, a community affiliation index, measures the connectedness and commitment of Jews to their community, both in behavior and in attitude. The items include synagogue membership (24 percent), which among all denominations is higher than is attendance, though the pattern of membership follows the same denominational order as attendance. Jewish community center membership, which is especially low (12 percent), probably as a result of the respondents' relatively young age, also follows the same denominational pattern. However, the percentage of those contributing to the CJP is identical for Conservative and Reform Jews (19 percent), compared with only 5 percent among nonreligious Jews. The proportion of those having mostly Jewish friends is similar among Conservative and Reform Jews (33 percent and 27 percent, respectively) but much lower for the nonreligious Jews (10 percent). The greatest difference between Conservative and Reform Jews is that of attitude to

Table 4. Jewish Community Identification Index, by Denomination

	All		Conservative		Reform		Nonreligious	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Synagogue member	24.4	599	49.0	171	18.7	248	4.2	140
JCC member	11.6	559	21.1	171	7.3	247	7.5	140
Most friends are Jewish	25.4	557	27.9	171	32.6	246	9.7	140
Very or somewhat negative feelings if child would intermarry	42.5	545	74.7	166	37.1	241	13.4	139
Contribution to CJP	15.8	551	19.3	165	19.5	246	5.3	140

Index reliability = 0.67

Table 5. Jewish Education and Level of Religious Practice

Jewish Education	Low	Medium	High	Total (%)	N
None	59	37	4	100	84
Sunday school	37	58	5	100	98
Afternoon school	22	62	17	100	316
Day school	7	63	30	100	33
All	30	57	13	100	531

Chi Sq. = 64.67; D.F. = 6; $p < .001$

a child's intermarriage. While 75 percent of Conservative Jews under the age of 35 express negative feelings toward such a prospect, only 37 percent of Reform Jews and 13 percent of nonreligious Jews similarly object.

The frequency distribution of these computed indexes, while controlling for Jewish education, is found in Tables 5 and 6. Overall, the indexes indicate a higher rate of religious identification than of community affiliation—though with regard to the latter, responses tend more toward a bipolarity (i.e., more responses at the extremes). The data presented in Table 5 show clearly that Sunday school has a greater effect on Jewish ritual practice than no Jewish education, afternoon school has a greater effect than Sunday school and day school the greatest effect of all (despite the small N of day school alumni throughout the analysis, it is presented here because it conforms to the pattern). The percentages are statistically significant. Those without any Jewish education score the lowest on this index—59 percent with a low level of religious practice compared with 30 percent of all respondents—and this ratio is reversed as the degree of Jewish education increases. In the Jewish community affiliation index of Jewish identification (Table 6), exactly the same pattern repeats itself: Although only 17 percent of the total score high on this index, afternoon and day school alumni have high levels of 22 percent and 30 percent, respectively.

In Table 7, the relationship between Jewish education and level of religious practice is examined within each denomination. While this analysis is somewhat limited by the small N's of the Jewish education subsamples in each denomination,

Table 6. Jewish Education and Level of Jewish Community Affiliation

Jewish Education	Low (%)	Medium (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	N
None	57	38	5	100	85
Sunday school	45	48	7	100	97
Afternoon school	36	43	22	100	312
Day school	15	55	30	100	31
All	39	44	17	100	525

Chi Sq. = 34.4; D.F. = 6; $p < .001$

Table 7. Jewish Education and Level of Jewish Religious Practice, by Denomination

Jewish Education	Conservative				Reform				Nonreligious				
	Low (%)	Med. (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	Low (%)	Med. (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	Low (%)	Med. (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	N
None	—	—	—	—	44	48	8	100	79	20	1	100	40
Sunday school	6	73	21	100	39	59	2	100	52	47	1	100	29
Afternoon school	6	60	34	100	27	66	8	100	42	56	2	100	62
Day school	4	57	39	100	NS	NS	NS	—	NS	NS	NS	—	2
				168				230					133

Chi Sq. = NS Chi Sq. = NS Chi Sq. = 15.86;
 D.F. = 6; p < .05

Table 12. Gender and Level of Jewish Religious Practice, by Denomination

	Conservative				Reform				Nonreligious						
	Low (%)	Med. (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	N	Low (%)	Med. (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	N	Low (%)	Med. (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	N
Men	5	79	17	100	70	35	61	4	100	119	50	48	2	100	67
Women	6	50	44	100	99	28	65	7	100	117	55	44	1	100	61
					169					236					128

Chi Sq. = 15.00;
 D.F. = 2; p < .001

Chi Sq. = NS
 Chi Sq. = NS

ference affirmed that Jewish identity was in crisis and that Jewish education was the appropriate response to that crisis. It was also agreed that the "Israel experience" was a central means by which diaspora Jewish education could be enriched on a large scale, both in quality and in scope.

"Israel experience" refers to a plethora of educational programs—formal and informal—that are based primarily in Israel. The duration of any given program is from less than a month to up to a year or more. In 1985, it was estimated by Annette Hochstein that some 41,500 participants were enrolled in approximately four hundred Israel experience educational programs. "These participants," she notes, "divided up into three main categories: 19,000 participants in informal programs and study; 15,000 participants in formal educational Yeshiva, high school, and universities; and 7,600 participants in work or other volunteer programs. Sixty percent of participants were aged 18–30."⁹ These participants came to Israel with a plurality of motivations, the most important of which were (in order) the desire to visit Israel's historical and archaeological sites; spend time with Israelis; and study (in decreasing order of importance) Hebrew, Judaism and politics. The Boston data do not deal with the Israel experience per se, but rather with *any* visit to Israel. In the Boston survey, 30 percent of the respondents under the age of 35 reported having visited Israel at least once, a figure that is in line with the national data cited by Cohen.

In Table 13 responses to the question "Have you been to Israel?" were analyzed by denomination and gender. Among the Conservative, 40 percent reported at least one visit to Israel, compared with 25 percent of the Reform and nonreligious. However, gender is much less relevant. Among Conservative Jews, both men and women visit Israel at the same rate. Among Reform and nonreligious Jews, women were slightly more likely than men to have visited Israel, but even here, the differences are not statistically significant.

The data found in Tables 14 and 15 reflect the finding that any visit to Israel, even one, is correlated with a higher score both on Jewish religious practice and on Jewish community affiliation. Although a causal relationship between visits to Israel and heightened level of Jewish identity cannot be conclusively derived from this cross-sectional data, the possibility of such a relationship is certainly indicated. More specific findings, by denomination, are shown in Tables 16 and 17. Concerning religious practice (Table 16), a visit to Israel is shown to have no statistically significant effect on Conservative Jews; among the Reform and nonreligious, how-

Table 13. Israel Visit, by Denomination and Gender

Any Visit to Israel	Conservative			Reform			Nonreligious			All
	All	M	W	All	M	W	All	M	W	
No	61	61	60	75	77	73	75	79	74	70
Yes	39	39	40	25	23	27	25	21	26	30
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
	N = 171			N = 248			N = 140			N = 559
	Chi Sq. = NS			Chi Sq. = NS			Chi Sq. = NS			

Table 14. Israel Visit and Level of Religious Practice

Any Visit to Israel	Low (%)	Medium (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	N
No	36	53	11	100	377
Yes	13	69	18	100	162
					N = 539

Chi Sq. = 30.53; D.F. = 2; $p < .001$

ever, there are statistically significant differences in the rate of medium and high scores between those who had been to Israel and those who had not. This overall pattern is quite different from that found in the earlier discussion on the monotonous relationship between Jewish education and religious practice and denomination. As can be seen from Table 7, once denomination is held constant, Jewish schooling does not have a significant impact on religious practice among either Conservative or Reform Jews.

For the second index of Jewish identity, namely Jewish community affiliation, the relationship between a visit to Israel and a high score is pronounced in all *three denominational groups*. Among the Conservative, 45 percent of those who had visited Israel had a high score, compared with 21 percent of those who had not. Similarly, for the Reform, 27 percent of those who had been to Israel had a high score, compared with 11 percent of those who had never visited there. Indeed, even among the nonreligious, 56 percent of those who had been to Israel had a medium score on this index, as compared with only 14 percent of those who had not. Is the relationship between a visit to Israel sustained for both indexes of Jewish identity for both genders? The answer is clearly yes, as can be seen in Tables 18 and 19. On each index, and for both men and women, those who have been to Israel score high on the religious practice index (especially and interestingly women) as well as on the community affiliation index. All of these relationships are both statistically significant and substantive: For example, while only 9 percent of the men and 14 percent of the women who had never been to Israel scored high on the index of Jewish community affiliation, the figures for those who had visited Israel were 31 percent (men) and 29 percent (women).

Table 15. Israel Visit and Level of Jewish Community Affiliation

Any Visit to Israel	Low (%)	Medium (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	N
No	47	41	12	100	383
Yes	19	52	29	100	153
					N = 536

Chi Sq. = 45.35; D.F. = 2; $p < .001$

Table 18. Israel Visit and Level of Jewish Religious Practice, by Gender

Any Visit to Israel	Men					Women								
	Low (%)	Med. (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	N	Low (%)	Med. (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	N				
No	38	54	8	100	188	33	53	14	100	186				
Yes	10	85	5	100	69	40	54	6	100	57				
All	30	63	7	100	256	26	55	19	100	277				
					Chi Sq. = 20.49; D.F. = 2; p < .0001					Chi Sq. = 18.44; D.F. = 2; p < .001				

The major finding presented here is that a visit to Israel affects *both* indexes of Jewish identity for both men and women—unlike Jewish education, whose frequency and intensity are mediated by gender. Moreover, a visit to Israel has considerable positive effects on both indexes for both genders.

Multiple Regression Analysis of Findings

In order to determine the relative weight of all these factors—denomination, Jewish education and a visit to Israel—on the two indexes of Jewish identity, multiple regression analysis was performed on the Boston CJP data. In this analysis, the two indexes of Jewish identity were treated as dependent variables, while denomination, gender, Jewish education and prior visit to Israel were entered as independent variables in the form of dummy variables. In the case of each index, the analysis was first performed for all the respondents and then separately for each gender. Results are presented successively in Tables 20 and 21.

The most striking finding of the overall regression analysis is that denomination has a powerful role in explaining the variance on both indexes. Both Conservative and Reform background are found to influence the variance in religious practice,

Table 19. Israel Visit and Level of Jewish Community Affiliation, by Gender

Any Visit to Israel	Men					Women								
	Low (%)	Med. (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	N	Low (%)	Med. (%)	High (%)	Total (%)	N				
No	50	41	9	100	185	44	42	14	100	195				
Yes	11	58	31	100	64	25	46	29	100	86				
All	40	45	15	100	248	38	44	18	100	281				
					Chi Sq. = 34.69; D.F. = 2; p < .0001					Chi Sq. = 13.34; D.F. = 2; p < .001				

Table 20. Multiple Regression Analysis of Factors Explaining Level of Jewish Religious Practice

Dependent Variable:			
Level of Jewish Religious Practices	All N = 525	Men N = 252	Women N = 272
	<u>Beta</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>Beta</u>
<i>Independent Variables</i>			
Conservative	.52***	.47***	.55***
Reform	.25***	NS	.36***
Gender	NS	NA	NA
Visit to Israel	.15***	NS	.18***
Sunday school	NS	.14***	-.12***
Afternoon school	.11***	.38***	NS
Day school	.10***	.23***	NS
F =	55.34***	33.5***	47.80***
R Sq. =	.35	.35	.42

***p < .0001

though the latter less than the former. Gender per se makes no contribution to either equation, while afternoon school and day school attendance make modest contributions only. What *is* critical is the independent and statistically significant contribution of a visit to Israel, which has an incremental effect above and beyond both denomination and afternoon and day school Jewish education. In contrast, Sunday school education did not in any way explain the variance on this index.

In the separate analyses of men and women for religious practice, a visit to Israel

Table 21. Multiple Regression Analysis of Factors Explaining Level of Jewish Community Affiliation

Dependent Variable:			
Level of Jewish Community Affiliation	All N = 519	Men N = 244	Women N = 274
	<u>Beta</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>Beta</u>
<i>Independent Variables</i>			
Conservative	.38***	.34***	.43***
Reform	.31***	.23***	.38***
Gender	NS	NA	NA
Visit to Israel	.19***	.27***	.13***
Sunday school	NS	-.11***	NS
Afternoon school	.08	NS	NS
Day school	NS	NS	NS
F =	49.93***	17.98***	35.9***
R Sq. =	.25	.22	.28

***p < .001

does *not* contribute to the explanation of religious practice variance among men; however, all three forms of Jewish education do so, and to a significant extent. For women respondents, *none* of the educational frameworks are a positive influence—and Sunday school is actually negative. But a visit to Israel once again appears as a positive factor contributing incremental and independent explanation of variance in the degree of religious practice of women, above and beyond that provided by denomination.

For the second dimension of Jewish identification, community affiliation, a different and even more interesting pattern emerges. As can be seen in Table 21, denomination again accounts for the major share of variance explanation, but in a less powerful way than was the former case of religious practice. Moreover, the gap between Conservative and Reform is smaller on this table. Gender per se, Sunday school and day school are all insignificant contributors to variance explanation, while afternoon school is only barely significant. Once again, it is a visit to Israel that serves as an independent factor explaining the variance in the degree of community affiliation above and beyond the denomination of respondents. For the separate gender analysis, it can be noted that, with regard to Jewish community affiliation, in contradistinction to Jewish religious practices, the weight of a visit to Israel is stronger for men than for women, but statistically significant for both.

When an identical analysis was repeated with Reform excluded but nonreligious included, the same general pattern was preserved.¹⁰ However, the nonreligious Beta was negative on each index ($-.17$ for religious practice and $-.28$ for community affiliation), while a visit to Israel was positive in both (0.17 on religious practices, 0.23 on community affiliation). In sum, a visit to Israel is a factor that makes a positive and statistically significant contribution to the variance on both indexes of Jewish identification for *all* respondents, irrespective of denomination and its well-documented correlates. It significantly contributes to the level of religious practice of women (more than men) and the degree of community affiliation of men (more than women). Thus, for all respondents, it contributes in one way or another to the strengthening of Jewish identity.

The data presented here confirm Cohen's general thesis that Jewish education does have an impact on Jewish religious practice. However, unlike Cohen's sample, afternoon school alumni in the Boston survey always score higher on both indexes of Jewish identification than do those with no Jewish education. As with Cohen, a statistically significant relationship was found between Jewish education and Jewish identification scores only when the genders were analyzed separately. Moreover, whereas Cohen reported a far lower impact of Jewish education on Jewish community affiliation, the data presented here indicate that Jewish education does explain differences in community affiliation, albeit more powerfully for women than for men.

Finally, in contrast to these mixed findings concerning the impact of Jewish schooling on Jewish identity, the factor of a visit to Israel explains the differences in religious practice for the Reform and nonreligious; the variance in community affiliation in all three denominations; and variance for both genders, analyzed separately, on both indexes of Jewish identification.

Otzma: An Israel Experience Program

Cross-sectional data, as is well known, are limited in their capacity to demonstrate the existence and direction of causal relationships. An alternative approach (albeit with its own methodological problems) is that of longitudinal analysis. The analysis that follows¹¹ is based on questionnaires given to participants in the "Otzma" program, which is cosponsored by the Israel Forum and participating member federations of the CJF. Otzma is a yearlong program in Israel for selected young adults, aged 18 to 30, aimed specifically at fostering stronger ties between Israel and the future leaders of the diaspora community. The major components of the program are a three-and-a-half-month stay in a kibbutz ulpan/work framework and an additional period of time working on kibbutzim and moshavim in the Arava desert. Otzma also includes service in youth villages and Project Renewal neighborhoods.

Questionnaires were presented both before and after the program, with the aim of determining whether changes in Jewish identity and behavior could be measured and explained in terms of this particular Israel experience. An analysis of the data leads to the basic thesis that the Israel experience has a positive impact on participants, irrespective of formal Jewish educational background.

The following four figures compress a great deal of data. In Figures 1, 2 and 3, three sets of histograms are presented. Each histogram shows the respondents' answers on the given dimension at three points in time: before the program begins; about a third of the way into the program (after the kibbutz ulpan); and ten months into the program, when it is near conclusion.¹² In each figure, the first histogram reports the changes over time in all 178 respondents. The second histogram records responses of those for whom Otzma was their first Israel experience, while the third reports the responses of those who had been there previously.

Figure 1 deals with responses to the question "How important is being Jewish in your life?" This figure reports the percentage of participants who respond "very important" or "important" to this question. It should be noted that Otzma participants were a scholarship-funded and carefully selected elite group that was clearly very Jewishly committed even at the outset of the program, and Jewish commitment was particularly pronounced in the case of those who had been to Israel before. In the course of the program, changes were greatest for those who had not previously been to Israel. The figures here clearly illustrate the "ceiling effect," whereby high initial scores had little room to advance in order to reach a 100 percent maximum score. This maximum score was recorded, at the third point in time, by two groups—day school alumni on their first Israel experience; and those with no Jewish education who had had a previous Israel experience.

In Figure 2, participants' responses are recorded for the question "To what degree is your fate and future bound up with the fate and future of the Jewish people?" Here, too, a similar though more dramatic effect of the Israel experience can be seen, especially among day and afternoon school alumni who are first-timers. Responses of veteran participants who either had no Jewish education or who were Sunday or afternoon school alumni showed radical increments over time. The

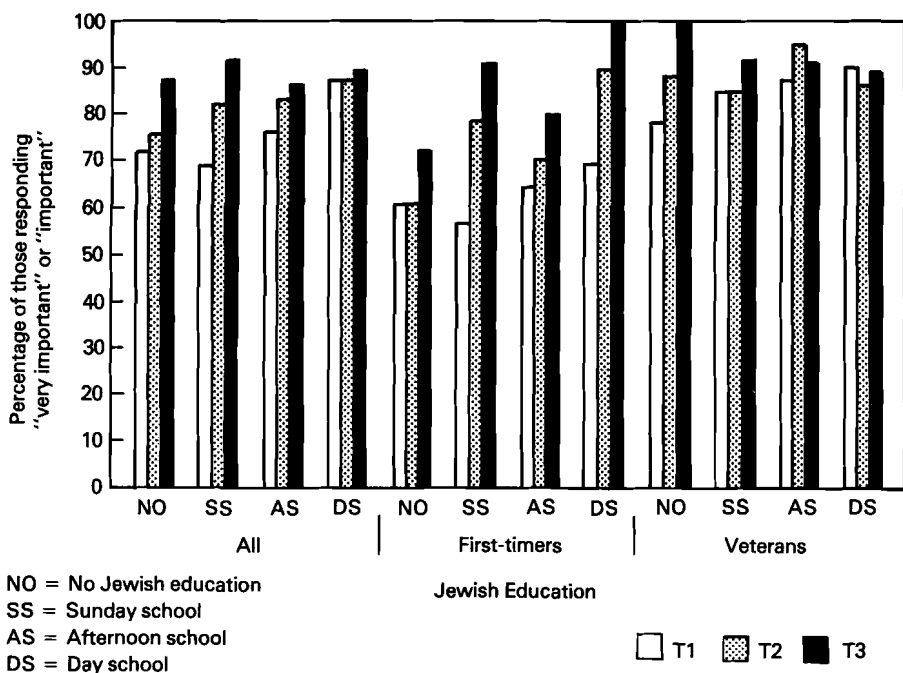


Figure 1. Personal importance of being Jewish.

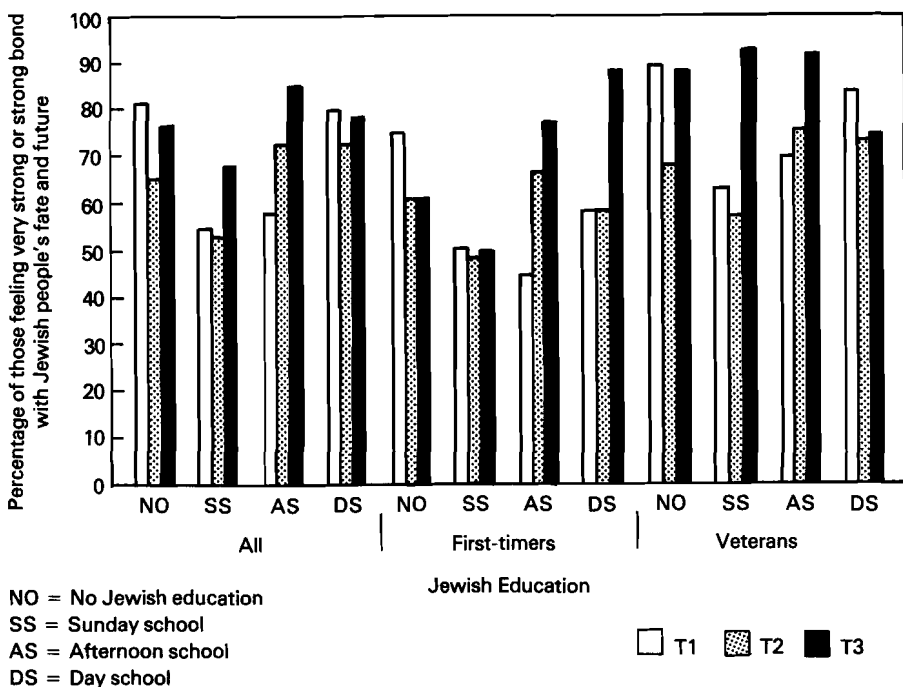


Figure 2. Personal fate and future linked with the Jewish people.

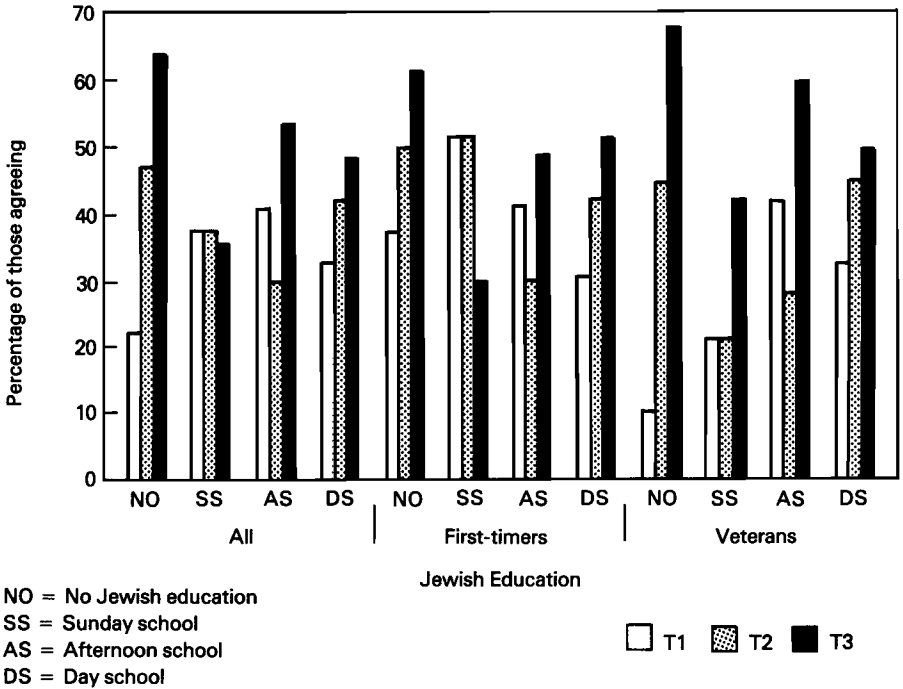


Figure 3. Fuller Jewish life in Israel.

absolute score was higher overall for those for whom Otzma was a second Israel experience. Among the first-timers, alumni of afternoon and day schools registered important positive changes; Sunday school alumni, in contrast, had higher levels of response over time only when they were veterans of a previous Israel experience.

Do the Otzma participants feel, after a year in Israel, that they can "live a fuller Jewish life in Israel"? (Figure 3) Between 22 percent and 42 percent of all Otzma participants gave an affirmative response to this question prior to the program (a response that can be compared with the 10 percent positive response reported by Cohen in his 1986 and 1989 national Jewish surveys). By program's end, the range of positive responses was from 37 to 65 percent.

Sunday school alumni are once again the exception in their pattern of responses. Over time, there is virtually no change in their level of positive response (though it is still far higher than that of the national sample). This is in clear contrast to all the other groups—especially those with no Jewish education at all, who start with a lower positive response (22 percent vs. 39 percent among Sunday school alumni) and end with a far higher score (65 percent vs. 37 percent). When the data on Sunday school alumni are broken down into two groups—first-timers and veterans of a previous Israel experience—two contradictory trends emerge. Sunday school alumni on their first Israel experience come to Israel with a relatively high score on this item (53 percent), which then falls by the end of the year to 31 percent. The veterans, however, begin with a far lower score than their Sunday school peers (21 percent) yet finish the year with a far higher score (43 percent). This suggests that

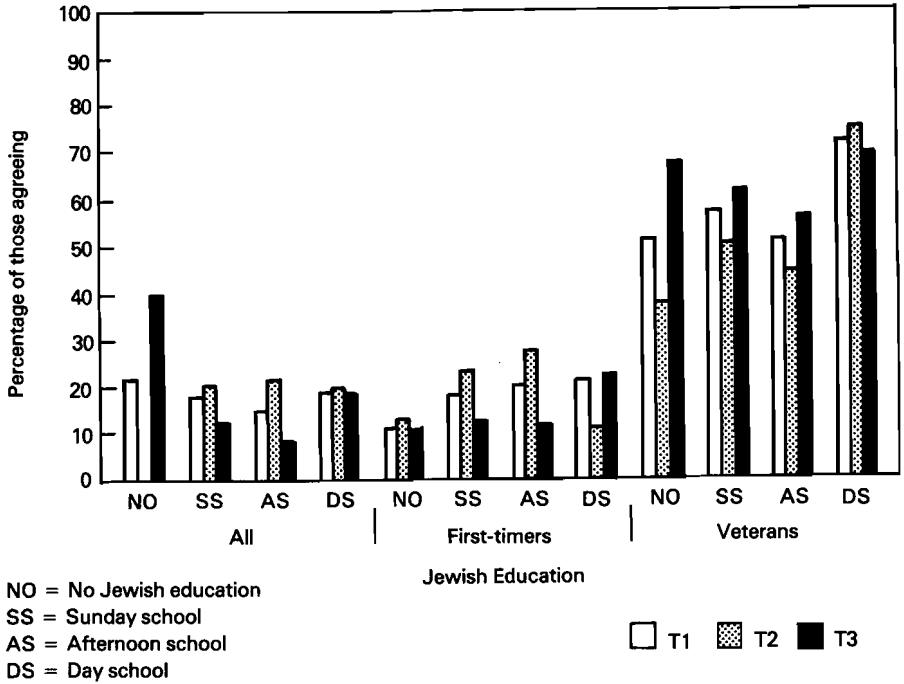


Figure 4. Threat to Jewish survival of assimilation.

the veterans may be giving a more realistic declaration of expectations at the outset (compared with the highly charged expectations of first-time visitors to Israel), while still being subject to the cumulative impact of multiple visits to Israel. In the other three groups, the Israel experience has a uniformly positive impact, most markedly among those with no Jewish education and those with afternoon school experience.

Figure 4 focuses on the problem of Jewish identity viewed from a diaspora perspective, namely, the degree to which “assimilation is seen as a threat to group survival.” Two elements deserve particular attention. The first is the universally low rate of concern felt on this issue upon the participants’ arrival in Israel. No more than 20 percent of participants from each level of Jewish education (including day school) consider assimilation a threat to Jewish survival. By the end of the year, however, there is a universal change on this variable—between 50 and 70 percent of the participants consider assimilation a threat. The most radical change is found among those with no Jewish education, although the highest scores are found, not surprisingly, among day school alumni.

Conclusion

This paper has utilized two radically different methodologies and two quite different data sets to address the following questions:

1. Does Jewish education have an impact on key aspects of Jewish identification, and if so, for whom and to what degree?
2. Does the Israel experience independently and aggregatively contribute to the Jewish identity of its participants, both while in Israel and on their return to the diaspora?

Utilized together, it appears that the cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses present two powerful points. First, all forms of Jewish education in the diaspora are only a basis for the development of the Jewish identity of the young adult. Second, interventions such as a focused, "quality" Israel experience are shown to have a statistically significant and considerable positive impact on the various components of participants' Jewish identity.

Those seeking to foster deeper Jewish identity and fuller Jewish community involvement might be well advised to focus on ways both to increase the number of educational programs in Israel and to deepen their quality (a factor left unexplored in this paper). For if Jewish education and its consequences are a function of denominational practice, then intervention with the goal of strengthening Jewish identity of North American young adults would require a transformation of the denominations themselves, in the absence of the Israel experience option. Whatever the desirability or chances of such a project might be, this paper has demonstrated that intervention at the level of the Israel experience is not contingent on such a burdensome prerequisite. On the contrary, it can be implemented by all the denominations and benefit all their members, indeed all Jews, wherever they may be.

Notes

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1. Steven M. Cohen, *Ties and Tensions: The 1986 Survey of American Jewish Attitudes Toward Israel and Israelis* (New York: 1987).

2. Geoffrey Bock, *The Jewish Schooling of American Jews: A Study of Non-Cognitive Educational Effects* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1976).

3. Harold Himmelfarb, *The Impact of Jewish Schooling: The Effects of Jewish Education on Adult Religious Involvement* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1974).

4. See Sherry Israel, *Boston's Jewish Community: The 1985 CJP Demographic Study* (Boston: 1987) for major findings, methodology, interview and sampling techniques, etc.

5. Cf. David Mittelberg, *Strangers in Paradise: The Israeli Kibbutz Experience* (New Brunswick, N.J., and Oxford: 1988).

6. Steven M. Cohen, *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?* (Bloomington: 1988), 91-95.

7. This procedure conforms to accepted practice in the literature. Mary C. Waters, for example, in her analysis of white, non-Jewish ethnicity based on 1980 U.S. Census data (*Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* [Berkeley: 1990]), demonstrated that denominational homogeneity in families tended to strengthen the socialization of religious values.

8. See Cohen, *American Assimilation*.
9. See Mittelberg, *Strangers in Paradise*, 171–172.
10. For the sake of brevity, the data are not presented here; they are available from the author.
11. See Mittelberg, *Strangers in Paradise*, 177–178.
12. Still to be completed is a follow-up study of Otzma alumni in North America and Israel.