

SYNERGY

INNOVATIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR SYNAGOGUES OF TOMORROW

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Should We Stay or Should We Go? Synagogue Empty Nesters on the Edge

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In 2012, a gathering of rabbis, lay leaders, and synagogue professionals met in Westchester County, New York to discuss the crisis of families who were deciding to leave synagogue life immediately following the completion of their children’s Jewish education.

Whether their synagogue affiliation ended at the completion of bar/bat mitzvah, confirmation, Hebrew high school, or the exodus of children from the family home, synagogue leaders lamented the loss and attenuated connections of these families, and looked to SYNERGY for solutions to stem the tide of departure.

In the year that followed, SYNERGY searched for a programmatic solution to the engagement of empty nesters in synagogue life. While many quality programs existed (and still do) to bring these “on-the-fence” and departing congregants nearer, the problem seemed more complex, and perhaps not quite as situational to the lifestage as first believed.

With that dilemma and its inherent questions in mind, SYNERGY decided to start with “why.” Rather than seek out a program, we decided instead to address the symptoms, solitude, and sadness within the synagogue ecosystem that were leading these members to the brink of rejection of their affiliation. What we uncovered was startling.

In these pages, we hope that other synagogues and Jewish communities will recognize themselves and the patterns of disconnection and ennui that lead synagogue members from the sanctuary to the exit door. It is our hope that clergy, leaders, and empty nesters themselves will use this research to further investigate and act upon the opportunity to redefine engagement, relationships, and the search for sacred purpose and meaning that motivates these decisions to leave – and to stay.

May our synagogue communities continue to respond to the needs of our empty nesters, and renew their boundless energy, commitment, and pursuit of spiritual meaning and Jewish life. May it ever be so.

L’shalom,

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For the last few years, UJA-Federation of New York, through SYNERGY, has been identifying and examining the attributes that make synagogues thrive. One of these attributes, which has been the subject of significant study, is Connected Community – building interpersonal, purposeful relationships within the synagogue community and creating a culture in which all people matter and are included. Synagogue vitality is sometimes measured by looking at the commitment of current members. If there is a significant percentage of members who are considering leaving the synagogue, this could be a sign of a lack of institutional health. Over the past several years, SYNERGY observed that many Empty Nesters in synagogues demonstrated attenuated connection and, in some cases, were leaving the synagogue. This led us to commission a study which would uncover the reasons behind these trends. It is our hope that this report will begin to provide key insights that will inform future planning and action for synagogue leaders today. We welcome your thoughts and reflections. Join the conversation by e-mailing us at synergy@ujafedny.org.

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Executive Summary

This study of current and former members of Westchester synagogues explored trends and assumptions related to synagogue membership and participation. Begun as an inquiry into the relationship between synagogue engagement and the departure of children from the household (the onset of “empty nester” status), it found that a wide cross section of congregation members, irrespective of life stage, are “on-the-fence” about their membership. It also revealed that some of the commonly presumed reasons for dropping synagogue membership are actually low on congregants’ lists for considering leaving.

To better understand factors that may contribute to membership attrition, UJA-Federation engaged David Elcott and Stuart Himmelfarb of B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform at The Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at NYU. The research included a series of local conversations (“convenings”) with synagogue professional and volunteer leaders, an online survey of synagogue leaders, an online survey of Westchester Jewish adults (primarily current and former synagogue members), and follow-up interviews with some former-synagogue-member respondents to the latter survey. Each component of the study was intended to delve more deeply into the question of people’s connections to their synagogues and Jewish life, to help identify new ways to engage or re-engage these empty nesters in synagogue life.

Key findings based on the 25 responses to the synagogue leaders’ study and the 1,284 respondents to the Westchester community survey include:

- **The study showed that while there is vulnerability to attenuated synagogue connection at the bar/bat mitzvah juncture, the findings revealed that the reasons for leaving showed a multiplicity of reasons for departure that did not include life stage as a primary motivator.** Of the reasons given for departure, reaching this life stage did not score as highly on the list of reasons as the original hypothesis first assumed.
- **Deciding to leave one’s synagogue is complicated and multifaceted.** Some of the most commonly presumed reasons for dropping synagogue membership — “my children have all completed Bar or Bat Mitzvah” and “my children have all left home” — are actually low on the list of congregants’ reasons to consider leaving.
- **Overall, “empty nester” members did not differ significantly from respondents with children still at home on a number of**

measures of Jewish connection and in terms of the reasons they cite for keeping their synagogue memberships. In addition, contrary to assumptions expressed by congregation leaders in their convenings and survey, there were no significant differences found between empty nesters and non-empty nesters with respect to life-stage related synagogue affiliation.

- **Nearly half of the synagogue members in this study said they have considered leaving their congregation.** Responses to this question were not related to household composition: just over half of empty nesters and nearly that many non-empty nesters responded that they had never considered leaving the synagogue.
- **These “on-the-fence” members (respondents who said they had considered leaving their congregation) look fairly similar to “committed members” (respondents who said they have not considered leaving), but are slightly less Jewishly connected than the latter.** They are also a little less staunch than committed members in terms of how much they value Jewish institutions and community.
- **Survey respondents who were former members of synagogues were less Jewishly connected than either group of synagogue members, but many still have strong Jewish identities.** They engage in a variety of Jewish activities that are more individual than communal in orientation. They tend to find sufficient ways to be Jewish without institutional belonging, such as being with family and friends or accessing Jewish content online.
- **Synagogue leaders and congregants, both current and former, hold divergent views about the risk factors associated with termination of membership, as well as about what synagogues do when someone chooses to leave.** Synagogue members who said they were considering leaving cited issues of meaning and personal connection far more than the commonly presumed excuses of B’nai/B’not Mitzvah completion or having no more children at home. And although nearly every synagogue said it reaches out to former members after they leave, more than half of former members said no one from the synagogue contacted them.

Caution is advised in generalizing results due to the sampling methods and small sampling size, but the findings do suggest new ways of thinking about synagogue membership and some ways to strengthen ties of members so they’ll be less likely to consider leaving in the future.

Introduction

This project began as an inquiry into the relationship between synagogue engagement and the departure of children from the household, that is, when members become “empty nesters.” The goal was to explore the conventional wisdom that once a family’s children had completed their bar/bat mitzvah and a few years later left the household for college, many families would leave their congregations. To test this assumption, UJA-Federation of New York retained researchers from the B3/Jewish Boomer Platform (hereafter B3) to work with SYNERGY to engage a cross section of Jewish organizational leaders and community members from Westchester in a study on synagogue participation.

The research team embarked on a series of local conversations (“convenings”) with synagogue professional and volunteer leaders and two online surveys – one of synagogue leaders, and one of Westchester Jewish households – as well as follow-up interviews with some respondents to the latter survey who were former synagogue members. Each component of the study was intended to delve more deeply into the question of people’s connections to their synagogues and Jewish life, to help identify new ways to engage or re-engage these empty nesters in synagogue life.

The study suggests that, although some empty nesters may ultimately “take the plunge” and drop their synagogue membership after the bar/bat mitzvah or kids-off-to-college junctures, there are many reasons for departure and life stage is not the primary motivator (or even second or third on their list). In fact, non-empty nesters are as likely as empty nesters to be “on-the-fence” about their synagogue memberships. Both families with children and empty nesters share similar doubts about the cost of membership, how personally connected they are to the synagogue, how meaningful it is to their lives, and other aspects about the religious and social context.

These reasons given for departure demonstrated that the decisions to leave synagogue life are complex, but are not solely because members reach this particular life stage. In exploring this question, the survey of Westchester Jewish households asked current synagogue members if they had ever considered leaving the congregation, and if so, why. One of the surprise findings of this survey was that in this sample that included 930 Westchester synagogue members, responses to this question were not related to household composition: just over half of empty nesters and nearly that many non-empty nesters responded that they had never considered leaving the synagogue.

Analysis thus turned to exploring the “on-the-fence” members – those who said they had considered leaving the congregation – and former members, and how both groups differed from “committed” members – current members who said they had never considered leaving. The study examined measures of connection to Jewish religion, culture, and community, as well as gathering meaningful appraisals of the benefits and challenges associated with respondents’ connections to synagogue communities. On select issues, it also looked at how responses of synagogue leaders compared with those of current and former congregants. The findings suggest a number of factors that may contribute to weak connections between a congregation and its members. They also point to substantive opportunities to re-imagine synagogue engagement and connection.

The perspectives and experiences of those who may be considering leaving, and those who have already left, offer insights for outreach, engagement, and retention strategies.

Background

UJA-Federation of New York believes in synagogues as core institutions of Jewish life, learning and spiritual practice. Through SYNERGY, UJA-Federation helps New York synagogues to thrive.

In its work with synagogues in Westchester, SYNERGY staff repeatedly heard concerns about dropping affiliation rates and how to stem that tide. Many rabbis, presidents, and executive directors reported a drop in involvement and even membership once a family's children completed Hebrew School and bar/bat mitzvah, or grew up and left home. They posited that connection to a synagogue is a phenomenon related to a stage of family life, and attenuates among parents when their children have reached adulthood and moved on. Thus the empty nest household was seen as most vulnerable to synagogue disengagement. On the other hand, having been more actively connected at some time, maybe ties could be strengthened so these families would not leave. In some discussions, the conversation widened to talk about how other adults – couples without children or single older adults – could be engaged and retained when synagogue life often focused so much on families.

These concerns were being expressed in an era when religious affiliation is declining across the United States among households of all faiths.¹ The trend has been widely studied and discussed.² This study in Westchester sought to explore the reasons why individuals choose to stay at their synagogues, and what may contribute to decisions to leave. By surveying adult members and former members of all ages and family status, SYNERGY and B3 sought to illuminate the ties that bind members to congregations and the stressors that potentially threaten those bonds.

It should be noted that this project does not purport to include a representative sample of all Jewish households in Westchester, but rather focused on connected Jews bound in some measure to a spiritual community. The sample was purposeful, convenient, and self-selected. As such, findings cannot be generalized to the Westchester Jewish population as a whole. In addition, the use of organizational lists by nature ends up recruiting more Jewishly affiliated families, which made it difficult to reach a

larger number of former members. Due to the sampling methods and the small sample size, caution is warranted especially in generalizing from this group. Nevertheless, the findings and insights compiled reveal new perspectives on issues facing members who are vulnerable to leaving synagogue communities and may merit further exploration. While the results of this study are of course unique to Westchester, they are worthy of consideration for other suburban Jewish communities.

Westchester County, New York, is a suburban residential district directly north of New York City with a Jewish population that has been growing over the past two decades. An estimated one in six Westchester residents lives in a Jewish household. In total, 161,000 people (including 136,000 Jews and 25,000 non-Jewish spouses, roommates, or children) live in 60,000 Jewish households there.³ The Jewish community is fairly affluent, with a majority of households earning more than \$100,000 a year. Jewish households are distributed across the county with a third concentrated in the south-central communities of Scarsdale, New Rochelle, and White Plains. Demographically, the community is aging, with seniors over 65 now 21% of the total Jewish population. In line with the growth of those across the United States who identify with no religion, from 2002 to 2011, Westchester saw a decline in the percentage of Jews who identify as Conservative or Reform, and a more than threefold increase in the proportion of people who identify as secular or no religion – from 6% in 2002 to 20% in 2011. Nevertheless, the proportion of households reporting that they belong to a synagogue remained unchanged at 52%.⁴

1 See for example: Putnam, R.D., Campbell, D.E. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, 2010, , p. 105; also, *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center, Religion & Public Life, May 12, 2015

2 See for example, *Conservative and Reform Congregations in the United States Today: Findings from the FACT-Synagogue 3000 Survey of 2010 and S3K Report: Spring 2007*, a publication of the S3K (Synagogue 3000) Synagogue Studies Institute

3 UJA-Federation of New York (2013). *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011 Geographic Profile*

4 *ibid*

Methodology

The research team used a mixed-method approach to test the assumptions expressed by synagogue leaders that members primarily join to invest in the Jewish education of their children and that bonds to congregations may weaken when youth leave home. They also sought to better understand membership trends within synagogues and factors that may affect synagogue membership. Specifically, there was a series of “convenings” with synagogue professional and volunteer leaders, an online survey of synagogue leaders, an online survey of Westchester Jewish households, and follow-up interviews with a sample of respondents to the latter survey. By using multiple methods and informants, including conferencing with the UJA-Federation of New York team members and community leaders, the researchers were able to compare leadership and congregant perspectives, sound out their theories and get feedback on their emergent findings, and provide a rich look at elements of synagogue engagement.

Synagogue Leadership Survey: Summer 2014

Over a three-week period in the summer of 2014, this online survey was sent to all local synagogue leaders, representing clergy, executive directors, presidents, and administrators. Rabbis, executive directors, administrators, and presidents from about half (25) of Westchester’s 54¹ synagogues responded. The questionnaire explored membership trends and what factors synagogue leaders believe influence people’s decisions to join, remain at, or leave synagogues.

The survey findings corroborated the initial hypotheses: the majority of congregations reported declines in membership compared to five or ten years ago, and the groups reported to be decreasing the most included families whose last child celebrated a bar or bat mitzvah and empty nesters.

First community convening: July 16, 2014

B3 met with the SYNERGY team, Westchester rabbis, lay leaders, and other synagogue and Westchester agency professionals to reveal the results of the first survey, and to use the reactions and questions that arose to help guide and determine what issues needed to be examined, what questions should be asked, and the reach of the second study, and to provide input that would help focus and refine the survey instrument for the community survey.

Community Survey: November 2014 – January 2015

A survey aimed at reaching Jewish residents of Westchester County – with a particular interest in reaching current and former synagogue members – was fielded between November 2014 and January 2015. To maximize efficiency and secure a sample that represented a broad spectrum of affiliation and localities, respondents were recruited from synagogue and community organization lists. More than 60 organizations – nearly every synagogue and Jewish organization in Westchester – participated by providing their lists or forwarding the survey link to their e-mail lists. In addition, survey respondents were invited to forward the e-mailed instrument to family, friends, and other interested persons. A total of 1,284 responses were received, of which 1,104 completed the 41-item survey. Of these, 930 were synagogue members, and 103 were former members; the remainder had never joined a synagogue.

The questionnaire for the Westchester community survey focused on measures of Jewish connection and engagement, with the aim of comparing empty-nester respondents to respondents with children at home. It included a particular emphasis on what contributes to making a family vulnerable to ending synagogue membership.

In-depth interviews: January/February 2015

The community survey included a question asking respondents if they would be willing to speak in more detail with the researchers through a follow-up call. This allowed the research team to reach out to those who had left their synagogues to further probe their reasons for departing. Eleven respondents were interviewed in January and February of 2015. These interviews were recorded and analyzed for common themes.

Second convening: March 24, 2015

Groups of local synagogue, agency, and UJA-Federation of NY leadership convened to reflect on the initial findings from the second (community) survey.

Focus groups: May 2015

B3 held three focus groups with clergy, synagogue executive directors, and synagogue presidents in which they examined the data more intentionally. (May 5-7 (execs and presidents) and May 13, 2015 (clergy)). B3 interviewed 11 former synagogue members with more in-depth questions about their departure (throughout June 2015).

1 54 synagogues in Westchester: 37% Reform, 35% Conservative, 6% Reconstructionist, 13% orthodox, and 9% post-denominational.

Findings

For the purpose of analysis, “empty nesters” included respondents who indicated that they had a child or children, but none lived with them at home (457), and respondents who said they had no children at all (61). In total, 46% of survey respondents were empty nesters, and 54% were not.

Surprisingly, the data revealed that empty nester status does not appear to be correlated to synagogue allegiance. Just over half of empty nesters (58%) and a similar proportion of respondents with children at home (51%) said they had never considered leaving the synagogue. Asked the top reasons for remaining a synagogue member, both groups’ ranking of reasons was similar, with just one exception. Likewise, among those who have considered leaving their congregation, reasons cited are quite similar, with “my children have all completed bar or bat mitzvah” and “my children have all left home” being near the bottom of both empty nester and non-empty nester lists.

However, the fact that nearly half (47%) of respondents say they have considered leaving their synagogue was deemed a critical finding to explore. As shown in the analysis below, this group shows weaker connections to many aspects of synagogue life than the “committed” members, though their connections are generally stronger than those of former members.

Westchester Synagogue Leaders Survey

Over half (56%) of respondents represented Reform synagogues, 32% Conservative, and 12% Reconstructionist. There was one respondent representing an Orthodox synagogue.

- The majority of congregations report declines in membership compared to five or ten years ago; in some cases the declines reported were as much as 35%.
- The three groups most likely to be increasing in terms of membership include families with pre-school age children, families with pre-b’nai/b’not mitzvah age children, and “younger people/singles.”
- The groups reported to be decreasing the most in terms of membership include families whose last child celebrated a bar or bat mitzvah, and empty nesters.
- Among synagogue leaders, the most frequently selected reason for congregants leaving was “change in children’s status — bar or bat mitzvah over” (83%), followed by relocation

“In exploring why current members remain members of their synagogue, the responses of empty nesters and respondents with children at home were barely distinguishable.”

(58%) and change in financial status (54%). One in four mentioned becoming an empty nester, that is, when the last child has left home.

- In response to an open-ended question, other reasons given included a possible loss of interest; a change in people’s priorities, perhaps after a spouse dies or after retirement; downsizing; taking a “non-synagogue route to bar/bat mitzvah preparation,” or being in arrears to the synagogue. No respondents volunteered any mention of issues regarding congregants’ relationship with the clergy (an issue that emerged in the responses from former members in the second survey).
- The overwhelming majority of synagogues surveyed indicate that they have a program in place to get in touch with members who leave the congregation, whether by phone (84%), by letter or email (72%), or in person (8%). Only 8% report not having a formal process.

Westchester Community Survey

Reform was the most common identification of respondents (39%), followed by Conservative (30%), just Jewish/cultural/secular (19%), Reconstructionist (8%), and Orthodox (4%).

Empty Nesters and Households With Children

Empty nesters are identified by those who, when asked “Do you have any children?” indicated that they have a child or children but none of them live at home (n=457) or they do not have children at all (n=61). All others, with any children at home (even if some have older children who are no longer living at home) are “non-empty nesters.” Of the 1,114 who answered this question, 518 (46%) are empty nesters and 596 (54%) are not.

- The demographic profile of empty nesters and non-empty nesters was fairly similar, with no statistical difference in gender or denominational identification of the respondents, but with the empty nesters a little bit older, and more likely to be widowed, separated/divorced, or single. Their Jewish engagement profile

Exhibit 1: Q 29: (If you are currently a synagogue member) what keeps you as a member? Please indicate all that apply.

	Respondents With Children at Home	Empty Nesters
I think Jews need to belong to a community	82%	81%
It is important to me	79%	76%
I want a place to worship	73%	74%
My family has always belonged to a synagogue	57%	55%
It is important to my spouse/partner	43%	38%
There will come a time when we need a rabbi	41%	34%
To get High Holiday tickets	41%	34%
My friends belong	35%	29%
I want a place to provide my children with a Jewish education	43%	18%

is also fairly similar, with no statistical difference between empty nesters and non-empty nesters in terms of “being Jewish” and “being part of my local Jewish community” is “very important,” and participating in activities like a trip to Israel, volunteering, or serving as a member of a committee. However, respondents with children at home are more likely than empty nesters to have friends that belong to a synagogue.

- In exploring why current members remain members of their synagogue, the responses of empty nesters and respondents with children at home were barely distinguishable. Top reasons given for continuing their synagogue membership relate to belonging to a community, personal importance, wanting a place to worship, and continuing a family tradition. There is only one difference in their rankings – 43% of non-empty nesters cite, “I want a place to provide my children with a Jewish education,” compared to 18% of empty nesters.
- Contrary to core assumptions held by congregational leadership that synagogue affiliation decreases or becomes more tenuous post bar/bat mitzvah and once children leave home, there were no significant differences found between empty nesters and non-empty nesters. Just over half of empty nesters (58%) and nearly the same proportion of non-empty nesters (51%) responded that they had never considered leaving the synagogue. Among reasons given for considering leaving, the most frequently mentioned reason by both empty nesters and non-empty nesters is cost, followed by not feeling a personal connection, and the synagogue not being “as meaningful as it once was.” Reasons relating to children having all completed bar or bat mitzvah, left home, or joined another synagogue are among the least common responses.

“Many originally joined because of their children; they no longer saw a value in belonging, they lost a personal connection, and they didn’t feel that the synagogue was well-configured for older people.”

Committed, On-the-Fence, and Former Members

The vast majority (85%) of Westchester community survey respondents were current synagogue members (n=930), and 9% reported that they were former synagogue members (n=103). The remaining 5% had never been members of a synagogue (of which nearly half said they would consider joining at some time).

For some of the analysis, the synagogue members were divided based on a question about whether they have ever considered leaving their synagogue. “Committed” members (49%) said that they had never considered leaving their synagogue. “On-the-Fence” members (47%) indicated that they had considered leaving their synagogue and explained why by checking from a list of possible reasons. The study team identified this group as vulnerable to exiting. The committed and the on-the-fence members were compared with one another and with the former member respondents to see if and how they differed in terms of Jewish identity and engagement.

The demographic profile of the three groups is fairly similar. On-the-fence members have a slightly younger age profile and former member respondents were slightly more predominantly female, but neither of these differences is statistically significant.

Exhibit 2: Q 30: If you have ever considered leaving your synagogue, please indicate all the reasons that may apply.

	Respondents With Children at Home	Empty Nesters
It is getting too expensive	29%	26%
I don't feel a personal connection there	11%	15%
It is not as meaningful as it once was	15%	13%
As I have gotten older I don't think it meets my needs	10%	9%
I want to try another synagogue	13%	8%
I don't agree with what is going on at the synagogue	11%	7%
I am not happy with the services and rituals	11%	7%
My friends have left	8%	7%
We are considering relocating	7%	6%
My children have all left home	5%	6%
I disagree with the political or social policy stances of this synagogue or rabbi(s)	6%	5%
My children have all been Bar or Bat Mitzvah	8%	5%
I am not happy with the programs	7%	5%
My children have joined another synagogue	1%	3%

- Both groups of current synagogue members were more likely than former members to be married. There was little difference in empty nester status between the committed and on-the-fence member cohorts: 51% of committed members had children still living at home, as did 57% of on-the-fence members; 49% of committed members and 43% of on-the-fence members were categorized as empty nesters. But empty nesters were more prevalent among former synagogue members; just 41% still had children at home and 59% did not. In addition, current members are more settled than non-members; 84% of committed members and 70% of on-the-fence members said they were not considering moving in the next year or two, compared to 60% of former members.
- There is a difference in the denominational identification of the groups: Committed members are most likely to identify with a major denomination (mainly Reform, Conservative, or Reconstructionist); but former members are more likely to describe themselves either as Reform or without denominational labels (“just Jewish,” “culturally Jewish,” or “secular/Humanist”). The on-the-fence members were similar to the committed members, though slightly fewer on-the-fence members identified as Reform, and slightly more identified as “Just Jewish” or “culturally Jewish.”
- Although current members report higher incidence than former members on a range of measures of Jewish identity and activities, former members have not ceased caring about their Jewish lives or doing things that, for them, are satisfying expressions of their Jewishness. Leaving the congregation, for virtually all former members that responded to this survey, does not mean that they have left “being Jewish.” For example, 96% of former members say that being Jewish is “somewhat” (25%) or “very” (71%) important.
- The survey also revealed that former members find other ways to be Jewish and connect to Jewish life outside of synagogue membership. Nearly three quarters agree that they can get all the Jewish involvement they want without belonging to a synagogue. In contrast, this statement is rejected by all but a small number of current members. The responses of the three groups are similar on the question of whether they can get sufficient Jewish involvement without belonging to a Jewish organization. Former members were far more likely than current members to say “I feel I can get all of the Jewish involvement I want with my family and friends,” and to feel that they can “get my Jewish involvement online through videos, streaming, and other media,” (31% of former members, compared with 12% of committed members and 14% of on-the-fence members).

Exhibit 3: Respondent Agreement or Disagreement* with Statements

Statements	Former Members		On-the-Fence Members		Committed Members	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
I feel I can get all of the Jewish involvement I want without belonging to a synagogue.	73%	24%	13%	86%	3%	96%
I feel I can get all of the Jewish involvement I want without belonging to a Jewish organization.	71%	28%	22%	77%	11%	87%
I feel I can get all of the Jewish involvement I want with my family and friends.	69%	28%	16%	83%	10%	89%
Nowadays I can get my Jewish involvement online through videos, streaming, and other media	31%	58%	14%	80%	12%	84%

*“Agree” includes “agree strongly” and “agree somewhat.” “Disagree” includes “disagree strongly” and “disagree somewhat.” Numbers do not add to 100 percent as a small percent of respondents indicated “no opinion.”

- In addition to these indicators that former members find sufficient ways to be Jewish without institutional belonging, former members reveal a much less intense connection to community. Asked the importance of being part of their local Jewish community, only 16% of former members say it is very important, compared with 68% of on-the-fence members and 87% of committed members. These former members seem to feel they can put together sufficient Jewish connections that work for them as individuals and as members of families or among friends, without needing the local Jewish community.
- Former members who responded to the survey remain engaged in a variety of Jewish activities and behaviors. Over half of all former members report that they sometimes or often read or view Jewish materials online (70%) or in a Jewish newspaper or other Jewish publication (not online) (58%). A majority continues attending High Holiday services (58%). About two in five (41%) reported having Shabbat meals sometimes or often, and the same proportion reported volunteering at or through an organization other than a synagogue.
- While synagogue members’ Jewish engagement levels are generally significantly higher than those of former members, there are differences between the committed and on-the-fence members that may point to either weakening of ties or pre-existing differences in involvement that contribute to their more tenuous attitude toward membership. For example, 68% of on-the-fence members say they have Shabbat meals sometimes or often, in comparison with 79% of committed members. Similarly, 67% of the former read Jewish publications sometimes or often, compared with 76% of committed members. Volunteering with the synagogue is slightly lower for both groups, but with a similar spread between them: 57% of on-the-fence members versus 71% of committed members.
- High Holidays are different – virtually all members, whether committed (97%) or on-the-fence (92%), find their way “often” to these services. This reinforces the importance of the High Holidays as an opportunity to connect with members – especially those whose commitment to belonging is at risk.
- These differences between committed and on-the-fence members are more dramatic when looking at attitudes toward the Jewish community. A key indication of this is the tepid response of “somewhat” agreeing or disagreeing. From the following table (page 12), which shows responses to a variety of statements that are negatively associated with Jewish institutional membership, we see that while both groups generally disagree with the statements, on-the-fence members are less likely to disagree strongly.
- The patterns grow stronger when looking at levels of overall satisfaction with the synagogue. Fully 98% of committed members say they are very (78%) or somewhat (20%) satisfied with their synagogue. In contrast, at-risk members are far more likely to say they are just somewhat satisfied (47%) with their synagogue, and a minority (34%) are very satisfied. Likewise, a third (33%) of committed members are very satisfied with their synagogue’s religious school compared to just 22% of on-the-fence members; 38% of both groups are somewhat satisfied. When asked about their attitudes toward paying dues, only 5% of committed members say they do not want to pay dues

Exhibit 4: Respondent Agreement or Disagreement with Statements.

Statements	Committed Members			On-the-Fence Members		
	Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Agree*	Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Agree*
I do not feel connected with people who are involved in the Jewish community.	86%	8%	5%	72%	17%	10%
I feel I can get all of the Jewish involvement I want without belonging to a synagogue.	84%	12%	3%	58%	28%	13%
The issues addressed by the Jewish community are not interesting or important to me.	81%	11%	8%	73%	17%	9%
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.	75%	13%	12%	54%	21%	21%
I feel I can get all of the Jewish involvement I want without belonging to a Jewish organization.	69%	18%	11%	44%	33%	22%
I feel I can get all of the Jewish involvement I want with my family and friends.	65%	24%	10%	48%	35%	16%
Most of my friends do not belong to a synagogue.	60%	23%	15%	39%	33%	25%

* Includes “agree strongly” and “agree somewhat.” Numbers do not add to 100 percent as small percent of respondents indicated “no opinion.”

to a synagogue; 24% of on-the-fence members feel that way. Fully 81% of committed members disagree strongly with that sentiment, in contrast to just 47% of those on-the-fence.

- Indicators showing the positive reasons to maintain membership provide additional examples that distinguish between committed and on-the-fence members. The top reasons cited by both groups are the need to be part of a community, memberships’ personal importance to them, and their desire to have a place to worship. For both groups, factors of friendship and providing their children with a Jewish education rank lower. Comparing both groups reveals a similar ordering of reasons, but lower rates of valuing each item among on-the-fence members with one exception: High Holiday tickets are the fifth-highest rated item by on-the-fence members, but is the least-cited incentive for committed members.
- For those who have considered leaving their synagogue (the on-the-fence members), multiple factors appear to be

influencers. The top reasons cited relate to cost, meaning, and personal connection. Factors relating to children’s education and empty nester status are toward the bottom of the list, cited by 13% or fewer respondents.

- To assess even more explicitly the potential relationship between children’s education and synagogue membership, respondents were asked directly whether they agreed or not with the statement “once my children have completed their religious education and bar/bat mitzvah, I no longer need a synagogue.” Fully 90% of committed members disagreed strongly. Among on-the-fence members, 68% disagreed strongly, and another 21% disagreed somewhat.
- Among the former synagogue members who responded to the survey, the top-cited reason for leaving their synagogue were lack of connection with clergy (46%). Change in children’s status was also widely cited, related to the completion of bar/bat mitzvah (39%) and no children living at home full time (37%).

Exhibit 5: Q 29: (If you are currently a synagogue member) What keeps you as a member? Please indicate all that apply.

	Committed Members	On-the-Fence Members
It is important to me	90%	68%
I think Jews need to belong to a community	88%	77%
I want a place to worship	81%	68%
My family has always belonged to a synagogue	63%	53%
It is important to my spouse/partner	46%	36%
There will come a time when we need a rabbi	41%	38%
My friends belong	39%	28%
I want a place to provide my children with a Jewish education	38%	30%
To get High Holiday tickets	37%	41%

Exhibit 6: Q 30: If you have ever considered leaving your synagogue, please indicate all the reasons that may apply.

	On-the-Fence Members
It is getting too expensive	52%
It is not as meaningful as it once was	26%
I don't feel a personal connection there	25%
I want to try another synagogue	22%
I don't agree with what is going on at the synagogue	20%
I am not happy with the services and rituals	19%
As I have gotten older I don't think it meets my needs	18%
My friends have left	14%
We are considering relocating	13%
My children have all been Bar or Bat Mitzvah	13%

Other fairly common answers included unhappiness with synagogue administration (29%) and change in financial status (21%). When contrasted with the responses from the synagogue leaders survey, there appears to be some disconnect or at least a gap of understanding motivation between the leaders and the former members. More than 80% of synagogue leaders associated discontinuation of membership with bar/bat mitzvah completion; just 25% of members associated

dropped membership with having no children at home; and no synagogue leader raised consideration of relationships with clergy when they had the chance to answer an open-ended question on other possible reasons for synagogue departure. A majority of synagogue leaders (54%) attributed membership loss to change in financial status, more than twice the incidence seen among the former member respondents to this survey.

- Regarding post-termination outreach, the majority of former members (57%) indicated that no one from the synagogue got in touch with them after they left. Just over a quarter (28%) say they received a call, 18% received a letter or email, and 1% mentioned an in-person visit. Again, this is extremely different from what synagogue leadership reported in their survey responses, in which 92% said they had some formal process to reach out. Part of this difference may well be attributed to faulty memories or calls made without actually reaching their intended recipients, but here again there seems to be a significant disconnect between the perceptions of synagogue leaders and those of former members.

Insights From Former Members

The varied responses from these telephone interviews fell into basic categories that align with the findings about former members cited above: many originally joined because of their children, they no longer saw a value in belonging, they lost a personal connection, and they didn't feel that the synagogue was well-configured for older people. When probing questions related to the cost of synagogue membership, a number of them responded positively to the idea of voluntary dues and said they might take another look at a synagogue that instituted that type of model.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings described in previous pages suggest that motivations for joining, maintaining membership, and potentially leaving a synagogue community are complex and informed by multiple factors. And with nearly half of synagogue respondents admitting that they have considered leaving their synagogue, it's important to try to understand these motivations. Common assumptions about the centrality of children's education and involvement as one of the key factors (along with cost) for maintaining or terminating membership do not play out as expected in the responses of committed and on-the-fence members who took the Westchester Community Survey.

Whether or not a respondent had a child living at home had no correlation with status as "committed" or "on-the-fence." For both committed and on-the-fence members, providing children with a Jewish education was among the least-cited reasons for maintaining membership. For on-the-fence members overall, and for both the empty nesters and non-empty nesters among them, completion of bar/bat mitzvah and children growing up and leaving home are among the least-cited reasons for considering leaving.

For all the synagogue member groups in the study, whether committed or on-the-fence, empty nester or non-empty nester, other factors related to being personally meaningful, belonging to a community, and wanting a place to worship, were cited as the primary motivators for continuing their synagogue memberships. And factors related to cost, meaning, and personal connection were the most common reasons for considering leaving. While change in children's status was commonly mentioned by former members as a motivator for their leaving, the top-cited reason was lack of connection with clergy; unhappiness with synagogue administration and change in financial status were also noted by more than one in five former members.

What are we to make of this contradictory information? Synagogue leaders say empty nesters and people whose last child celebrated a bar or bat mitzvah make up the cohort decreasing the most in terms of membership. Among survey respondents, the group of former synagogue members had significantly more empty nesters than either of the current-member groups. And among on-the-fence members, about a quarter either agree or only somewhat disagree with the statement, "Once my children have completed their religious education and bar/bat mitzvah, I no longer need a synagogue." So it appears that while empty nesters are not more likely than respondents with children to be considering leaving, empty

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nesters may be more likely to actually leave, and on-the-fence members with families may wait until their children are grown up and out of the house before they act on their dissatisfaction.

From all this, a picture emerges that suggests that if synagogue leaders can better address congregants' needs for meaning, personal connection, community, and relatedness, fewer on-the-fence members might leave after they become empty nesters.

The need for synagogues to be places of meaningful experiences and personal connection relates also to the findings seen among former members who are finding sufficient ways to be Jewish without institutional belonging. Much has been written about the modern trends toward episodic affiliation, declining membership rates, and transformations in how people relate to one another in a global, high-tech age.¹ This is not unique to Westchester and its Jewish community; across the United States, these trends are seen among Boomers and Millennials. For synagogues to maintain relevance in this context, they need to reach individuals in a more personal, individual way while cultivating a deeper sense of connection to the collective. The on-the-fence members still have a fairly strong sense of this collective and the value of synagogues and institutions. However, their more tepid responses to these questions, tending to just "somewhat disagree" with the idea that they could have a satisfying Jewish life without belonging to a Jewish organization, suggests that they, too, lean toward a more individual path to their Jewish identity.

The findings also suggest that finances matter and the cost of being a synagogue member is problematic to many — but it may not be the key determinant of leaving a synagogue. Although more than half of synagogue leaders believed change in financial status was a key factor in congregants' decisions to leave, only a fifth of former members cited this as a top reason for their

¹ See for example, Putnam, Robert (1995). *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital* and Cohen, Steven M. and Eisen, Arnold M. *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*, 2000.

departure. If members feel more personal connection and value in their involvement in the congregation, this might move further down the list. Much also remains to be learned about how new models of synagogue membership, such as voluntary dues, are affecting membership trends. Is cost really a key factor, or do synagogues with voluntary dues also see decreases in membership among the same demographics? Further study of this is needed.

Another area worth further exploration is the discrepancy between the responses of synagogue leaders and the findings from the survey and interviews with former members. Are synagogue leaders relying on preconceived notions to explain why people leave synagogues? Some of the differences might be explained by the differences in the surveys – the synagogue leaders were presented with just eight answer choices, and instructed to choose the top three reasons. In the Westchester Community Survey, former members had the same list as the synagogue leaders, with two additional answer choices – both of which were widely chosen.

In both cases, there was an “other” option with space to specify additional reasons. If lack of connection with clergy is so widely felt, it is somewhat surprising that no synagogue leader suggested anything like that when given the chance. Even more startling is the discrepancy in reported outreach efforts to former members by synagogue leaders, and in the perception by the former members of almost no actual contact from the synagogue after their departure. Are synagogues not following through on their intentions to reach out? Do former members ignore efforts to reach them? Are the interactions ineffective and easily forgotten? Or done by a board member who is also a friend, so it isn't recognized as a formal gesture by the synagogue? This topic, too, warrants further exploration.

This research, conducted among synagogue leaders, members, and former members, confirms the reality that deciding to leave one's synagogue is complicated and multifaceted. Some of the most commonly presumed reasons for dropping synagogue membership – “my children have all been Bar or Bat Mitzvah” and “my children have all left home” – are actually low on the list of congregants' reasons to consider leaving. Even finances appear to play a smaller role in decisions to disaffiliate than many synagogue leaders assume. Those who seek to strengthen Jewish life and the organizations and institutions that serve the Jewish community need to broaden their understanding of the wide range of reasons people consider leaving – especially in light of the fact that nearly half of the synagogue members in this study admitted they have considered leaving their congregation.

The presence of such a large contingent of on-the-fence members may be startling to some. But their perspectives and experiences offer insights to improve outreach, engagement, and retention strategies. While synagogues provide an important context for families to connect with one another and deepen their Jewish identities through educating their children and youth, synagogues also provide a less-recognized place for adults to nurture their spirituality, social connection, and personal growth. And these are exactly the factors that are most widely cited by members as the reasons for their continued membership (personal meaning, belonging to a community, and wanting a place to worship) and for considering leaving (lack of meaning and personal connection). These interests and needs reflect larger trends in the American landscape, including a trend away from enduring, stable relationships with institutions and organizations, and toward short-term, episodic commitments. Drilling down into lessons learned from congregants who have left, and those who contemplate leaving, suggests that connectivity can be sustained and strengthened by forging deeper, more personal connections with members.

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