

# The Generational Transmission of Jewish Values in Small Communities: The Utility and Magic of Thinking Small

Dissertation Defense

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# The Accidental Talmudist hosts the Small Jewish Community Project

[Click here for a short video clip.](#)

[Click here for the full video.](#)

Easy to be Jewish in the city...



Difficult to be Jewish in a small town...



# Thinking small works!

- Don't rely heavily on institutions or the professional class.
- Reduce outsourcing.
- Increase parental responsibility.
- Clarify and articulate Jewish values.
- Don't be afraid to set boundaries.





# Research Path

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH:

### Three Small Jewish Communities:

- Mountain City (mountain west)
- Riverton (midwest)
- Green Valley (southeast)

### One moderate-sized Jewish community:

- Springfield (northeast)



# Research Path

## QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH:

Two existing data sets:

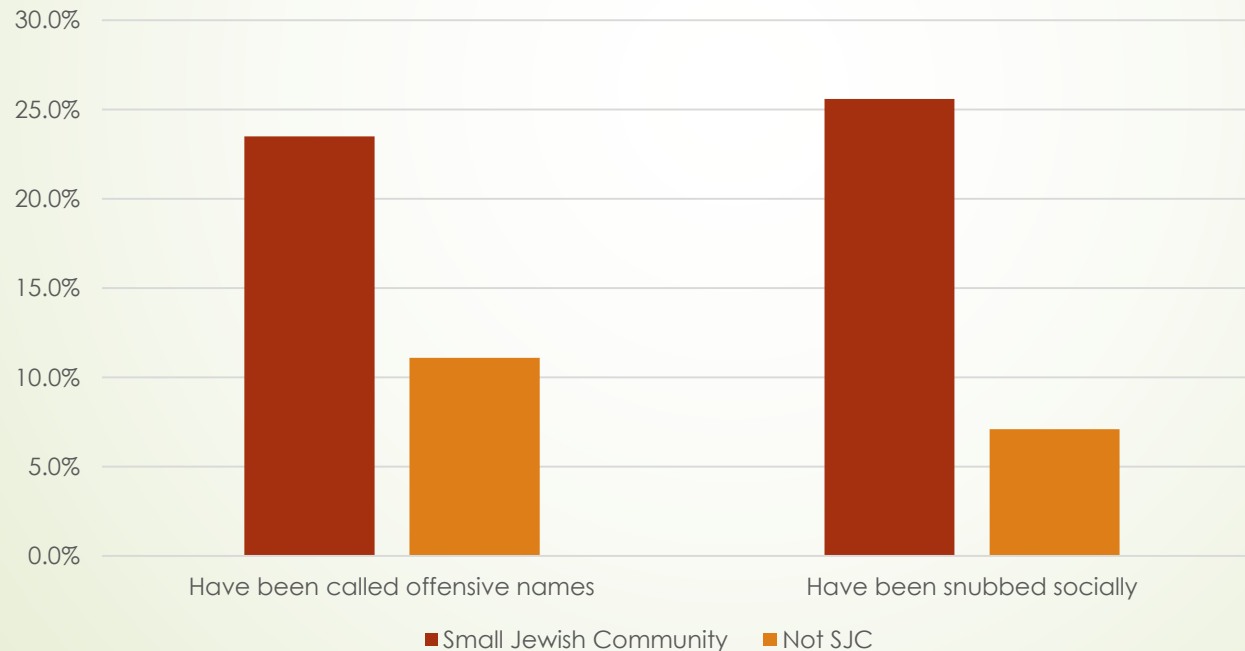
- 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey  
(United Jewish Communities / Berman Institute)
- 2013 Pew Research Center Survey of Jewish Americans

Proof-of-concept internet-based survey directed at those living in small Jewish communities

- Launched February 9, 2017
- Scheduled to close on May 22, 2017
- 532 completed responses to date

- Fewer resources in small Jewish communities
- Fewer options for divisiveness within the community (no islands)
- Impossible to hide inside the community
  - Difficult to be invisible to the larger community.
- Many opportunities for cross-community interaction

Figure 4.3: Respondents who said that in the last twelve months they had the following experiences



*NOTE: Weighted data from the Pew 2013 survey comparing the proportions of respondents from small Jewish communities with those of other communities with regard to the frequency of experiences with anti-Semitism in the past year.*





# Lack of resources reduces outsourcing

Parents must be the teachers and mentors, living out Jewish values in front of the children of the community.

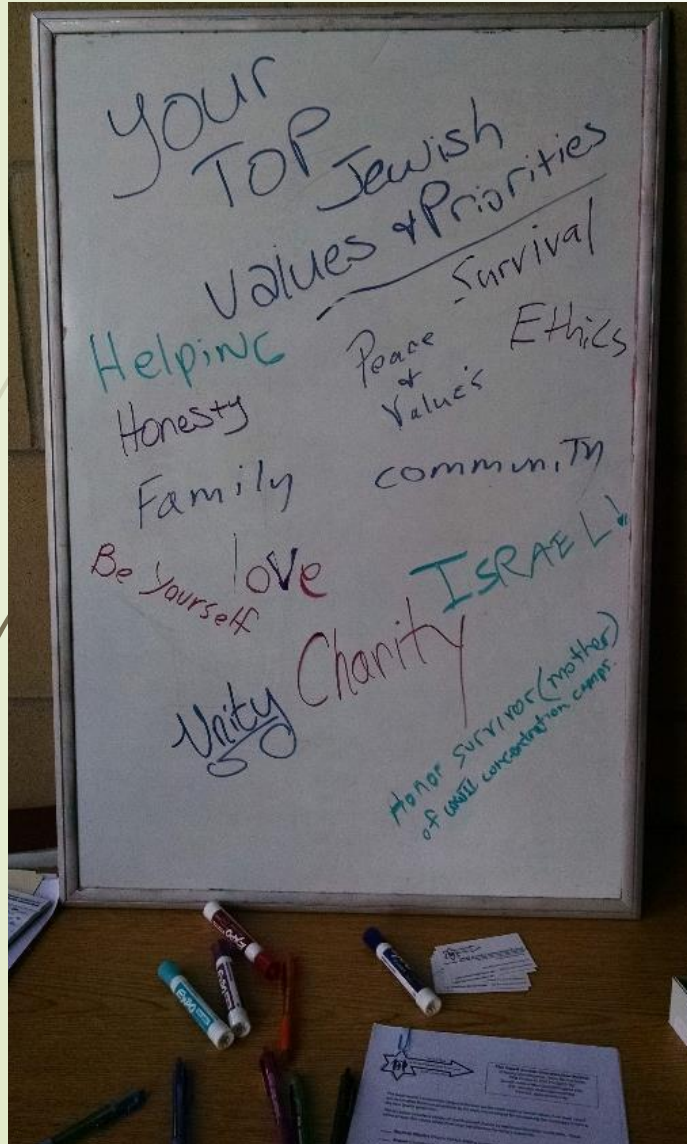
Parents must be the face of the Jewish community, living out Jewish values as they work, play, shop, and engage with their children's friends, teachers, coaches, etc.

*“Are there things we can't or shouldn't outsource? There is one form of outsourcing that tends to be little noticed: the outsourcing of memory... Memory is the answer to the question, 'Who am I?' History is his-story. It happened to someone else, not me. Memory is my story, the past that made me who I am, of whose legacy I am the guardian for the sake of generations yet to come. Without memory, there is no identity. And without identity, we are mere dust on the surface of infinity.”*

- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks upon receipt of the  
2016 Templeton Prize

Lack of resources requires “thinking small.”

Mountain City Information Table



## Top Values

COMMUNITY		
Mountain City	Green Valley	Springfield
Lovingkindness	Lovingkindness	Respect/Dignity/Honor
Loving the Stranger	Righteousness	Love of Israel
Respect/Dignity/Honor	Respect/Dignity/Honor	Faith/Trustworthiness





# Strengths of small Jewish communities

The community is family

## **From Riverton focus group of dads:**

**Man 1:** “We are a close-knit community. Everybody is accepted. I come from big family, but everybody is family. There is no qualm about calling anybody for any type of a favor.”

**Man 3:** “If you come to this congregation, you’re family.”

**Man 1:** “If you’re a Jewish student and you need a place to be for any Jewish holiday, we’ll find out and that kid will get an invitation.”

**Man 3:** “Everyone who comes here will have a place to eat.”



# Strengths of small Jewish communities

Parents know they need to step up without relying on a professional class to educate their children.

Woman from Green Valley

“Here it’s hard... everything that you do or participate in is important because if you’re not there that’s like 1/50th of the community who isn’t there. I feel an obligation... pressure... an expectation. It’s not easy.”



# Strengths of small Jewish communities

Parents take their responsibility very personally. When asked what they need to transmit Jewish values to their children, respondents to our proof-of-concept survey answered:

- More help from the rabbi – 29%
- More help from the children's education program – 41%
- More holistic family education – 44%
- More adult education – 56%
- Parents who are more focused on teaching their children – 73%



# Strengths of small Jewish communities

What does the rabbi do?

- The standard-bearer
  - Parents are the boundary-enforcers  
“Rabbi Adam is the glue...” (Riverton)
- The cheerleader
  - Parents, grandparents, and others are the coaches and referees  
“The rabbi keeps us going... he won't give up!”  
(Riverton)
- Sets the example of a community servant  
“We are very fortunate in Rabbi Ben... I feel toward him almost like he's my son.” (Mountain City)



# Strengths of small Jewish communities

What does the rabbi do?

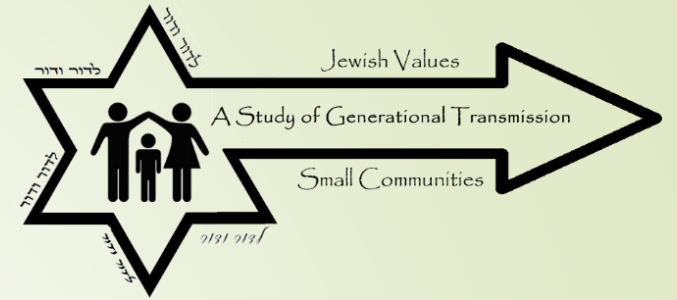
*The rabbi guides the imagining of the community.*

From key informants in Mountain City:

“The rabbi established the culture we all love in our Jewish community.”

“The rabbi is able to speak to the community without angering people. He doesn’t convince people to do things but is leading.”

# Why the new survey?



- No national or regional survey to focus on small Jewish communities since research on American Jewry began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- The latest surveys consider only “Jews who live in small communities,” not “small Jewish communities.”
- Very limited information on generational trends and the transmission of Jewish values.
- Important to gather knowledge about this understudied community while simultaneously encouraging them.





# Key Findings

1. In small Jewish communities, religio-ethnic boundaries are better kept and maintained through family and community than institutional education.

“To *want to* pass down traditions, you [first] have to know you’re a part of something.”

– lay leader in Green Valley

“Parents have to be proud of [their] Jewishness so that their kids will be proud of it.”

– parent in Green Valley

How do you know if someone has a strong Jewish identity? “...they have to be willing to show that they are Jewish.”

- Green Valley Teen



# Key Findings

2. Parents in small Jewish communities are \*very\* aware of the need to provide for their children's Jewish needs. While they are not always certain what to do, they understand that they need to do.

When I talked with parents about values and the need to understand and teach the Jewish antecedents of their values, they were able to align their actions with those values.

These parents seem to be willing to incur the wrath of their pre-teens and teenagers by insisting that community activities sometimes take a higher priority than sports or even school.



# Key Findings

3. Jewish Parents and Grandparents across America are terrified for the Jewish future. In small Jewish communities, however, at least some of the children have been listening. The surprise for the future may not be that Judaism continues to thrive, but that the Judaism of the next generation will most likely look different than that of the mid- to late-twentieth century.
  - While their core friendships may be Jewish, the next generation may be spending much more time in the larger community with religious Christians than secularists.
    - E.g. attending Catholic parochial schools and participating in community inter-faith activities.
  - Community funding will need to be more creative as career paths and regional economics change.
  - Inter-faith marriages, will no longer be considered a challenge, but an opportunity.



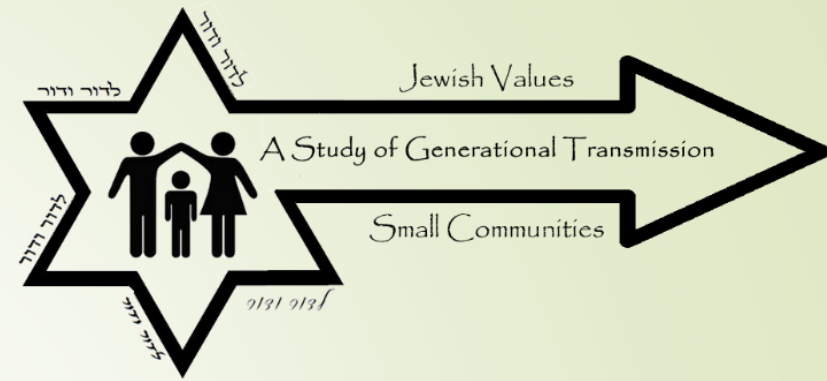
# Key Findings

4. While not only is there a future for small Jewish communities - there are many 20-somethings in these communities today who understand that they have all the responsibility in the world to make sure that future comes to pass. They want *Jewish* homes.

Young women in Riverton were open to “intermarriage” but not to an “inter-faith” home.

“I could care less what my wife believes, so long as she keeps a Jewish home. I want my children to be raised Jewish.” After a pause, he added, “I would be fine with a woman who is more observant than I am.” – young professional from Green Valley

“Most of my Sunday school class lives here now with their children. They moved away to college, married someone (maybe) Jewish and got pulled back in by their family. It’s easier to feel connected here in some ways – it only takes 15 minutes to get to the JCC.”  
– young mom from Green Valley



# Thinking small works!

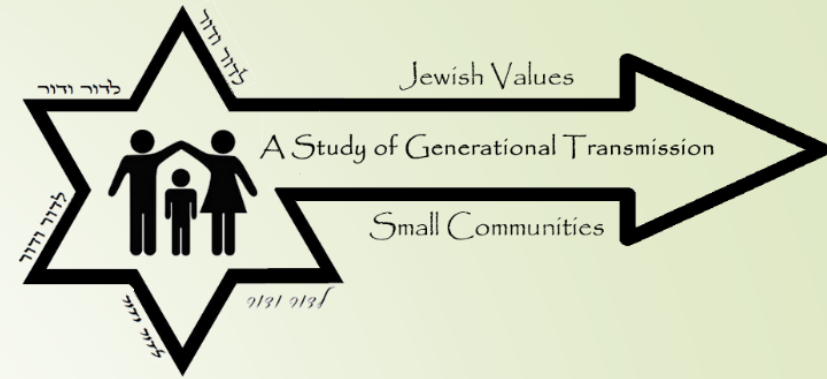
- Don't rely heavily on institutions or the professional class.
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I/We light Shabbat candles on Friday night.

N=204		Never	Rarely	On Occasion	Often	Regularly
Growing up, we lit Shabbat candles on Friday night:	Never	28.0%	12.0%	17.3%	13.3%	29.3%
	Rarely	26.7%	13.3%	20.0%	13.3%	26.7%
	On occasion	15.6%	25.0%	28.1%	12.5%	18.8%
	Often	16.0%	8.0%	36.0%	20.0%	20.0%
	Regularly	8.8%	19.3%	15.8%	12.3%	43.9%
Total		19.1%	15.7%	21.1%	13.7%	30.4%

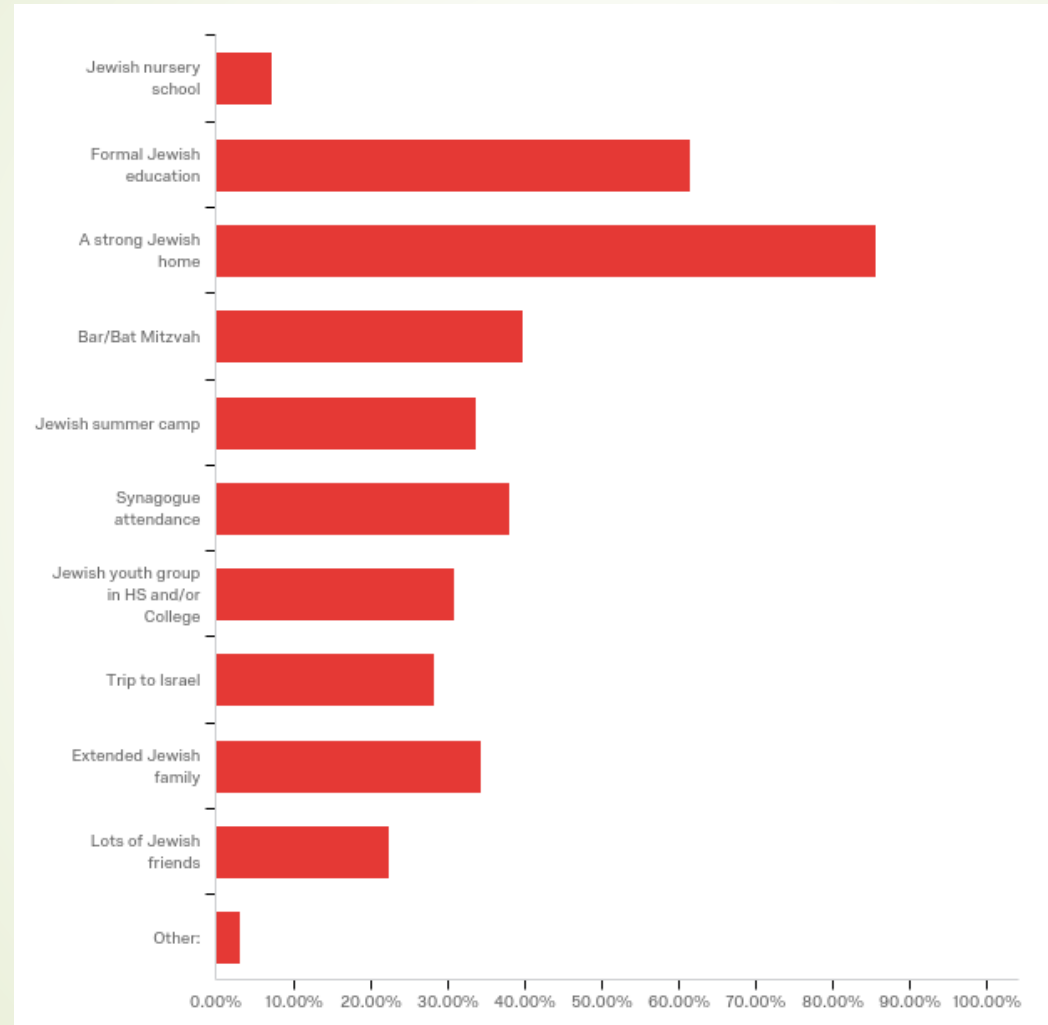
NOTE: Proof-of-concept survey participants responding to the prompt, "Please let us know how often you engage in the following practices:" and the resultant frequency responses for "light Shabbat candles on Friday night." Crosstab with responses to the prompt "How often did you observe the following rituals while growing up?" N=204.

I/We currently keep kosher at home

N=203		Never	Rarely	On Occasion	Often	Regularly
When growing up, we kept kosher at home:	Never	72.9%	3.8%	6.8%	6.0%	10.5%
	Rarely	35.7%	28.6%	21.4%	7.1%	7.1%
	On occasion	33.3%	13.3%	6.7%	13.3%	33.3%
	Often	25.0%	25.0%	0.0%	25.0%	25.0%
	Regularly	21.6%	8.1%	16.2%	8.1%	45.9%
Total		57.1%	7.4%	9.4%	7.4%	18.7%

NOTE: Proof-of-concept survey participants responding to the prompt, "Please let us know how often you engage in the following practices:" and the resultant frequency responses for "keeping kosher at home." Crosstab with responses to the prompt "How often did you observe the following rituals while growing up?" N=203

**Figure 5.2** – The most important things a child needs for a strong Jewish identity:



*NOTE: Data taken from the Small Jewish Community Project (advertised by direct community invitations and social media in the spring of 2017) internet-based self-administered survey. Participants responding to the prompt, “Please drag and drop the three-to-five most important things a Jewish child needs in order to obtain a strong Jewish identity.” N=275.*