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Executive Summary of Recent Research and Findings: The Small Jewish Community Project

Per the archives of the Berman Jewish Databank, since 1971 there have been eight nation-wide surveys of the American Jewish population; the last was performed by the Pew Research Center in 2013. In the same time frame, there have been over 200 surveys of medium and large local Jewish communities within 35 states. Each of these endeavors led to the discovery of new and significant knowledge about Jews in America. The drawback to these studies, however, is that there has been a marked neglect of the smaller Jewish communities (those with between 1,000 and 3,000 known Jewish individuals) throughout the United States. The result of this deficit is an incomplete picture of the American Jewish landscape. As far back as the mid-19th century, surveys of the American Jewish landscape have focused on the major Jewish centers. With regard to the most recent nation-wide survey, A Portrait of Jewish Americans, conducted in 2013 by the Pew Research Center, of the 4,884 cases geographically identifiable by zip code, only 140 cases (.0287%) correspond to a known and active small Jewish community.

My personal life journey and my research has taken me to small Jewish communities across the United States. It is my argument that those who live in small Jewish communities have different patterns of identity development and maintenance, community structure, and – most importantly – generational transmission of values than those who live in the large urban centers. Common sense dictates that, all else being equal, a Jewish family in Oak Ridge, Tennessee or Boise, Idaho would look and live differently than a Jewish family in New York, Los Angeles or Miami. It is no surprise, then, that the research points in that direction as well. Other researchers have found that, as with other groups, Jewish identity salience levels are higher among those Jewish communities which have a smaller share of the overall population than those communities which enjoy a larger share; this is true even among those individuals who do not engage regularly in religious practices. The net effect of small Jewish communities on American Jewry as a whole, therefore, could be greater than expected. If behaviors such as assimilation and out-migration are less likely among those who reside in small Jewish communities (due to a stronger salient identity), it could be that in 100 years' time the non-Orthodox Jewish world will be more accurately and strongly represented by Charleston, WV, Fort Collins, CO, and Charlottesville, VA, than Boston, MA, Washington, DC, or Los Angeles, CA.

In order to come to a better understanding of these small Jewish communities, their unique way of living out Judaism in real-time, and their current and future impact on American Jewry, I employed a mixed-methods strategy of exploration. My qualitative research took me to

three small Jewish communities in the United States: one in the Mountain West, one in the Midwest, and one in the Southeast. By way of comparison, I also visited one moderate-sized Jewish community in the Northeast. Due to the lack of extant qualitative data I launched a proof-of-concept internet-based survey directed specifically at those living in small Jewish communities. From February 9 to May 22, 2017 over 700 respondents from over thirty small Jewish communities across the United States.

The key concept explaining how small Jewish communities thrive for multiple generations I have coined, “thinking small”. The key concepts of thinking small can be classified into four groups and leveraged by parents in a community of virtually any size or tradition:

- 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.

Specific to small Jewish communities, the lack of resources reduces or eliminates the outsourcing of Jewish education, communal memory, and individual identity growth. Parents must be the teachers and mentors, living out Jewish values in front of the children of the community. Parents must also 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.

The strengths of these small Jewish communities include the following:

- An understanding that the community is not comprised of families, but that the community *is* the family.
- Parents understand that it is up to them to provide their children with a Jewish education without relying on a local professional class.
- The rabbi is not considered to be an employee of the community but the standard-bearer, the cheerleader for parents (and grandparents), and a permanent member of the community who guides the current and future *imagining* of the community.

While there is bound to be variance from one community to another, these behaviors stemming from *thinking small* seem to play a consistent part in the long-term viability of small Jewish communities across the country.

When Jewish values are successfully transmitted from generation to generation, the likelihood of community continuity is increased and its vitality strengthened. My key findings include observations of the mechanisms of the generational transmission of Jewish values:

1. In small Jewish communities, religio-ethnic boundaries are better kept and maintained through family and community than institutional education.
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.
3. Although Jewish parents and grandparents across America are terrified for the Jewish future, in small Jewish communities at least some of the children have been paying attention to the example of their parents. There are many 20-somethings in these communities today who have seen their parents teach and model the value of a Jewish future. The bottom-line is that they want Jewish homes and are willing to make life choices to increase the chances of having Jewish children and grandchildren.

It is my belief that *thinking small* is a strategy Jewish communities across the US could use to raise the odds of seeing more Jewish young people around the family Passover Seder table in the decades ahead. It is my intention and goal to place this strategy and its accompanying tools into the hands of as many Jewish parents and grandparents as possible.

The full dissertation is available here: <http://doi.org/10.18130/V3C361>