

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

Executive Summary for Survey Participants

Sam Richardson, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Virginia

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.

To help build the case for the importance of small Jewish communities in America – their historical significance, enduring vitality, and unique contributions to American Jewry – the Small Jewish Communities Project has launched a first-of-its kind survey specifically for residents of small Jewish communities to express their voice and make their presence known. The survey link is available from our web site at <http://www.smalljewishcommunities.org/>. Most people will be able to complete the survey in 10 - 15 minutes. Your assistance in this project is greatly appreciated.

Sam Richardson, Primary Investigator, [The Small Jewish Communities Project](http://www.smalljewishcommunities.org/).