Where I Belong:

Jewish Adults Ages 35-40 and Their Feelings of Belonging in the Philadelphia Jewish Community

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines experiences of belonging among Jewish adults ages 35–40 without children in the Philadelphia Jewish community. This cohort often falls between targeted programming for younger adults and family-oriented offerings. Seven participants, representing males and females and native Philadelphians and those who moved to the city from elsewhere, were recruited via purposive sampling and studied via surveys and semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using grounded theory, revealing four core themes: (1) Personal Connections and Welcoming, (2) Leadership Activation, (3) Alignment of Personal Values with Communal Leadership, and (4) Synagogue at the Core and at the Periphery. The research revealed that belonging emerges through intentional welcoming, sustained personal relationships, and leadership opportunities rather than age-specific programming. The 10/7 attack and its aftermath catalyzed deeper engagement for several participants, heightening the importance of values alignment, especially regarding Israel. Leadership activation proved a powerful inclusion mechanism, transforming participants into community co-creators. Recommendations include centralized event communication, targeted programming for ages 35–40, and institutional support for lay leadership and grassroots initiatives. Relational welcoming and meaningful leadership roles offer the most effective paths to enlarging the communal tent for this cohort.

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I've always belonged in my family: Mom, Dad, Todd, Dale, Tracy, Karol, Jack, Rocky; and the extended Van Wagner and Bogage clans. Go Birds.

During my freshman year at college, I met Eva Gruenberg in the lounge by the laundry room as she was reading *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam. Both the friendship and the book have stayed with me since, and form my foundational thinking on this research.

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הַרְחִיבִי ו מְקוֹם אָהֳלֵךְ וִירִיעוֹת מִשְׁכְּנוֹתַיִךְ יַטּוּ אַל־תַּחְשֹׂכִי הַאֲרִיכִי מֵיתָרַיִךְ וִיתֵדֹתַיִךְ תַּזְקִי׃

Enlarge the place of thy tent, And let them stretch forth the curtains of thy habitations, spare not; Lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes. (Isaiah 54:2)

Isaiah's charge to "enlarge the place of thy tent" serves as a metaphor for communal inclusion, with the call to actively welcome more people under the tent. The tent of Jewish communal life holds within it a series of lifecycle moments that welcome a particular family trajectory. From brit milah to b'nei mitzvah, weddings, and family engagement, Jewish institutions are organized around rhythms associated with raising children and guiding the next generation. Yet many Jewish adults move through adulthood along different paths—paths that do not have these traditional touchstones of engagement. Isaiah's call to "enlarge the place of thy tent" then raises a pressing question: Whose needs, voices, and experiences currently fall outside the tent of established Jewish communal structures?

There are a range of programs and offerings that serve post-college young adults and young families, ranging from Israel travel opportunities and social groups to family-focused holiday programs and Jewish children's books. Researchers have studied the post-college young adult and young families cohorts (Rosov Consulting, 2018; Martin, 2020). At the other end of the spectrum, "adult programming" in many institutions typically focuses on older adults or retirees (see *Embracing Aging and Thriving* in Durham, NC; Chandler, 2014).

Between these two well-served and researched populations lies a largely invisible cohort: Jewish adults ages 35–50 without children. These adults do not fit the post-college young-adult

category, yet they are not eligible for family-oriented programs, nor do they align with older-adult offerings. Despite the fact that 1.9 million American Jewish adults fall between ages 30 and 49 (Pew, 2021), little is known about how those without children navigate Jewish communal opportunities, where they find belonging, and what barriers limit their engagement. It is my contention that this cohort holds distinct experiences of identity, belonging, and communal connection that warrant focused study.

This thesis addresses this substantial gap by conducting qualitative case studies of Jewish adults ages 35–40 without children in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States. In this research, I employed a qualitative case study approach and used a combination of surveys and semi-structured interviews with seven participants selected through purposive sampling. I analyzed the data using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which allowed me to develop theories through coding the data and participant observation. My thinking was informed by social capital theory and theories of belonging and community engagement. Social capital theory (Putnam, 2000) highlights the centrality of trust, relationships, and interpersonal networks in community formation and shaping feelings of belonging. Belonging theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) emphasizes the emotional and psychological dimensions of feeling recognized, valued, and included within a community. When brought together, these frameworks help explain why belonging matters, how it forms, and how it influences individual decisions to participate or withdraw from communal life. They also clarify how the absence of social capital or belonging can create persistent barriers to engagement for those who fall outside standard institutional categories. In addition, I focused on a document and organizational review of major Philadelphia Jewish institutions to map the opportunities currently available for this demographic. Together,

these methods illuminate both individual experiences and structural patterns across the communal environment.

Following this introduction, I present scholarship to ground the experiences of belonging of Jewish adults ages 35-40 in Philadelphia. I begin with the concept of belonging—its significance, its psychological dimensions, and its relationship to communal participation. I discuss demographic trends in the United States and the American Jewish population, and then focus specifically on the Philadelphia Jewish community. I examine recent data on belonging in the post-10/7 environment, and then survey post-college Jewish life opportunities across the United States and review the Philadelphia Jewish communal landscape, with attention to organizations mentioned by research participants. Next, I present my methodological approach, including participant inclusion criteria, sampling processes, and participant profiles. The findings appear in the form of case studies and cross-case comparisons. I conclude with a discussion and recommendations for Jewish institutions seeking to strengthen their efforts toward inclusivity and belonging for this cohort. My hope is that this research will help Jewish communal leaders, educators, and institutions better understand the needs of this cohort and develop more inclusive strategies for engagement, leadership development, and communal belonging.

A Note on Terminology

Throughout this paper I use the terminology "without children" in place of the terms "childless" and "childfree." Research shows that these terms carry strong emotional connotations (Blackstone, 2014). "Childless" is often perceived as implying loss or deficiency, while "childfree" suggests a deliberate choice not to have children. Given the diversity within this cohort—and in an effort to avoid weighted implications—I use the neutral and inclusive phrase "without children" to describe participants in this study.

Literature Review

Belonging

Why Belonging Matters

Social scientists frequently describe "the need to belong" (NTB), or belongingness, as a fundamental human drive and related to feelings of connection to community and others. Baumeister and Leary (1995) characterize this need as the formation and maintenance of positive, enduring relationships—an impulse that extends beyond simple affiliation or intimacy. Community is the social collective through which belonging can occur; welcoming is a means of creating belonging. Belongingness has a positive emotional affect, leading to the experience of positive emotions of the individual, and deprivation of belongingness has a negative impact on both emotional and physical health. Positive social relationships help individuals get through times of chronic stress and contribute to overall happiness (Gardner & Diekman, 2000).

Allen (2020) emphasizes the essential nature of belonging by comparing it to the human need for water. Belonging is an evaluation of how one feels within one's relationships and one's environment. It encompasses the quality and meaning of social connections and the degree of satisfaction they provide (p. 2). This perception is not static. A person's sense of belonging shifts over time in response to internal changes or external circumstances.

Hagerty et al. (1992) similarly highlights the relational dimension of belonging. This scholarship notes that belonging is shaped by whether an individual feels recognized as an integral part of a system or environment, and by how they understand their place within it.

These frameworks, together, underscore that belonging is not merely a social preference but a core component of human flourishing. For communities—including Jewish communities—

understanding what drives or hinders belonging is essential for fostering participation, leadership, and long-term engagement.

Belonging in America

Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) famously argued that civic and communal participation in the United States has declined since the mid-twentieth century. He described a shift from collective, relationship-building activities—such as bowling leagues—to more solitary forms of participation, a trend that signaled decreasing social capital across American society.

More recent research offers a nuanced picture of American belonging. In *The Belonging Barometer: The State of Belonging in America* (Revised Edition, 2024), the organization Over Zero reported that 57% of Americans experience "friend belonging," a sense of belonging with their closest friends, which suggests that the majority of Americans feel some form of belonging, though this belonging may differ from previous civic-focused belonging. Over Zero found that 38% of Americans experience friend ambiguity, a state of uncertainty about whether they belong with their friends, and 6% feel friend exclusion, a clear sense of being rejected by friends. Their findings highlighted that both friend and family belonging strongly correlate with overall life satisfaction (Over Zero, 2024).

When analyzed by religious identity, Jewish participants demonstrated the highest level of friend belonging at 67%, compared with 61% among Protestants—the next highest group. Generational differences also emerged: 77% of Millennials reported either ambiguity or exclusion in their sense of local belonging, compared with 73% of Gen X and 72% of Boomers. The study further found that higher levels of civic engagement—such as participation in worship spaces, parent-teacher associations, youth coaching, or similar community activities—increased feelings of local belonging by 17% (Over Zero, 2024, *Supplemental Materials*).

This research illustrates that belonging in contemporary America is shaped by multiple factors, including social networks, Generation-specific dynamics, and patterns of civic participation. These dynamics form an important backdrop for understanding the experiences of Jewish adults ages 35–40 without children, whose relationship to Jewish communal life may mirror broader national trends while also reflecting the unique contours of Jewish engagement.

Jewish Engagement and Belonging

Research consistently shows that early Jewish socialization has a profound impact on adult engagement and belonging. Cohen & Veinstein (2011) found that individuals who grew up with strong Jewish social networks—such as having two Jewish parents or Jewish friends in high school—were more likely to maintain a strong Jewish identity in adulthood. This is significant given that, across the United States, religious affiliation tends to decline in young adulthood, though the trend is less pronounced among those who become parents (Uecker et al., 2007).

Patterns of organizational involvement further illuminate the landscape of Jewish engagement. Sheskin and Kotler-Berkowitz (2007) reported that Jews are equally likely to hold membership in one Jewish organization as they are to multiple organizations. Twenty-eight percent belonged to two or more Jewish institutions, such as synagogues, JCCs, or other cultural organizations. Institutional membership also correlated strongly with other aspects of Jewish life—including denominational identity, philanthropy, volunteerism, attitudes toward Jewishness, Israel travel, and social networks—suggesting a polarized population in terms of Jewish connectivity.

Sheskin and Kotler-Berkowitz (2007) observed a modest relationship between age and belonging, with income, household composition, and marital status serving as stronger predictors of institutional membership. This is relevant for Jewish adults 35-40 without children, who may

not meet these markers of institutional engagement, and have, as I posit, heretofore fallen through the gap in communal life.

Cohen and Kelman (2008) noted that unmarried Jews tended to be less institutionally engaged than those in-married Jews. However, this lower level of affiliation did not indicate a lack of Jewish identity. Rather, they found that "single Jews express Jewish pride in many different ways… are widely and deeply connected to Jewish friends, and… express keen interest in self-directed ways of expressing and exploring their Jewish identities" (p. 3).

Research supports a distinction between institutional engagement and personal Jewish identity. A 2013 study of Birthright Israel applicants (ages 18–26) found that stronger Jewish backgrounds correlated with greater participation in Jewish ritual and communal events, while disengagement was more likely among young adults with weaker backgrounds and no children (Shain et al., 2013). Gender differences also appeared: women tended to be more Jewishly involved than men, a pattern consistent with broader American religious participation (Wright et al., 2025).

Generational trends further highlight shifting patterns of affiliation. Steven M. Cohen (2010) argued that this reflects a broader cultural shift toward autonomy, creativity, and individualized Jewish expression:

> In response to their alienation from conventional Jewish institutions, younger Jews seek creative autonomy, often seeing themselves as social entrepreneurs creating Jewish life and culture for those who share their tastes and interests. In response to the perception of blandness in the older generation, they are keen on promoting diversity in people and cultural elements. In response to the sense of coercion around such matters as Israel and in-marriage, they seek to act

> nonjudgmentally, to allow each person's search for Jewish meaning to determine the value of their actions. And in response to divisiveness in the Jewish community, they abjure boundaries to the participation of non-Jews, they transcend denominational identities, intentionally integrate cultural elements from outside of Jewish life, and display an interest in conducting some of their Jewish lives in non-Jewish spaces, using the facilities of churches for prayer, or cafés for Purim parties, or concert halls for musical performances.

Cohen argues that younger Jews are integrating diverse cultural elements and prioritizing self-directed spiritual meaning.

Cohen and Kelman (2008) directly addressed the challenges faced by single young adults in finding a place in the institutional Jewish landscape, noting that Jewish institutions are often designed around the needs and rhythms of conventional family life. As they wrote, when younger adults encounter institutions populated primarily by married, older, or more affluent Jews, it is unsurprising that they may find such spaces less appealing Yet this demographic, despite being "demographically disenfranchised," remains deeply engaged in Jewish life—albeit on their own terms (Cohen & Kelman, 2007).

A 2020 study focusing on American Jews without children (ages 22–40) echoed these findings. Participants expressed a strong preference for informal, relational Jewish gatherings over institutional settings (Atlantic57, 2020). The study also pointed to significant openness to future Jewish engagement:

- Sixty-four percent reported nostalgia for their Jewish upbringing,
- eighty-one percent enjoyed participating in Jewish-related activities, and
- many expressed a desire for renewed community connection.

These findings highlight both the challenges and the possibilities for engaging Jews who feel outside the traditional family-centered model of institutional life. This shift toward informal and culturally oriented engagement is reflected in Keysar's (2018) observation of the rise of secular and cultural Jewish communities that emphasize social connection, arts, media, and heritage rather than formal religious participation.

David Cygielman (2024), founder of Moishe House (now part of Mem Global), emphasizes precisely this point:

> As we simultaneously battle the loneliness epidemic and rising antisemitism, we need more opportunities and environments where young Jewish adults can be in community. Whether it's through retreats, living with friends as roommates, volunteer opportunities, classes or Shabbat meals, providing more Jewish spaces to come together will help young Jewish adults feel connected to a community, more comfortable in their own skin and secure in their Jewish identities.

Demographic Information

Population Data: Trends in Marriage and Fertility

Over the past several decades, there has been a marked shift in the United States in patterns of marriage and childbearing. I include a review of these shifts here, as they provide context for the growth of the number of Jewish adults without children in their late 30s, as well as how that population has changed over time. According to the US Census Bureau, the median age at first marriage in 1990 was 24 for women and 26 for men. By 2010, it had risen to approximately 26 for women and 28 for men, and by 2024, it had reached 28.5 for women and 30 for men (United States Census Bureau, 2024). There has been a related narrowing in the number of single Americans compared to the number of married Americans. In 1950, there were

37.1 million more married Americans than unmarried Americans. By 2023, that gap had decreased to 4.3 (United States Census Bureau, 2023).

Fertility patterns have shifted as well. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported a 14% decline in the total number of births in the United States between 1990 and 2023 (Driscoll, 2025). The median age at which women give birth has also risen. In 1990, the median age of mothers was 27; by 2019, it had increased to 30 (Morse, 2022). These trends in delayed marriage and delayed childbearing provide an important demographic backdrop for understanding the experiences of adults whose lives do not follow traditional family timelines, including the cohort at the center of this study.

Jewish American Demographics and Psychographics

The American Jewish Population Project (AJPP) estimated in 2020 that there were approximately six million Jewish adults in the United States, including 4.9 million who identify their religion as Jewish and 1.2 million who identify as Jews of no religion. The Jewish child population was estimated at 1.6 million (Saxe, 2021). Within the adult population, 13% were between the ages of 35-44, slightly lower than the 16% general American population. Notably, the Jewish community has a comparatively larger share of older adults: 19% of Jewish adults are between 55-64, compared with 17% of the general population; and 16% are between 65-74, compared with 13% nationally (Saxe, 2021).

Marriage and fertility patterns also show notable distinctions. Pew (2021) found that 59% of American Jewish adults are married and an additional 7% live with a partner, though the survey did not provide an age-specific breakdown for these categories. In terms of fertility, Jewish women are less likely than American women overall to have children. Among women aged 18–39, 54% of Jewish women have no children compared with 44% of American women.

Among women aged 40–59, the gap widens: 20% of Jewish women remain without children, compared with 10% of American women (Pew, 2021).

Despite these demographic differences, the desire for Jewish communal connection remains strong. Over 70% of American Jewish adults agree that being a part of a Jewish community is essential to their Jewish identity (Pew, 2021). Among adults aged 30–49, 21% report that all or most of their friends are Jewish, while 45% report that some of their friends are Jewish (Pew, 2021). Additionally, 85% of Jews in this age group report feeling either a great deal or some sense of belonging to the Jewish people (Pew, 2021).

Population Data: The Philadelphia Jewish Community

The Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia's 2019 population study estimated that the greater five-county region is home to 308,700 Jewish adults, including 142,100 within the City of Philadelphia itself (Marker & Steiger, 2020). Among these adults, 31% are between the ages of 25-39, and 13% are between the ages of 40 to 54, indicating a substantial young and midlife population within the metropolitan area.

Marriage patterns in Philadelphia differ from national Jewish trends. Thirty-two percent of Jewish adults in the region are single, 13% live with a partner, and 38% are married—the last figure being twenty-one percentage points lower than the nationwide marriage rate for Jewish adults reported in the Pew survey (Marker and Steiger, 2020). The 2019 study did not distinguish between households with children and those without, making it difficult to determine the proportion of Philadelphia adults who share the demographic profile at the center of this thesis.

Educational attainment in Philadelphia is comparatively high. The survey found that 31% of Jewish Philadelphians hold a college degree and 45% hold a graduate degree, both higher than national Jewish percentages (Marker & Steiger, 2020).

Regarding Jewish institutional engagement, 24% of Jewish households in the five-county region maintain synagogue memberships. Membership varies by age: 14% of adults under forty belong to a synagogue, compared with 25% of adults aged forty to sixty-four (Marker & Steiger, 2020). The study also identified a notable group that participates in synagogue events without holding formal membership: 17% of adults ages 18–39 and 11% of adults ages 40–64 fall into this category (Marker & Steiger, 2020). The study found a generational gap in denominational affiliation: 58% of Jewish adults ages 18–39 do not identify with any denomination, compared with 33% of adults aged 65 and older (Marker & Steiger, 2020).

As mirrored in national research, Philadelphia-area families who were dues-paying synagogue members were far more likely to send their children to Jewish summer camps. While 15% of Jewish families overall sent children to camp, that figure rose to 42% among synagogue-member families (Marker & Steiger, 2020).

Patterns of cultural, educational, and social participation further illuminate forms of engagement. Among respondents ages 18-39, 42% attended Jewish cultural events in the past year, 28% attended High Holiday services, and 20% attended a Jewish class or lecture (Marker & Steiger, 2020). These data suggest that while formal affiliation among younger adults is lower, informal and cultural forms of engagement remain meaningful modes of connection.

The Surge: The Impact of 10/7 on Jewish Engagement

A March 2024 study by the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) documented a marked rise in Jewish engagement following the 10/7 terror attack in Israel and its aftermath. According to the study, 43% of American Jews either sought to increase or had already increased their engagement with Jewish life immediately following the 10/7 attack. JFNA referred to those who had previously been “less than very engaged” but were now seeking greater involvement as

"the Surge." This group represented approximately 30% of the Jewish community and was visible across all demographic categories, with especially strong growth among "young and single" adults and those in "mid-life" (Manchester, 2024).

A key finding of the study was that individuals within the Surge tended to have fewer Jewish friends than those who were already engaged prior to 10/7. Their heightened interest in Jewish life was expressed primarily through social connections: building friendships with other Jews, participating in cultural and communal activities, and seeking spaces where they felt safe, understood, and connected (Manchester, 2024). Many were looking for community not through formal institutional membership, but through relational entry points that could reduce isolation and affirm belonging.

A follow-up study conducted in March 2025 found that 72% of those categorized as part of the Surge continued to engage Jewishly at higher levels than before 10/7 (JFNA, 2025). The follow-up identified three primary modes of sustained engagement: (a) spending time with Jewish friends, (b) attending programs at local synagogues, and (c) participating in online communities such as WhatsApp groups and social media forums. These modes of engagement suggest that belonging was experienced as both social and spatial—embodied in in-person gatherings and sustained through digital networks.

The follow-up study also highlighted the ongoing challenges faced by young adults, particularly those ages 18–34 without children. This demographic remained steady at 21% of the Surge. Respondents described wanting Jewish spaces where they could feel accepted without political pressure and where they could access reliable information about Israel and the war. Many reported feeling isolated from their non-Jewish peers, noting that their perspectives on Israel often differed significantly from those of their social circles. The report emphasized that,

although Jewish communities and institutions frequently offer programs for this demographic, many young adults are unaware of these opportunities or do not find them easily accessible (JFNA, 2025).

Other Jewish institutions also reported increased engagement. Hillel directors and Jewish day schools noted higher participation and stronger expressions of Jewish identity on their campuses (Gross, 2025). A 2025 UJA-Federation of New York study underscored this growing desire for connection, reporting that 66% of Jewish adults ages 30–49 expressed a wish to have more Jewish friends.

Taken together, these studies illustrate a significant cultural moment: the experience of crisis intensified many Jews' desire for community, connection, and belonging. For adults in their mid-thirties to mid-forties without children—those who are the focus of this thesis—this shift was particularly relevant. Their increased interest in finding Jewish peers, informal spaces of connection, and communal networks may offer important insights into what belonging means for this cohort and how Jewish institutions might better meet their needs in the years ahead.

The Jewish Landscape for Post-College American Jews

Across the United States, a wide network of organizations serves Jewish adults in the years after college, ranging from local grassroots initiatives to large national programs. Although their missions and models vary, most of these organizations concentrate on individuals in their twenties and early thirties, with relatively few extending their focus into the late thirties and early forties. This section outlines several of the most widely recognized offerings to provide context for what exists beyond Philadelphia and to clarify the age ranges they are designed to serve.

Table 1 below presents a broad survey of some of the national and international organizations that exist to serve Jewish adults, with a focus on the organization's age range and

activities. Table 2 covers similar data, with a focus on organizations serving Jewish adults within a geographically-bound community. This information was gathered from the organizations' respective websites.

Table 1

National and International Organizations Serving Young Jewish Adults

Organization Name and Parent Organization, if Applicable	Target Age Group	Brief Description of Organization
JNFuture, part of Jewish National Fund	20s and 30s	Gathers young Zionist philanthropists
OneTable	20s and 30s	Funds Shabbat dinners and creates Shabbat dinner communities
Trybal Gatherings	20s and 30s	Creates immersive experiences in a "socially Jewish context"
Moishe House, Moishe House Without Walls, Base, Camp Nai Nai Nai, and Jewish Learning Collaborative, all part of Mem Global	20s and 30s, with House residents 32 and under	Creates and supports peer-led communities and learning opportunities

Table 2

Mid-Atlantic Organizations Serving Young Jewish Adults

Organization Name and Location	Target Age Group	Brief Description of Organization
The Den Collective, Washington, DC and Northern Virginia	20s, 30s, and 40s	Creates Jewish experiences of learning and belonging with rabbinic mentors
GatherDC, Washington, DC metro area	20s and 30s	Works to connect Jewish adults to local Jewish life

Manhattan Jewish Experience, New York City	20s and 30s	Runs a range of programming, including classes, Shabbat and holiday programs, retreats, and parties
Aviv, Manhattan	20s and 30s	Runs Shabbat and holiday programs as part of B'nai Jeshurun synagogue

The Philadelphia Jewish Landscape for Post-College Jews

In the Philadelphia area, a range of Jewish organizations serve post-college Jewish adults. Some are rooted in synagogues, others function as independent communal groups, and many sit somewhere in between. As several participants in this study noted, individuals often move fluidly across these settings—attending a synagogue-based social group without joining the synagogue itself, or participating in communal Shabbat dinners without identifying with a particular denomination. In December 2025 the *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent* covered a new social group started by Stacey Lasky for Jewish adults 40-65. As the "Just Jewish Adults" group started after my study was concluded, it was not referenced by participants, however, its initiation demonstrates the need I discuss in this paper.

This section highlights the Philadelphia organizations mentioned by two or more case study participants, organized first by communal initiatives and then by synagogues and related institutions. This information was gathered from the organizations' websites and news coverage in the *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*.

Non-Synagogue Communal Organizations

Tribe 12. Tribe 12 describes its mission as connecting "people in their 20s and 30s to Jewish life and community in Philadelphia today so they will choose to stay connected tomorrow." Originally founded as "The Collaborative" in the early 2000s by philanthropist

Annabel Lindy, it has since developed into an independent organization housed at the Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History. Funded by private foundations, business sponsors, and the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, Tribe 12 reaches more than 4,000 individuals annually.

The organization serves adults ages 21–40. Participants may continue attending through the day of their 41st birthday, and Tribe 12 recently added quarterly programming for those who have "aged out" (over 40) or "staged out" (through becoming parents). Offerings include recurring social events—such as happy hours, Shabbat dinners, and board game nights—along with time-limited cohorts focused on specific demographics, including interfaith couples. A central feature is its network of "tribes," small groups built around shared interests or identities (for example, a foodie tribe or a queer tribe). Tribe 12 also runs a matchmaking program with dedicated matchmakers and frequent singles events.

The Chevra. The Chevra describes itself as a community for "Young Professionals & Grad Students" that blends social, cultural, educational, spiritual, and Israel-related programming. Though operated by an Orthodox rabbi and rebbetzin who also lead a nearby outreach-focused synagogue, the organization is explicitly open to all backgrounds. It does not publicly define an age range, but its audiences generally align with other young-adult initiatives.

The Chevra is supported by private philanthropic families, the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, and Olami, an Orthodox outreach organization. Its programming includes large holiday parties, weekly happy hours, Jewish learning sessions, volunteer opportunities, and social events.

Moishe House Philadelphia. Moishe House Philadelphia provides peer-led Jewish community for "young professionals (22–30)" through social gatherings, Shabbat and holiday

events, and occasional larger celebrations such as Purim and Hanukkah parties. Like all Moishe Houses, the model relies on resident hosts who commit to running monthly programs and building an inclusive environment for peers in their age cohort.

Synagogues and Related Organizations

Mamash Chabad (Mamash). Mamash is a Chabad-run initiative that focuses on creating Jewish experiences for young professionals in Center City. Its offerings include Shabbat cooking classes, Shabbat meals, concerts, Jewish learning sessions, and a variety of social events. Mamash describes its Friday-night gatherings as drawing "50+ guests every week," positioning itself as a bridge between the Jewish life many participants experienced in college and the identity-building they undertake as young adults in the professional world. The organization also runs dedicated programming for graduate students. Mamash was founded by the rabbi and rebbetzin in 2010, and in 2019 moved into a larger building that can seat up to 200 people for meals, reflecting the rapid growth of its community.

South Philadelphia Shtiebel (Shtiebel). The South Philadelphia Shtiebel was founded in 2019 by Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter, ordained by Yeshivat Maharat. Its website describes the community as "a center for Jewish gathering, buzzing with spirited Jewish learning, kids playing, new friendships forming, and lively prayer services." The Shtiebel identifies as an inclusive modern Orthodox community and is known for its "tri-chitzah," a three-section sanctuary that creates space for men, women, and non-binary individuals. In addition to regular prayer services and weekly kiddush meals, the Shtiebel offers adult education, family programming, and frequent holiday gatherings. The community is notably intergenerational but includes a substantial contingent of young adults. A 2025 *Jewish Exponent* article reported that more than

twenty babies were born to members between September 2024 and July 2025, underscoring both rapid growth and high levels of participation.

Beth Zion Beth Israel (BZBI). BZBI is a Conservative synagogue located in Center City. Its mission describes a vision of members who are "uplifted spiritually, connected socially, engaged intellectually, [and] empowered as members and leaders." The community serves a wide range of age groups, and in fall 2025 BZBI initiated a national search for a new senior rabbi. Although BZBI maintains a traditional synagogue structure, its programs—ranging from adult classes to family services—draw young adult participants, especially those living in nearby neighborhoods.

Society Hill Synagogue (Society Hill). Society Hill Synagogue is an unaffiliated congregation located in the historic Society Hill neighborhood. Its clergy include Rabbi Nathan Kamesar (ordained at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College) and Hazzan Jessi Roemer (ordained by ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal). Although unaffiliated, the synagogue uses prayerbooks published by the Conservative movement.

The congregation has grown significantly, expanding from 275 families to more than 400 families in the first half of the 2020s. Society Hill maintains an active "Young Friends" group for members and friends in their 20s and 30s. Co-chaired by two synagogue members, the group hosts social programming such as Sukkot potlucks, designated Young Friends tables at synagogue dinners, and local outings like brewery meet-ups. For many young adults in Center City, Young Friends provides a way to develop relationships and explore Jewish life without immediately committing to full synagogue membership.

Current Study

The purpose of the case studies featured in this thesis is to explore how Jewish adults ages 35–40 without children in Philadelphia experience belonging in local Jewish communal spaces. This population falls between well-supported programmatic structures for young adults in their twenties and early thirties and the family-centered programming for adults raising children. As a result, they often occupy an ambiguous communal space.

For the purposes of this study, the central phenomenon is defined as the perception of belonging—that is, how individuals understand, construct, and assess their inclusion, connection, and identity within Philadelphia's Jewish communal landscape. This definition encompasses emotional experiences, patterns of engagement, perceived invitations or barriers to participation, and the ways Jewish adults without children interpret their place (or lack thereof) in existing communal structures.

Methodological Approach

Participant Criteria and Recruitment

In designing the study, I sought participants who demonstrated at least some inclination toward Jewish involvement as demonstrated through past participation or interest, and who currently reside in the greater Philadelphia area. Restricting the sample geographically allowed the project to focus closely on one specific communal ecosystem and, potentially, to offer practical recommendations for similar metropolitan contexts.

Using purposeful sampling (Patton, 1987), I initially aimed to recruit individuals in two contrasting groups:

(a) adults native to the Philadelphia area, and

(b) adults who had moved to Philadelphia from elsewhere.

My hypothesis was that native Philadelphians might have stronger local family or friend networks that could shape their sense of belonging, while transplants might approach community engagement more intentionally, perhaps resulting in greater familiarity with available Jewish offerings. However, once data collection was underway, these distinctions did not ultimately produce meaningful analytic differences. For that reason, the native/transplant distinction is not carried forward in the findings or analysis.

A similar methodological decision applied to my planned comparison between:

(a) partnered participants and

(b) single participants.

Although I hypothesized that relationship status might influence patterns of engagement, recruitment did not yield sufficient partnered participants for meaningful comparison. One participant was partnered, and their experience contributes to the broader analysis, but "partnered vs. single" does not appear as a thematic category.

While not primary selection criteria, I sought variation across gender, denominational background, halachic observance, and Jewish upbringing (including both Jews-by-birth and Jews-by-choice) to capture a fuller range of experience.

I intended to recruit ages 35-45, however I was only able to recruit ages 35-40. The study that follows will be about participants between the ages of 35-40.

I recruited participants through a combination of direct outreach, referrals from Jewish communal professionals, and a public post on the "Jews in Center City" Facebook group:

- one participant was recruited through a personal social connection;
- one through a recommendation from Danielle Selber, matchmaker at Tribe 12;
- two through the communications manager at Society Hill Synagogue, LilyFish Gomberg;

- and three through a Facebook group post.

This recruitment strategy yielded seven participants, all of whom engaged meaningfully with questions of navigation, belonging, and communal life.

Participant Profiles

The study includes seven participants between the ages of 35 and 40. Although recruitment was open to adults up to age 45, no individuals over 40 responded to the invitation. Six participants were single, and one was partnered. Three grew up in the Greater Philadelphia or South Jersey area, and four were raised elsewhere in the United States. Most of the transplants had lived in Philadelphia for approximately a decade, with one having arrived only two years prior to the interview.

Participants lived primarily in Center City neighborhoods—including Old City, Rittenhouse, and East Passyunk—with one participant residing in Northwest Philadelphia. Their professional backgrounds varied widely, spanning marketing, philanthropy, data science, teaching, behavioral therapy, and occupational therapy. Levels of engagement in non-Jewish local organizations differed as well: several participants took part in fitness or arts-based activities (such as yoga, sports clubs, or band participation), while others reported no involvement in non-Jewish community groups.

Table 3

Participant Data Chart, Basic Demographics and Participant Engagements

Name	Time in Philadelphia	Gender	Age	Relationship Status	Professional field	Non-Jewish local engagement	Past Jewish engagement	Current Philadelphia Jewish engagement
Brian	2 years	M	36	Single	Behavioral therapy	none	Synagogues	Tribe 12, the Chevra, Old City Jewish Arts Center, Mamash, Sthiebel
Lauren	9 years	F	36	Single	Data science	none	Hillel; Birthright Israel; music	Shtiebel, Mamash, Mikveh Israel
Eli	12 years	M	35	Single	Teaching	Yoga; music group	Moishe House	Tribe 12, Kol Tzedek, Mt. Airy House Minyan
Michelle	Native	F	35	Single	Marketing	Sports club; social group	Hillel	Tribe 12, Mamash
Aliza	Native	F	40	Partnered	Philanthropy	Nonprofit org. leadership	USY	BZBI, local advocacy group
Casey	10 years	F	37	Single	Marketing	none	Camp, day school, Tribe 12, Moishe House, synagogue	Society Hill
Rita	Native	F	39	Single	Occupational therapy	Yoga	Lay-led Jewish group	Society Hill

Participants reported a broad range of past Jewish involvement, from relatively minimal to robust. Four participants described only a single form of past engagement—such as synagogue/chevruah participation, college-based Hillel involvement, or Moishe House. Among the remaining three, two spent at least a year in Israel after college. One participant attended both Jewish day school and Jewish summer camp. Several mentioned Jewish engagement during their university years, including programs such as Hillel, Jewish Heritage Program, Jewish a cappella groups, Jewish sororities, and Birthright Israel.

Survey Questions

After agreeing to participate in the study, interviewees received an online survey that collected both descriptive background information and preliminary data on patterns of engagement. The survey first asked participants to identify their involvement with Jewish and non-Jewish organizations and to describe the nature of that involvement:

- What Jewish organizations are you currently involved with, and what does this involvement look like?
- How did you find out about the above organizations?
- What non-Jewish local organizations are you involved in? What does your involvement look like?
- What has your *past* Jewish involvement looked like?

The survey then gathered relevant biographical information:

- Where do you live now?
- How long have you lived in the Philadelphia area?
- Where did you grow up?
- Current relationship status

- What is your age?
- What type of work do you do?

These questions provided the foundational demographic and experiential context needed to guide the subsequent in-depth interviews.

Interview Questions

The long-format semi-structured interviews expanded upon the survey responses and were designed to elicit a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, decision-making processes, and perceptions of belonging. Each interview included individualized follow-up questions based on the information provided in the survey:

- I noticed that you are involved with X organization in Y ways. Can you tell me the story of how you got involved with that organization, and tell me a little about your involvement?
- In the Jewish world, how do you find out about events and programs?
- How do you decide what to attend? To get involved in?
- Do you find that there are events and things of interest for you, given your age and stage of life?

In addition to these targeted questions, the interviews included a range of probes and prompts to encourage elaboration and capture the nuance of each participant's experience:

- Can you expand on that?
- I noticed you alluded to feeling X in this community/organization. Can you tell me more about that?
- Are there ways that you feel part of the community?
- Are there ways that you feel you are *not* part of the community?

- I noticed X, can you tell me more about that?
- How did that make you feel?
- What was that experience like for you? Did that lead to anything else?
- Are there ways in which your age has impacted this? Are there ways in which your life stage has impacted this?
- Why do you think that is?
- How did you find out about that?
- What do you think is missing?

This flexible, conversational structure allowed interviews to follow the natural flow of each participant's story while still generating comparable data across the sample. The probes also facilitated the emergence of unexpected themes, which later informed the coding and analysis.

Analysis

I analyzed the interview data using grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which allowed themes to emerge from participants' narratives rather than from a predetermined framework. I began with *open coding*, reviewing each transcript line by line and noting recurring language, descriptions of experience, and emotional cues related to belonging, exclusion, and navigation of Jewish communal life. As patterns accumulated, I shifted to *focused coding*, grouping related ideas and tracing the relationships among them. This stage highlighted where participants' experiences converged, where they diverged, and how these distinctions shaped their sense of Jewish connection.

Through *axial coding*, I examined how these categories interacted with broader dynamics such as denominational culture, peer networks, organizational structure, and life stage. Outliers and disconfirming evidence were incorporated into the analysis to avoid overgeneralization and

to preserve the complexity of individual experiences. Following grounded theory conventions, I completed all interviews and initial coding before conducting the literature review, ensuring that participant voices directed the formation of core themes.

After an iterative review of my data, I identified common patterns and themes that served as analytical codes used to describe the emergent phenomena associated with my research questions and the experiences of my participants. I applied the codes, looking for disconfirming evidence, before conducting my final analysis, which produced four codes, which I define below:

- *Personal Connections and Welcoming*: This code describes participants' navigation of and participation in Jewish communal experiences.
- *Leadership Activation*: This code describes participants' formal or informal engagement in leadership positions.
- *Alignment of Personal Values with Communal Leadership*: This code describes alignment between their values and the organizations with which they are engaged.
- *Synagogue at the Core and at the Periphery*: This code describes the participants' relationship to organized synagogue life.

The final thematic framework presented in this study therefore reflects an inductive process shaped directly by the participants' accounts and later situated within wider sociological research on belonging and Jewish communal engagement.

Positionality Statement

My interest in this topic is shaped by my own experience as a Jewish adult without children who has spent much of my thirties navigating Jewish communal spaces in several regions. As I moved from a smaller Jewish community to Durham, North Carolina, I intentionally chose a city with a Moishe House, assuming it signaled a strong environment for

young Jewish adults. Although I met warm and thoughtful people, I found that much of the programming—often centered on movie nights and breweries—did not align with my interests, and I quickly aged out of Moishe House's demographic. I eventually found more meaningful connection through a monthly chavurah-style Kabbalat Shabbat and potluck at the local Conservative synagogue, where shared learning and repeated encounters allowed relationships to develop across age and life stage.

In 2020, I moved to Philadelphia and became involved with the South Philadelphia Shtiebel, first through online learning and later through in-person gatherings. The Shtiebel's culture of multigenerational learning and prayer enabled relationships to form organically, independent of demographic categories. During the same period, I attended several Tribe 12 programs, appreciating the Shabbat dinners but gradually sensing that I was aging out of their offerings as well. I briefly explored the Federation's young-adult division, but because the programming appeared to center on fundraising—and because I was a financially limited rabbinical student—I did not pursue it further.

Now, as I approach forty and live in Central Jersey, I again find myself outside the primary categories around which most programming is organized: young families on one end and seniors on the other. Synagogues in my area tend to be populated either by individuals decades older than I am or by peers whose primary engagement centers on their children. Standing outside both groups, I often wonder where someone in my stage of life is meant to locate belonging, visibility, and community.

Although these reflections do not determine the findings of this study, they shape my sensitivity to how adults in this demographic encounter Jewish communal structures. They also inform my motivation to understand whether others share similar experiences and how Jewish

institutions might more intentionally support adults navigating Jewish life in the years after young-adult programming but before family-centered engagement becomes the typical entry point.

My thinking on community and engagement is informed by Jim Ward, my manager at Starbucks, who would observe the staff interactions with customers from the doorway to the backroom. He took me aside one shift and taught me his Bob-Not-Bob philosophy.

The teaching goes like this: Imagine a line with several people in it. The first person in the line is Bob; the staff knows Bob and is excited to see him. “Bob! Good morning! I already put in your order for the grande whole milk scooped-foam cappuccino,” they say, “Are you still headed to the beach this weekend?”. Bob responds, and goes to get his drink.

The next customer is Not-Bob. “Good morning,” says the staff, “What can I get for you today?”. The enthusiasm of the Bob-interaction is absent; the customer feels that they are decidedly Not-Bob. The difference is not ill intention; it is simply the difference between someone who felt known and someone who did not.

My hope is that through this research, the Jewish adults without children in our communities are embraced as Bobs (or Mikes, or Shiras, or Jens), and *not* the Not-Bobs that some of us may feel like now. The tent of Jewish community is wide, and adults in their late thirties and forties need not stand at its edges. With intentional communication, age-appropriate programming, and opportunities for leadership, they can be welcomed as full participants whose presence is noticed, valued, and embraced.

Summary of Interview Results

Case Studies

Brian: The Super-Involved Participant

Context and Background. Brian, 36 years old, moved to Philadelphia shortly before 10/7. After years of study, he converted to Judaism and is now involved in a wide range of Jewish organizations, including the Chevra, Tribe 12, South Philadelphia Shtiebel, Old City Jewish Arts Center, and Mamash Chabad.

Experience of Jewish Life in Philadelphia. Brian participates actively in both Jewish social organizations and synagogues. He primarily learns about events through word of mouth and social media, highlighting the importance of personal connections:

> The Facebook algorithm… I think I went to a Hanukkah event in 2023 for the Chevra. And from there, I talked to people. And they told me… there is a snowball effect where they just told me all the events that are going on for Jewish young adults in Philadelphia, and that was it.

Over time, repeated attendance has helped him build friendships, particularly through Tribe 12:

> It just came from repeated attendance, to be honest, and just seeing people, growing familiar with people, and having conversations. I do everything from the social gatherings to the Shabbat dinners to also the classes they have. The classes really kind of have that sort of continuity of getting to know people. It kind of helps that pretty much any night of the week, I can rely on there being some sort of event that I can go to that is subsidized in some way.

Brian's leadership in the Jews-by-choice cohort at Tribe 12 emerged through a direct invitation from the Executive Director, Rabbi Megan GoldMarche: "Rabbi Megan knew I was a Jew-by-

choice, and she wanted this to be a cohort within the group. She discussed it and asked if I could be a leader in that way." Brian's leadership activation led to his deepening involvement in the organization.

At the Chevra, an Orthodox organization, Brian is conscious of occupying multiple marginal positions, both as a convert and as a gay man:

> I agree more [with their] positions on Israel. However, I definitely feel like, as somebody who is openly gay, a little bit on the outside, but not profoundly so. Not the way some people might expect. I have made friends there as well. But I am also more cautious about my status there as a convert and somebody who is openly gay.

Rather than seeking a single "perfect" community, Brian has learned to engage different spaces for different needs, underscoring his engagement with the codes of alignment of personal values with communal leadership and synagogue at the core and at the periphery:

> I have also accepted the idea that community is not a space where you are going to agree… I am not going to agree with everybody on everything, and I think it has helped me to accept that. And understand that I carry this complexity with me, and my identity, and all the intersectionalities that I have. That I can go to some places to get some of my social needs met, and my religious needs met, and in other places, to get other aspects of that met, and ultimately, I need both to be the whole person I am.

The events of October 7 intensified Brian's desire to root his social life in Jewish spaces:

> I moved to Philadelphia in September 2023. I intended to be involved in Jewish community, but I did not think it was going to be such a primary part of my social life, like it is now. But after October 7, I decided that it was going to be a primary part of my social life. And also, I felt less comfortable in the spaces that were not Jewish.

Summary of Brian. Brian is highly engaged socially and religiously across multiple Jewish organizations in Philadelphia. His Jewish involvement deepened significantly after October 7, and he has taken on leadership roles, particularly within Tribe 12. He navigates his identities as a gay convert and as a strongly pro-Israel Jew with awareness and intentionality, using different communal settings to meet different aspects of his religious, social, and emotional needs.

Lauren: The Unintentional Organizer

Context and Background. Lauren, age 36, has lived in Philadelphia for nine years. She holds an advanced degree and describes her work as intellectually challenging and satisfying. For most of her adulthood, she did not seek out organized Jewish communal life. Her Jewish identity was expressed primarily through family relationships. The events of October 7, however, awakened in her a strong desire to connect with other Jews, especially in spaces where pro-Israel views could be expressed openly and thoughtfully. Although she entered the organized community as a newcomer, she quickly stepped into a leadership role by creating an online WhatsApp space for like-minded individuals.

Experience of Jewish Life in Philadelphia. Lauren's initial steps into organized Jewish life after October 7 were shaped by family ties and personal connections. She turned to her cousin, who had been involved for years at the South Philadelphia Shtiebel:

> I got involved with the Shtiebel because I needed a place to land after October 7. My cousin had been going to the Shtiebel for years… I had never really been interested in going anywhere with a mechitza. I joined her once or twice, but, you know, it was not necessarily for me. I was not looking for it. And then October 7 comes and goes. I have not really ever sought out Jewish community in my adulthood. It was never something

> that I prioritized. My Jewish life was always lived through family. But after October 7, I needed to change that.

From there, a series of digital and in-person interactions drew her more deeply into communal life. She joined a local WhatsApp group, "Jewish Connections," and encountered growing tensions in the chat around protests targeting Goldie, a local restaurant accused by demonstrators of supporting genocide. When the group administrators tried to shut down those conversations, Lauren responded by creating a separate space, demonstrating leadership activation:

> Things start to heat up in the chat, the admins come in the chat, and they say, hey, that is not what this chat is for. So I, who knows nobody, but feel that this kind of stuff is important to talk about, I am going to make a splinter group for, like, current events type of discussions. I made this splinter group and made friends through there… It was not actually about Israeli politics. It was meant to be about, like: We have to talk, like, we cannot go to Rittenhouse today between the hours of 5 to 7 p.m., because it is unsafe.

Through that splinter group, she met people who were already connected to the Shtiebel. That overlap gradually shifted the Shtiebel from an occasional visit to her default community space, at least for a period, in alignment with this study's code of synagogue at the core and at the periphery:

> I met people through there, a lot of people were in Shtiebel, and so I started going to Shtiebel more regularly because I started to meet people, and then it just became… became kind of my default place until a couple months ago when I took a step back.

Lauren's path into community did not begin with the Shtiebel alone. She had previously experimented with Tribe 12 programs and did make a few friends there, but she increasingly felt

out of place generationally: “I started to feel like I was a little on the older end of everything that I went to.”

She describes herself as a “monogamous activity person,” preferring to invest deeply once a setting feels right, yet she remains open to finding new spaces that align with her values: “Once I find my thing, I am happy to stick with it.”

At the same time, she is intentional about seeking communities that feel warm, authentic, and non-performative. She says that she looks for places with “a sense of warmth and community and welcoming without a sense of performativity or formalness,” and tends to follow where her friends feel at home, in line with this study’s codes of personal connection and welcoming.

Lauren is acutely aware of how age and life stage shape her choices. She prefers spaces where she is neither decades younger nor markedly older than those around her:

> I would rather be in a place where I am younger than older, but not too much younger. I do not want to be the youngest by three decades; I would rather be in the 35 and up than 40 and down. You know, like, at a certain point in your childhood, when you watch movies, you identify with the kids in the movies, and at a certain point, you grow older, and all of a sudden, you are identifying with the parents of the movies.

Her experiences at Mamash Chabad illustrate how ritual practice and gendered space also affect her sense of belonging, demonstrating the study’s code of alignment of personal values with communal leadership. While she enjoys Shabbat dinners there, she had a painful experience at Shavuot services because of the height and opacity of the mechitza:

> That was my first experience of not being able to see the Torah, and having to kind of peek through and peer and hope to get a glimpse of it, and I felt utterly humiliated just to

be in that position and be around a bunch of women who did not seem to mind; that is where they were very happy to be, and I just felt humiliated to be peering through the mechitza, hoping to catch a glimpse.

Summary of Lauren. Lauren entered organized Jewish life as an adult in response to October 7, carrying strong expectations about the clarity of communication, safety, and values she wanted to see enacted in communal settings. Deeply rooted in family, she seeks a similar warmth and honesty in her communal spaces. Though she initially viewed herself as a consumer of community, she quickly became an unintentional organizer, creating digital spaces where people could speak openly and then following those relationships into synagogue life. Her story highlights how crisis can catalyze engagement, how digital networks can become gateways to in-person belonging, and how age, gendered space, and political climate shape where and how adults in their mid-thirties choose to plant themselves in Jewish communal life.

Eli: The Deep Diver

Context and Background. Eli, age 35, has lived in Philadelphia for twelve years. Before re-engaging with Judaism, he was deeply involved in the city's musical and social circles. His return to Jewish life began during the COVID-19 pandemic, when he found himself more introspective and searching for deeper meaning. Eli approaches Jewish engagement with intentionality and curiosity, particularly through learning and music. He has cultivated a core group of friends who are similarly exploring Judaism as adults, and he speaks with enthusiasm about reconnecting to texts, ritual, and communal singing.

Experience of Jewish Life in Philadelphia. Eli's early attempts to attend synagogue services in 2022 and 2023 were shaped by lingering COVID-19 restrictions, which left him

feeling isolated. His more meaningful entry point came through music. A friend told him about a Tribe 12 song circle:

> I went to a song circle that was hosted downtown, and the person leading the song circles said she was leading a 6-week course on Intro to the High Holidays. And I really enjoyed the song circle, and really enjoyed her leading, and decided to sign up for the class. I have taken many classes over the last year—educational classes, and also song circles.

Tribe 12 became Eli's primary portal into Jewish life. He found that repeated participation created continuity, not only in learning but also in friendships, demonstrating the code of personal connection and welcoming:

> There is a neighborhood pod out of that, so it is a smaller subgroup of people who live in the area of Philly where I am, and we have been meeting once every week or every other week… to learn birkat hamazon. It has been fun to hang out and chill and learn and do a text study together.

Although the neighborhood pods were initiated by Tribe 12, Eli played a key role in transforming them from inactive chat groups into actual gathering spaces, enabling his leadership activation:

> I reached out to five of my friends in that group… asked them one-on-one if they were interested and when they were free. Then I messaged the whole group saying, 'Hey, we are thinking of doing it on this date.' So I spearheaded it. And we liked it, and we have set the next dates every time we meet, so we are booked a few weeks out now.

Eli also hopes to create more opportunities for communal singing in his neighborhood. Noting the scarcity of such spaces, he began planning a local Jewish song circle, combining his musical background with his desire for spiritual resonance.

Summary of Eli. Eli approaches Jewish life with deliberate curiosity and a desire for depth. He is drawn to learning, music, and intentional relationship-building, and he tends to "dive deep" when he finds a teacher or community that resonates with him. Although he does not seek formal leadership positions, he naturally steps into organizing roles when needed—coordinating pod meetings, initiating group learning, and planning new musical gatherings. His story illustrates how meaningful engagement can grow through sustained participation, shared learning, and the willingness to create the experiences one hopes to find.

Michelle: The Social Connector

Context and Background. Michelle, age 35, grew up in the greater Philadelphia area and has lived in the city for a decade. Deeply social by temperament, she has been woven into the local Jewish community since her arrival—initially through college friends and later through a range of organizations. Over the years she has witnessed shifts in Philadelphia's Jewish landscape and in her own needs. Michelle described the impact of the war in Israel and the plight of the hostages as profoundly shaping her emotional life, reinforcing her belief that community is essential to Jewish identity and resilience.

Experience of Jewish Life in Philadelphia. Michelle has been engaged in Philadelphia's young-adult Jewish institutions since college, beginning with the Collaborative (the predecessor to Tribe 12). Over the years she shifted from participant to volunteer leader, especially within Tribe 12's programming for adults in their thirties, demonstrating the code of leadership activation:

> Over the last two years, I have been helping with programming for their 30s tribe. I generally go to the 30s events that I am involved with. Sometimes I go to other

> programming, like a Phillies game or sports-related things, but it tends to be my age group. That is why they brought me on as a volunteer to help with that.

Her leadership reflects both personal motivation and a desire to respond to the needs she observed among peers:

> I saw that there was a need… people wanted more 30s programming. Me and [a co-volunteer] helped do that—events we wanted, low-cost things, chances for new people to meet, people newly out of relationships, people here for grad school. We wanted to bring people together, not just do things solo. I think it is better to do things as a collective.

Michelle also expressed a strong emotional connection to Israel and a desire for more Israel-related programming: "I would like more things to be focused on Israel… My heart is in Israel right now," reflecting the code of alignment of personal values with communal leadership.

The divergence she sometimes feels between her own values and those of organizational leadership has encouraged her to diversify her involvement and to consider new initiatives. For example, she is working independently to form a Jewish outdoors group for adults in their thirties and forties—an initiative born from her desire to create community in ways that feel natural and joyful.

Summary of Michelle. Michelle is a natural connector who thrives in communal settings and prioritizes bringing people together. Deeply rooted in Philadelphia's Jewish life for more than a decade, she has become increasingly active as a volunteer organizer, shaping programming that reflects both her interests and the needs she identifies within her cohort. She values fun, shared experience, and cultural connection, and she seeks communal spaces where her commitments—including her connection to Israel—are reflected. Her story illustrates the

significance of peer-driven leadership and the desire for age-stage–appropriate spaces that foster belonging.

Aliza: The Committed Grower

Context and Background. Aliza, age 40, grew up in the Philadelphia suburbs and has lived in the city for more than a decade. She and her husband have chosen not to have children. Professionally, Aliza works in the nonprofit and philanthropy sector, which shapes her expectations for Jewish organizational life: she looks for institutions that reflect her civic values and where her time and energy can have meaningful impact.

Experience of Jewish Life in Philadelphia. For twelve years, Aliza and her husband have been members of BZBI, though for most of this time they attended only occasionally, in alignment with this study's code of synagogue at the core and at the periphery. Her involvement deepened in recent years following changes in the synagogue's rabbinic leadership. The new associate rabbi reached out to her directly, inviting her into committees and eventually into leadership roles, demonstrating the code of leadership activation:

> She really kind of roped me into different things… talking to me, asking if I would be on certain committees… and then she started asking me to take leadership roles. One of the things was an urban Shabbaton in February at BZBI, and I ended up co-chairing that.

Synagogue life became a meaningful part of Aliza's Jewish identity. She even learned to read Torah for her 40th birthday through the synagogue's educational offerings. At the same time, she was aware of generational gaps within the committees she served:

> The other women I co-chaired with were contemporaries of my mother… because that is who has time—either child-free women or women whose kids are grown. It was a little

> sad, because there were not a lot of people of my generation unless they had kids there for kid-related things.

As someone who has chosen not to have children, Aliza sometimes encounters assumptions or judgments within the Jewish community: “Especially within the Jewish community, it is like: ‘What is wrong with you? You are supposed to go make more Jewish babies.’ That can be isolating.”

At the same time, the personal outreach she received from synagogue leadership was deeply affirming, illustrating the code of welcoming: “It felt good to be recognized and appreciated… that I was worth engaging, even though I did not have kids in the early childhood program. It just felt nice to be appreciated.”

Approaching her forties, Aliza noted that her sense of belonging is increasingly shaped by age and life stage. She said she now relates more easily to adults in their fifties than to parents in their thirties: “Being 40, I feel like I am at the very upper end of young professionals… I am more likely to make friends with a 50-year-old than a 30-year-old at this stage.”

Summary of Aliza. Aliza is a dedicated community member drawn to settings where her time and commitment can have tangible impact. She values being recognized as a full participant in Jewish communal life, not defined by parenthood or the lack thereof. Although the broader community’s assumptions about family and children can feel isolating, she has found meaningful belonging through personal invitation, leadership opportunities, and shared values. Her story highlights the importance of intentional outreach and the need for inclusive communal structures that recognize the diverse life paths of adults in their late thirties and early forties.

Casey: The Self-Starter

Context and Background. Casey, age 37, has lived in Philadelphia for a decade. Strongly connected to her family, she makes decisions about synagogue affiliation with them in mind. Although she had been an active member of one Center City synagogue, she and her sister eventually sought a community that fit their needs more fully and transitioned to Society Hill Synagogue. Casey brings a professional skill set to her communal involvement and looks for ways to contribute meaningfully to the institutions she joins.

Experience of Jewish Life in Philadelphia. Casey described her first experiences at Society Hill Synagogue as immediately welcoming, exemplifying the study's code of welcoming: "They were really welcoming from the moment we stepped in. Members came up and introduced themselves to us—it was just very nice and inviting."

Soon after joining, Casey proactively reached out to the synagogue's executive director to offer her time and skills, indicative of the code leadership activation:

> I told him I had a lot of free time and would like to volunteer or be involved in the community in some way. I am not someone who goes to synagogue regularly, but I still wanted to be part of the Jewish community.

A few months later, she was invited to co-chair the synagogue's Young Friends group. Casey embraced this role and described a growing sense of ownership over its development:

> This last event was at Yards Brewery. We had 36 people sign up, 22 came, and I saw a lot of people exchanging numbers. Then five people immediately signed up for the next event. That is the kind of thing I am looking at—we are gaining momentum.

She views Society Hill not merely as a place for prayer but as a broad community center with varied opportunities for engagement. Casey is intentional about fostering connections among

Jewish adults, and she enjoys seeing participants form friendships through the programs she helps lead.

Summary of Casey. Casey is a proactive community builder who seeks to contribute to the vitality of her synagogue. Although she does not regularly attend services, she cares deeply about strengthening Jewish communal life and readily volunteers her time. Her leadership of the Young Friends group reflects her desire to create welcoming, relational spaces for adults in her age cohort. Casey's narrative underscores how individual initiative—combined with institutional openness—can create meaningful pathways for belonging.

Rita: The Recommitted Community Member

Context and Background. Rita, age 39, grew up in Philadelphia and returned to the city in 2019. Earlier in her adult life she had been deeply involved in lay-led Jewish communities and in various progressive social justice movements, including Jewish Voice for Peace. When she moved back to Philadelphia, she gradually stepped away from activism and did not initially seek out Jewish communal life. By the time of our interview, however, she had become an active member of Society Hill Synagogue.

Experience of Jewish Life in Philadelphia. Rita explained that she did not prioritize Jewish community when she first returned to the city. The events of October 7, however, shifted her sense of urgency and desire for a conscious Jewish home: "After October 7th, I wanted more consciously to develop Jewish community. I just knew that being intentional about having a Jewish community was important to me. I wanted a more conscious space to express my faith."

She also emphasized the simplicity of proximity—Society Hill Synagogue was close to her home—and how that accessibility made it easier to begin attending. Once she arrived, she found the community remarkably warm, reflective of the study's code of welcoming: "People

were overtly welcoming—'We are thrilled you are interested in coming'—and everyone was really friendly. That made a big impression on me, that people were happy I was there."

Rita's past involvement in activist spaces shaped, but did not determine, what she sought in this new chapter. She was explicit that she did not return to Jewish communal life to engage in social justice activism: "When I was looking for community after October 7th, I was not looking for activism. I wanted a way to express faith and express Judaism." Her values aligned with those she encountered at Society Hill, but her primary motivation was spiritual and communal rather than political, exemplifying the code of alignment of personal values with communal leadership.

Rita quickly became involved in leadership when she volunteered to facilitate one of the synagogue's Israel dialogue groups, indicating the code of leadership activation. The opportunity emerged after a conversation with a synagogue leader, and she felt that the role allowed her to contribute something meaningful:

> It was important to me to be a part of this, just having experienced the diversity of perspectives within my own family. I wanted to help people feel less alone and to reach a space where they could see each other's humanity, even across real differences.

Serving as a facilitator also deepened her sense of belonging: "It made me be more known to people who had been members for 30 or 40 years. It increased that sense of belonging."

Summary of Rita. Rita is a thoughtful, recommitted community member who sought a spiritual home rather than an activist platform. She values spaces that welcome a diversity of perspectives and appreciates communities that greet newcomers warmly and without reservation. Rita's leadership—particularly in dialogue facilitation—reflects her desire to help others navigate differing viewpoints with compassion and mutual recognition. Her experience

demonstrates how intentional openness from both the individual and the institution can foster renewed communal attachment.

Cross-Case Study Comparison

General Overview and Participant Views on Community

Across all seven case studies, participants expressed a strong desire for community and a clear sense that belonging depended on both social connectedness and alignment with organizational values. While their paths differed, they emphasized that communal life was most meaningful when they felt welcomed as full participants rather than as demographic outliers. Most discovered organizations through personal networks, friends, and social media rather than through institutional outreach. When an organization conveyed warmth—whether through clergy, staff, or fellow participants—individuals remained engaged and often increased their level of commitment.

At the same time, participants described holding a dual consciousness: feeling simultaneously "a part of" and "apart from" the community. Each expressed a nuanced awareness of their position relative to established groups, generational patterns, and the centrality of parenting in Jewish institutional life. Some articulated confidence in seeking out what they needed; others noted the difficulty of entering already-formed circles. Several participants spoke of intentionally seeking out environments where they could be known, recognized, and valued—spaces where their contributions mattered and their identities were respected.

For many, the events of October 7 sharpened this search for community, either by motivating greater involvement or by deepening the emotional meaning of the relationships they formed. Despite differences in orientation, participants shared a foundational belief that

community is essential for Jewish flourishing and that belonging is not a passive condition but something actively experienced, negotiated, and cultivated.

Motivations for Engagement

Participants approached engagement in two primary ways: some were program-driven while others were values-driven. The program-driven participants tended to enter communities because particular offerings appealed to them—such as concerts, cultural gatherings, or social meetups. Michelle's involvement followed this pattern; she sought out programs that were fun, social, and accessible, which later led organically to leadership roles.

The values-driven participants prioritized ideological, religious, or communal alignment before choosing where to invest their time. Aliza, who works in the nonprofit sector, selected organizations that matched her civic commitments and personal values. For her, meaningful engagement required trust in leadership and a clear sense that her contributions supported something she believed in.

A third group blended both approaches. For participants like Eli and Lauren, initial engagement was sparked by a single program or relational connection, but longer-term involvement was sustained by a deeper resonance with the tone, purpose, or ethical grounding of the organization. This blend of curiosity, relational attachment, and values alignment shaped not only what they attended but also the commitments they were willing to deepen over time.

Personal Connections in Finding out about Events and Organizations

All participants emphasized that personal networks—friends, colleagues, cousins, acquaintances, and social-media clusters—were the primary means by which they discovered local Jewish opportunities. Word of mouth functioned as the most reliable mechanism for

shaping their participation. Even when an online search initiated the process, relationships ultimately sustained it.

For participants like Michelle and Eli, one connection naturally led to another. Attendance at a single event generated an invitation to a WhatsApp group, which led to another program, which finally established a sense of personal regularity. The organic nature of these pathways contrasts with the limited impact of formal institutional publicity.

Social media platforms—especially Facebook groups and WhatsApp—played a noteworthy role. Participants described these digital spaces as informal hubs through which information circulated quickly. They provided efficient routes for learning about upcoming events, coordinating attendance, and gauging the grassroots "pulse" of the community. In several cases, WhatsApp groups led directly to sustained involvement in minyanim, house concerts, or affinity-based gatherings.

Participants' reliance on personal networks underscores the importance of relational outreach, especially for adults who are not embedded in parenting networks or school-based communities. Their experiences suggest that the Philadelphia Jewish community is best navigated through interwoven social ties rather than through centralized institutional channels.

Importance of Feeling Welcoming

Participants repeatedly described welcoming behavior as the single most decisive factor shaping their sense of belonging. Whether the welcome came from clergy, professionals, or lay members, its presence—or absence—left a lasting impression.

For Aliza, a simple invitation from the associate rabbi opened the door to deeper religious engagement and leadership. For Casey and Rita, being greeted by name or approached directly by synagogue members transformed what could have been a tentative first visit into an

experience of genuine hospitality. Eli pointed to the personal attention he received before a song circle as a turning point that encouraged him to return.

Participants framed welcome not as cheerfulness or friendliness alone but as a recognition of their presence, capacities, and potential. Several described how being approached with intentionality—whether to join a committee or to share one's skills—created a sense of being valued. The opposite was also true: when participants felt unseen, or when their contributions were not acknowledged, their engagement diminished.

Importantly, a sense of welcoming was not tied to life stage. Participants did not expect programming exclusively designed for adults without children; rather, they wanted to feel that the community genuinely cared about their participation, regardless of their demographic category. This finding suggests that recognition and relational attentiveness may matter more than age-based segmentation for sustaining engagement.

Leadership Activation as a Pathway to Belonging

Leadership emerged as a central, cross-cutting theme. Nearly all participants assumed leadership roles—some by invitation, others by self-initiative, and still others by necessity when they identified gaps in communal offerings.

Invited leaders, such as Aliza and Eli, described how clergy or experienced members recognized their talents and encouraged them to step forward. This recognition deepened their investment and affirmed their presence in the community. For Brian, being asked to lead the Jews-by-Choice cohort signaled trust and opened space for personal expression. Rita's facilitation role offered her a way to contribute her background in dialogue and conflict navigation.

Self-initiating leaders tended to be individuals who, after identifying unmet needs, created the structures they sought. Casey's outreach to Society Hill leadership exemplifies this initiative, as does Michelle's work developing 30s programming and a Jewish outdoors group. Eli's attempts to create song circles function similarly: the absence of something he valued prompted him to take action.

Across cases, leadership served as both a pathway into belonging and a tool for shaping the community to better reflect participants' needs. Participants derived meaning from contributing to the community's growth and from seeing others benefit from their efforts. Leadership thus functioned not only as a role but as a relational practice that deepened connection.

Age and Stage Impact

Participants demonstrated acute awareness of their life stage and how it shaped their interactions in the Jewish communal landscape. Although none rejected the idea of multigenerational spaces, several noted that their experience differed from those of peers with children or from significantly younger participants.

For Aliza, being in her forties and without children meant that she often found greater affinity with older adults than with parents her own age. This was partially due to conversational flow and partially due to feeling judged or questioned about her life choices in some Jewish spaces.

Lauren expressed a similar dynamic, articulating a desire to be neither the youngest person in the room by decades nor the oldest by decades. Her reflections captured the subtle shift in self-perception that often occurs in midlife, as identity is renegotiated in relation to younger adults and emerging cultural norms.

Casey and Eli offered contrasting views. Casey believed that parenting status—not age—would be the primary variable affecting her level of involvement; Eli, focusing more on learning and relationships, felt less impacted by age and more sensitive to whether there were at least a few peers present at any given event.

Michelle and Eli both described recalibrating their participation based on perceived age fit: Michelle shifted to programming specifically for adults in their thirties and early forties, while Eli refrained from attending Spruce Street Minyan after sensing he was significantly older than many in the room.

Collectively, these responses reflect a nuanced reality: age and stage do play a role in shaping experiences, but participants negotiate these factors flexibly, seeking spaces where they feel both comfortable and authentically connected.

Impact of 10/7

The events of October 7 served as an inflection point for several participants, though in varying ways. For three participants—Brian, Lauren, and Rita—the attacks prompted immediate and significant re-engagement with Jewish communal life. Their reactions reflected a desire for safety, solidarity, and shared identity at a moment of profound vulnerability. These individuals described October 7 as the catalyst that moved Jewish community from the periphery to the center of their social and spiritual lives.

For Casey and Eli, October 7 did not fundamentally change their communal patterns, though both became more attentive to their Jewish friendships and their emotional ties to the Jewish people. Their engagement remained consistent, but their emotional relationship to that engagement deepened.

Participants emphasized that post-October 7 belonging was not purely about political alignment; rather, it involved the search for spaces where grief, fear, and solidarity could be held collectively. Their experiences highlight the important role of Jewish communities in responding to collective trauma and in sustaining members through uncertain times.

Misalignment of Personal Values with Communal Leadership

While several participants reported feeling broadly included, others described moments where alignment, trust, or comfort felt fragile. The most common source of disconnection was political disagreement, particularly around Israel. Participants who were strongly Zionist sometimes felt out of step with organizational leadership; those who expected more robust Israel engagement sometimes felt unseen.

Brian's experiences at Kol Tzedek and the Shtiebel illustrate the impact of ideological mismatch. Similarly, two unnamed participants felt a disconnect between their personal commitments to Israel and the programming offered by Tribe 12.

Another form of mismatch involved ritual or religious expectations. Brian, who is traditionally observant, noted the absence of full ritual components (e.g., full birkat hamazon) at certain events, creating a subtle but persistent tension for him.

Even when not articulated as exclusion, participants acknowledged that entering new spaces could feel intimidating or disorienting—especially when existing social circles were tightly knit. Feelings of not belonging thus emerged both from ideological mismatch and from social obstacles that made integration difficult.

What's Missing?

Participants identified several gaps in the communal landscape, though their responses varied widely depending on personal needs and preferences.

The most frequently expressed need was for centralized coordination of information. Participants described Philadelphia's Jewish scene as "diffuse" and "dispersed," noting the difficulty of tracking opportunities without relying on dense personal networks. They suggested that a unified clearinghouse for events—digital or otherwise—would help adults at their life stage navigate the landscape with greater ease.

Participants also called for age-appropriate programming for adults in their late thirties and forties, especially for those without children. They felt that institutional expectations often default to a heteronormative, family-centric model that does not reflect the diversity of contemporary Jewish adult life.

Networking opportunities, spaces designed specifically for older young adults, and low-barrier communal experiences were among the concrete suggestions raised.

Yet not all participants perceived gaps. Lauren and Casey noted that the community already offered ample opportunities; from their perspective, access was more a matter of personal bandwidth than structural absence. This divergence highlights the diversity of needs within the cohort and the varying degrees to which individuals rely on institutions versus personal initiative.

Discussion

Personal Connections and Welcoming

Across all participants, initial engagement with Jewish programs and organizations began through personal connections. Every interviewee first learned about opportunities not from centralized communication but from word of mouth—a friend, coworker, or acquaintance who extended an invitation or shared information about an organization. This pattern underscores

how deeply Jewish communal life continues to depend on human relationships rather than publicity or institutional outreach.

Once participants attended a program for the first time, experiences of intentional greeting and warmth played a decisive role in shaping their sense of belonging. Being welcomed by both peers and organizational leaders—through personal introductions, invitations to sit together, or simple acknowledgment—made participants feel that they were wanted in the space. As Charles Vogl (2016) notes, invitations themselves become a form of recognition: "When those who are trapped in a crisis of belonging receive an invitation from any insider or community leader, the invitation becomes evidence of their belonging… Our invitation provides the necessary evidence that they are indeed insiders" (p. 47).

Participants' stories consistently illustrated this dynamic: belonging took root not through programming alone but through interpersonal gestures that affirmed membership and value.

Leadership Activation

A striking theme across interviews was the degree to which participants stepped into leadership roles within their communities. Some did so organically, identifying gaps in existing offerings and creating the gatherings or groups they wished existed. Others received direct invitations from organizational leaders to help run programs, serve on committees, or coordinate events.

In both pathways, leadership activation strengthened participants' sense of identification with the community. Taking responsibility—whether through hosting, organizing, or shaping initiatives—helped participants feel that they were not merely consumers of Jewish life but contributors and co-creators. For several, this shift from attendee to leader functioned as a pivotal

moment: it transformed spaces that felt provisional or experimental into communities they felt committed to sustaining.

Alignment of Personal Values with Communal Leadership

Participants emphasized that their ongoing involvement depended significantly on value alignment with organizational leadership. Many were intentional about spending time only in spaces whose priorities, ethics, or approaches resonated with their own. When a mismatch emerged—especially around issues participants regarded as fundamental—they often reduced their involvement or stepped back entirely.

This was especially evident in areas related to political outlook, approaches to Israel, and the broader culture of a given organization. Participants described feeling most connected when communal leaders articulated values that reflected their own commitments, and most unsettled when leadership expressed positions that felt discordant or exclusionary. Value alignment thus served as both an attractor and a limiter of engagement.

Synagogue at the Core and at the Periphery

Participants related to synagogues in notably varied ways, yet synagogues remained an important part of their Jewish landscape—sometimes centrally, sometimes at the edges. For several, synagogues were their primary point of engagement, even if they attended services only occasionally. What mattered was the sense of being anchored within a recognizable Jewish institution and participating in other aspects of synagogue life, such as committees, learning opportunities, or young-adult groups.

Other participants divided their involvement across multiple synagogues—such as Mamash Chabad or the South Philadelphia Shtiebel—drawing on different settings for prayer, community, or learning. Even those whose main affiliation was with a non-synagogue

organization (for example, Tribe 12) demonstrated awareness of the synagogue landscape in Philadelphia and had considered exploring synagogue options.

Amid widespread national trends of synagogue mergers and closures (Telushkin, 2024; Schultz, 2023; Salkin, 2019), it is noteworthy that synagogues remained present in participants' lives as both symbolic and practical centers. They functioned as stable communal anchors, even for adults whose primary connections were informal, episodic, or program-based.

Conclusion

Recommendations from the Research

Event Centralization and Organization

As several participants noted (see "What's Missing?"), the Philadelphia Jewish community would benefit from a more coordinated approach to sharing information about events and opportunities. At present, programming is dispersed across many organizations, and participants described difficulty in keeping track of what is happening, for whom, and when. A centralized system of communication could significantly improve accessibility and awareness.

One practical tool would be a community-wide event calendar with clear filtering options—allowing users to sort by target age group (young adults, families, older adults), type of event (religious service, social gathering, speaker), or level of observance. A weekly email summarizing upcoming events could complement the calendar, keeping programming visible for those who have already expressed interest by subscribing. Similarly, coordinated social media posts and cross-institutional sharing would help build awareness beyond individual organizational lists.

This recommendation aligns with findings from the 2019 Philadelphia Jewish community study, in which participants in focus groups identified the need for improved communication as

the top communal priority (Marker & Steiger, 2020). While the Jewish Exponent does host an online calendar, its CitySpark platform aggregates regional events from all communities and, at present, lists few if any Jewish programs. A more intentionally curated and visibly Jewish resource would better serve adults seeking connection and engagement.

Events for the 35+ Cohort

Participants pointed out that, although Philadelphia has many programs for Jewish adults in their twenties and early thirties, there are no organizations dedicated specifically to adults in their late thirties and forties. This absence leaves many individuals feeling that they have aged out of young-adult offerings without yet belonging in settings centered on children or parenting.

Creating programming specifically for the 35-40 age range would allow participants to meet peers experiencing similar life stages. Several interviewees described entering general community events in which no one else was within ten to twenty years of their age, which made sustained engagement difficult. Events tailored to this cohort—whether social, educational, or religious—would support the development of peer networks, deepen a sense of belonging, and provide a clear point of entry for adults who feel caught between existing demographic categories.

Leadership Training and Support for DIY Initiatives

Participants' experiences suggest that leadership opportunities play a crucial role in sustaining involvement and belonging. A coordinated effort to cultivate leadership among adults below retirement age would support both individual growth and community vitality. This could take shape through a three-part approach:

1. **Formal leadership training** for emerging lay leaders in the Jewish nonprofit sector.

2. **Development of leadership roles** across organizations, including opportunities to serve on committees, join boards, or develop new programs.
3. **Support for grassroots, DIY initiatives**, such as providing space for small gatherings, helping advertise peer-led events, or offering modest funding for participatory projects.

These pathways would enable adults aged 35–45 to shape their own Jewish environments while reinforcing their sense of ownership and belonging. For this cohort, opportunities to lead—not only to attend—can serve as an essential point of connection.

Conclusion

In this study, I researched how Jewish adults 35-40 without children navigate the Philadelphia Jewish community, and the feelings of belonging and connection that they hold in regards to the Jewish community. I did this through in-depth surveys and interviews of seven participants, and then analyzed the results using grounded theory methods. I used purposeful sampling to focus on already-engaged adults, seeking a range of community engagements, backgrounds, and religious practices.

I found that informal and relational pathways are more effective than programming alone. Participants highlighted that it was the personal connections and welcoming they experienced that brought them to Jewish community life and experiences, and the feelings of warmth and welcoming once there that led to their deepening engagement. Leadership activation served as a key pathway of belonging, with some participants observing a gap and moving to fill it, and others being invited to leadership within established organizations. Awareness of their age and life stage impacted participants' sense of belonging and where they wanted to spend their time. October 7 served as an inflection point for some participants, shifting their focus to Jewish community engagement, and focusing their feelings towards values-alignment.

This research demonstrates that belonging is an experience, not a structure. Belonging is cultivated by initial welcoming and ongoing relationship and strengthened by leadership activation and ownership. Leadership creates a sense of belonging; leadership is a technology of inclusion. While leadership is often an end-goal of organizational involvement, this study demonstrates that it was leadership that led to belonging, and participants became leaders before being long-term committed. Leadership serves as an authorization of belonging.

Jewish adults 35-40 without children are navigating their shifting age identity and non-normative life paths, attempting to find communities that welcome them as they are. Choosing where and how to engage reflects an existential decision, not a transaction. Institutions that offer a range of programming and connection opportunities, beyond the young families focus, will serve as a welcoming space for this cohort's shifting identity. Participants seek to have their needs met from a variety of institutions; this is a feature, not a bug. Institutions that work together to meet the varied needs of their larger community can co-create a thriving local ecosystem.

What matters is how institutions *relate* to their constituents, and less what the institutions offer. When adults 35-40 without children are shown welcoming under the tent of the Jewish community, and given the tools and means to lead, then they understand that they belong within the Jewish community, and their voice and being matters.

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