

Experiences of Non-Jews in Jewish Life

Karrie Breton - Colby College | The Jews of Maine

What does it mean to belong to a community you weren't born into?

That question was at the heart of the research I conducted. In Maine, 8,100 non-Jewish adults live in Jewish households. Many of them are deeply and actively engaged in Jewish life — not as outsiders looking in, but as participants, spouses, parents, and friends. There are also non-Jews living in non-Jewish households who engage in Jewish life. In some cases, non-Jews feel more at home in Jewish tradition than in any other community they've ever been part of. Their stories reveal something important: belonging is rarely about birthright. It's about showing up, again and again, and finding the door is always open.

Engagement by non-Jews in Jewish life

Ray Davis Murdoch Curry explained what brought him to join Maine's Jewish community. He isn't Jewish, doesn't live in a Jewish household, and yet is drawn to Jewish life. For Ray, the pull is intellectual and spiritual. As he explained, "I feel like I'm accessing the roots of what Jesus experienced growing up. I find the richness of the history and tradition very intellectually and spiritually stimulating." That sense of connection keeps him engaged. He volunteers for the Purim box packaging fundraiser, lights candles for Shabbat, and joins friends for dinners. He attends synagogue services regularly and is moved by how the synagogue nurtures young people, seeing in that practice a living example of the values he admires. For Ray, Judaism offers something he hadn't found elsewhere — a community that satisfies both his curiosity and his longing for meaningful tradition.

What does home life look like as a non-Jew living in a Jewish household?

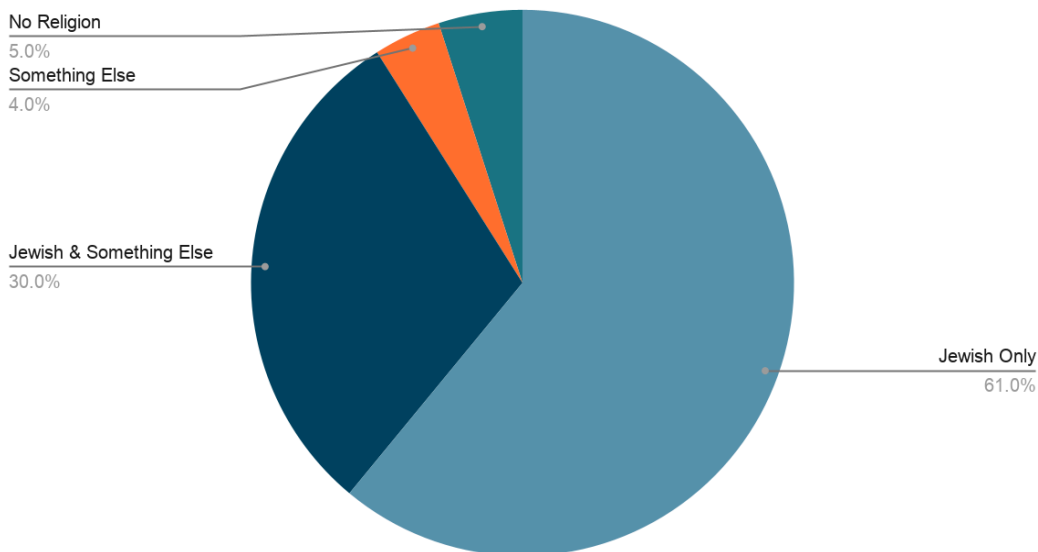
Ray's story speaks to the power of chosen engagement, but what about those who have made Jewish life the center of their home? Brian Allenby doesn't leave any room for uncertainty: "Our household is Jewish. Straight — full stop." Brian, a non-Jew, is very active in Jewish life — attending synagogue, celebrating Jewish holidays, and even helping in the search for a new rabbi. Crucially, he embraced Jewish life before his marriage, recognizing that his wife's faith was central to who she was. His decision wasn't about obligation, it was about identity. As he put it, "It was the first time I had to kind of wrestle with who I want to be. What do I want my faith identity to be? Is it important for me to choose a religion by name — associated dogma, theology? Is it

more important to have spirituality and to be connected with the person I love in approaching faith in a more open-minded, holistic way? And so the latter, right? And it's to say, well, I'm going to choose you and if that's a path to come back at faith or religion in a slightly different way, but still grounded in some of the same principles that I grew up with, then that's what I'm going to choose." Brian's story raises the question — what actually makes someone part of a community? Is it the faith they were born into, the beliefs they hold privately, or something harder to define, like choosing, every day, to show up?

Raising children in intermarried households

The question of belonging extends to the next generation as well. The *Jewish Maine 2024 Community Study* found that 91% of intermarried households in Maine consider their children to be Jewish in some way: 60% exclusively Jewish, and 31% Jewish and something else. This data challenges a long-held assumption in Jewish demographics. As discussed by Christine Hayes in "Building Communities of Belonging," demographers once predicted that intermarriage would erode Jewish identity and reduce the number of Jewish households over time. Instead, Jewish professionals have documented the opposite. Intermarried households have a high rate of living Jewishly, and the non-Jewish spouse often plays an active, even leading role in raising children with a Jewish identity. Maine's data reflects this shift clearly. Children in these households are not only being raised Jewish, they are carrying on that identity into adulthood.

How children are raised



Do non-Jews feel accepted in the Jewish community?

Given how fully people like Ray and Brian have integrated themselves into Jewish life, a natural question follows: do they feel genuinely welcomed, even without converting? For Brian, the answer isn't complicated — “I don't care that I'm not Jewish, right? It's not meaningfully impacting my ability to engage with this community. So, like, why do I need to convert?” Brian has never felt a pressure from family, friends, or his synagogue to convert. For him, the option remains open, but only if he ever feels it would deepen his participation in a way that matters to him.

Ray's experience adds another dimension. He came to Jewish life without any familial connection to it, building community from the ground up, and finding it just as welcoming. Together, their stories suggest something meaningful. The Jewish community, at least in Maine, has created space for people to explore authentic Jewish life on their own terms, without the expectation that they must convert to belong. These are only two voices out of thousands, but they point toward a community that understands belonging as something earned through presence and care, not granted only through formal identity.

Reflection

The stories of Ray, Brian, and others like them invite us to look honestly at the communities we belong to. Are we building spaces open enough for people to find their way in, not because they are born there, but because something called to them? In your own life and your own communities, what makes someone truly part of something?

Sources

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Hayes, Christine, “[Building Communities of Belonging. Jewish Identity. Conversion, Inter marriage, and Adjacency.](#)” Shalom Hartman Institute, 2026.