

How Jews by Choice Engage in Maine's Jewish Communities

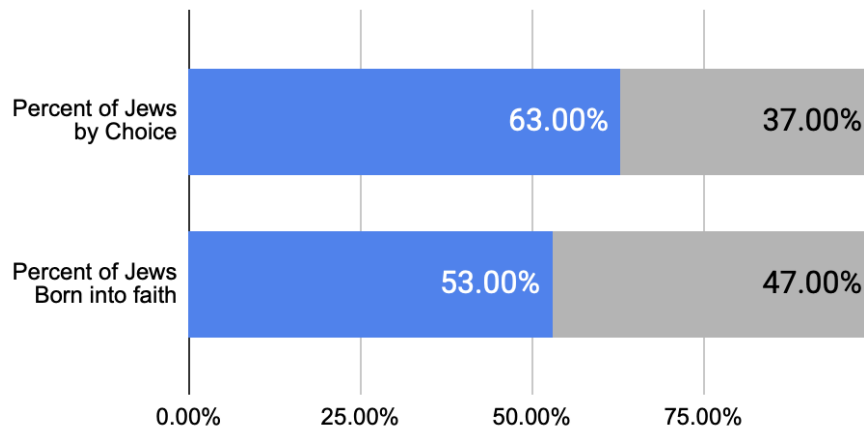
Jacob Thibodeau

Jews by choice are people who chose to convert to Judaism despite not being born Jewish. Depending on when they converted, these people did not grow up around Jewish holidays or going to synagogue. Instead, these people found their way to Judaism through a personal decision that is often triggered by a relationship, a moment of spiritual searching, or simply the feeling, as Ashley Inbar described it, that they were "already living a Jewish life" without quite knowing it. According to the Jews of Maine 2024 Community Study, Jews by Choice account for 7% of all Jewish adults, which is an incredibly small portion. Throughout this project I gathered quantitative data from Jews of Maine 2024 community survey and qualitative data from two interviews with Jews by Choice from the Maine area. The first person I interviewed was Ashley Inbar, a professional with the Community Alliance of Southern Maine who converted after the birth of her son. My other interviewee was Joey LeBlanc, co-vice president of Beth Israel Synagogue in Waterville, who converted after a lifelong sense of spiritual calling. These different sources clearly show what it means to choose faith, rather than to be born into it, and how that choice influences how they live. The question of what happens to Jews by choice after they convert is a question that many in the Jewish community have been wondering for quite some time. Writer Esther Kustanowitz took on that question in an article for the Jewish Journal (<https://jewishjournal.com/judaism/189448/>). She wonders whether or not, years after conversion, they still love Judaism and if the communities around them have been fully supportive. That is exactly what my data sets out to answer.

Before diving into my research, I made a prediction on what I expected to find. To me, it was obvious that Jews by choice would be far less engaged in Jewish life than those born into faith. This is because of the fact that Jews grow up celebrating holidays and attending services.

However, this hypothesis was not the case. The 2024 Maine Jewish Community Study found that, even though Jews by choice make up on 7% of Maine’s Jewish population, they make up **16%** of Jews who are “immersed” in Jewish life, the study’s highest level of engagement.

Looking specifically at the 1366 Jews in Maine who responded to the survey, 63% of Jews by choice report that they belong to a synagogue, compared to 53% of Jews born into faith.

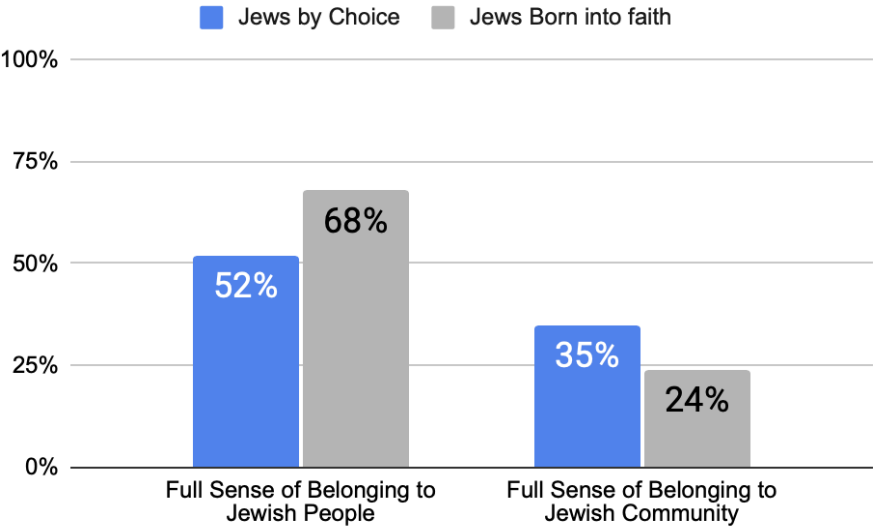


The survey also captured the frequency of how often Jews by choice and Jews born into faith show up. Jews by choice are more than **twice as likely** to show up to services two to three times a month than Jews born into faith (17% vs. 8%). An additional 11% of Jews by choice who responded to the survey attend synagogue once a week, compared to only 6% of Jewish respondents born into faith.

These findings made me ask myself: why does this happen? The interviews that I conducted gave me a pretty good explanation. Joey, who grew up Catholic before discovering Judaism in college, talked about what it feels like to be a Jew by choice. “I like that I am not coming into it with baggage... It’s something that I felt and chose fully by myself, so I have this real excitement about that.” Ashley described a similar idea as she said “anytime you get to choose a part of your life, you tend to see more of a connection to it.” Joey and Ashley both described their Judaism not as something that they inherited but rather as a relationship that

they chose. This is likely the reason as to why the engagement data is the way it is. Jews by choice do not participate in religion because it is a habit or obligation but rather it is something that they do because they have a genuine love and passion for it.

The data on sense of belonging, on the other hand, tells a much more complicated story. The survey asks respondents about their sense of belonging in two different contexts: their sense of belonging to the Jewish people and their sense of belonging to their local Jewish communities. From this data, extremely interesting patterns quickly emerged that show the emotional reality of Jews by choice. The sense of belonging to Jewish people is the most historical and broadest level of identity, meaning that this is a connection to Jews across the world and to thousands of years of shared history and memory. Only 52% of Jews by choice who responded to the survey very much agree that they feel a sense of belonging to the Jewish people, compared to 68% of Jews born into Judaism. This is the biggest difference in the data I analyzed, and my interviews helped explain this gap: Joey and Ashley both talked about moments of uncertainty about whether they truly belong to the Jewish community in terms of the history of the identity.



With regard to their local Jewish communities, however, 35% of Jews by choice who responded to the survey very much feel a sense of belonging, compared to 24% of Jewish respondents born into faith. This difference in having strong local roots and a weaker connection to the broader Jewish people is exactly what Kustanowitz thought would happen. She noticed that Jewish traditions never referenced a convert's past, which can completely cut converts off from their own journey as they “negate all the experiences they had before.” Without that connection to their pre-Jewish selves converts may have a hard time feeling that their own story matters within Jewish history despite being so connected and engaged to their local communities.

All of this data shows a true, genuine tension which the qualitative interviews bring to life. Ashley and Joey both talked about the process and moments of uncertainty when walking into tight-knit communities in Maine where everyone seemed to already be so close to one another. This made my interviewees question whether or not there would be room for them, which led to the importance of individuals reaching out to help welcome others into the community. Ashley described the challenge as she talked about how it took her a while “to feel really welcome” due to the fact that growing up “knowing the same 10 Jewish people...it’s hard to make room at the table” because they are on autopilot. Joey’s experience showed the impact an individual can have as they were “so welcoming from the very beginning” and that individual made it so Joey was “welcomed by everyone that they connected him to.” Through these experiences it is clear that the sense of belonging did not come right away, but when it did come it came because one person reached out and made an introduction. Today, Joey and Ashley both try to be that person for others to make sure that the next Jew by choice that comes into their community does not question whether or not they are welcomed.

My data taught me that choosing your faith, like Judaism, changes your relationship to it. Kustanowitz helps show that converts bring something to the table that is irreplaceable. Jews by choice experiencing Judaism for the first time is a “privilege and a blessing” due to the fact that

Jews by choice give a fresh set of eyes and can point out things that Jews born into faith have grown too comfortable to notice. In no world are Jews by choice “less Jewish” than Jews born into faith. The data from this study suggests that Jews by choice are more engaged, and may even be the motor that helps drive Jewish life. The data on sense of belonging is the honest reality of what it means to make the choice of becoming Jewish rather than being born into it. Ultimately, this not only challenges stereotypes, but it also shows what faith can look like when it is freely chosen.

Citations:

Boxer, M., Chandler, A., Levine, D., Martin, A., Magidin de Kramer, R., Friedman, I., Krasner Aronson, J., Brookner, M. A., & Saxe, L. (2025). [*Jewish Maine: The 2024 community study*](#).

Inbar, Ashley. Interviewed by Jacob Thibodeau. Spring 2026. Colby College, [Maine Jewish History Project](#).

Kustanowitz, E. D. (2016, August 31). How the Jews by choice experience can make us all better Jews. *Jewish Journal*. <https://jewishjournal.com/judaism/189448/>

LeBlanc, Joey. Interviewed by Jacob Thibodeau. Spring 2026. Colby College, [Maine Jewish History Project](#).