

How Friends Shape Jewish Lives

By Eric Hernandez

This project explores how Jewish friendships — and how many of them a person has — shape their engagement with Jewish life. The findings draw on data from the 2024 Maine Jewish Community Study, supplemented by personal interviews and sociological theory.

The Maine Context

To help understand this dynamic, we can first take a look at the reality of Maine Jews. Maine's Jewish population is small (1.4% of the total population) and physically spread out, with 43% of the community facing significant geographic barriers to traditional participation. In fact, only 24% of all Maine Jews belong to a formal congregation — yet 58% of Maine Jews are still more than “minimally involved.” This shift in infrastructure begs the question: if involvement doesn't occur for everyone in buildings, what keeps 58% of Maine Jews more than “minimally involved?”

The answer, I argue, lies in an “infrastructure of social circles.” Jewish life in Maine — and increasingly across the country — is sustained not by proximity to synagogues, but by interpersonal networks that bridge physical distance and keep people connected. In a modern, more secular world, minority cultural communities rely heavily on these informal ties.

This brings us back to the core claim: the number of Jewish friends a person has is an important predictive factor for their engagement; while causation is hard to prove, the connection between social circles and involvement is highly statistically significant.

Defining Friendship and Correlation

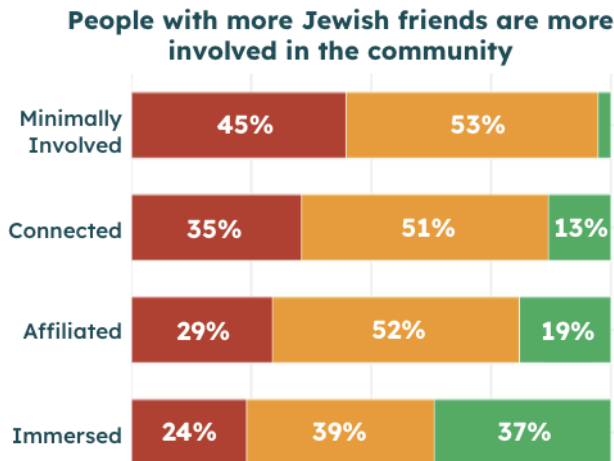
"Friends" here is defined by the 2024 Maine Jewish Community Study as how many Jewish friends you have, categorized by three groups:

"None/Hardly Any Jewish Friends" | "Some Jewish Friends" | "Most/All Jewish Friends"



Using raw data from the survey, I found a clear and consistent correlation between Jewish friendship levels and engagement levels. The direction of causation is difficult to establish — do people make more Jewish friends because they're engaged, or become more engaged because of their Jewish friends? — but the strength of the relationship makes it worth taking seriously regardless.

As you can see on the graph, as the level of engagement increases, the percentage associated with lower levels of Jewish friends dramatically decreases. The metric of "Engagement" I am using here is one crafted by the research team at Brandeis based on respondents' answers to a list of 20 questions regarding Jewish behaviors.



Shared Values, Experience, and Social Capital

Interviews I conducted shed light on why this correlation exists. When asked about number of Jewish friends and whether they communicate differently with Jewish versus non-Jewish friends, respondents consistently described an ease of connection with Jewish friends rooted in shared values, shared experiences, and a kind of cultural shorthand that doesn't require as much explanation.

This maps closely to what sociologist Robert D. Putnam describes in *Bowling Alone* as bonding social capital — the trust, loyalty, and solidarity that forms among people with a common identity. In contrast to bridging social capital (which links people across different groups), bonding capital fosters the deep, immediate comfort that many interviewees attributed to their Jewish relationships.

“We get together every once in a while... we’ve done Shabbat. There’s shared values and experiences... language you don’t have to explain”
 - Nicole Jacobson

Mapping the Social Multiplier

The data also reveals something interesting about which behaviors are most affected by friendship levels. This plot displays behavior engagement by friend level compared to a “None” group baseline.

Behaviors that are inherently social — like talking about Jewish topics and marking Shabbat — show the largest increases as friendship levels rise. These activities depend on having others to do them with, and Jewish friends provide the cultural to make them more natural and frequent.

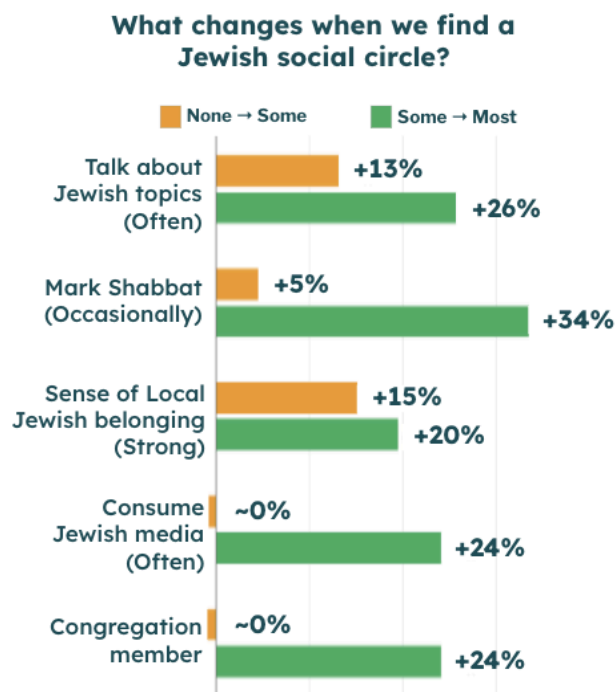
In contrast, behaviors like consuming Jewish media shows little change between the “None” and “Some” groups. This makes sense as media consumption is a primarily solitary activity, and people with fewer Jewish connections may actually lean on it more heavily as a substitute for community.

The takeaway from this is a kind of social magnification effect where Jewish friends don’t just add companionship, but they unlock and amplify participation in specifically Jewish behaviors.

The Congregation Membership Anomaly

One key finding complicates the broader picture, however. Between the “None/Hardly Any” and “Some” friendship groups, congregation membership shows virtually no change, where most other behaviors show meaningful gains.

This is counterintuitive. One might expect that having some Jewish friends would either encourage someone to join a congregation as a means to deepen those connections, or reflect an existing membership, since congregations are natural places to meet Jewish friends. The data supports neither.



One plausible explanation: formal membership may not always mean active participation. Putnam identifies this same pattern in *Bowling Alone*, noting that modern organizational membership is increasingly transactional; Paying annual dues without meaningful hands-on involvement. Congregation may have paying members who remain socially disengaged, which could explain why friend counts resemble those of non-members.

That said, this finding is one that is very intriguing and deserves further investigation. It points to a real gap between institutional affiliation and community belonging.

“There’s this idea of community versus attending.” — Ben Weiss

Recommendations for Community Expansion

There is clear evidence that Jewish friendships are one of the strongest predictors of Jewish engagement. For community leaders, this suggests a practical direction for efforts. Rather than investing in traditional institutional structures, communities should create spaces that deliberately foster Jewish social connection — social events, groups, and programs designed to encourage a shift from lower to higher levels of Jewish friendship, associated with increased engagement levels.

Works Cited

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Nicole Jacobson, interviewed by Eric Hernandez, Spring 2026. Colby College, Maine Jewish History Project.

Ben Weiss, interviewed by Eric Hernandez, Spring 2026. Colby College, Maine Jewish History Project.