

Jewish Home Engagement as a Beacon for Jewish Life

by Alex Clapp

The Home is Important to Jews in Maine Because...

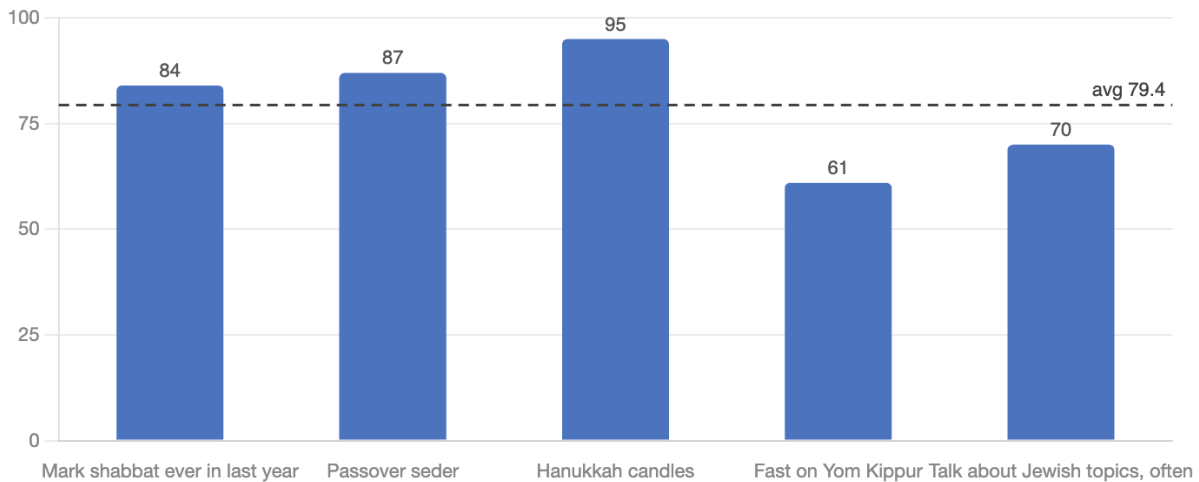
Camee Davidson is an Israeli-American artist who grew up in Israel, was drafted into its military, and met her husband there. In Israel, “if you’re Jewish you always know when it’s a holiday or when it’s Shabbat,” she explains. “Here in rural Maine it’s different. Sometimes I don’t feel like cooking, but if I don’t cook and invite my family over, then it won’t be Shabbat.”

That sentence carries everything. In a place where the ambient culture offers no reminder, no early store closing, no stream of neighbors heading home for dinner, the Jewish calendar exists only because someone *wills* it into existence. For Camee, that someone is herself — and she has embraced that role fully, deliberately, and with beauty.

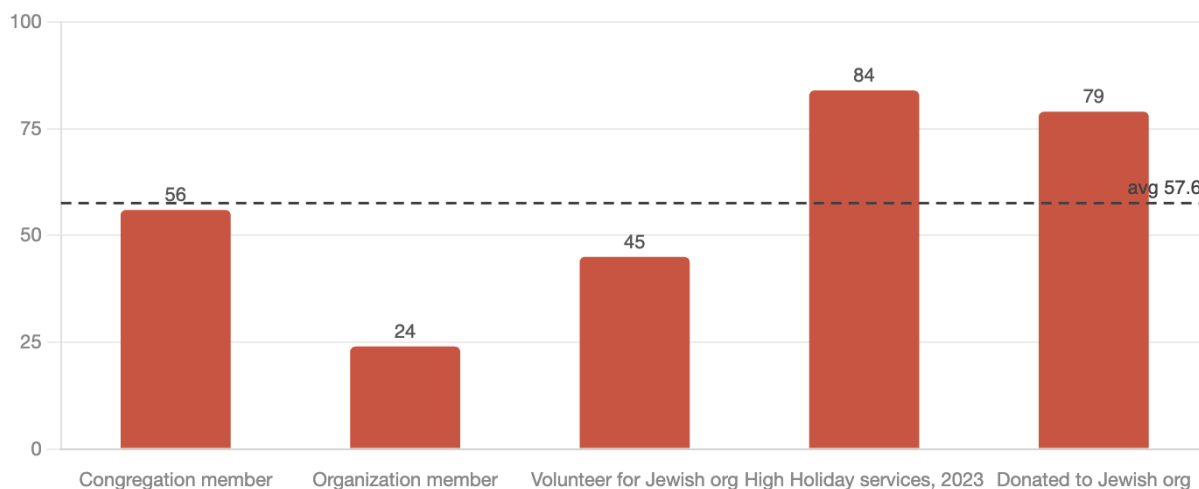
Every Friday she bakes her own challah. When her children were small she would tuck chocolate inside their tiny personal loaves so they would love Shabbat. She told them the Shabbat Queen would leave chocolate in their silver kiddush cups overnight — and a chocolate shop in Brunswick wrapped little bags specially for the occasion. She didn’t just observe a tradition; she made it enchanting, something her children would carry forward across their lives.

Barbara Leopold, who raised four children about an hour from Waterville after moving from Long Island, arrived at the same conclusion through a parallel path. When she could no longer find the kosher foods she loved — the gefilte fish, the fresh challah — she simply learned to make them herself. “I basically learned out of necessity,” she says, “because I wanted to keep eating my favorite Jewish foods.” Now she makes her own gefilte fish, her own beet and horseradish relish, blintzes, borscht, and challah that congregants at Beth Israel have come to know and love at the kiddush table. Barbara is also an artist, she says her home is very Jewish, as they have mezuzahs on all their doors, and a lot of home made Jewish art around the house. Her art is another way for her to feel connected to other Jews all over the world.

Home Engagement Characteristics — Maine



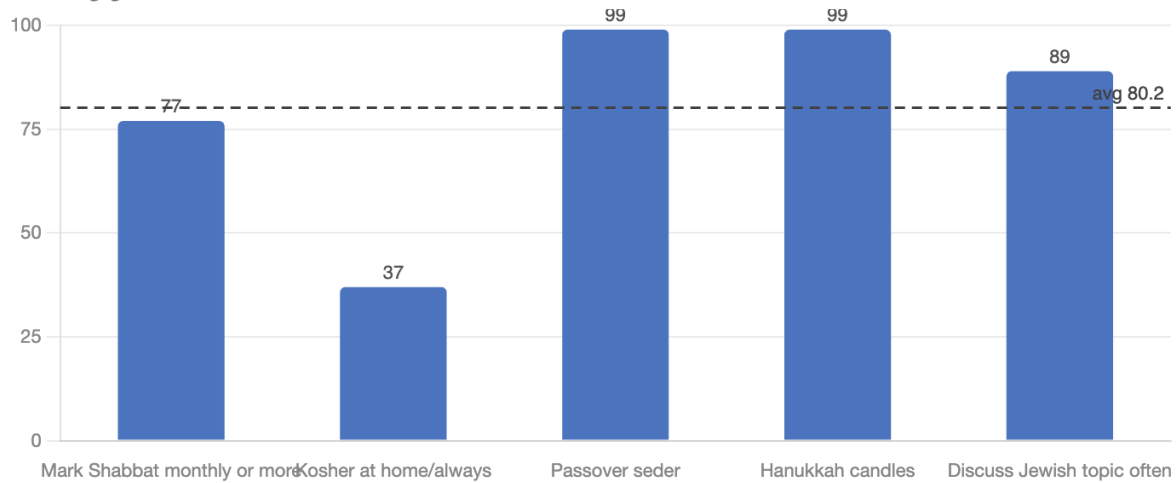
Organizational Engagement Characteristics — Maine



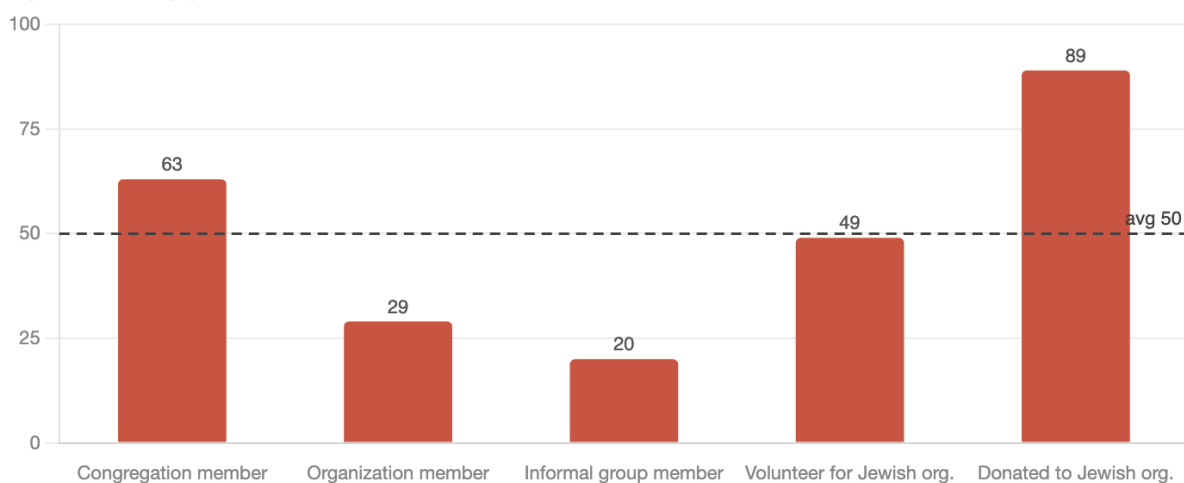
At first, this makes sense because Maine is so spread out and there is not much availability for organizations. In cities, it must be different — right? No. In fact, this is not just a Maine characteristic: there is a trend nationally in engagement moving to the home. This can be seen in data from metropolitan areas like Miami, where home engagement is also greater than organizational engagement even though Miami has more Jewish resources and distance is less of an issue.

The engagement characteristics captured by the Miami study differ slightly from those captured by the Maine Jewish study: fasting on Yom Kippur is replaced by keeping kosher at home. This difference does not greatly affect the comparison of the data, as the Miami home engagement average is actually brought down by its focus on keeping kosher at home. This shows that the home as a more popular site for Jewish engagement is not just a Maine trait but a national one.

Home Engagement Characteristics — Miami



Organizational Engagement Characteristics — Miami



Why is this the case?

Jack Wertheimer’s book, *The New American Judaism: How Jews practice their religion today*, sheds light on the increase in home engagement. He finds that the home and family have become the primary “sacred ground,” largely because organizational participation has become “episodic” and often feels burdensome or intimidating to the modern, “rational” individual. This statement fits into what Barbara and Camee say they love about the home. While over 40% of Jews report attending synagogue not often or never, home-based rituals like Passover Seders and Hanukkah candle lighting remain the most widely practiced because they focus on building family memories rather than fulfilling communal obligations. This transition is further fueled by a culture of “radical individualism” in which many Jews prefer a personalized, customized

Judaism that allows them to engage on their own terms and schedule, avoiding conflicts with the “God of soccer” and other secular commitments that compete for their limited leisure time. Furthermore, a significant “knowledge gap” often makes the synagogue an intimidating environment for highly competent adults who lack rudimentary Hebrew or ritual skills, leading them to feel “disenfranchised” in public worship and favor more comfortable, private expressions of their identity. Recognizing this, many religious leaders have adopted a deliberate strategy of “returning Judaism to the home.” Instead of focusing solely on temple attendance, rabbis are increasingly teaching congregants the skills needed to practice in their private lives—such as building a *sukkah* or reciting the *Sh’ma* at bedtime—thereby validating the home as the most resilient and meaningful site for contemporary Jewish engagement.

Sources

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Davidson, Camee. Interview by Alex Clapp. Spring 2026. Colby College, Maine Jewish History Project.

Leopold, Barbara. Interview by Alex Clapp. Spring 2026. Colby College, Maine Jewish History Project.

Wertheimer, J. (2019). *The new American Judaism : how Jews practice their religion today*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691184142>