

Maine Jews Are More Engaged Than New York's Non-Orthodox Jews

Take out NYC's large Orthodox population, and Maine's Jewish community outperforms.

By Will Schneider

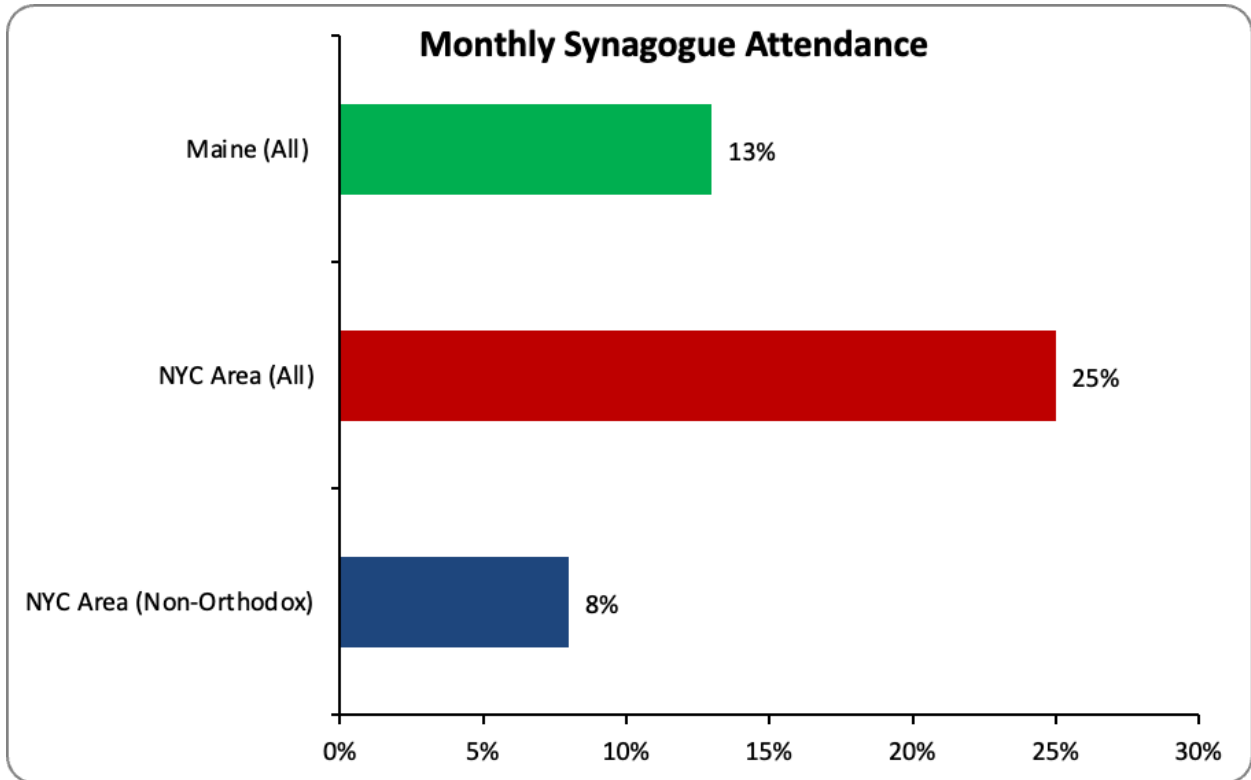
At first glance, the story seems straightforward: Jewish community life is far stronger in the New York City area than in Maine. The numbers appear to prove it: **62%** of New York area Jews report feeling a sense of local belonging, compared to just **40%** in Maine. New York area Jews attend synagogue monthly at nearly twice the rate of Maine Jews, and they observe Shabbat weekly at twice the rate. (The New York area is defined as the five boroughs of New York City along with Nassau, Suffolk, and Westchester counties.)

On paper, it looks like a blowout. Every number points in the same direction: New York dominates, Maine trails. If you stopped at the raw data, the story would write itself.

But the raw data is misleading — not because the numbers are wrong, but because the two communities have fundamentally different compositions. Comparing Maine's Jewish community to New York's is like comparing the Colby College football team to the Michigan football team. On paper, they're all college athletes, but Michigan's roster is stacked with five-star recruits and future NFL draft picks. If you compare the two teams' average stats, Michigan wins every category by a mile, but take out the All-Americans, and the gap between a Colby player and a Michigan player gets a lot smaller than the scoreboard suggests.

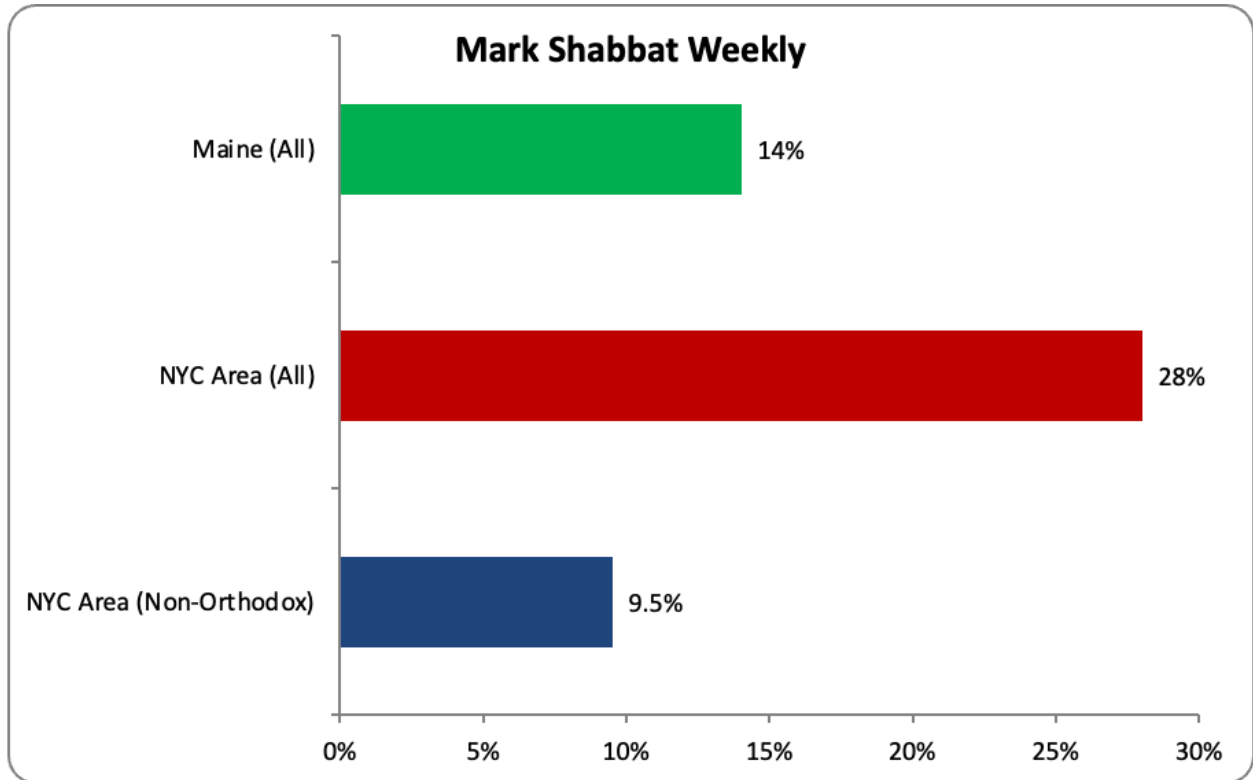
New York's Orthodox population is the All-Americans of Jewish life. They attend synagogue, observe Shabbat, and raise their children Jewish at rates that exceed **90%**, numbers that dwarf every other denomination. The New York area's Jewish community is **19% Orthodox**. Maine's is just **3%**. Take the All-Americans out of New York's numbers, and compare the rest of New York's Jewish community to Maine's, and Maine doesn't just close the gap. Maine wins.

Here's what that looks like in practice.



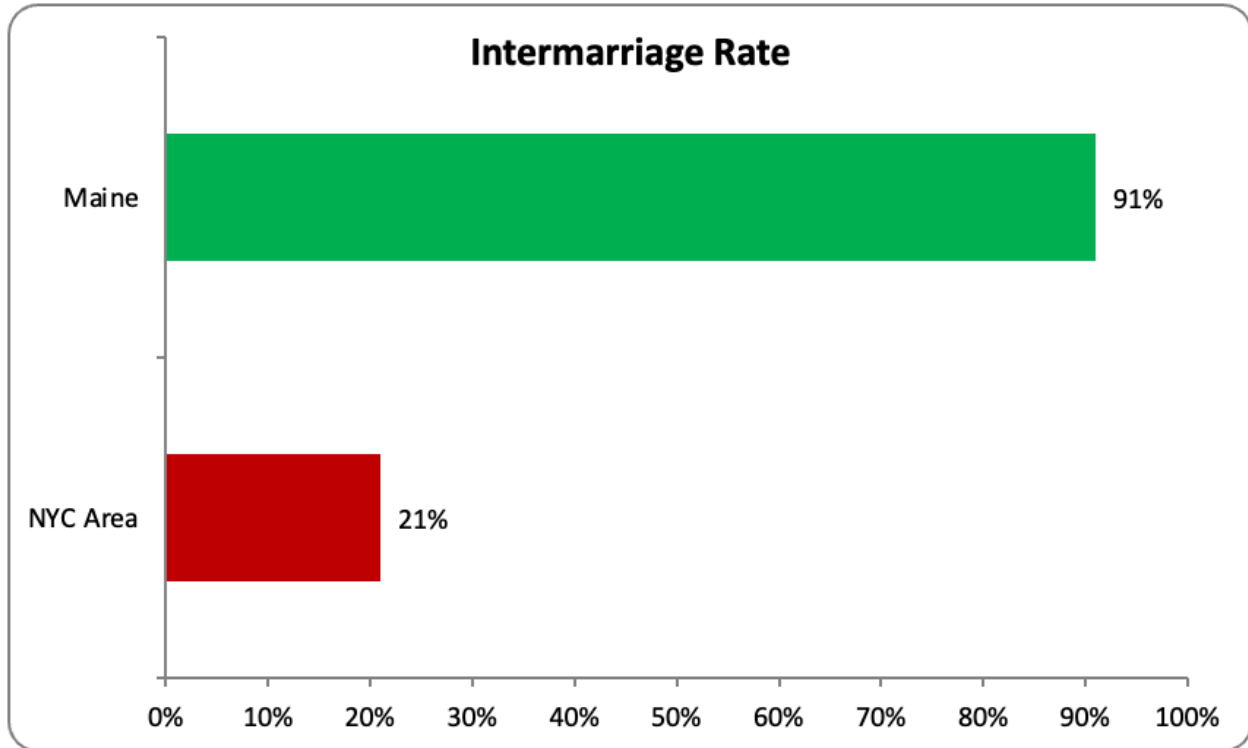
Sources: *Maine 2024 Jewish Community Study, Table 3.1*; *UJA-Federation NYC Area 2023 Community Study*

At first glance, Maine's 13% rate of monthly synagogue attendance appears significantly lower than New York's 25%, but that's not the whole story. New York's overall monthly attendance (25%) looks nearly double Maine's (13%), but that number is inflated by New York's large Orthodox population, who make up 19% of the community and attend synagogue at a rate of ~89%. Once you remove their contribution, the math tells a different story: New York's non-Orthodox Jews attend monthly at just 8% (blue bar). Maine, at 13%, actually beats them.



Sources: *Maine 2024 Jewish Community Study, Table 3.1*; *UJA-Federation NYC Area 2023 Community Study*

The same pattern holds for weekly Shabbat observance. New York's **28%** doubles Maine's **14%**, but once again, the Michigan Football All-Americans are doing most of the work. Orthodox households observe Shabbat at a rate of around **97%**. To compare more average football players to average football players, let's take the Orthodox out of the numbers. New York's non-Orthodox rate falls to **9.5%**. Maine, at **14%**, wins here too.



Sources: *Maine 2024 Jewish Community Study, Figure 4.3; UJA-Federation NYC Area 2023 Community Study*

91% of Maine intermarried families, in which one partner is not Jewish, consider their children to be Jewish. In New York, the comparable figure, measuring families actively raising their children Jewish by religion, is just **21%**. That is a **70-point gap** and, unlike every other measure in this study, it needs no Orthodox adjustment. Part of the gap may reflect how the two studies ask the question: the Maine study asks whether parents *consider* their children to be Jewish, while the New York study asks whether their children are *being raised* as Jews, so direct comparison requires some caution. But the scale of the difference is too large to be explained by methodology alone.

So why are Maine Jews more engaged?

Matthew Boxer, in his 2013 dissertation, *Jewish Identity on All Frontiers*, offers the most useful starting point. He said that Judaism functions as a “**contact sport**” in small communities, meaning a do-it-yourself practice where each person’s participation is essential to keeping institutions alive. In New York, any given synagogue runs without you. There are hundreds of others, dozens of rabbis, an entire ecosystem of Jewish infrastructure that carries on regardless of whether you show up. In Maine, your absence might be the difference between a minyan forming and not. That necessity, Boxer argues, creates something that money and density cannot manufacture: genuine personal investment in Jewish life. When the institution depends on you, you feel it differently than when it doesn’t.

But the “contact sport” argument only goes so far. It explains why Maine Jews show up to synagogue more, but it doesn’t explain why they mark Shabbat at home at higher rates, or why intermarried couples in Maine are so much more likely to raise their children Jewish. Those are private decisions made around kitchen tables, not synagogues.

In New York, Jewish identity can be almost entirely **passive**, absorbed without effort from the surrounding environment. Jewish holidays appear on school calendars. Neighborhoods, delis, and social networks carry Jewish presence without anyone having to choose it. But that passive model breaks down the moment you leave a high-density Jewish environment. In places like Maine, every expression of Jewish identity, marking Shabbat, raising children with Jewish traditions, and making the drive to synagogue, is a conscious, deliberate act. And when being Jewish requires that kind of active, repeated choice, the people still making it tend to mean it in a way that ambient Judaism simply doesn't demand.

Two New York natives who moved to Maine put it better than any statistic could. **Brandon Blinderman** told me, “The distance filters for commitment. The people who show up here really want to be there.” **Irwin Gratz** said it even more directly: “In New York, you're Jewish by osmosis. In Maine, you have to actively choose it — every single time.” That’s not just a poetic observation. It’s the mechanism behind every number in this study.

That same dynamic carries over into Shabbat observance as well. **Barbara Leopold**, who moved from Long Island, New York, to Maine with her family, said: “In Maine, you really have to be personally invested in your Judaism. It doesn’t come to you easily. You have to make the effort. We live about an hour from Waterville, so any synagogue we went to required a drive. And in a small synagogue, every person really matters. If you want a minyan or events, people have to show up and volunteer.” In New York, she had institutional resources, easily accessible Kosher Food, and a large synagogue with services many times a day. In Maine, she had to drive an hour to Beth Israel in Waterville and cook her own gefilte fish. Barbara makes it happen for her and her family. She is making an effort to be a part of this community, which is different than if she were still in New York.

The same pattern shows up in how intermarried families choose to raise their kids. **Jenny Ngidi-Brown**, said that when she arrived in Waterville in 2020, she made a deliberate decision: “I knew I wanted my kids to have a better understanding of Judaism than I did growing up. I want my kids to have access to that community in order for them to decide how much it means to them.” Jenny made a hard choice to build a more Jewish life, for herself and for her kids. It is not easy. But she keeps choosing it. In Maine, that is the only way it happens.

Sources

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