

Assessing the Impact of Jewish Youth Connection on Teen Engagement in Maine

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Introduction

Maine is a big state with a small Jewish community. For many Jewish teenagers here, the question isn't just whether they have access to Jewish life, it's whether they have access to other Jewish teens.

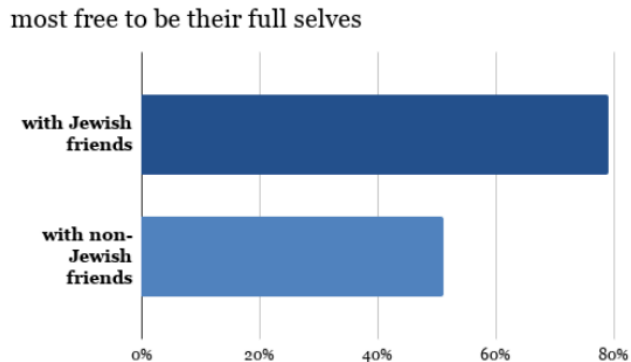
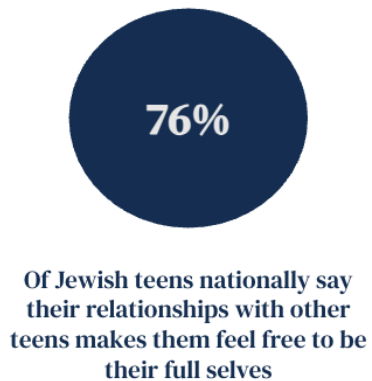
Jewish Youth Connection, or JYC, is a statewide program of the Center for Small Town Jewish Life that brings together Jewish teens from across Maine. It was created to address a problem that is both geographic and social: in a state where distance separates communities and Jewish teens are few, the ordinary adolescent experience of having peers who share your identity can feel out of reach.

A small community, spread thin.

Maine has roughly 1,000 Jewish teenagers aged 13 to 17, and the great majority live in one corner of the state. For teens outside Southern Maine, Jewish peers at their school or in their town may be rare or nonexistent. But even within the more concentrated areas, the community is small enough that many young people move through daily life without a single Jewish friend their own age.

This matters because adolescence is precisely when peer relationships become central to identity. Teenagers are figuring out who they are, and they do that, in large part, through the people around them. For Jewish teens in Maine, the challenge isn't only access to Jewish institutions. It's access to each other.

Why peers are the point



Source: BeWell National Study of Jewish Teens, Stanford University, 2025

Research confirms what many Jewish teens in Maine experience intuitively. A 2025 national study conducted with researchers at Stanford University asked Jewish teens: “Where, if anywhere, do you feel free to be your full self?” The results were striking: far more teens answered “with Jewish friends” than “with non-Jewish friends.” That gap matters. It suggests that for many Jewish teens, full self-expression doesn’t travel easily into their broader social world. In a state where most Jewish teens spend their days in predominantly non-Jewish environments, that finding carries real weight. Jewish identity doesn’t disappear in those settings, but it often has to stay quiet. There’s no one to share it with in the casual, unrehearsed way that actually makes identity feel real.

JYC exists to create that space.

What JYC offers

JYC is built around two types of programming, each blending learning and play, that move teens from acquaintances to genuine friendships over the course of a year.

The Shabbaton is central to what makes JYC distinctive. Spending a full weekend with peers creates a different kind of connection than a few hours at an event. In a geographically dispersed state, where teens may rarely see each other between programs, that concentrated time together matters.

“In Maine, you don’t see a lot of other Jews, honestly, especially when I switched to public school. I really liked the opportunity to connect with other Jewish teens here in Maine.”

_ Ren, JYC Participant

The year-round events sustain that connection, giving teens reasons to gather, shared experiences to build on, and a growing sense of a community that is genuinely theirs.

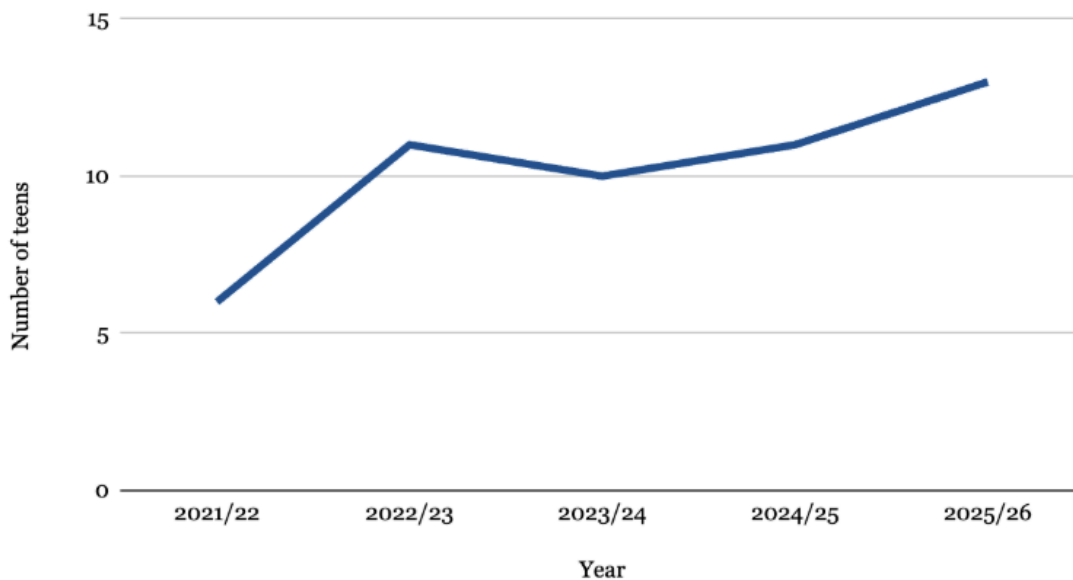
What makes JYC’s model work is that Jewish identity isn’t presented as a formal subject to be studied. It comes up in the middle of ordinary teen life. Eleanor, a JYC participant, described it simply:

“We were walking around in an arcade talking about God while playing air hockey.”
— Eleanor, JYC Participant

That kind of casual, embedded engagement is often harder to manufacture in structured religious education, and for many teens, it’s exactly what sticks.

Participation is growing, and there’s room to grow further

Teen participation in JYC events has doubled since 2021/22



Note: Participation figures are JYC program records; chart is illustrative of the trend reported in JYC data.

Since 2021/22, teen participation in JYC has doubled. The growth suggests something straightforward: when Jewish teens in Maine are offered opportunities to gather, they show up. Families are actively seeking programs that help their kids build Jewish friendships across the distances that separate them.

But the growth also points to how much further JYC can go. The program exists within a much larger landscape of unmet need.

Nine in ten Jewish K-12 students in Maine had no connection to a Jewish youth group or teen program in 2023-2024. That doesn't mean they're disconnected from Judaism, but it does mean most lacked structured opportunities to build Jewish peer relationships outside their families. JYC can be that entry point: a program that meets teens where they are, without requiring prior Jewish education or synagogue membership.

What the teens say

Beyond the participation numbers, JYC's impact shows up in how teens talk about what the program has meant to them. Two themes emerge consistently: friendship that feels irreplaceable, and a changed relationship to Jewish identity going forward.

On the friendships

“I have friends there now. There are people who I only really see because of JYC stuff, and I wouldn't miss that for the world.”

— Ren, JYC Participant

Ren's comment shows that JYC creates relationships that do not easily happen elsewhere in Maine. These friendships are not incidental to the program, but one of its central outcomes.

On their Jewish future

“If I hadn't done the JYC, I definitely wouldn't want to be more Jewish in my future. I'm going to try and find a Jewish community wherever I go to college. I really appreciate JYC and Jewish people everywhere—they're pretty cool people.”

— Eleanor, JYC Participant

Eleanor's comment is particularly striking. She isn't just describing a positive experience, she's describing a shift in how she sees her own Jewish future. JYC turned the Jewish community from something abstract into something she actively seeks out. That's a different outcome than attendance or retention. It's Jewish identity that teens are choosing, because they've experienced what it can feel like.

Parents notice it too. One JYC parent, Shana, described how the program connected her daughter to adult mentors, rabbis, and staff, who could support her Jewish questions in ways that complement what she receives at home: “I could only go so far with her. Mel and Rabbi could share even more and give her more resources.”

Looking Forward

JYC has demonstrated that Jewish teen life in Maine is possible, and that when teens are brought together, connection follows. The challenge now is scale.

In a geographically dispersed community, word of mouth may be the most powerful way to grow. If you know a Jewish family with a teen in Maine, a personal referral is genuinely meaningful, and it's one of the most direct ways to help JYC reach the young people it was built to serve.

To learn more or get involved, contact Mel Weiss at maweiss@colby.edu.

References

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Ren, interviewed by Allie Tarkoff, Spring 2026. Colby College, [Maine Jewish History Project](#).

Shana Bloomstein, interviewed by Allie Tarkoff, Spring 2026. Colby College, [Maine Jewish History Project](#).