

Jewishness as a Verb: Why Do So Many Jews in Maine Volunteer?

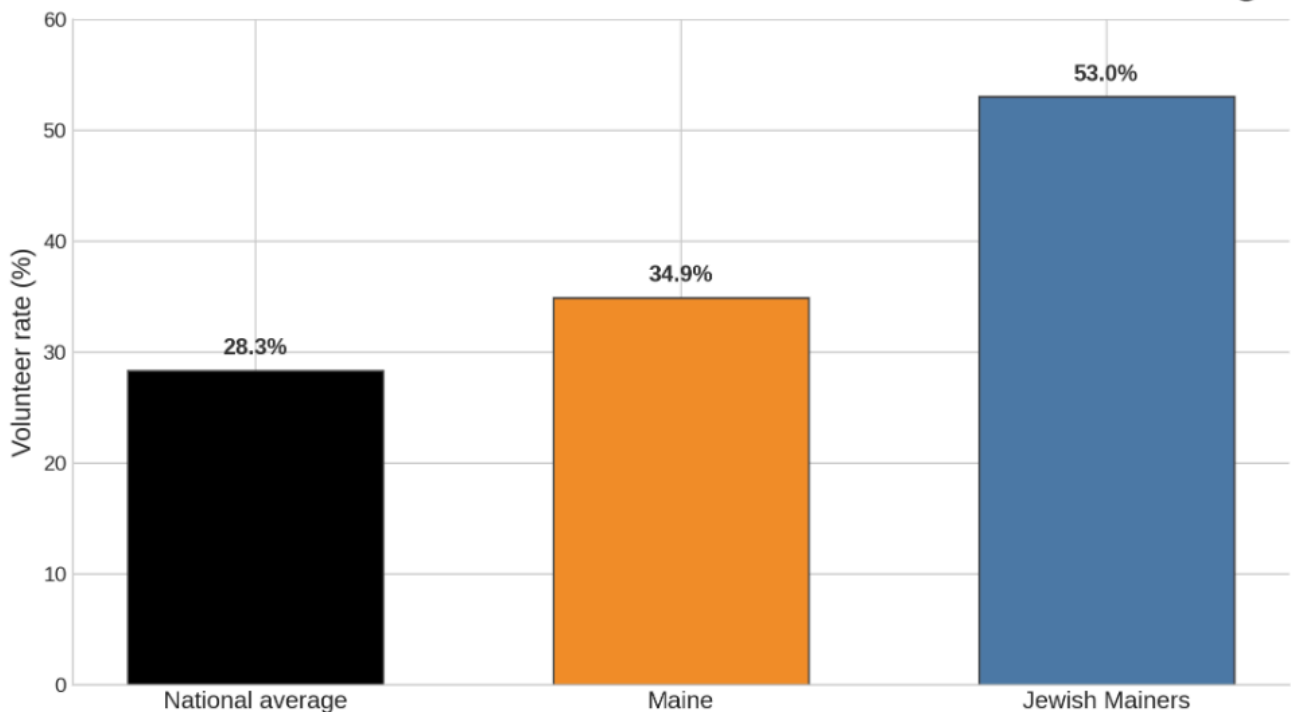
By Gabriel Huajardo

Traditionally, religious identity is viewed as something that happens primarily within the walls of a house of worship. However, in Maine, I discovered a profound shift. For the Jewish community in Maine, identity isn't just about prayer or spiritual practice; it's about doing the work. My research suggests that in Maine Jewishness has become a verb, not a noun.

The Striking Data

When looking at the numbers, the trend is clear. While the national average for volunteering in the United States stands at almost 29%, the Maine state average is even higher than that with almost 1 out of 3 people volunteering. Even more surprising, Jewish Mainers are in a league of their own with over half of the population of Jewish Mainers engaging in volunteer work.

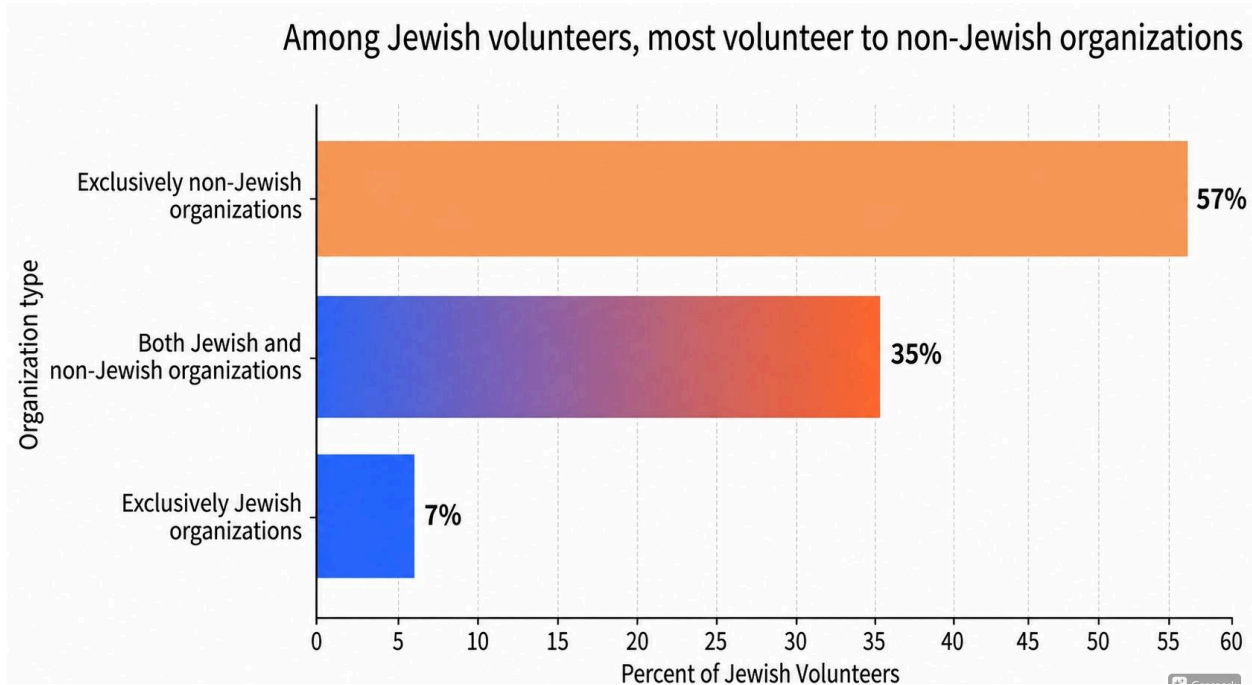
Jewish Mainers volunteer more than the U.S. and Maine's average



Where Is the Energy Going?

One might expect religious individuals to volunteer primarily for religious causes, but the data tells a different story. Only a small percentage of Jewish Mainers volunteer **exclusively** for Jewish organizations. Instead, the vast majority of Jewish Mainers volunteer **exclusively** for

secular, non-Jewish organizations. Even the number who volunteer to both Jewish and non-Jewish organizations is more than those who just volunteer to Jewish organizations. This demonstrates that Jewish philanthropy in Maine is universal and outward-facing, serving the entire state rather than just a particular group.



Why does this high volunteerism happen?

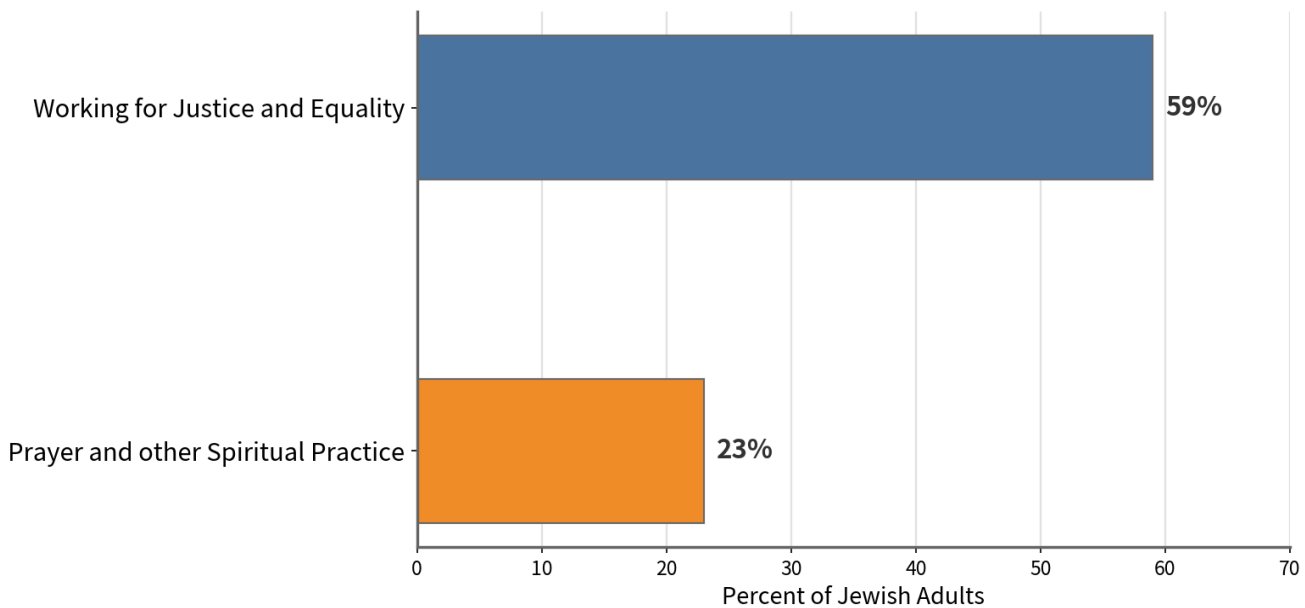
When asked questions about what Jewish Mainers believe is **essential** to being Jewish, there are big contrasts between different responses, one of them is how more than half of all Jewish adults in Maine believe that to work towards constructing a better society through solidarity and volunteerism is an essential component to be part of the Jewish community.

In comparison, less than half of that same number of all Jewish adults believe that prayer and other spiritual practice is essential to being Jewish.

Although these two are not the only indicatives of what Jewish people in Maine believe is essential to being Jewish, the discrepancy between these two numbers is what highlights the possible reason there are so many Jews in Maine who volunteer.

This reveals that Jewish Mainers are expressing their religious values through civic action, making their **actions speak louder than their words**.

There is a sharp contrast in what Jewish Mainers believe is essential to being Jewish



The National Framework: Redefining the “Good Jew”

To understand why modern Jewish Mainers favor action that benefits the community, it helps to look at a broader national sociological shift that began 70 years ago.

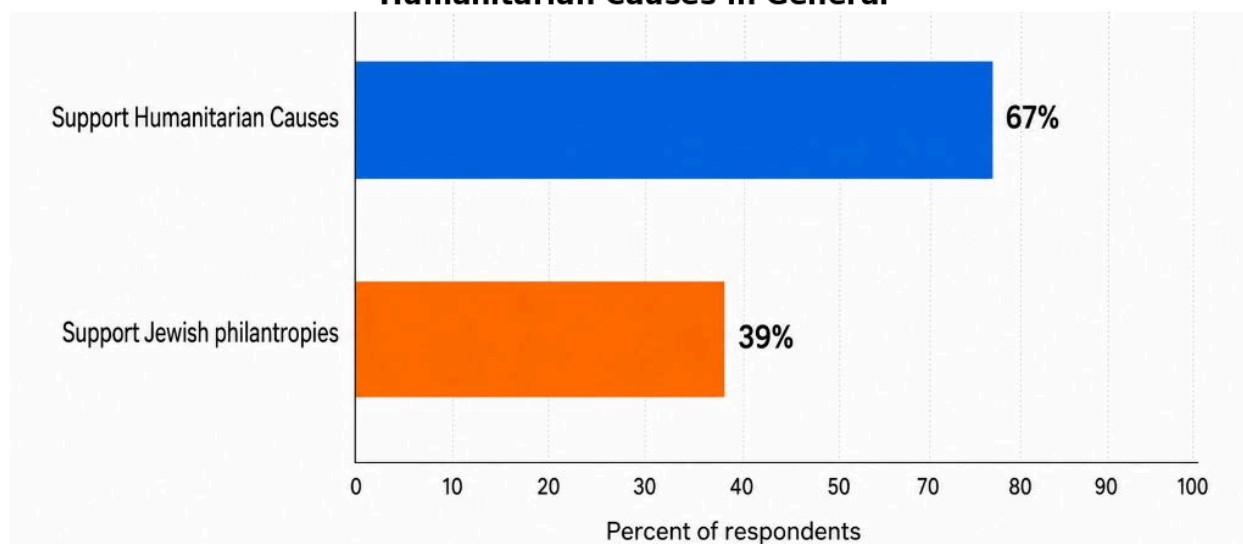
The "Good Jew" Model (1950s):

The preference for secular volunteering was first predicted in the late 1950s by Marshall Sklare in his "Lakeville" study, where he sought to locate trends that would define the future of American Jewish life.

He found that Jews were already redefining what it meant to be a “good jew”, for context, Sklare’s research question involved determining the characteristics that would make up the best version of a Jewish person. To do this, Sklare provided his respondents with a list of 22 different behaviors, practices, and attitudes. He asked them to categorize each item into one of four choices: **Essential**, **Desirable**, **Makes no difference**, or **Essential not to do** to be considered a "good Jew". This research would later inspire the 2024 Maine Jewish Community study.

Even 70 years ago, we still see the same trend of responses that we saw in Maine 2024 Jewish Community Study. Below we see data that highlights this trend which was conducted by Marshall Sklare.

According to Sklare, Among Jewish Respondents, More of Them Support Humanitarian Causes in General



Within these respondents, a high percentage of them believed that "supporting all humanitarian causes" was essential to being a good Jew. The data shows how even in the past, the general sentiment towards philanthropy fell under not just supporting Jewish causes but rather *all* causes. As Sklare says, "The true test of being a good Jew is not loyalty to the old sacramentalism but the extent to which an individual actualizes moral ideals" (Sklare, p.324). There is of course always the doubt of whether people are actually coming forward and helping the community, in the end, however, it is the responsibility of each individual to "practice what they preach".

Bridging Philanthropy and Volunteerism:

It is important to note that while Sklare's studies were centered around Lakeville, they still offer valuable insight into learning about Jewish philanthropy in Maine. Sklare's study provides a theory that explains Maine's modern practice. Because Maine's Jewish population is historically small and geographically dispersed, expressing a universalist desire to "Support all humanitarian causes" requires stepping outside the synagogue. In Maine, what Sklare predicted as an attitude becomes a daily, lived action.

Why High Volunteerism Isn't New for Jewish Mainers

While a 53% volunteer rate might seem like a modern phenomenon, it is actually the result of a decades-long historical trend. Research by sociologist Marshall Sklare alongside analysis from Colby College student Ginny Keesler, shows that for Maine's Jewish community, the transition from religious-only giving to universal community support began over 70 years ago.

1. From Gratitude to Principle

Keesler's research identifies two historical waves of this philanthropic spirit in Maine:

The Interwar Generation: Early 20th-century donors gave to secular institutions out of gratitude for the lack of discrimination they found in Maine compared to other regions.

The Modern Generation: Today's volunteers, like those in my study, give out of principle. They view social justice and community stability as the primary way to live out their values in a secular world.

2. The Legacy of Giving

2.1 The Alford Legacy: "Community is Number One"

In Maine, this history is visible in the physical landscape. One clear example is how Jewish philanthropy has benefited educational centers like Colby College, where Philanthropist Harold Alford showed how he was a pioneer of the "universalist" approach. His philosophy was simple: *"The community is number one."*

Instead of funding only Jewish-specific institutions, Harold Alford and his family funded multiple charitable organizations, some examples include athletic centers, tracks, and residence halls at Colby College and other institutions. This reflects a broader, shared principle among Jewish Mainers across generations: the deeply held belief that a meaningful impact is made when serving the entire population.

2.2 The Lunder Influence: Civic Art and Education

Similarly, the Lunder family transformed the Colby Museum of Art. Their philanthropy wasn't about promoting a specific religion; it was about providing a gift to the children and residents of Waterville. By donating massive collections of American art, they ensured that the local community had access to cultural resources that were previously unavailable in rural Maine.

Human Voices Across Maine

Now that we know Jews in Maine have been involved in volunteering and philanthropy for decades, it's important to know what the volunteers in the present think. To understand the individual side of these statistics, I spoke with community members from Portland to Wilton. A repeating sentiment of accountability and presence emerged:

Sam and Bette Novick (Portland)

The Novicks are prominent figures in the Portland community, representing a long legacy of Jewish business ownership and civic leadership.

Sam is the third-generation owner of Hub Furniture, a family-owned business in Portland that has been operating for over 100 years. His wife, Bette was born in Bangor, Maine, and moved to Portland at age 12. She and Sam met when they were teenagers and have been married for 55 years. Much of their volunteer work is rooted in the Jewish concept of *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world).

They view their business not just as a commercial entity but as a way to connect with and help the community, often performing "anonymous" mitzvahs (good deeds) to support those in need. When interviewed, they both shared similar thoughts on philanthropy and more importantly volunteering. Bette Novick remarked how volunteering has essentially become part of her life, she says how "If all you did was go to work and come home, it would be quite boring". This shows how volunteering for her is more than simply an obligation but a choice she likes to follow.

Sam Novick echoes this sentiment by stating the importance of volunteerism, his remarks could be summarized by a call to action, saying "My feeling is that if everybody would just do one little thing to help someone else, it would be fabulous".

For Sam and Bette, volunteerism can start as simple as doing one small act of kindness, which can snowball into a positive impact that helps out the entire community.

Andrew Lardie (Brunswick)

Andrew represents the intersection of professional social service and Jewish values of accountability. Before moving into social services, Andrew had a background in education, serving as a math and science teacher and working in student affairs at several schools. While working at Bowdoin College as a volunteer coordinator, he discovered Tedford Housing, a Brunswick-based agency addressing homelessness. He began as a

volunteer, eventually joined the staff, and has served as the Executive Director for nearly three years.

His current focus involves expanding shelters and developing strategies for homelessness prevention across a multi-county area. He explicitly links his Jewish identity to his sense of community responsibility, viewing his professional work as a form of accountability to his neighbors. Additionally, he remarks how specifically living in Maine has allowed to see the impact of his own work first-hand, he remarks “In a small community every person matters, if you don’t step up, things simply won’t happen”.

Barbara Leopold (Wilton)

Barbara provides a view on maintaining a deeply Jewish life in a rural setting where the community is small but highly dedicated.

She explains that in rural Maine, Jewish engagement isn't just a choice, it's a responsibility. Because her local community is small, she notes that "if you don't step up, things simply won't happen" regarding everything from welcoming new members to supporting families during religious practices. Her quote represents a very important theme for Jewish Mainers, strength in numbers. In a small community, it is essential for everybody to put in the work, this is how progress is done within a community, through teamwork.

Rachel Ackoff (Portland)

Rachel’s history highlights the intersection of professional activism and a modern, politically engaged Jewish identity.

Her quote “Maine is such a small place that Maine really notices if you’re here” stems from her experience that the state's small scale makes it easier for individuals to have a visible, meaningful impact. This was a common sentiment among Jewish Mainers who were interviewed about volunteerism, having a small community lets you see the positive impact it can have, which only motivates you to keep helping your community and watch it prosper.



Conclusion

Ultimately, this research shows that the Jewish community in Maine has successfully shown how they expressed their identity through action. Volunteerism and philanthropy has become an essential part of the way they live life. It represents an effort towards expressing their Jewish identity through works that not only benefit their own people but the entire community. Whether it is Andrew Lardie's professional work with homelessness at Tedford Housing or Sam and Bette Novick's legacy of giving through their 100-year-old business, Hub Furniture, volunteering is how Maine Jews stay visible and relevant.

In Maine, you don't have to be in a synagogue to be Jewish, you just have to show up for your neighbor.

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