

**Looking Back, Thinking Forward:
How Jewish Summer Camps Shape Youth Religious
and Ethnic Identity**

**An Honors Thesis for the
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ABSTRACT

Past research shows that in the wake of widespread structural assimilation in the mid-20th century, Jewish leaders and adults began to worry about ethnic and religious dilution. One of their “top down” responses was to strengthen community ethnic institutions, including by establishing a large network of summer camps, intended to expose Jewish youth to Jewish cultural and religious practices, as well as other young Jews. A few pioneering scholars have studied these camps specifically, focusing on their number, structure, and goals. Nevertheless, little is known about how Jewish youth understand, interpret, and make sense of their religious and ethnic identity within the context of Jewish summer camps -- from the “bottom up”, through their own perspectives. The present study utilizes in-depth interviews with 21 Jewish campers and counselors at one summer camp in 2021 to explore this question. I argue that even in a quickly secularizing society, the opportunities that Jewish summer camps present for youth encourages them to actively express their Judaism on their own accord in adulthood, regardless of previous religious background or community ties. I then discuss my argument’s implications for the existing literature and future research.

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Introduction

Picture this: the late July humidity in the Midwest is overwhelming, but that isn't stopping ninety four year old's from running at full speed across camp in a horde of all-black clothing to a fifteen foot wooden wall. It's time for the yearly Wall Climb, one of those strange traditions that happened at my Jewish summer camp without a concrete origin story, where all the incoming ninth graders are hoisted over the otherwise untouched wall as quickly as possible while being spectated by everyone else. As music blasts over a portable speaker and everyone is cheering deafeningly loud, one by one our names are called in a previously arranged order, leaving the strongest who can pull themselves up by their arm strength alone to the end. I don't remember much about the Wall Climb itself other than the anticipation of seeing my friends in front of me being hoisted up and over, and then jumping off the hands of my counselors when my turn came around. However, the loud cheers of "8:34! 8:34!" after the final jumper was over the wall solidified our unit's place both in camp's history and in my mind; existing teenage cliques, petty drama, and general exhaustion put aside for a brief moment. Our time would be a pride point for as large of a unit as we were, showing cohesiveness and collegiality among some strangers and some longtime friends after only a few weeks of being thrown together. And unsurprisingly, the numbers "8:34" would be written on the walls of our cabins alongside our names at summer's end. It was interesting how a timestamp on a stopwatch defined so much in one space at one point in time.

I thought about this a lot over the next few years, as one summer of not returning to camp turned into what has now become seven, more years than I attended Jewish overnight camp in the first place. There were times that final summer, my third at Camp Tzachak (a pseudonym) and sixth at overnight camp in general, where I truly felt like a part of a strong community of

people like me: Jewish, curious, social, and eager to meet, learn from, and connect with others. I felt empowered to express my Judaism in new ways, experiences that were not available to me at Jewish Day School and within my family's Jewish social networks back at home in the Bay Area. But there was always a sense of being on the outside, both in a physical sense during the rest of the year, and in a social one when it came to understanding the nuances of the community I was essentially playing visitor in, even though theoretically, camp was just as much my space as it was for those who spent the rest of the year in Minnesota. I loved my years at Jewish summer camp; having a place to go each summer where the only goals were to have fun and spend time with other Jewish kids was a privilege that I hope to pay forward in my adult years. However, camp never felt like *my* place in the way that it seemed to for the other campers around me, and I spent years questioning why. As someone who has always better understood myself through pulling together the facts and finding the story within it, what else was I to do besides putting together the pieces of the puzzle through research?

While the academic literature on Jewish summer camps is miniscule compared to other topics on Jewish social life, what currently exists is approached from a “top-down”, leadership-oriented perspective. The information we have and the analysis conducted also comes from the perspective of a generation of Jews that have structurally assimilated, but still maintain close familial and community ties to those whose existence as Jewish people were threatened by the horrors of the Holocaust in Europe, and extreme anti-Semitism in the United States. My generation has been fortunate enough to be raised with the existence of the State of Israel as a given, little widespread anti-Semitism until relatively recently, and most importantly, the opportunity to be able to choose when to express our Judaism in an increasingly secular society, which I will show later is characteristic of an embodied way of life called symbolic ethnicity

(Gans, 1979). Compared to our parents and grandparents, we experienced a different version of American Judaism that possibly requires a renewed approach in understanding the manifestation of our religious and cultural identity.

From summer camps' websites and the existing academic literature, we know what the key, "top down" goals of these camps are: to help Jewish youth foster a stronger and deeper connection to Judaism both inside and outside of the camp sphere, mainly through encouraging the development of positive Jewish social networks and relationships, alongside education about key tenets of the Jewish faith in a "light" or fun setting. However, there is relatively little information to date on how Jewish youth themselves perceive the experience of going to Jewish summer camp. Through 21 in-depth, semi-structured interviews I conducted in 2021 with former campers and current staff at Camp Tzachak (a pseudonym), plus a content analysis of promotional videos and camp website text as supplementary material, I attempt to fill this gap. Specifically, I ask the following two interrelated questions: How do these youth understand, make sense of, and navigate the larger camp efforts to socialize them into Jewish faith and networks? Second, how do these experiences in turn shape these youth's sense of ethnic and religious identity? I find that while youth enter camp with a range of Jewish backgrounds, experiences, and observance levels, ultimately, Jewish summer camps offer them a level playing field to explore their identities in a safe space. This experience leaves many of them with a positive association with their Judaism that carries on into early adulthood, regardless of previous community-based ties or experiences.

In what follows, I first outline in Chapter 1 the historical context surrounding Jewish youths' rising numbers in Jewish summer camps by the beginning of the 21st century, beginning with an overview of large-scale Jewish immigration to the United States in the late 1800s to early

1900s, of Jewish Americans' experiences of structural assimilation and upward mobility over the mid-century while simultaneously experiencing ongoing anti-Semitism and fear of annihilation after the Holocaust, and of the community's renewed focus on the importance of religious ethnic retention by the late 20th century, including through primary and secondary socializing institutions such as synagogues, families, schools and summer camps. I end by detailing the rise in Jewish summer camps in particular, focusing on their main missions and goals, as set up by community leaders and adults.

Next, in Chapter 2 I provide an overview of my study's research methods, discussing my site selection, purposive sampling strategy for the in-depth interviews, and process for conducting my content analysis as well as my coding the data. Here, I also begin introducing readers to my respondents: the campers and "Key Informants" who participated in my study.

Chapters 3 through 5 present my main findings. In Chapter 3, I start by introducing the two typologies into which my camper respondents generally fall: those campers I call *the Embedded* and those campers I call *the Self-Determined*. Here, I provide deeper context into my respondents' Jewish backgrounds and experiences and present the framework that informs their approaches to various aspects of community, camp, culture, and religion.

In Chapter 4, I walk backwards to compare my camper respondents' discussions of their experiences at camp based on the aforementioned typologies. Overall, both groups say they enjoyed their time at camp. However, I find that due to differences between the typologies in their reasons for initially attending camp, plus the ways in which they are situated with respect to Jewish institutions outside of camp and to their peers inside of camp creates variety in their perception of their experiences.

In Chapter 5, I then take a more retrospective view showing where my camper respondents are now and how they generally think about their Judaism today, in early adulthood. I examine their perspectives in regard to their previous and current institutional involvement, the connection that they draw between religion and community, as well as the nuances of maintaining a relationship with Israel in contemporary Jewish life.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I tie up my argument that Jewish summer camps allow people to have a common shared experience that encourages them to express their Judaism on their own accord, regardless of previous background, experience, or existing communal ties. My data illustrates that though my respondents are experiencing a different context than the generations before them did in terms of Jewish expression, socialization efforts that began in the 1970s are continuing to work. Finally, through my concluding discussion, I will explain how my thesis builds on the previous literature, implications that the research may have for future academic studies on a similar topic, and how this work may inform the Jewish community outside of academia.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

In this thesis I aim to understand how Jewish youth navigate and make personal meaning of Jewish leaders' and adults' efforts to socialize them within Jewish religious and ethnic institutions and community, most specifically at Jewish summer camps. Compared to their parents' and grandparents' generations, Jewish young adults in the twenty-first century may have different priorities when it comes to maintaining and expressing their Judaism. At this point, Jewish people have structurally assimilated into American society as they are perceived as White, overall have high levels of educational and occupational attainment, and have influence in many sectors of American life. Yet, their parents and grandparents had certain experiences that led them to encourage and create summer camps to operate as a key site of socialization and ethnic retention. To be able to understand how these camps grew, and how they operate and with what purpose, we first need knowledge about the history of Jewish immigration and their early settlement within the United States, about Jewish immigrants' initial experiences of facing anti-Semitism and structural barriers to upward mobility, about Jewish Americans' intergenerational path toward structural assimilation over the 20th century, and following that, the emergence of efforts to retain Jewish religious and ethnic identity at the end of the 20th century.

The History of Jewish Migration to the United States

The story of modern Jewish life in the United States begins between the years of 1881 and 1928, a period in which almost 2.5 million Jewish people immigrated to the United States alongside a wave of immigrants from other countries in Southern and Eastern Europe (Tevis, 2016; Lopez et. al, 2015). While there were some communities of Western European Jews mainly from Germany already present, it was proportionally small before the 1880s. Most of these immigrants came to the United States from Eastern European countries such as Russia,

Romania, Poland, and Austria-Hungary; while some did arrive from other parts of Western Europe, they often were previous transplants from Eastern Europe (Gold, 1999). The ‘May Laws’ had been implemented in 1873 by Czar Alexander III, forcing Jewish people within the Russian Empire to live within an area called the ‘Pale of Settlement’ in the Western area of the empire, curtailing their already restrictive economic and civil rights in these territories; along with destructive pogroms that were carried out on Jewish villages after Czar Alexander II’s death, the dangerous rise in anti-Semitism left many Jewish people no choice but to leave Europe or continue to suffer in the shtetls. During the great wave of immigration, half of Russia’s immigrants to the United States were Jewish. Because of the knowledge that Jewish people were coming to the United States with no intention to return to the old country, they were considered to be refugees (Gold, 1999; Center for Israel Education, 2022).

However, this wave of immigration came to an end under the 1921 and 1924 Quota Acts, implemented by nativists to mimic the ethnic composition of the United States in 1890, back when the initial colorizing wave of U.S.-bound immigration was underway and Northern Europeans were the largest group of immigrants. At this point, over 13.9 million people had immigrated, making the foreign-born population 13% of the American composition (Alba and Nee, 2003; Lopez et. al, 2015). The 1921 Quota Act was the first law to assign a numerical quota on immigration; from 350,000 to 165,000 immigrants per year here on forward. In 1924, the law was amended to add stricter quotas for each European country. The quotas had some exemptions; highly skilled immigrants, domestic servants, and certain specialized workers were still allowed to come to the United States. It also became required that immigrants that were sixteen years old or older had to be literate to immigrate. Nevertheless, even with the quotas, 350,000 Jewish people were still able to enter the United States between 1924 and 1965, when

many of these laws were eventually lifted (Lopez et. al, 2015; Gold, 1999). Many Jewish people were turned away, however, even during the atrocities of World War II. For Jewish people that were already in the United States though, in 1940, the United States Census expanded the legal definition of Whiteness to include European immigrants and their children, rather than solely 'natives' (i.e. descendants of Northwestern, Protestant Europeans). This opened up access to material and political resources that supported Jews' upward mobility and structural assimilation. Overall, because of legislation and a simultaneous lack of distinct ethnic groups entering the United States, between the 1920s and 1960s, ethnic Europeans became Whites both by law and in practice, and other groups became more racialized (Brodkin, 1998; Jacobson, 1998).

Jews' Empirical Experiences of Structural Assimilation

Robert Park and E.W. Burgess were the first scholars to coin the term assimilation as we know it today; they defined it as a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and other attitudes of different persons and groups, and by sharing their experience and history become incorporated with them in a common cultural life. They argue that the process of assimilation brought ethnic minorities into mainstream American life. Robert Park also developed the concept of social assimilation: a process by which people of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritages occupy a common territory and achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence. Regardless of type of assimilation, it's argued that the process of acculturation must occur first: efforts to move towards the core culture of the society a person is aiming to be a part of; in the case of this wave of immigration, this would entail embracing stereotypical American values and customs (cited in Alba and Nee, 2003)

Theories about European assimilation amongst scholars varied. Some believed that the longer a group was in the United States, the easier it would be to become a White American; Italians, Greeks, Poles, and Slavs, who came to the United States in droves at the same time as Eastern European Jews, all became White over time, both culturally and by law. However, the initial residential isolation of European Ethnic groups threatened to keep them as 'others' forever, and were initially seen by Northern and Western Europeans and their descendants as a different race (Waters, 1990; Alba, 1990; Lieberman, 1980). Through the structural assimilation that European ethnic groups and their descendants experienced, expressing ethnicity or ethnic identity is a choice by the individual, even if there are social influences that affect that choice (Alba, 1990). However, Jews are sometimes presented as possibly being an exception to generalities made about other European ethnic groups. In comparison to other groups that came from South and Central Europe, Jewish people still face high levels of discrimination and anti-Semitism despite having structurally assimilated. In addition, religion and ethnicity are uniquely tied for the Jewish people, leading to more institutional structures in place to preserve the culture (Alba, 1990).

Before the Quota Acts, the majority of Jewish people stayed in New York after their initial intake at Ellis Island; New York still has the largest Jewish population in the United States today. In the first years after large groups arrived in the United States, many Jews lived in isolated ethnic enclaves in New York's Lower East Side, crowding into tenement houses where diseases such as tuberculosis and diabetes were rampant. There were aspects of Jewish communal life that aided them in upward mobility, but these occurred in tandem with being given the status of Whiteness by law, as well as arriving in the United States at a time when the manufacturing economy was rapidly expanding under industrialism, which created many factory jobs (Brodkin, 1998). Similarly to many immigrant families, women and children were very

active in the urban workforce, mainly in garment assembly and pushcart peddling, for which products were purchased from Jewish wholesalers, keeping the income within the community. However, unlike many of the other White ethnics that arrived at the same time, many Jewish families with school-age children arrived intact because they were escaping the old country, rather than having one parent come alone to work with the family following them later on. Children attended American schools at a higher rate because of Jew's high value of education; two-thirds of immigrant Jewish children spoke English, compared to twenty-nine percent of other immigrants. By 1934, even though Jewish people were only one-third of New York's population, half of the women in New York's colleges were Jewish. While not often part of the narrative, organized crime in the 1920s and 1930s also played a role in financial security for certain families, and the gangster Meyer Lansky became a household name. These aspects of life combined with Jewish families tending to implement family planning methods made more immigrant families financially stable, leading them to have an easier time becoming upwardly mobile (Gold, 1999; Brodtkin, 1998). Before World War Two, there was not a great deal of upward mobility for Jewish people as a whole; those who attained it were special among Jews, and for the most part Jewish people were working class in regards to their occupation, residential, and social levels (Brodtkin, 1998).

However, this changed after the Second World War. The United States had the strongest economy in the world in the post-war years, and corporations boomed. Along with the passage of the GI Bill making higher education more accessible for Whites, the American Dream was able to come to fruition for most White ethnics, leading to upward mobility for groups that had previously lived in ethnic enclaves and struggled socioeconomically before the war. However, this was not the case for all groups; because Jews were now White by law, they were given

opportunities that Blacks and other BIPOC groups were not. The lack of quotas in higher education institutions led to a decline of Jewish small businesses and a larger proportion of Jewish professionals. With their newfound wealth, Jews moved out of urban ethnic enclaves and into the suburbs with their fellow Jewish White ethnics who had also structurally assimilated (Brodkin, 1998; Waters, 1990). Jewish people were fiercely loyal to their new country, and wanted to be thought of as the same as White Americans. Zionism was unpopular among American Jews until the 1930s, until the need for a Jewish state for those facing increasing anti-Semitism in Europe was obvious. However, even then it was seen as a need to help an ‘other,’ rather than all Jews. Daily Jewish practices that would now be considered as Orthodoxy fell to the wayside to make way for less obtrusive denominational movements, now known as the Reform and Conservative branches. Edward Shapiro cites Sociologist Erich Rosenthal in noting that at this point in time, Jewish people had begun the process of acculturation by taking on the values and customs of the general American public (Shapiro, 1997). Finally, in what became the impetus for a renewed interest from Jewish leadership in socializing Jewish youth, intermarriage became more commonplace. In the context of Jewish people, before the 1960s only a small percentage of Jewish people married outside of the religion due to shared norms and an expectation of marrying Jewish. The idea of intermarriage was appreciated because of the implied notion of structurally integrating, but raised new dilemmas due to a larger percentage of homes in which Jewish ethnicity had the risk of disappearing due to inaction. Scholars studying assimilation argue that intermarriage plays a role in muddling the ideas held surrounding ethnic identity. In Richard Alba’s book, he notes that three-quarters of White marriages accounted for in the 1980 census had some inter-ethnic crossing; intermarriage can lead to a lack of ethnic expression. Today, over half of today’s American Jews marry outside of the religion. Marrying

within the religion and culture keeps power within the ethnic group, making sure that it does not disappear. Because of structural assimilation, Judaism became an aspect of life that had to be chosen, which has led to a resurgence of institutional efforts to introduce young Jewish people to each other (Alba, 1990; Alba and Nee, 2003; Domhoff, 2009).

The Rise of Symbolic Ethnicity and Jewish Socialization

Sociologist Herbert Gans (1979) was the first major theorist to argue that Americans perceive themselves undergoing cultural homogenization, and that because of this, White Ethnics are embodying what he calls symbolic ethnicity. Symbolic ethnicity stems from two very American desires: a desire for community combined with a desire for aspects of life to contribute to one's individuality. However, scholars have discovered that American Ethnics need to be members of voluntary institutions to maintain their ethnic identity, or else they will not find the sense of community that leads them to become vulnerable to assimilation and feelings of ethnic loss. (Waters, 1990). Gans (1979) argues that identity cannot exist separately from a group, and that symbols are part of embracing culture; symbolic ethnicity is the persistence of these ethnic groups and cultures accompanied by structural assimilation and integration. Stanley Lieberson (1980) notes in his book *A Piece of the Pie* that for people of color, their skin color makes their lack of Whiteness very visible; however, by the third and fourth generations after immigration, European ethnics were much more easily able to shed their ethnic markers upon immigration to the United States, such as dialect, clothing, and customs, giving them the ability to perform Whiteness and simultaneously embrace aspects of their ancestral culture when it was most beneficial and convenient. These products of structural assimilation were also supported by legislation put in place making White ethnics officially White by law (Brodkin, 1998). In the third generation after immigration, when there tends to be little to no familial conflict with acting

‘American,’ ethnic culture then became a novelty that could be considered voluntary. There is little practical reason for third-generation White ethnics to maintain their place in an ethnic community once they have structurally assimilated, which is why positive aspects of ethnicity are the ones that are typically more readily embraced (Gans, 1979). Because of this, when Whites emphasize wanting an all-encompassing ethnic community, they are referring to the positive aspects of it, such as strong relationships with others, holiday and food-related activities, and community opportunities.

From his studies that he conducted on the development of ethnic identity, Richard Alba outlines mundane ways of embodying it into one’s life, which creates culture through action: eating ethnic foods, holiday rituals, using the mother tongue intertwined with English language, and attending ethnic social clubs, among others. These activities are needed to sustain ethnicity and a culture that stems from it because if identity is not reflected in a person’s actions or life experience, ethnicity then becomes truly symbolic, and the person is not doing anything to actively preserve the culture. One in particular that is often used in the Jewish community is called ‘ethnic signaling’ which is intertwining the mother language into English; in Jewish culture, this is when Yiddish and Hebrew words are interwoven into everyday vocabulary in American Jewish communities and institutions (Alba, 1990; Domhoff, 1998). Others include the celebration of popular and more light-hearted Jewish holidays such as Hanukkah and Purim, visiting the ancestral homeland through youth group-sponsored Israel trips or for free through Taglit-Birthright, feeling a special sense of connection with other Jews, discussing Jewish topics, or feeling strongly about certain issues because of Jewish background (Shain et. al, 2013, Alba, 1990).

However, for Jews, becoming White by law and in practice cannot be separated from the memory of the atrocities of the Holocaust in Europe, and ongoing experiences of anti-Semitism at home (Jacobson, 1998). This sentiment led to elders becoming worried about the possibility that future generations might forget this history, which led to establishing more widespread implementation of Jewish socializing institutions for youth, such as youth groups, Jewish Day Schools, and summer camp. These institutions were and are intended to foster social contacts within the ethno-religious group, leading to friendships with a foundation of shared experiences and a sense of ethnic distinctiveness as a member of a minority group, leading to a collective pride in one's Jewish identity (Gans, 1979; Alba, 1990; Sullivan, 2014). Without Jewish institutions and social structures, Jewish leaders worried that ethnicity could become something completely private. Creating ethnic experiences through institutions like the synagogue, youth group and summer camp were then viewed as crucial for cultural survival, especially for younger generations (Alba, 1990).

The twentieth century was a time of many trials and tribulations but also triumphs for the Jewish people: the recentering of Jewish life from Europe to North America, the murder of six million Jews under Hitler's regime during the Holocaust, and the foundation of the State of Israel, which then became one of two centers of Jewish life worldwide. These events combined with existing anti-Semitism in the United States on arrival in the forms of residential and occupational discrimination shaped the integration experience for Jews differently compared to other White Ethnics (Gold, 1999). Before World War Two, anti-Semitism was extremely common in the United States as part of a broader pattern of racism and nativism towards all groups coming from Southern and Eastern Europe (Brodkin, 1998). In the media, huge figures such as Henry Ford and Father Charles Coughlin publicly made comments regarding Jewish

people leading to national denigration. In higher education, Harvard's President Abbott Lawrence Lowell reduced the Jewish population to fifteen percent because he felt like there were too many Jews; even without the quota decades later, it was still more difficult for Jewish people to obtain admission. Studies of the job markets in Los Angeles and Chicago in the 1950s noted that seventeen to twenty percent of job postings requested non-Jewish applicants. Up through the 1960s, there was plenty of social discrimination as well, with institutionally based exclusion of Jews from social clubs (Gold, 1999). The memory of these pernicious sentiments towards Jews, even as Jewish Americans have structurally assimilated over time into U.S. society, is a key driver behind Jewish elders' desires to build supportive socializing institutions that can instill in Jewish youth both greater knowledge of their faith but also connections to other Jews.

It must be noted that much of the focus of these Jewish institutions are young people, and adolescents in particular. This is no coincidence: in her dissertation on the history of Jewish summer camps, Sandra Fox argues that Jewish life tends to be youth-centered because Jewish elders believe that the life of Judaism is centered around preserving the next generation (Fox, 2018). Similarly, in David Bryfman's dissertation on the connection of religion and peer groups, he notes that the primary objective of educational institutions is for older adults to impart knowledge onto younger people. Education is pertinent in identity formation, and if young people resonate with it, especially if they can take on an active role within an institution, they feel a greater sense of responsibility and affinity towards those institutions and identify more closely with their values (Bryfman, 2009). The dominant paradigm surrounding exposure to Jewish institutions in childhood and adolescence is 'more is more': the greater and varied exposure that a person has to Judaism as a child, the greater the likelihood is that they will maintain a connection to Judaism throughout their life because it is part of their habitus

(Bryfman, 2009; May, 2013). This is important for the continuity of the culture, because if someone does not have exposure to these institutions and subsequently does not have an intervening experience in their early twenties, such as Taglit-Birthright, a free ten-day educational trip to Israel, there is a very slim chance that it will be passed on to the next generation (Shain et. al, 2013).

Aspects of life that these institutions aim to influence can include social ties, social structures, and political affiliations. Because of ties to Israel that have been passed down through the generations, Jewish people are unusually likely to be part of Jewish-based political activities because Israel and politics have become intertwined because Jewish people feel that their own ancestry and identity might be threatened if Israel did not exist or was potentially destroyed. It is also known that Jewish ethnic ties tend to be denser than other White ethnic groups; it has been proven that most Jewish people have at least one Jewish friend, likely because of how Jewish institutions are set up to facilitate Jewish relationships (Alba, 1990; Gans, 1979). If a person's world remains ethnically homogeneous, their ethnic salience will remain high if they are surrounded by those who are members of the same ethnic group, although it is also the case that ethnicity becomes salient when a person is in a heterogeneous group as well. This truth manifests even more intensely in total institutions such as Jewish summer camps: a place of residence or work where like-situated individuals are isolated from the rest of society for a notable period of time and maintain a distinct culture within it. (Waters, 1990; Goffman, 1961, cited in Davies, 1989). These intentional efforts at fostering a distinct ethnic identity amongst young Jews have proven important in the face of growing anti-Semitism today. While it does not erase the history of the trials and tribulations of Jewish people in the United States, it gives them a foundation to bond together over to fight against it.

Jewish Summer Camps: How We Got Here

Jewish summer camps are one of the key sites where Jewish community leaders and elders intend to foster Jewish identity and social ties. The first Jewish summer camp was founded back in 1893 (Zola and Lorge, 2006). But after World War Two and the Holocaust, as well as increased assimilation into American society, American Jewish leaders became increasingly anxious in deciding how to preserve and reproduce ‘authentic Judaism’ after it became clear that structural assimilation might prevent it from manifesting itself when American Jews began to attain increased upward mobility (Fox, 2018). These Jewish leaders believed that authentic Judaism could not be produced in a wholly American environment, leading elders to believe that summer camps could manifest as a necessary tool to immerse young Jews in their culture while still reaping the benefits of structural assimilation, even if only temporarily. At camp, Judaism and Jewish values are intended to be everywhere, making it so that one does not need to go out of their way and potentially make sacrifices to embody Judaism and incorporate it into their daily routine. The intention behind this is to lead to a more positive association with their ethnicity compared to doing so in secular society, where time at synagogue or youth group takes away from other responsibilities. As camps began to develop into a formal-yet-informal educational institution, another objective manifested: informal and fun Jewish education while socializing with other Jews, which has become a goal of most Jewish socializing institutions today (Fox, 2018; Gans, 1979; Bryfman, 2009).

According to Leonard Saxe and Amy Sales’ 2002 study *Limud by the Lake*, the criterion for defining a summer camp as Jewish are that the camp has Jewish owners or is sponsored by a Jewish organization, over half of the campers are Jewish, and the camp identifies itself as a Jewish camp (Saxe and Sales, 2002). While there has not been an updated number of camps or

campers in the academic literature, the Foundation for Jewish Camp conducts a census each year of Jewish summer camps and the number of beds they fill each year. Due to COVID-19, the most recent census was conducted in 2019, which accounted for 164 Jewish summer camps in the United States, with a full 80,718 campers served. They note in the report that there had been a steady increase of camps, campers, and number of campers at camp over the previous decade; the number of campers had grown by 21%, with the number of camps growing by 15%. In addition, the majority of campers came from the Northeast, which was 47% of the census in 2019, and then the Midwest and West, which were each 16% (Foundation for Jewish Camp, 2019). Camps have become a widespread institution of great importance; Charles Kadushin and his team learned through the Jewish Futures Study, a longitudinal study on Taglit-Birthright participants and applicants, that to understand avenues for influencing social networks of Jewish young adults, one needs to understand the settings in which they meet their friends and significant others, summer camp often being one of them.

Leonard Saxe and Amy Sales at Brandeis University pursued two extensive studies of American Jewish summer camps that were published in 2002 and 2011, giving Jewish organizations insight into what camps were doing well and how they could be improving. The data collection was extensive and varied between the two studies. In 2002, the authors collected their data through field observations at 18 Jewish summer camps, conducted a census of all Jewish camps in the United States at that time, and gathered responses from two separate surveys that targeted 1,000 camp counselors and 4,000 Jewish college students who were not counselors, respectively. In 2011, they conducted field observations of 22 Jewish summer camps (with seven camps that were not included in the first study), conversations with 500 camp informants, and four surveys: two that targeted counselors at 20 of the 22 camps where observations were

conducted that collected their demographics as well as their takeaways from the counselor experience, a survey of 4,100 Jewish families that sent their children to these 20 camps, and a survey of 423 families who had never sent their children to camp. The data for these studies is mainly survey-based compared to the interviews I conducted, but were able to reach a larger number of respondents to make generalizations about a more diverse Jewish population (Saxe and Sales, 2002; Sales et. al, 2011).

Two of Sales and Saxe's major findings were focused on the influence that summer camps have on exposure to Jewish education and Jewish friendship, both important contributors to long-term Jewish engagement. Saxe and Sales note that camps have begun to understand that for many Jewish youth, the experience is the most salient and influential part of their Jewish education, making the role that they play even more important. In their view, the most beneficial part of education that camps impart is the informal education, where activities may not be explicitly Jewish but tie in Jewish elements, such as challah braiding or activities surrounding Israeli culture. The researchers have noted that these informal experiences that are incorporated throughout the day have a more positive effect on Jewish activities at camp than compartmentalizing Judaism into certain parts of the day. Parents want their children to leave camp with an enhanced Jewish identity, so the education they receive at camp aims to complement what they are exposed to at home (Saxe and Sales, 2002; Sales et. al, 2011).

In the follow-up study published in 2011, Sales and her team focused on the importance of developing Jewish friendships, as they argue that relationships are the essential element of the camp experience. When it comes to attending summer camp, there is mutual causality: having Jewish friends makes one more likely to go to Jewish camp, and going to Jewish camp will make someone more likely to have close Jewish friends. It can go even deeper when family ties are

involved; if there is familial commitment to Judaism, more youth may attend camp. In the survey that the researchers sent to staff at 20 of the 22 camps that they observed, 66% of the survey respondents said they met at least one of their closest friends at camp, illustrating how powerful relationships at camp are for Jewish connection. There is a noted connection between attendance of Jewish summer camp and the likelihood or density of a majority-Jewish friend group later in life, which continually helps young people develop their Jewish identity in a relational fashion (Sales et. al, 2011).

Nonetheless, despite these few pioneering studies, overall the literature on Jewish summer camps remains more practical than academic. The non-profit Foundation for Jewish Camp, for example, produces reports on everything from impact to marketing techniques, as well as funding fellowships to improve various aspects of camp life (Foundation for Jewish Camp, 2022). To date, this literature is still concentrated on describing these camps' larger "top down" goals without fully exploring the "bottom up" question of how Jewish youth navigate and make their own personal meaning from Jewish summer camps. With the background in this literature review framing the ways in which Jewish summer camps became what they are today, I now will outline how I set up my study to examine how Jewish youth today experience the camps, and what they eventually take away from it, differing from the "top-down" approach that the previous literature has taken.

Chapter 2: Methods

This thesis draws on triangulated data collected with two different qualitative methods at one Jewish summer camp that I will refer to by the pseudonym Camp Tzachak: content analysis of YouTube videos, publicly available social media posts, website content, and educational materials, and 21 semi-structured interviews with former campers and counselors. Through the case study model, I aim to provide an in-depth understanding of the dynamics that play out at one camp to assist in generating new ideas that future scholars can investigate to answer the larger questions that I have about the long-term outcome of summer camp attendance. I will also note here that no case study can be expected to be representative of all others, especially if the institution in question was not randomly sampled.

Camp Tzachak is a pluralistic Jewish summer camp in the U.S. Midwest that draws the majority of its constituents from the Twin Cities (i.e., Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota), but attracts young Jews from across the region, other communities in the United States, and even some from other countries. Tzachak was founded a year after the end of World War II in reaction to the atrocities of the Holocaust and in support of the founding of the State of Israel. Camp Tzachak labels itself as an independent pluralistic camp, which places it in a strategic position to draw in constituents that have a large range of experiences with Judaism. It also identifies itself as a Zionist camp and has ties to different Zionist organizations across the United States and in Israel.

One practical rationale for choosing to conduct my case study on Tzachak is that I attended it myself years ago growing up, so I still maintained connections to a number of potential interview recruits. Choosing Tzachak also makes purposive sense since it classifies itself as an independent summer camp, meaning that it is not associated with a larger branch of

camps like the Ramah Camping Movement (Conservative) or the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ). Those branches of camps have strong and established educational and Jewish curricula that remain the same across all of the camps that are associated with their movement, and have stayed relatively stable over time. By contrast, Tzachak's communal practice of Judaism falls somewhere in between, and has shifted over time with different leadership because it is not held to a specific standard. While Tzachak's leadership is in the process of trying to develop a set Jewish curricula for each edah (age group), that is not something that is currently in existence, and expression and integration of Jewish education has shifted over time. Therefore, Tzachak is certainly not representative of all Jewish summer camps. But it does offer a sort of middle ground where youth from a variety of Jewish backgrounds and religious and political affiliations may have the chance to meet each other and to navigate their Jewish faith together.

However, one unique aspect of Tzachak that does stand out is its Zionist connections and its emphasis on Israel education within its curricula. Some ways that Tzachak does this is by bringing in several campers each summer from the South of Israel, hosting Israeli bunk staff on its team, and teaching campers a Hebrew word of the day each morning. Otherwise, education was age-graded as it might be at a range of other camps, with intensity of exposure and structured programming rising as campers grow older.

Content Analysis

In order to identify the explicit and implicit missions and goals of Camp Tzachak and how the camp presents these to its potential and current campers and families, I started out by conducting a content analysis of various forms of textual and visual content associated with the camp website and its promotional materials.

First, I purposively sampled eight publicly-available videos on the Tzachak YouTube page that were posted between November 13, 2009, and March 11, 2020. I hand-picked each of these videos based on their title and their “promotional” content; all had a clear goal of either attracting potential campers or soliciting donations. Some also advertised reasons as to why members of the community should donate money to Tzachak, while others were meant to explain Tzachak’s history and goals. Taken together, these videos all tried hard to *present* something about the camp to the larger public: about what life was like at camp, and how camp came to be. They all also featured stories from former campers themselves to personalize the messages and show the public how they might potentially benefit from a scholarship to attend. These were conscious strategies to present attending camp as a positive Jewish socializing experience that are aimed at recruitment.

Second, I watched slideshows from recent camp community meetings that were held between October 1, 2020 and February 4, 2021, and copied into a Google folder attached to a public blog post. These slideshows mainly discussed COVID-19 safety protocols for the coming (2021) summer, so overall, they did not provide as much insight into camp’s missions and values as I had anticipated. Still, I examined them because I wanted to see how Tzachak was aiming to present itself to prospective parents, campers, and staff during an unprecedented historical moment that made recruitment particularly difficult.

Third, I examined three key pages on Tzachak’s own website: its “History” page, its “Mission and Values” page, and its description of “Camp Life” page. There was no information about when these webpages were published, but the bottom part of the page indicated a “last update” in 2021. These pages provide a clear way to examine Tzachak’s manifest vision of itself, as well as of its goals for socialization and education.

Fourth, I analyzed posts written on the camp's Facebook page between December 13, 2020 and April 29, 2021. Most of these posts were either of graphics alone or combined written posts alongside graphics. Main themes included staff highlights, the camp leadership's thoughts on Judaism and Israel, and friendship. Here, my goal was to continue understanding how Tzachak presents itself to its public online, but the interactive nature of Facebook posts also allowed me to see how some of their community constituents responded back and interacted with the camp as well

Lastly, as a former camper, I was able to ask for and be granted access to three educational planning documents by the camp's Director of Jewish Education (Dexter), whom I later interviewed. I asked him if it were possible to receive any written curricula for my project, and these were the documents that he provided. I thought they would provide some insight into what Tzachak's Jewish main educational goals and priorities are. Altogether, I note that these varying forms of textual and visual content all originate from Tzachak's leadership and staff members.

To code the content analysis data abductively, I began by using inductive thematic codes that were developed in a prior project that examined the content of Reform vs. Conservative Jewish summer camp promotional materials and compared the experiences of a small sample of campers who had attended both types (Birger, 2020). Using those codes as a loose guide, I then added emerging themes that were Tzachak-specific or that had not appeared in the data for my prior project. Five central themes came from the data that was sampled in my content analysis: Authenticity, Symbolic vs. Substantive Ethnicity, Jewish Responsibility, Israel, and Tzachak-specific findings. The sampling of the content analysis and subsequent coding was completed in the spring of 2021, before any of my interviews were conducted.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Next, I conducted 21 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 19 former Tzachak campers (between the ages of 18 and 26) and 2 “Key Informant” staff members between July and December 2021, who had also previously been campers. I used a quota sampling strategy to seek out these respondents, meaning that I started by recruiting former campers who had attended camp for either a lot or just a little bit of time, and who were at least 18 years old. Then, I used my own social networks to contact potential respondents who fit into each group, allowing and encouraging them to refer up to two more respondents at the end of the interview.

These interviews all took place on Zoom, aside from two that took place over the phone, and lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 32 minutes. All were voluntarily recorded using a consent script that was developed by the Tufts University IRB. Out of the 19 campers that I interviewed, nine were male-identifying, and ten were female-identifying. They were between 18-26 years old, with the average age being 20.3 years. I did not ask my two “Key Informants” their ages, but one was male-identifying, and one was female-identifying. My participants had spent between 2 and 13 summers at Tzachak. Of my “camper” respondents, 12 were former counselors, while 7 were not. All but one respondent spent at least part of their childhood in the Twin Cities area (Minneapolis, St. Paul, or their respective suburbs). Besides Minnesota, my participants lived full-time in Nebraska, Washington State, Washington D.C., and California. However, the majority of my respondents (who were college-age) took part in the interview with me from their respective universities (mainly across the Midwest, but in all regions of the United States) rather than their home residence.

As we will see later, many of my respondents and their families are members of three interlocking institutions in the Twin Cities area: Clear Lake High, a high school that draws a lot

of Jewish families, Temple Hayim, a Conservative synagogue, and Camp Tzachak. Even though only 18% of Jewish people in the Twin Cities identify as Conservative (Krasner Aronson et. al, 2020), 15 of my 21 respondents were part of the Conservative movement, as Tzachak attracts a lot of its constituents from Temple Hayim, the Conservative synagogue. Additionally, 3 of my participants identified as Reform, 2 as Modern Orthodox, and 1 did not feel as though they belonged to a denominational movement.

All of my interviews had a similar structure. After my initial consent speech and giving the respondent a small summary of who I am and why I was interested in pursuing this project, I started with asking my respondent to tell me about themselves (“a CliffNotes version of participant”). I also always framed the beginning as less of an interview, and more of a conversation, noting that we could also focus more on aspects of camp or Judaism that they were more passionate about. Most of the respondents chose to tell me about their education, career aspirations, and hobbies, though some opted to enter with an introduction to their Jewish path. I did this to gain initial rapport with my respondents (especially those who I didn’t know previously) and have things to follow up on regarding their personal lives throughout the interview, as well as being able to tie their responses into their outside passions. Then, I always started with asking the participants to tell me about their relationship with Judaism and how it has changed over time. In this part of the interview, I always asked how my participants would compare their relationships with Jewish people and non-Jews. We then would talk about camp experiences, focusing less on Judaism at certain points and mostly on life experiences, as camp is a socializing institution that instills certain qualities. Finally, my last set of questions focused on takeaways from both sets of questions and how those experiences influence them today. I took notes on the interview guide during the interview for certain information, as well as how the

respondent was acting. Sometimes, I would also jump around the interview guide because the participant would mention something that related to another question, and it made more sense to ask it at that time in that context rather than doing so later in the interview.

My interview data was coded mostly inductively, aside from building off the general themes mentioned previously that emerged from my content analysis. To keep track of important open codes and to connect them to various themes, I used N.Vivo, a qualitative analysis software. I read through each interview twice, assigning various quotes to larger themes and open codes as I reviewed them. Using the software, I was also able to assign each interview respondent to what N.Vivo calls a “case,” which outlines their typology and demographic characteristics and attaches it to their quotes, making it easier to decipher the topics that certain types of respondents were discussing more frequently. The major themes that I focused on in my coding were: the Twin Cities, Religion, Jewish Relationships, Institutional Involvement, Israel, Ethnic Identity, Camp, Cultural Judaism, and Anti-Semitism.

Chapter 3: The Embedded and the Self-Determined

Logging onto our Zoom call from his dorm's common room with an atypical amount of energy for the morning, Ezra is your typical first-year college student in every sense of the word. Easing into our conversation, we discuss the novelties of the first semester of college: trying to make friends in the dorm, looking for community through extracurriculars, the dreaded pledge process when rushing a fraternity, and how even though he is at one of the top schools for Business in the country, classes have not been his first priority. He's planning to change that soon; finals are coming up in a month. Throughout the interview he often fiddles with the large *Magen David*, or Star of David, that hangs around his neck. His involvement with Jewish life on campus is on the mind, as we spend a lot of time discussing his sense of guilt for not involving himself more in Hillel and Chabad during the previous two months. After all, even though he has a multitude of new commitments that would be difficult for anyone to juggle, "that's not an excuse" for not participating, even though during high school his religious expressions of Judaism were limited to the holidays and occasional synagogue visits with his parents and grandparents.

Before college, however, Judaism was always a given for Ezra, both as an intrinsic value and through his external relationships. His parents did not grow up in the Twin Cities, but upon moving there found themselves a part of an existing close-knit Jewish community that involved themselves with the various schools, synagogues, and camps in the area. Though his siblings did not love camp, Ezra did, so much that he returned as a counselor during the unpredictability of the COVID-19 pandemic. His best friends and community were there; why would he not want to go back? With the world changes due to COVID-19 though, things were different. The freedom and fun that counselors were once afforded were taken away, and political discussion being tied into camp activities was a turn-off; camp is supposed to be fun, not intertwined with the doom

and gloom of the real world! These sentiments, combined with his newfound responsibility to seek out Judaism on his own left a big question mark in Ezra's mind as to what to do going forward. There's a clear sense of feeling like there is a way things should be, and a struggle to differentiate this perception from his new reality: one where instead of being handed Judaism you have to seek it out, one where Jewish embeddedness and comfort is not a given, and one where norms that existed years ago are up for change.

Several weeks earlier I had also spoken with Rebecca, whose bubbly demeanor, a shared college major in Sociology, and through a quick game of Jewish Geography, a realization that we share mutual friends outside of our connection to Tzachak led to quickly developed rapport; our conversation immediately felt less like a formal interview and more like a reflective discussion with an old friend. Right away she noted that when she went to college, "going to camp and being really active in Jewish youth group were two of my biggest identity markers." However, even though her college has a very large Jewish population, "I haven't really found myself doing much Jewish activities, which is completely opposite of what I thought I would be doing," because "I really enjoy developing personality outside of my religion." I sensed that Rebecca was fairly at peace with this, both because of her distance from the beginning of her college experience, as well as her demonstrated ability to seek out Jewish spaces when she needed them. She relished her relationships with non-Jews, where Judaism was not always a core topic of conversation, and bonding was facilitated over other common interests and values. However, her Jewish friends were those she often felt the most comfortable with, due to similarities in how they were raised and what she noted as their down-to-earth nature.

However, coming to Tzachak from outside of Minnesota, there were times at camp when things were socially difficult for Rebecca. Social dynamics spilled over from her friends' home

lives, which she had no interest in dealing with during her limited time with them in-person. As a teenager, when meeting boys was more of a concern, there was the sense of being several steps behind the rest of her peers that grew up in the Twin Cities. Despite these frustrations, her love for camp was greater, and she too returned to camp as a third-year counselor amongst the uncertainties of COVID. Having entrenched herself deeply in leadership roles in high school within her Jewish community while simultaneously playing visitor in the Twin Cities during the summer, Rebecca holds a nuanced understanding of what it means to be an insider sometimes and on the outskirts at others. Compared to her friends from the Twin Cities, camp “was this big adventure I always went on.” She considers herself to be better for the experience.

Overall, I found that my camper respondents fell into one of two main types when it came to their connection to both Camp Tzachak as an institution, and the Twin Cities Jewish community at large: those, like Ezra, whom I call *the Embedded*, who felt completely connected to and “at home” in the Tzachak and Twin Cities communities , and those whom I call *the Self-Determined*, who enjoyed their time at camp but did not feel like they were “insiders” in the “clique”, either there or within the larger Jewish community. While these two groups experienced camp similarly, they away took different lesson from it back to their “real world” lives.

In this chapter, I aim to introduce and describe these two main types of campers, and to go into greater depth in regard to the day-to-day aspects of their lives inside and outside of camp. I show that there are multiple ways that these youth engage with camp and their ethnic identities

here, with Self-Determined campers largely using camp as an enjoyable way to seek out and explore aspects of their identity that they do not get to entertain elsewhere, while Embedded campers using it primarily as a space to deepen their extensive prior Jewish relationships, albeit in a supportive and fun context.

The Embedded

A third of my interview respondents fall into a group I call the *Embedded Jews*. This group of respondents were those with the deepest familial and social ties to the Twin Cities, but even more than that, to a smaller subgroup within the larger Jewish community consisting of three major institutions: Temple Hayim, a Conservative synagogue, Clear Lake High, a high school in a district where a lot of Jewish families live, and Tzachak, the camp under study (all pseudonyms). Compared to places with large Jewish populations like New York and Los Angeles, in smaller communities like the Twin Cities campers sometimes feel like “there's a lot more focus on camp and synagogue life and things like that, and a more organized form of Judaism. Just because the Jewish pockets are harder to find,” speculated Orly, one of the two Key Informants. Because of the shared institutional involvement and ensuing connections with each other, the Embedded’s families tend to have strong and dense social ties to each other, either directly or indirectly, that go back for several generations.

In fact, many of my respondents’ parents went to Tzachak themselves, and some of them even met there. The camp knows this about its community and boasts it, on their website it says “there is tremendous continuity in the Camp Tzachak family. Campers become counselors; counselors become senior staff, counselors and other staff become parents & grandparents who then watch their children board the camp buses.” While all summer camps have their own unique culture because of their immersive characteristics, many of my respondents noted explicitly in

their interviews that Tzachak's culture and traditions cater mainly to people who already possess the dense social ties that connect these members together outside of camp.

Ethnic retention is an explicit and primary goal in many Embedded campers' families. My respondents' parents were raised in the post-Holocaust generation, meaning that many had a great sense of urgency to maintain Jewish ties because of a still-existing fear of annihilation. They purposefully enrolled my respondents, their children, in Jewish activities and institutions, and often chose to spend most, if not all their time, surrounded by other Jewish people. This community-based socialization is very intentional on the parents' part; when talking about her family's customs during her childhood, Sasha explained that:

"I was raised in a house where it was very important to be involved with community, not necessarily to be super religious and be very, like, devout to the religion...we never necessarily did Shabbat growing up, like every Friday night or whatever. But I would go to summer camp, I was always in Hebrew school. I moved schools and school districts and houses between first and second grade so I could go into a school district with more Jewish kids, so I could have more people that I related to...that was always very important growing up." – Sasha (21, Embedded)

When talking about their ethnic surroundings growing up, many of the Embedded noted rather matter-of-factly that in their childhoods, they were surrounded by only other Jewish people, even though there are many diverse ethnic and religious groups also living in the Twin Cities area. Therefore, this group of respondents were likely to say that their Judaism just felt natural and part of their "core." Because of how socially embedded this group was within the broader Jewish community in terms of relationships with other Jews and in entities like their synagogue, youth group chapter, and school, Jewish life was not necessarily something that they felt like they

needed to seek out during the summer because it was already present in their lives all year round. Even heavy involvement with Jewish institutions felt natural; when asked about why he began to attend summer camp in the first place, Ezra explained that “in my community, you go send your frickin' Jewish kid to summer camp...everybody was going, so like, obviously my parents sent me...all of my close friends growing up, their parents also, like, grew up and went to Camp Tzachak, too.” Because of deep ties to Jewish people and institutions in almost all aspects of their lives, going off to Tzachak for the summer was not a novelty or an active choice for the Embedded. Rather, it was an extension of what members of their Jewish community do. It is natural, typical, and comfortable.

Staying in the Comfort Zone

Eight of my twenty-one respondents fell into the Embedded category: Anna, Danielle, Elijah, Evan, Ezra, Grant, Jonah, Sasha, and Dexter, who is associated professionally with Tzachak and in this study is a Key Informant. As mentioned in the Methods section, many of Tzachak’s constituents attend one of “two big Conservative synagogues” and identify with the Conservative movement. All but one of the Embedded considered themselves to be Conservative Jews based on their upbringing, though Jonah, who identifies as Modern Orthodox, was initially raised Conservative as well. Because this group of respondents felt the most tied to this subset of the Twin Cities Jewish community as a whole, they understood the insularity and the sense of cliqueness that inevitably ensues from those who are not as socially tied, but did not feel isolated by their embeddedness and felt little effort to change that aspect of their lives. As Sasha notes, her “camp friends were also her home friends, who she did all her Jewish life with.”

All of my Embedded respondents live in the Twin Cities full-time. Some of them attend university elsewhere, but all currently have concrete plans to return to Minnesota or other cities in

the Midwest after the conclusion of their studies. Most of their families also grew up in Minnesota and spent their childhoods with each other; Dexter notes that his “grandparents were all born in the Twin Cities, all four of his grandparents were born here. So you know, there's some serious roots that exist.” Because of how socially tied the Embedded are to their community, there is not much impetus for a larger shift, and they do not feel the need nor desire to leave, because in their eyes it does not make sense to remove oneself from a community that has given good to them.

This leads to insularity. Dexter, who moved away to a large city on the East Coast for several years before recently returning to Minneapolis, explains how multigenerational family ties create a sort of ‘bubble’ of their own, even isolating them from new Jewish arrivals to the area. His position as a ‘social entrepreneur’ within the larger Twin Cities Jewish community presents him with the opportunity to bridge two separate circles that are typically impenetrable:

“I have a buddy who grew up in the Twin Cities, went to the University of Minnesota, lives in St. Paul, has never left Minnesota. And it took him making a friend of somebody who moved from Ohio to meet all these people and experiences, a whole Jewish life and Jewish community he never knew existed. And he only got connected to it because I met this person that connected the two of them...I'm kind of on the border of being a transplant now...he was baffled by this Jewish life that exists and all these people that exist that he never even could fathom. So I'd say that's an anecdote of how they live apart in the same place.” – Dexter (Key Informant)

When asked what aspects of their Judaism and relationship to camp are the most important to them, the Embedded respondents mentioned a devotion to some aspects of religious Judaism and a relationship with God, being surrounded by other Jews and maintaining Jewish relationships, a connection to Israel, ensuring camp’s longevity through tradition, and combating anti-Semitism. However, even though these aspects are of value to them, they are not necessarily

the reason that the Embedded attend summer camp due to their parents sending them without input, but just things that they appreciate about the experience.

Even though they are embedded within the Jewish community, this group of respondents expressed a greater perceived sense that their Judaism was not accepted by outside influences, both in the Twin Cities and in other places outside of Israel. Their embeddedness in institutions is so deep that sentiments that were not wholly pro-Jewish or Zionist were seen as threats; Anna exemplified this when she shared that “there was one time freshman year of high school...this was kind of an anti-Semitic thing...in one of my first weeks some girl tried to tell me that Israel didn't exist, and it was Palestine...I like didn't even know what to do. And I had to meet with the school counselor, and it was a whole big thing, but I guess in that sense I definitely felt like it set me apart from non-Jews.” Because of their socialization and education, the Embedded tend to view these sentiments more as a personal offense and less something that could be ameliorated with education. The way that Jewish youth are taught to approach those with ideas that differ from what they were taught is right sets experiences like Anna’s up to be scare tactics that encourage young Jews to stay within the community in a cultural and relational sense; it becomes the assumption that they will feel the most comfortable surrounded by other Jewish people.

The Self-Determined

By contrast, over half of my interview respondents fall into a group that I will call the *Self-Determined Jews*. This group of respondents is part of institutional Jewish life as well, but for a multitude of reasons these campers are not as deeply and densely embedded in the larger Jewish community; in fact, their perception and experiences within these institutions were sometimes shaped around lacking certain social ties that the Embedded did.

For one, some did not possess the familial connections that are formed within Jewish institutions such as synagogue and youth group, and their families may not have been involved with certain institutions during their youth and therefore lack connections to the larger Jewish social network. For some, it was as simple as that their parents did not grow up in the area and when they did move to the Twin Cities, formed relationships with other people not within the same social networks as my Embedded respondents. Lack of involvement with Temple Hayim (and consequently, the youth group chapter associated with the synagogue) and Clear Lake High may have also had an influence, but even this was not a guarantee to become Embedded. Levi, who attended both Temple Hayim and Clear Lake High during the school year and went to Tzachak for a few summers, but was born in Israel and only moved to the Twin Cities in elementary school, explained that:

“The cliques are consciously formed by the kids, of course. But there's some unconscious part that parents form part of it. So they send their kids to specific programs or socialize them around other kids. That's a key part of it. I think that the language barrier initially, because I wasn't great at English, did contribute to it...I think that there's a certain level of insular comfort in Minneapolis Jewish communities, where you don't have a lot of interchange, and even Minneapolis and St. Paul are separate orbits, where you don't really have to go outside your comfort zone, so you don't. And when you don't, you don't see why others should be let into your comfort zone.” – Levi (26, Self-Determined)

Not having as dense of community ties led these campers to feel sidelined at points during their experience, as though they had to work harder to find ways to “fit in.” But at the same time, the built-in separation was also a provider of freedom, allowing them to experience camp in a more personal way. Rebecca, my only respondent who did not spend any of her childhood in the Twin Cities but whose father went to Tzachak, illustrates the positives and negatives of this separation when she said:

“I think that I would probably attribute the cliquey-ness to Minnesota Jewish culture...being from a big Jewish community, they all know each other. I mean, if I picture it as like, multiply my Jewish community by four or five, and I've grown up with four or five amount of the people that I did, and I love those people with all my heart, I would be pretty exclusive about it too, because I know...my home Jewish community was very cliquey. And so I had to insert myself in [the Embedded's] cliquey group as an outsider...I think when I was younger, what I enjoyed the least was being an out-of-towner, I didn't know any of the boys. And that's really what became an issue for me, especially by our 9th grade summer because I felt way far behind everybody, since they had all grown up together...when I was younger, I just kind of like glorified those friends as people, and didn't always know what they would be like in the real world because I wasn't around them 24/7, all year round. So those became my camp friends and camp friends...I think that connection is really strong because you're not with them all year round.” – Rebecca (20, Self-Determined)

Most of this group of respondents still found participation in social Jewish institutions important for maintaining their connection to Judaism outside of the nuclear family, and actively sought it out. Similarly to their experiences at camp though, they oftentimes felt excluded or sidelined in institutional activities as well. Youth group-sponsored Israel trips in the year after their last camper summer (among my respondents, this was either USY Pilgrimage or BBYO Passport), which most closely mimic summer camp both in terms of immersion and the people that comprised these groups, were other breeding grounds for cliquey-ness. Yet, even in their unhappiness with the status quo, they feel an unspoken requirement to show up regardless, or risk being further excluded. Not participating in communal forms of Jewish life felt like forms of social sanctioning within this specific community; as soon as a person stops showing up, it is assumed that they are no longer invested in the greater group or the relationships within it. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as becomes generally unenjoyable to push oneself into a

place that they feel that they are not wanted. Ruby discussed this phenomenon more in-depth when she said:

“A lot of people went on Pilgrimage in between sophomore and junior year of high school, and I didn't go because it was too expensive. So I kind of felt left out, I guess. But also, everyone got even more connected through Pilgrimage, and I wasn't there. So I didn't really feel as connected with everybody else in my age group...and also the USY conventions and travel and stuff like that just got to be so expensive. And not that my family couldn't afford it, but if I wasn't as invested as I was in previous years, then we weren't going to spend the extra money to do that.” – Ruby (21, Self-Determined)

The Self-Determined walk a fine line. While many of them take part in aspects of institutional life that their Embedded counterparts also engage in and should feel a similar sense of kinship, generationally and community-based factors create an intangible divide that shapes their lived experiences within these institutions.

Feeling a little bit left out

Twelve of my twenty-one respondents fell into the Self-Determined category: Amelia, Bailey, Benjamin, Emma, Hannah, Leora, Levi, Mike, Rebecca, Ruby, Ryan, and Orly, one of my two Key Informants that is also professionally associated with Tzachak. Like the majority of my participants, most of the Self-Determined identified as being a member of the Conservative movement. However, all my Reform and non-denominationally affiliated respondents were part of this group due to their lack of involvement with either of the Conservative synagogues but mainly Temple Hayim. Self-Determined respondents and their families were much less likely to have “traditional” Jewish upbringings; several of my respondents had parents that had converted to Judaism, or a parent that was not Jewish at all. They also may not have been raised with the

same approach towards Judaism that many of the Embedded did; for example, Levi was born and spent the first several years of his life in Israel, where expressing Judaism is less of a concrete action to take and more of an everyday aspect of life due to its existence as a Jewish state. The Self-Determined were also not restricted to living in the Twin Cities; many of their permanent residences were in places outside of the Midwest as well, though they all maintained connections to the Twin Cities Jewish community for various reasons.

Due to the Self-Determined's lower levels of community embeddedness, they tended to be more acutely aware and cognizant of their Judaism in non-explicitly Jewish spaces and did not take the opportunity to engage in 'authentic Judaism' for granted. Bailey, who grew up outside of Minneapolis but moved to a community in Washington State with a large Mormon population as a teenager, describes the isolation that manifested for her because of the lack of Jewish peers in her surroundings:

"I felt like I didn't really get to talk about [Judaism] at all, or share it with anyone. Besides me, in my grade, basically, there's my best friend, [friend], and it was just us. We were the only two Jewish people in my whole grade. So talking and celebrating Judaism was kind of just limited to the two of us. And it was never really brought up upon the other groups, unless it was, 'Oh, I know a Jewish person.' And it's Bailey and [friend] and that was it, really." – Bailey (21, Self-Determined)

This group felt the most at peace and comfortable with their Judaism in spaces that they knew it would not be questioned, such as at camp, youth group, and on Israel trips. All my respondents had the ability to be a White American whenever they chose due to their structural assimilation, as Mike noted, saying "I don't think anyone really profiles me like, 'oh, he's a Jew.'" But there was an underlying sense among the Self-Determined that their Judaism was something

that needed to be shielded in certain situations, particularly ones in which other people's level of education on the subject was unknown.

Finally, this group had many more close relationships with people that were not Jewish compared to the Embedded, both in terms of friendship and romantic partners. This was because of their presence and more consistent involvement in other spaces that were not tied to Jewish institutional life. Overall, they had more to say about these relationships compared to their Embedded peers, both positive and negative sentiments. These relationships also highlighted a dichotomy and mild discomfort between Jewish relationships and all others; when talking about his friend group at the high school he attended that had a less than 1% Jewish population, Benjamin tactfully observed the lack of shared understanding between them when it came to Jewish life:

"I was the odd one out, because, you know...we became great friends. It's just they didn't have a camp experience. Some were religious, some weren't. And it's different religions. And they're just, you know, they wouldn't understand why I'd have to be home for dinner on Friday, or when the holidays were coming on, or even when I went away for camp this summer. Like they just didn't understand why I would be gone for seven weeks in the summer. They just wanted to hang out with me. And I was like, 'You guys don't understand this, this is my home, and I've got to be here.' And so that was interesting." – Benjamin (18, Self-Determined)

Though their privilege to express Judaism sometimes felt conditional to the Self-Determined, they tried to turn expression into a tool of empowerment rather than subordination. The Self-Determined hoped to learn from others' differences rather than being threatened by them. Most importantly, rather than taking in Judaism just as it was prescribed to them through camp or other socializing institutions, the Self-Determined respondents searched for individual

meaning from the activities and experiences they were involved with, rather than taking things at face value and immersing themselves in what was already present in the status quo.

Similarities between the Embedded and the Self-Determined

Even though there are plenty of differences between the Embedded and Self-Determined, there are also similarities and shared experiences worth mentioning as well. None of my respondents felt alienated by their Judaism. Further, all of them (and their families) have structurally assimilated into White, middle-class American society today: all had or were in the process of obtaining their Bachelors' degree, and mainly came from well-off towns in the Twin Cities Metropolitan area. Though some of the communities that they hailed from had stronger Jewish institutional life than others, all my respondents fostered some degree of this knowledge and, generally, the people living around my respondents knew who Jewish people are and expressed mostly positive sentiments towards them. There was definitive worry about anti-Semitic experiences happening, but my respondents felt safe being Jewish in comparison to other places. Compared to the Self-Determined, the Embedded noted more often that they feared acts of discrimination. Luckily, however, there was not a discernable difference in how often either group dealt with anti-Semitism. Interestingly, my respondents also sometimes saw the differences between themselves and non-Jews as a positive, as is illustrated by Ezra:

“I liked being a part of the group of being Jewish, because it felt special. I still feel special. Growing up, like being a minority, I mean, I have the privilege of being a minority that isn't necessarily persecuted too much. And so...especially where I was, every non-Jew knew a Jewish person. Not every but like, pretty much, most people where I grew up. And so it felt special to be Jewish and cool. And not a bad thing.” – Ezra (19, Embedded)

Whether they were Embedded or Self-Determined, it was also especially empowering for them to be able to teach other non-Jewish people about Judaism. Many of them felt a sense of responsibility to do so, as valuing education is a key tenet in the Jewish culture. Having the chance to share knowledge with others who did not have it and were willing to learn was a pride point, but was also a mechanism for them to feel more accepted within the larger community. At her state college with a tiny Jewish population, Leora explains this:

“I don't go to a Jewish school at all...I feel like being here without other people that they have talked to that are Jewish, especially because a lot of people here are from small towns, and not diverse towns, I might be the first Jewish person that they've met, ever, or had a relationship with. And so I feel their questions and them wanting to learn about it, and kind of hear my experience being Jewish, and going to Jewish camp, and then going on Birthright, and going to Jewish school. I think that's when I'm like, ‘Okay, this is really cool that I'm Jewish, because I'm teaching all these people and they're learning about my experiences.’” – Leora (21, Self-Determined)

However, this association with their Judaism also led to anti-Semitic encounters, or at least those that harnessed a negative sentiment towards Jewish people. This led to a greater sense of urgency to hold responsibility to be actively Jewish in order to combat what they perceived to be a lack of education by American society. The Jewish value of ‘l'dor v'dor,’ or ensuring that traditions are passed on to the next generation, is intertwined into institutional socialization for all Jewish youth, regardless of typology.

Even though some of my respondents had a large number of non-Jewish friends, they tended to have different types of relationship with friends that were Jewish. These friendships and connections were seen as more comfortable because of the shared unspoken knowledge

about Jewish culture and values. This offers up the idea that maintaining relationships with those who possess similar ethnic and cultural traits is a powerful tool in making sure a distinct subculture within a larger society remains present. In fact, not having that connection could be dangerous, as without people to engage in culture with, there's no reason to keep it, as Elijah explains:

"I think if you don't have Jewish friends at all, like if you have no Jewish friends, you're not gonna care about Judaism at all ever...if my friends don't care, it definitely makes it harder for me to care. But if you have that Jewish friend, you always know you're Jewish and you always have that relatable thing in common. And so that kind of sort of bonds you together in a way. Yeah, and I mean, I really think like...when I know someone's Jewish after meeting them, you kind of automatically have that immediate thing in common and it makes it so much easier to get to know them and be a lot more comfortable." – Elijah (22, Embedded)

This sense of needing to actively maintain one's Judaism to preserve it manifested itself in different ways amongst my respondents. Though the Embedded participated in them to a higher degree, all the people that I interviewed had experience with other Jewish institutions besides attending Tzachak, whether that be synagogue, Jewish Day School or Hebrew School, youth group, or involvement with Hillel and Chabad at their universities. They all found ways to incorporate Judaism into their lives outside of camp and found it to be an important aspect of their lives. Because institutional immersion is so vital to shaping Jewish community in the Twin Cities, many of my respondents had many of their identity-shaping experiences within these larger structures. When explaining the larger influence of these institutions on Jewish youth, Dexter talked about his friends' experiences with USY (the youth group associated with Conservative Judaism) and how it was where "they learned everything." Sasha seconded this

influence of institutions on daily life when noting that a common saying amongst her and her friends is “everything I learned, I learned from camp.” Engaging in leadership within these institutions was also a common thread among all my respondents, especially as teenagers. Both the Embedded and Self-Determined took on leadership positions in places like youth group, camp, and synagogue, and felt a sense of pride instilled by the adult leadership at these organizations to engage in this. Instilling the desire to lead is a key socialization practice, which Rebecca attributed to “religion as an institution needing people to lead...it's really easy for the Jewish community to reach out to younger kids to do that for them.” Younger kids are more likely to want to learn from people closer to their age than adults from a different generation with whom they may struggle to relate.

Along with clothes, a secret snack stash, and bottles of bug spray, my respondents bring a variety of backgrounds and experiences from their upbringing with them when they board the bus that takes them to Tzachak each summer. As Tzachak is an independent, pluralistic camp, it attracts campers from across the spectrum of Jewish observance. But as soon as the buses drive away, no matter where they come from, everyone suddenly finds themselves in the same space for the summer together. In the next chapter, I illustrate that while all my respondents generally hold a love and appreciation for camp, the unique backgrounds from which they come inform how they approach and navigate camp, as well as what they take on with them after summer’s end.

Chapter 4: Deriving Meaning From Summer Camp Socialization Efforts

In 2014, which was my last summer at Camp Tzachak, Levi was a counselor for one of the boys' cabins in my age group. While many of my camp memories are fuzzy now, after almost eight years' time, I clearly remember Levi being a counselor who was cool, smart, and consistently kind; to me, it seemed like camp was his happy place. That's why it came very much as a surprise when he told me during our interview that he had had more years on staff than as a camper. His first year at Tzachak was the summer before his sixth-grade year, three summers after most of his age group started attending; after that, he "went to [a different overnight camp] the following year, went to Boy Scout camp the year after that. Sailing camp, then Boy Scout camp, and then came back to Tzachak for the last year because my parents wanted me to have kind of a well-rounded...all the opportunities. [They] didn't realize that taking me out of the Tzachak community means you're not part of it, you know." Coming to the United States from Israel when he was in elementary school, even though he had taken part in everything from Jewish Day School to youth group, things never quite seemed to click: because his family was not embedded into the social networks of the Twin Cities Jewish community, he was a perpetual outsider looking in.

However, Levi found his stride at Tzachak and within the larger Jewish community his Nefesh summer, the methodically structured counselor-in-training program. While he connected deeply with his fellow Nefeshim and returned as a counselor the following summer to continue building on those relationships, for him the true joy came from being a mentor for his campers. This aptitude for connection led to him being selected for the Cornerstone Fellowship run by the Foundation for Jewish Camp, a four-day seminar at the start of each summer where the strongest counselors from summer camps across the United States are nominated to undergo additional

training in Pennsylvania (Foundation for Jewish Camp, 2021). When discussing the seminar and his relationships with his co-fellows, Levi happily reminisced that “they're all the most hyped people ever...it's a wild, high-energy experience.” Continuing our conversation about lasting connections stemming from the camp community, he shared that through having “the chance to kind of be influential in camper’s lives...you gain as much as you give when it comes to mentorship and leadership and all those things.” This mentorship has not stopped; through Tzachak-based social ties, he has been able to help former campers get admitted to his prestigious college alma mater, as well as obtaining internships at the company he currently works for. While he feels as though he has and continues to drift from his former fellow campers due to the nature of both physical separation from them and a lack of initial full immersion, the appreciation he holds for the generation of campers whose lives he has been able to impact has not waned. He believes they are the start of a new future for Jewish life, one where multigenerational community ties are not the determinant of feeling a part of something. “I think the only real way to improve things when it comes to this is to start to just let the younger generations lead...those younger generations who care about this will just improve it by virtue of the fact that we're attuned to inclusion.”

By contrast, throughout the entirety of her childhood and adolescence, Sasha went “to Tzachak every year, for the end of the summer” as “a camper for eight years” and “staff for three.” Not only that, but her mother also went to camp, her brother had been a camper and involved with the community before she was old enough to go, and she had attended Tzachak’s Family Camp, which occurs after the conclusion of the regular session for multiple years as a child. Having spent most of her life’s summers intertwined with Tzachak in some capacity, as well as being an active member in the Twin Cities Jewish community during the rest of the year,

the boundaries between camp and day-to-day life were and continue to be thinner for Sasha than for most. As she explains: “I go to a school with a 10% Jewish population. I rushed a Jewish sorority...I switched schools so I could be closer to Jewish people. I had parents who encouraged me to go to summer camp every summer, and I made myself very active in my youth group that was Jewish. The sport that I played, over half the team was Jewish...I played Ultimate Frisbee in high school. I made the decision to surround myself with Jewish people.” Sasha is a walking definition of what it means to be embedded within a community.

Throughout our conversation, off-handed statements she made alluded to this as well. Words such as *edah* (age group), *tzrif* (cabin), and *mercaz* (Hebrew for ‘center,’ but at Tzachak, an elevated deck that overlooks the lake and where Shabbat services were held each week) were said casually, with an assumed understanding on my end due to having once been a member of the community. There was a sense of disdain and frustration on her end towards those who were not understanding of her perspective, wondering as to why Judaism would not be at the forefront of her life. It was unsurprising that camp was one of her happy places; it was a space where nothing she valued would be questioned. Instead, it would be encouraged.

Jewish summer camps hold a lot of power as a socializing institution, especially for people who live in smaller, less diverse communities. As a young person, it is the first place where Jewish youth may have the freedom to be oneself without the influence of one’s parents, but rather by the surroundings of their peers and young adult mentors who are counselors. Campers are completely immersed in the culture of camp, which, as a total institution, structures

and dictates what one does throughout the entire day. It offers a range of experiences unlike anything found at synagogue or youth group, as Mike describes, “you meet new people from all over the country, maybe even people from Israel. And you're doing activities during the day that you would never ever do at school...unless you went to a Jewish Day School, you wouldn't have morning minyan, or you wouldn't go and be able to do art or Israeli Studies or be with Israeli scouts during the day.” Most importantly, it's a place where Jewish youth can “normalize their Jewish identity...putting you in a place where you don't feel like an outsider,” according to Ryan, one of my Self-Determined respondents. Being surrounded by people with similar characteristics for weeks at a time leads to a development of greater comfort when that may not have previously been present, and consequently an incentive to continue leaning into that aspect of one's identity in other settings besides summer camp.

In this chapter, I examine how my respondents personally understand the efforts made at Tzachak to help Jewish youth engage in practices of ethnic, religious, and cultural retention, both as camper and counselors. I focus mainly on how my two different groups of camper respondents (the Embedded and the Self-Determined) experienced camp, and which ways of encouraging ethnic retention resonated (or not) with each.

Setting the Scene: Why Go to Camp?

Camp attendance is par for the course for engaged Jewish youth in the Twin Cities, based on the community being set up around institutional involvement. As Elijah, an Embedded respondent, said, “I started going to camp before I even had a choice whether or not to go to camp.” On a general level, parents were the main decision-makers when it came to initial attendance, showing that earlier generations see summer camp as a valuable institution to maintain ethnic identity, both as a socialization effort as well as a direct result of their own

positive experiences attending camp decades ago, in their youths. In my respondents' childhoods, they were set up to care about their camp community by the people around them; Dexter, an Embedded Key Informant, noted the silos that lead to a deep consideration for their camp when he said "if you're in New York City, every single kid in a classroom goes to a different camp. So they grew up together and then leave. Whereas in the Twin Cities, there's three camps you go to. So either you're part of the Tzachak community, [or part of one of three other camps' community]. Four camps...either you are going to camp with your friends that you're seeing year-round, or you're going to camp and then coming back to your community with friends that go to different camps."

This affinity for the camp community spreads to the larger community as well; in Embedded campers' experiences, much of the impetus to go or be sent to camp by one's parents is because lots of people around them are doing the same thing. Anna and Elijah's mother had a leadership role at the local Jewish Day School, so even though their family is not originally from the Twin Cities, they were able to gain an understanding of what the other families were doing, which became the status quo in order to feel included. When asked why she began to attend camp in the first place, Anna's response was "probably because everyone else was sending their kids to camp too, and a bunch of people from my grade were going. And I was like, oh, 'Let me just try this out.' And my parents were...I'm sure happy to get rid of me." While there were religious imperatives for the Embedded to attend summer camp, the experience manifested more so as an extension of social norms of their community during the rest of the year.

The Self-Determined approached the beginning of their camp experience in a different fashion than the Embedded. Rather than attending camp because it is "what you do" in the community, there were a variety of reasons that they initially went. Some of their parents took

similar action to the Embeddeds', where they went because it was part of the childhood experience, but there was more questioning and thought behind the decision amongst their families. For Levi, who is originally from Israel, the need to be a member of institutions that facilitate ethnic retention is not as pertinent. His parents did not necessarily understand why one would need to go to camp in the first place, because Judaism is more natural in his home country. After a few years at the Jewish Day School, "everyone told me I should go. Though didn't do the first year because we moved to the community and we didn't know what the heck...why Americans cared about summer camp and all that stuff, why they were building up to it." As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Levi's family did not have him undergo the typical Tzachak cycle, rather opting to have him participate in several types of summer activities. Nevertheless, community-based social pressures drove his family to give him a camp experience, even if it was atypical due to the lack of continuity during his childhood and early adolescence.

On the other side of reasoning, Amelia had familial support to go to camp from a young age, but due to personal reasons chose not to attend until the summer before her eighth grade year, six years after most of her peers in her age group began going. Unlike the majority of my respondents, Amelia only has one Jewish parent. The year prior, however, when faced with an uncomfortable religious situation, she felt the urge to learn more about her Jewish side, aligning with many of my other respondents' experiences when faced with anti-Semitic or generally negative rhetoric towards Jews. In explaining the context for this switch in perspective, she passionately shared:

"My family that I'm really close with is Jewish. My grandma was just always into everything Jewish, was trying to get me to go to Tzachak since I could, you know, do whatever was first...I grew up going to church and my mom's family is Southern Baptist. So I

actually went to a summer camp where it was very intense. It was like...they basically told me like, if you don't convert your entire family to Christianity, bad things will happen...for whatever reason, that pushed me to go to Tzachak and explore my Judaism, I think just because I was like, 'I want out of whatever this is.'” – Amelia (18, Self-Determined)

Additionally, for some of my respondents, their parents had attended camp and perhaps had even met there; this happened for both typologies. This positive experience and consequential influence on their parents' own upbringing made it seem like a necessity to send their own children to Tzachak. For example, Ryan and Jonah's parents met at camp, so their family felt a responsibility to continue the tradition because the space holds a special place in the story of their lives and formation of their relationship with Judaism.

Upon Arrival: The Camper Experience

There are many ingredients that create camp magic: independence in being away from home, a supportive community, the intensity of being within a total institution, and most importantly: camp is fun (Saxe and Sales, 2002). Activities and traditions at Tzachak were described as enjoyable by both the Embedded and Self-Determined, especially being able to explore new things and gain a deeper understanding of who they are without the presence of parents.

A large percentage of campers' days revolve around activities, which are meant to help campers build rapport with each other while also engaging with different kinds of hobbies. Promotional materials on YouTube for Camp Tzachak consisted of many shots of campers happily engaging with a variety of activities, such as sports, art, and yoga, amongst many others. Cabin and age-group based programming also contribute to this. Some of my respondents'

favorite memories from camp entailed ridiculous programming often developed on the spot; Evan, an Embedded respondent, shared that one night, “we did an exorcism with one of my co-counselors, where we literally...like we tied him to a chair. And then he escaped and then ran throughout camp. And like we followed after him, like shouting a prayer to exorcize him, and throwing sprays of water on him to pretend that we were exorcizing him.” Like many total institutions, the literature shows that since campers are completely isolated from the real world, each camp becomes its own society with norms, traditions, and quirks that bring people back year after year (Saxe and Sales, 2002). These formal-yet-informal ties contribute to retention rates.

One of the most long-lasting ways that young Jews find personal meaning from summer camp are the life lessons they learn through experiences they have with their peers. Levi explains that “in a non-*Lord of the Flies* way, camp offers up a system without rules. So one where you can define your own value without having your parents looking over you and telling you what your value is.” Without the distractions of technology and school, campers are presented with the increasingly rare opportunity to be fully present with their friends for weeks at a time. Sharing formative experiences with their peers under these circumstances gives Jewish youth common ground to bond over and allows them to expand on those relationships for years to come. My participants made many references to continued experiences that they shared with their camp friends based on a foundation of comfort and openness formed by living in a cabin for several weeks, as Anna, an Embedded respondent, notes “camp people, we just don't give a shit...we grew up literally living in the same cabin for weeks at a time...it just is so comfortable compared to my friends at college. I would never change in front of one of [my college friends]...because they didn't have the experience that I did growing up, they don't understand it.” My respondents

from both groups also explained that camp attendance also creates a sense of mutual understanding with other Jewish people that went to other summer camps; illustrating that if a person shares anecdotes from their summer camp experience with new people, it suggests that they had a mostly positive experience with it. In unfamiliar situations, this shared common ground can take a weight off people's shoulders when trying to develop new relationships, as Benjamin demonstrated by saying:

"I got to college and I just immediately felt a connection to anyone who was Jewish, and we were able to talk about our summer camps...everyone from the Northeast goes to a summer camp. A lot of people from Chicago go. And so that was cool, where we did feel like a common connection in that way...I would say the most influential thing for me has been that it is like kind of a common ground for anyone who has been the camp, you understand each other and know how it goes and the nuances, and so that I think, is crazy that people all around the country, different environments have gone through very similar experiences, and gained very similar things from it." – Benjamin (18, Self-Determined)

This anecdote from Benjamin illustrates and suggests that even though people that attend different camps have variation in their day-to-day experiences, as a larger institution, summer camps function in this manner for many Jewish youth that attend. Levi echoed this notion, noting that camps are "all fairly the same" but that "the value that we assign to it later in life" through positive memories and lasting relationships is what shapes people's deeply emotional connection and bond with the institution of camp as a larger entity.

Campers enjoyed being surrounded by people who had similarities to them in terms of religious, cultural, and social background. They felt as though camp is one of the few places where they can embody 'authentic Judaism,' and not have to think about the way they are being

perceived, because their surroundings are completely Jewish. The Self-Determined in particular felt positively about this, considering that sometimes their commitment to Jewish life caused rifts between them and their non-Jewish friends and peers, intentionally or not. One example was when Rebecca decided to take on a Midwest-wide leadership position in her youth group, she dropped her school's cheerleading squad to focus on that instead, which led to "one of her close friends despising her for choosing the Jewish thing over cheer...I can almost remember the way that they would say 'Jewish.'"

Developing the sense of comfort that my respondents noted they had amongst their fellow Jews is also a manifest goal of Camp Tzachak's programming. On the "History" page of the camp's website, it says: "Children came to Camp Tzachak from dozens of small communities where Jewish children had few role models and limited cultural institutions. At Camp Tzachak, they learned what it meant to be Jewish, to practice cultural and religious traditions, and to live a Jewish life." Several paragraphs later, the website mentions that in Tzachak's second summer of existence (1947), campers came from 10 states and 40 cities, suggesting that there was a need for institutions to facilitate Jewish connections to foster a sense of 'authentic Judaism,' even before there was widespread upward mobility in the years following World War II. An older speaker in a YouTube video celebrating the history of Camp Tzachak from its channel also emphasized the benefits that this community creates for campers when they said "I'm proud of what Camp Tzachak did for my family, and I'm sure that other families feel the same way, especially the families that didn't have the opportunities that I had living in the Twin Cities, St. Paul; the children from the Dakotas, Minnesota, Iowa, all were able to come here and be part of it." Due to the entirely Jewish surroundings that camp entails, at camp there is no need to choose between

day-to-day life and Judaism, which empowers those who feel as though they may need to decide between two aspects of their life in a normal circumstance.

Shared traditions were cause for bonding and positive sentiments towards camp. However, a tradition that called for mixed reviews from my respondents of both typologies was the widely discussed notion of camp hookup culture. Hookup culture both at camp and in other Jewish socializing institutions is subtly encouraged by its leaders and is known widely to occur, even by non-Jews. Emma, a Self-Determined respondent, noted this underlying expectation within the institution when she said “it's funny because it's a consistent joke that, you know, people's parents send their kids to camp to meet their future husbands and wives.” Many Jewish socializing institutions aim to introduce young people to each other to create explicitly Jewish bonds that presumably end up in marriage and reproduction, ensuring that there will be a next generation to maintain Judaism’s distinct ethnic and cultural traditions. Most of my respondents alluded to having knowledge about this underlying goal. Understandably, hooking up is more likely to happen at camp versus other environments because of separation from parents, complete immersion amongst other teenagers, and by nature of having a large group of teenagers together that are hoping to begin exploring aspects of their sexual selves. In addition, the counselors in charge of campers encourage the act as well, firstly due to the aspect of tradition and wanting to replicate tradition for their campers, and secondly, because according to Ryan, a Self-Determined respondent, “they themselves were actually having sex.” Anna, an Embedded respondent, echoed this, reminiscing how during her camper years, “if one of the girls had their first kiss, we'd celebrate, and the counselors would come up and be like, ‘eizeh yofi’...I count it as definitely perpetuated hookup culture.” Some of my respondents accepted this as tradition, but many of the women (and Self-Determined women in particular) felt uncomfortable with the

expectation that they would need to find “someone to kiss”, though did not have the courage to challenge it, rather allowing the status quo to continue and deciding to make a personal effort to not participate in it. They hoped that this would change for future generations though; when asked about what she hoped her future children would get out of a potential camp experience, Hannah quickly made sure to emphasize that she “[hoped] the hookup culture would be improved by then...[I] definitely have to think about how to approach that.”

Many of my respondents failed to realize the multigenerational community ties that contribute to inclusion within larger institutional life had an influence on their place within the larger system. Those with families who are not originally from the Twin Cities that did not make a concerted effort to involve themselves with institutional life (such as Anna and Elijah’s parents) had a more difficult time breaking into camp’s social ‘in-group’. For example, in her childhood and adolescence, Amelia was not a member of the larger Jewish social networks in the Twin Cities, though she was friends with girls that went to Tzachak through school and extracurriculars. However, because of her not being fully Jewish by blood (due to one non-Jewish parent), her Judaism was put into question by those who were fully Embedded, as she shared:

“There was one boy in particular that was like, ‘You are not Jewish.’ And I was like, okay, great...my mom didn't convert, like Orthodox...and I guess that that's a thing. I guess, like, if you're not converting Orthodox, you're not actually Jewish, because it's your mom that makes you Jewish. So there was a lot of that. And also, it was just like, I felt very out of place, because I didn't know what was going on half the time. But...it made me really interested.” – Amelia (18, Self-Determined)

When she then talked about another girl that was in her age group at Tzachak with one non-Jewish parent and her assimilation into the camp culture, she noted that “she had gone with them since third grade. So I think that's why it was different. Like I also was going into it in eighth grade, when everyone had known each other for six years plus, you know what I mean?” The dichotomy between the way the Embedded and the Self-Determined experienced integration into camp culture was stark, and often their comfort was contingent on whether they understood the nuances of the larger community.

Finally, cliquy-ness and drama that led to strained relationships with peers were the most common complaints about camp amongst both groups of respondents. Unsurprisingly, the Self-Determined were more likely to raise these complaints regarding cliquy-ness, as they were more likely to be coming into camp as relative outsiders. Tzachak’s camp culture leans into many inside jokes and assumes knowledge that spills out into the Jewish community outside of camp; if a camper was not part of the interlocking institutions, they were likely to feel a sense of separation. Some of the Self-Determined embraced this and used it as a motivation to work harder to get to know the people around them, such as Levi’s approach to proving his commitment to Tzachak values:

“On the back of my Nefesh shirt, one of the things on there is ‘Underdog’, like the little cartoon hero. Because nobody had ‘known me,’ even though they had known me for years. But I was still an outsider to the group. And I surprised them by being competent, which was very patronizing to hear as a compliment, but also...to an extent, endearing?” – Levi (26, Self-Determined)

However, the dislike for cliquy-ness and drama is partially related to typical teenage relationship dynamics, as even the Embedded felt a sense of discomfort at certain points. The last

two camper years, which were generally the most formative for my respondents, come after eighth and ninth grade: a time where most teens are haphazardly attempting to develop their sense of selves and inclusion is determined on one's adherence to peer culture, a stable set of activities, routines, artifacts, values and concerns that children produce and share (Bryfman, 2009). Anecdotally, early adolescence is difficult. Anna reflected on this, noting that "I've always been an anxious person, so the unknowns are hard for me. Just like not knowing who's going to be in my cabin or not knowing which counselors I was gonna have or just basic worries like that." Sasha echoed the struggles of camp, saying "living with a bunch of other kids is not easy, especially when you are dealing with your own stuff. Everyone's got their own stuff going on. No one knows how to handle their emotions, no one knows how to communicate, at the end of the day you really don't have control over your life, you're on a schedule that someone else is setting for you." Statements on cliqueness coming from both the Self-Determined and Embedded illustrate a phenomenon of social networks that exists both inside and outside of the camp sphere: teens' brains have not fully developed, leading to oftentimes rash behavior in and out of cliques. The intensity of camp is positive in that it leads to stronger relationships being formed, but it also contributes to negative social dynamics becoming more exacerbated.

The Counselor Experience

As noted earlier, in most cases my Embedded respondents did not have much agency when it came to attending camp, due to what could be described as parental pressure or even expectation. However, when it came to moving on to the next step of the Tzachak experience, this choice was fully my respondents'. In the case of the people that I interviewed, most people who became counselors-in-training or counselors were a part of the Embedded group. However, this may not have been representative of the entirety of the population.

On a personal and what some of my respondents called “selfish” level, people want to return to camp as counselors because of the deep love that they have for it and not feeling ready to let it go. This sentiment was understandably more common from my younger respondents, due to them mostly having less than a semester of college under their belt at the point of the interview and few experiences outside of the Twin Cities Jewish community. They raised the question as to why they would choose to leave a community that is familiar and comfortable to them and go too far out of their comfort zone. Camp is also something that they have partaken in for most of their conscious lives, and many were unsure as to what else to do during the summer. Even with other plans, many of the campers who returned as staff made a conscious effort to make time for more reasons than just themselves, as Danielle did:

“I wanted to go back to camp just for a little bit and didn't want to go the whole summer because I was moving away to college and I wanted to be able to spend time with my family at home and my home friends before we all parted ways, but I wanted to go back to camp and just like give back, do what my counselors did for me and help these new campers have the a great experience and like experience the Tzachak Magic and like, I wanted to give them a reason to come back. If staff don't go back after their campers -- camp's gonna die, like that's not something I want to happen. I want my kids to go to camp. And so I wanted to go back and just keep it going and be part of people's love for camp and just...I wasn't ready to let go of my love for camp.” – Danielle (18, Embedded)

The question of whether camp will continue to exist is up to the oldest campers to answer, leaving them with an unsaid but present responsibility to return; many summer camps also perpetuate a culture that encourages campers to return in order to “give back”. In fact, my respondents who were counselors felt it to be a given that they would return to Tzachak in order

to take the lessons that they learned and share them with the following generation of campers. In my data, I noticed that for many of the Jewish socializing institutions, there was a sense of urgency associated with ensuring the continuity of values seen as ‘good’ within these institutions, and a deep desire to continue making them better in a changing society. I will call this notion *institutional continuity responsibility*, which was mostly seen through my Embedded respondents. The Embedded struggled to accept change in tradition, even if it was for the overall benefit of campers and counselors alike. There’s an insistence in making sure tradition is upheld, but because they are not the ones fully in charge at this point, it is a cycle of unprocessed frustration, as Benjamin (who I categorized as Self-Determined but had more characteristics of the Embedded than my other Self-Determined respondents) explained, “As a counselor, when you feel so passionately about upholding camp in a certain way. And then other people see it in a different way. And you get directed or see it being or see others doing the opposite of what you would do. And you just get annoyed.” The idea of institutional continuity and normative reciprocity (the norms and expectations of giving back when one has already received) gives campers the sense that they owe the camp their time, but in a way that resonates with their personal experiences and values.

A case of resistance to tradition occurring manifested itself in a major change as to how Tzachak’s counselor-in-training program, called the Nefesh program, was structured about six years ago. Previously, prospective Nefeshim underwent a rigorous training and application process, and only twelve girls and twelve boys were chosen to be Nefeshim each year, and was a major source of social capital within the community for those who were given the title; in a video celebrating Tzachak’s 70th anniversary, a speaker said, “When I think of a Nefesh at Camp Tzachak, I think of a magic maker.” However, Tzachak’s leaders shifted the application process

to require a combination of community service and education during high school, and whoever met the requirements could become a Nefesh. On a general level, people resisted change to major tradition, but in this case the Embedded held major misgivings towards how the program was changed due to it being accessible to people who they perceived may not have been the right fit for the program. The Self-Determined shared similar sentiments due to the association of being seen as special due to their selection, but some also expressed relief that they could take part in a coveted tradition that previously, they may not have possessed the connections to obtain. Nonetheless, a break in tradition is cause for upset for all, as it is described that “it doesn’t mean much to be a Nefesh anymore.” Levi was the only person that I interviewed who was in the perspective of the respondents, a “normal Nefesh” and gave this anecdote about the legacy of the original Nefesh program outlasting the summer experience:

“[Over one summer] I ended up trying out for one of the local frisbee teams, because Tzachak teaches you frisbee skills, of course. And I was wearing shorts that said “Camp Nefesh...” and one of the guys that was going up against you was guarding me actually caught the shorts and was like, ‘Hey, were you a Nefesh? Who do you know?’ And did a whole conversation with me...so there’s somebody that I knew, and I knew his name. It was part of being interconnected through a legacy of this program. And he also then started griping about how the Nefesh program’s changing, and how much worse it was. pause I never saw the new Nefesh program in action, I’d left just before it came in. So I don’t know if it’s worse. But the idea that we were part of a small pocket of selected individuals, and the selected individuals were meant to be leaders, spoke to a multi-generational understanding of the shared values that go into being a good Nefesh. Being professional, being upstanding, taking care of others, being conscious of your kids and their needs, being a compassionate individual, understanding what it means to be selected to this program above others, and displaying those values to the community -- those were the kinds of things that stood out. And he didn’t need to talk to me much to know that I had those same values.” – Levi (26, Self-Determined)

In what was described as another positive aspect of the counselor experience, kids may be more accepting of advice from people who are older than them but still are somewhat close to their age, such as the counselor age gap. This effect is even stronger when there's a continued relationship, as Hannah shared:

“So every summer, I had this one cabin of girls, and I had them as they got older for three summers in a row. And they were the cool cabin and terribly behaved. They were just mean. Their staff before just kind of let them get away with things because it was so difficult to deal with them. But I guess I always tried to approach it as like ‘I’m not there to be their friend,’ but to make them better people. And so enforcing the rules and trying to teach them things and get them to participate in things. And it eventually paid off, and I was their 9th grade summer staff and they were great, and super open to meeting new people. And great leaders in the program, I guess. So I feel like part of being a role model is all that stuff I did.” – Hannah (21, Self-Determined)

The other fact of the matter is that if young Jews are not contributing to camp, there will be no camp, which is a major fear for the adults that run the institutions and young campers and counselors alike. For secular Jews, today's American society allows for the benefits of structural assimilation. However, Jewish summer camp allows for the option to be ethnic in a safe space; for many of the people who attend camp, Judaism becomes a large part of their identity. Summer camp is also the first time that Jewish young adults get to actively facilitate efforts of ethnic retention and pride for people other than their peers in youth groups, taking what they learned from socializing institutions in their early teens and finally having the chance to implement those lessons as actual leaders, giving back in return what was provided for them in their childhood. For counselors across both typologies, it is empowering and meaning-making in itself to lead,

because it is a chance to change the aspects of an institution that they do not like as much and to implement what they do in order to create a better experience for the next generation.

Making Meaning From Tzachak Judaism

Experiences with identity-shaping institutions such as summer camp are relational; if a person has a positive experience within one of these institutions, such as summer camp, they will most likely have a positive attitude towards the aspect of identity that is being shaped. If that is not the case, that negative experience may drive them away. This expands to Jewish aspects of camp as well (Bryfman, 2009; Kelman et. al, 2017). For my respondents, one of the central aspects of their Judaism were the social connections and experiences that they shared with members of the community, rather than solely religious activities. In what is seen as a privilege in their eyes, camp is a place where a person gets to be surrounded by those who share a similar upbringing, value set, and penchant for fun, which differs from other Jewish institutions. Compared to youth groups and Israel trips, the two closest comparisons noted by my respondents, camp finds itself in its own category because of its position as a total institution, leading to becoming completely immersed in the camp culture, which in Tzachak's case is embedded in a pride for Judaism.

Sentiments towards camp Judaism was the one major divide in regard to meaning-making occurring at camp between the Embedded and the Self-Determined. However, an overarching positive sentiment towards Judaism at camp was that it gives young Jews the option to think freely about religion and question the lessons and sentiments that were prescribed to them through structured Jewish education or the family. Many disagreed with the notion taught in schools that being more observant automatically makes one a "better" Jew, perpetuating the idea that there is only one prescribed way to be perceived as a "good" Jew. This will be explained

more in-depth in the following chapter, but this sentiment illustrates that on a larger level, Jewish youth want to change what they perceive as negative aspects of socializing institutions, but have no framework to do so based on the examples set by the generations before them; there is a desire to hold onto tradition but simultaneously shift them to match the current times. Being able to develop a personal sense of meaning from Jewish activities at camp is empowering to young people, especially the Self-Determined. And even though they are members of an older generation, those in charge are hearing what their younger constituents value, and are shifting the way Judaism manifests at camp to align with those values, as Orly explains:

“I think this shift that we’ve made of more towards middot and Jewish values than when you were at camp, [when] it was a lot more praying, has been really important and helpful, because I think then they leave camp going into the world...I don’t know how much they even see it as knowing their Jewish values, but it makes them into better Jewish people. Services and praying is great, and we’d love for them to learn that, but it’s not like a skill that’s going to help you in life. And I think the learning of these Jewish values, of being able to be good people, are skills that help you in life...I think they are things that people later in their life attribute back to camp. I think as kids, you don’t think about that at all, which is totally fine. But that’s why parents send their kids to camp, is to get these skills.” – Orly (Key Informant)

In comparison to the Embedded, the Self-Determined spoke much more about how Judaism was approached at camp, as well as in a more positive manner than the Embedded. This is for several reasons. First, camp Judaism was likely to be more intense than what they did at home, and what they did at home tended to be unenjoyable because it was set up to be chore-like; camp’s goals give people the outlet and opportunity to engage with Judaism in a more personal way. Secondly, because of the freedom to explore at camp, it gave the campers the

agency to discover what aspects of Judaism worked for them, and which ones did not. In talking about Shabbat traditions at Tzachak, Leora shared:

“I think the nice thing about camp versus synagogue or Jewish school is I think that they really let you think freely about everything. I mean, as much as it is a little bit forced, just with having to go to services and you know, those things that you do on Shabbat, there's always discussions which I really liked, and I remember being able to pick the discussion group that I wanted to go to for the day, right? And I think that would allow you to form your thoughts more freely, and kind of get your own take on it versus it being forced on you.” – Leora (21, Self-Determined)

For some of the Self-Determined, this agency made them want to seek out opportunities to incorporate Judaism into their lives outside of camp once the summer ended, both in lighthearted ways as Bailey explained, “the first weeks back from camp, me and my sister would still love to sing the prayers and do all the fun little hand gestures before and after dinner,” but also approaching it from a more serious perspective. Camp helped to open their eyes to see other options of what a ‘Jewish Life’ could entail because the activities are engaging and fun, as well as Judaism being omnipresent. This omnipresence made my respondents feel proud to be Jewish, as Rebecca noted:

“I think that every summer when I went to camp, I would come back and be like, ‘Oh my gosh, I'm just so fired up about being Jewish.’ But I definitely didn't feel that way religiously at home. I did Hebrew School, but that never moved me religiously really. Whereas going to camp I would say, was a very engaging religious environment to be in, where my religion appealed to me.” – Rebecca (20, Self-Determined)

On the other side of things, however, the Embedded expressed far fewer positive sentiments about Tzachak's approach to Judaism. This group often already felt very Jewish in their day-to-day existence through their social networks and activities, which made them not want to incorporate it more than was absolutely needed. Many of the Embedded viewed Jewish activities at camp as a have-to-do rather than something they could learn from, as Grant proved when explaining his relationship with Shabbat services, "I would have rather slept in. I'd do my best to sleep in. But the counselors would come back and wake all of us...and drag us over to services." Additionally, camp Judaism was apt to be less intense than it was at home, so camp became a reprieve from Judaism and was possibly a space where they could be a typical, secular teenager, rather than embodying Judaism at all points in their lives. For example, Anna and Elijah's family keeps strict Shabbat every weekend, which prohibited them from seeing friends or using electronics like normal teenagers during their high school years. Anna lamented that even for major events like Prom or Homecoming, "it was always a conversation...they always came up with ways for me to do it, whether it was getting driven there, or biking, something like that. So that was always just frustrating because it was like, I don't want it to just be the big things, I wanted to always be able to have that social Friday night or Saturday night that I wasn't able to have." Elijah also noted that his dad "inserts Judaism into everything he does in his life now. He says prayers before he eats anything, stuff like that." While aspects of this were present in camp life because everyone participated in the activities, it was not a separation mechanism and therefore was less restrictive and a decrease in active and intentional Jewish observance from his perspective.

The Self-Determined often picked up on these sentiments from the Embedded. Until they came to their own understanding about Judaism in their later years at camp, they often went

along with what the Embedded did because that group was the ‘in crowd.’ Even though Amelia was friends with people who would have been considered Embedded, “as [she] got older, [she] would just go by [herself]. [She] would go to services early, instead of going at 11 o'clock and doing an hour of it...[her] friends didn't really follow along with services. They did their bracelets, they did whatever. Like, I had a siddur, like I was doing it.” However, some of the Embedded who held more Self-Determined traits (and tended to be older) saw the benefits of Tzachak’s Judaism, because of the knowledge that it makes Judaism accessible to those who may have been uncomfortable engaging with it previously due to lack of institutional involvement.

A unique aspect of Tzachak’s Jewish curriculum in comparison to other summer camps is the intense integration of Israel education that takes place, which my respondents discussed in a positive manner. Anna explained that “Israel was something embedded in everything we did at Tzachak. Every morning if it wasn't services, it was an Israel activity or like an Israel program or like, with the Israeli scouts...we would like constantly be bringing in Israelis, and having Israeli campers. And I think that was so important to hear from like, actual Israelis about their experiences living in Israel. And that's kind of the best way to learn about Israel is hearing it directly from people who live there.” Tzachak’s values are based in Zionist philosophy, as is noted on its website where it says “In its first brochure, Camp Tzachak’s aim was to bring a child closer to Jewish life and the Jewish people... to prepare the child to absorb the content and values of modern Palestine...to enlist the child’s interest and help in building of the Jewish national homeland’...the belief was that if the State of Israel was a Jewish state for Jewish people where Jews performed all of the tasks required to run the country, then Camp Tzachak would follow suit, employing Jewish people to fill all of the jobs needed to make the camp

function.” Fostering a connection to Israel and equating it with Jewish observance is a manifest vision of Tzachak, which has a chance to influence the ways in which its constituents think about Israel as well.

Tzachak also aims to educate its campers on Israel and political conflicts associated with it in age-appropriate manners with historical context. Dexter, one of my Key Informants, shared that “we’re really trying to root it in history. So we’re trying to not dive into [political] conversations until we feel like our campers understand the history and the existence of the State of Israel. And then we have really brought out you know, where we’ll do like debates with our older kids, but like debates where you assign them a side so they have to, like learn about one side, and not necessarily like their own belief, but like they’re learning about one side of the conflict, or whatever it is, and then kind of debating it with each other.” Many other Jewish summer camps have Israel programming in their curriculum, but the consistently active presence of Israelis at Tzachak in the form of bunk staff and fellow campers in comparison to other camps was noted by my respondents to foster a deep and personal connection to the country.

Finally, camp was only a true educator when it came to Judaism for very certain people. In this camp’s larger Jewish community, there is an assumed knowledge and involvement with institutional life. Elijah joked that “when people were considering where to send their kids to camp, that was one of the main things in Minnesota. You either wanted them to go to a Jewish summer camp, or you wanted them to go to a summer camp for Jews.” If a person is sending their child to a “summer camp for Jews,” there is an assumed background of Judaism already. This manifested in many of the Jewish activities. Amelia, who as previously mentioned did not have any major Jewish experiences until she was a teenager, discussed that during Jewish programming “there wasn’t a lot of meaning for them to teach it to us. Like it was kind of just

something they had to do. So I feel like they didn't super go into detail about the stories or like, explain the stories or what they meant.” On a positive note though, this gave her the push to seek out more education on her own, allowing her to have a greater understanding as to how camp made an impact on her.

As I have explored in this chapter, there are a variety of ways that the Self-Determined and Embedded make meaning from their camp experiences. While their reasons for attending in the first place may differ, camp provides a common space for them to independently explore their Jewish identity, but even more so exploring friendship, independence, and the chance to be a true leader and mentor. Camp is enjoyable, but the true motivation behind camp is to educate and instill Jewish values in their constituents past the summer and into adulthood. Their camper years falling further behind them, my respondents hold those experiences close to their hearts as they are faced with the choice of how to incorporate Judaism into their lives as potential counselors and as independent adults.

Chapter 5: Thinking Anew and Moving Forth

Throughout his life, Elijah has stopped in just about every place on the Jewish map when it comes to religious and cultural participation. From living in Israel as an elementary schooler while his parents attended a Conservative Yeshiva, to begrudgingly keeping strict Shabbos rules to appease his newly Orthodox family throughout middle and high school, to dabbling in Hillel and Chabad during college, and now in his words, having an “okay relationship with Judaism,” Elijah came to our interview with a deeply nuanced perspective in what it means to be a Jewish person in the United States today. Though he grew up extremely embedded within the Twin Cities community, separation from it during college allowed him the space to reflect on what aspects of Judaism meant most to him, and to make a calculated decision as to what he would choose to actively take forward into his adult life.

“Israel is not everything, but close to it,” he explained. “There are various religions that have different countries, and Judaism has one country...it's one of the only countries where there's always a question about its existence...I think it's important in Jewish continuity as well, because there's no other place where the majority of people are Jewish, especially considering we make up like less than, what is it? Like, less than 1% of the population in the world...Judaism in the U.S. is big. But I could see 200 years down the line, just so many intermarriages that it becomes pretty irrelevant. And that's what worries me.” The idea of Jewish continuity came up repeatedly, whether it was in the context of maintaining Jewish relationships, or making sure that Jewish institutions continue to exist; his socialization experiences at home and at camp informed the importance of this. In his life, making sure these systems continue to exist for generations to come was the greatest motivator in his Jewish observance.

Amelia grew up quite the opposite from Elijah, as well as just about all my other respondents: with a lack of many Jewish experiences on top of attending church camp as a child, camp was her first immersive experience with Judaism. At times during camp, she felt a bit like a fish out of water when knowledge of certain customs was assumed by the leadership rather than explained. However, her lack of exposure inspired a desire to learn more and take greater advantage of the Jewish opportunities that camp had to offer. At the beginning of August, observant Jews fast for twenty-four hours to mourn the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. This also typically coincides with the end of the camp season. “Tisha B'av is the first time I had really, really celebrated a Jewish holiday. It was the first one I ever fasted. Or, like, chose to fast. And I was like, Oh, this is so cool...a lot of my friends were not into it, they didn't want to do it. They were like, oh, I don't have to do anything today...And I went to all the services that they had; they had services three or four times that day, and I fasted, and it was just really cool. That was one of the big things that I had chosen to do that my peers didn't.”

Compared to most of my respondents, camp directly influenced Amelia’s approach to Judaism rather than just supplementing it. Even after she started attending camp, she did not engage with Jewish institutions often until she missed what was supposed to be her Nefesh summer due to COVID cancellations, but now she goes “to Shabbat every weekend at Chabad and Hillel, and [she doesn’t think she] would have done that if she hadn't gone to Tzachak. And like, at least gotten some experience with Judaism.” Her college studies are informed by a newfound passion for Israel that was formulated during camp. But most importantly, summer camp gave Amelia the agency to be empowered by her Judaism, even in moments where it sets her apart. “I think being Jewish in a place that doesn't have a lot of Jews is extremely isolating...I feel like it's hard to sometimes relate to other people. Because, you know, they don't have the

same shared experiences. Judaism is a very big part of your life, and your values. And I feel like going to a camp and seeing like, oh my gosh, there's people like me, there's a big group of people like me, that is very empowering...like, I'm not the only one.”

As explored thus far, my respondents come to camp with a variety of different Jewish experiences in their upbringing, whether it be religiously, culturally, or socially. Some were embedded into the greater Jewish community of the Twin Cities, while some felt as though they were on the outside looking in; some were not even raised in the Twin Cities for the majority of their childhood. Some had plenty of involvement with institutions like synagogue, religious school, and youth group membership. For others, attending summer camp was their first or one of their first introductions to Judaism and its lessons. In this chapter, I show how they went about navigating camp and taking their experiences home with them and later into their young adult “real lives” as they grew older. In other words, I examine how, when looking back retrospectively, my respondents believe camp has impacted them in the longer durée.

Living With Intention

Today, in their young adulthood, my respondents express a range of views on their Jewish faith. Some, as Ryan noted when he told me “I think Judaism is just a part of me...you can't take it away from me...it's just ingrained in who I am. So how Jewish am I...I guess I would say 100% even when I'm not being religious,” feel completely Jewish at all points because based on their experiences, it has become part of their “core.” Others viewed their connection to Judaism on a religious scale, viewing themselves as having a range of dedication to it depending

on how often they chose to integrate religious activities into their lives. Still others saw their Judaism as cultural and centered more in community-based activities and relationships, as Rebecca, a Self-Determined respondent, showed, saying “when I was most Jewish in high school, it wasn't the religious part that attracted me to it, it was socially, and community.” For Rebecca and other respondents like her, maintaining relationships with other Jews in formal and informal settings helps maintain a connection with the religion due to ‘bonding social capital’: a feeling of belonging, similarity to others, and acknowledged interdependence, and feeling that one is a part of a system that is larger than oneself (Saxe and Chazan, 2008). Emma explains how close friendships developed within interlocking institutions leads to strong bonds later on that even non-Jews notice:

“I think anybody who wasn't Jewish always felt, in my opinion, a little bit disconnected from Jews, because Jews were very much like 'there are our people.' And as much as you had your school friends...and sport friends and all that stuff, you also always had a core Jewish friend group that was more like family than friends. And I think I noticed consistently that a lot of people who aren't Jewish look at that as like, 'Oh, why is that such a thing? Why are you guys all so much closer?’” – Emma (19, Self-Determined)

Associations between one’s connection to Judaism and the intensity of one’s religious observance and practice tended to come more often from the Embedded than from the Self-Determined, most likely due to the Self-Determined harnessing a larger sense of personal agency when it comes to deciding how religion and culture was going to exist in their lives by virtue of their built-in separation from the tight-knit community, as Bailey noted when she said “My family, we're pretty chill...in terms of Judaism. So if one day we were super tired, didn't really have the energy to go to Sunday School that day, it was pretty understanding that you weren't

required to go every week.” Consciously or not, the Embedded often felt as though there was less freedom in general in regard to how to express Judaism, though this perspective became less constricted with age and a larger variety of experiences. Jonah, who is Embedded but whose older brother Ryan is Self-Determined, explains this, saying:

“I think, at least the way I was taught it or implied it when I was growing up was that how Jewish you are depends on how observant you are. So the most Jewish people were the Orthodox and the least Jewish were the Reform, when in actuality, that's not the case. And we're all equally Jewish, because that's not even what the core of Judaism is. The core is to just be better today than you were yesterday. And better tomorrow than you were today. In any facet.” – Jonah (18, Embedded)

Regardless, both Self-Determined and Embedded respondents felt that as they have gotten older, expressing Judaism has become a more intentional act, done both for themselves and for their future families. Now no longer under the supervision and guidance of their parents, they must choose what Judaism means for themselves and how they will express and live by it. For some of my respondents, such as Amelia, being intentional with expressing Judaism is empowering because it is an identity-shaping force. For her and several of my other Self-Determined respondents such as Emma, Ryan, and Leora, embracing Jewish education as an avenue to find meaning within sacred texts, culture, and connection to Israel made discovering their Judaism more empowering. Fully internalizing that Judaism is not necessarily just going to synagogue or practicing for a B'nai Mitzvah makes the idea of embodying it more appealing, because it is then something that is both exploratory and enjoyable, as Leora shared:

“I think as I've gotten older, I realized that...to be a practicing Jew isn't going to synagogue and keeping kosher and praying, you know...I think the biggest thing ...I went on Birthright, and that's what our tour guide told us, was that people think that you have to go to synagogue all the time and keep kosher and do this and this and this, but Judaism is how you want it to be and how it feels for you. So if you, you know, listen to Hebrew music, if that brings you into feeling connected to Israel, which kind of reminds you that you're Jewish, that's one way that you're practicing. Or if you like eating different Jewish foods or popular Israeli foods, that's okay, too. It doesn't have to be that you go to synagogue and you pray. If you feel connected in other ways, that's fine. And I think that's the biggest thing that I've noticed is that I don't really feel connected when I'm at synagogue in any way. But when I'm around other Jewish people, or if I'm eating Jewish foods, that kind of reminds me more...like it brings me back to my Judaism.” – Leora (21, Self-Determined)

In talking about their sentiments towards expression of Judaism today, hallmarks of symbolic ethnicity often came up when discussing religious or cultural activities, such as eating food or celebrating holidays (Waters, 1990; Gans, 1979). One hallmark most notably mentioned from members of both typologies is the case of having the ability to not participate in Jewish life if it was not necessarily convenient to a given situation. Mike illustrated this when saying, “I'd be more religious around my family, but I'm kind of when I'm on my own, like, not really. My roommates celebrate Shabbat every week, though, which is nice. But still like, I didn't go to Rosh Hashanah, I'm not gonna observe Yom Kippur. I just have class I don't plan on missing...for me on a Friday night, if I'm like, do I just want to go to the dining hall? Or do I want to go to Hillel and walk...it's kind of like, I'll just go get dinner with the boys.” My respondents understand their privilege compared to older Jewish adults and their ancestors in general in that they are free to be Jewish in modern American society without formal repercussions and do not need to hide it in order to achieve their dreams, and are not held back

by it in terms of pursuing education, occupation and housing. If anything, they sometimes feel guilty for not observing Jewish practices more than they do, but like Mike, they appreciate the freedom of not having to; in describing his Jewish observance at college, Grant explained: “On the holidays, I’ll maybe go to one Jewish thing here or something like that. But it’s not something that I...I wouldn’t say I practice Judaism on a day to day or week to week basis. It’s probably like, once a month, max...but I’d say it’s something that I largely identify with.”

Interestingly, more of the Embedded than the Self-Determined noted that during their college years, they moved slightly away from their Judaism. For some it was a rebellion against a strict religious upbringing, as Elijah explained, “[Judaism] can’t be everything to me. And like, I want to focus on doing school, I want to focus on making friends. I want to focus on being in my fraternity. This is like pretty much the last thing on my list. So I would try to occasionally go [to Hillel and Chabad], but honestly, I just did not care.” However, the desire to return to it after time away was also mentioned, showing that Jewish values and experiences are socialized to be seen as the most comfortable. For others, it was simply inconvenient to their lifestyle, even though at many of their colleges there was a strong presence of Hillel and Chabad, two nationwide campus organizations: a clear hallmark of embodying symbolic ethnicity.

Compared to the Self-Determined, the Embedded were more likely to think of the Jewish people as a whole when it came to decision-making or embodying religious aspects. Because of their typically more traditionalist upbringing, they have been socialized into a stronger understanding that if they do not actively engage in their Judaism, then the community that they grew up in and positive aspects of their way of life will not be replicated for the next generation. These sentiments are probably associated with rhetoric they received from older members of their families, and sometimes they feel guilty for making their own choices that do not one

hundred percent align with familial hopes and customs. When discussing the idea of keeping Judaism within the community, Elijah shared:

“I'm dating a non-Jewish person, and that's not going over well with my family, and it never has. I've been dating her for four and a half years now...my parents want me to marry a Jew, obviously...my extended family is not religious at all. Like my family is the only really religious, observant family in my extended family. But one rule in my family is always about marrying Jewish people. And I get it. That's been the main problem for me, is that I want to get really mad at them. And I do. But like, I get it, because I understand the concept of Jewish continuity. And they sent me to camp, they sent me to all these things to try to meet someone Jewish practically; that's half the reason why parents send their kids to camp, in my opinion. And it's definitely been tough. They really want her to convert. And that's like a tough conversation to have.” – Elijah (22, Embedded)

Overall, Judaism continues to be an important aspect of my respondents’ young adult lives due to its value being ingrained through childhood and adolescent socialization practices. Through balancing others’ expectations of observance while simultaneously experimenting to find the best way to personally incorporate it into their lives, they have a newfound personal meaning towards the culture and religion created through shared bonds and self-reflection. Even though the ways in which they approach their changing landscape vary based on their upbringing, the shared experience of camp provides an overarching understanding of what it means to be Jewish, and sets up the framework to implement it into their lives.

Creating Bonds for Life

Though people come to Jewish summer camp with a variety of religious and cultural experiences, camp levels the playing field in a way that provides campers of all backgrounds an

opportunity to find what personally excites them within Judaism. Whether the camp experience develops into an affinity for forming relationships with other Jewish peers, teaches them new ways to incorporate Jewish values into their lives, or sparks an inspiration to learn more about Israel, there are a variety of ways that camp inspires formal and informal connection with Judaism into their “real lives” in the years after their time as a camper.

For all my respondents, expression of Judaism in their college years and early twenties was less about institutional participation (though most at least dabbled in student chapters of Hillel and Chabad) and more prominently so about forming and maintaining Jewish relationships in order to perpetuate Jewish continuity. Because of the interlocking institutional involvement in the Twin Cities, camp friends most often carried into the world outside of camp, and my (mostly Embedded) respondents often referred to their camp friends as their “real friends.” This also happened more often when former campers moved into the counselor phase, as Evan explained, “I think the people that I got close with my first year on staff are definitely the people that I'm now super close with, especially the people that I was at camp with this past summer.” In general, friendships are built on common ground. Even though the group that attends Tzachak come to camp with a variation of Jewish experiences, at their core they are all Jewish and can build off those shared values and customs through the camp trajectory (amongst other institutional experiences), an example of how bonding social capital is created. As previously mentioned, many of my respondents tended to feel more comfortable with other members of “the tribe” because “a good amount of Jewish people at least follow some of the traditions...it's probably more generally just there's a similarity in morals and values and stuff like that. So I guess it feels comfortable because it's familiar. And there's already similarities that you can bond

over,” according to Grant. Adding onto that, for those that feel Judaism is part of their “core”, such as Sasha, surrounding oneself with Jewish people ensures that their core will be accepted:

“There's a lot more pre-established common ground with Jewish people...because it's such a core part of my identity, and a core part of my life, it is like a very prominent part of who I am and what I do, and my character and my personality. And so, when I am with someone who's Jewish, I don't have to explain those things to them. When I'm with someone who's not, it's like, the extra step of code-switching myself to be more relatable, but also being more attentive...if I'm explaining things, what I'm saying, the topic I'm talking about, like that kind of stuff.” – Sasha (21, Embedded)

Besides camp, experiences with the same group of people such as youth-group sponsored Israel trips (for my respondents, these were through BBYO and USY, the youth groups associated with Reform and Conservative Judaism, respectively) and youth group retreats brought my respondents closer together. As many of these occurred after the conclusion of their camper years and the respondents were older, they were able to use these experiences to expand their horizons and learn from each other through connection, rather than keeping themselves closed off. Making memories outside of the singular sphere of camp actually made those relationships deeper, as Jonah shared:

“I think it's actually more so just through either our 10th grade summer or through us going to Israel together. Because I will say our 9th and 10th grade summers were a lot more communal than the years before that. So I got along with people that I hadn't talked to as much before then, and then Israel as well. And we're experiencing all these sad, all these happy, all these actual, real spiritual moments together. And I think moments like that, and

experiences like that will bond people for life.” – Jonah (18, Embedded)

In relation to feeling more in tune with their Judaism when they are surrounded by other Jewish people, respondents from both groups often felt the least Jewish when they were surrounded by people who were not Jewish and were unable to cover that common ground with their peers, compared to camp where the purely Jewish surroundings are an avenue for people to be more authentically themselves. Evan, an Embedded respondent noted that the opportunity to develop Jewish relationships is one of the most important aspects of camp, saying that “if a person doesn’t have any other Jewish friends at school, or maybe they’re the only Jewish person at their school, and then all of a sudden, they get to go to camp and everyone else is Jewish, they’re good. It helps people feel confident in their Judaism. And that is a part of their identity.”

For several of my respondents, their most powerful experience of being surrounded by non-Jews happened at the beginning of their college experience; while they eventually found their Jewish community at school as time went on, there was a sense of isolation at the start. For Hannah, a Self-Determined respondent who attends a liberal arts college in the Northeast with a small Jewish population, she noted that this distance felt the most pertinent in the aftermath of the Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh and having no one to speak about it with, especially due to it occurring during her first semester of college, when she was already feeling somewhat isolated. Compared to other dimensions of her life, she still has a smaller community of Jewish people in college, noting that in day-to-day life, “I don’t feel less comfortable, but I definitely miss having someone Jewish around if I have something funny to share, or like something going on that’s Jewish.” Even though she did not grow up embedded in a Jewish community and had

greater exposure to non-Jewish people in her day-to-day life, this sense of isolation maintained for Hannah and several other respondents like her.

For others, it was due to the lack of Jewish surroundings in their living situation, as Sasha explained:

“The least Jewish...I would definitely feel the very beginning of freshman year. I was the only Jew on my floor, a lot of my friends were from small-town [state] and never really met a Jew. Or only had one Jewish friend or like whatever. And I was kind of very much like the token Jew. And it just made me feel very artificially Jewish because...in the same way I know when I'm like, oh, Christmas, Easter for my friends who are Christian...there's so much more to it than that, that's like barely scratching the surface of it. And so I kind of felt like I was having to portray that version of Judaism to a lot of my friends because they had no idea.” – Sasha (21, Embedded)

In what could have been used as a vehicle for educating others who had a lack of knowledge regarding her customs as some of the Self-Determined did, Sasha instead retreated to code-switching methods she knew would work to appeal to members of White Christian America. Feeling uncomfortable and out of place, when she had developed strong enough social networks, eventually Sasha chose to return to her comfort zone: having her community be mainly made up of other Jews, accomplished through joining a Jewish sorority and becoming heavily involved in her college's Israel advocacy group. She noted earlier in our interview that she “was raised in a house where it was very important to be involved with community” and was so deeply embedded within the formal and informal institutions of the Twin Cities community that she was socialized in a way where Jewish immersion would be the most comforting for her;

when this expectation is not met, she feels threatened and blames others for not understanding the nuances of a community she did not try to explain.

Incorporating Jewish values into their lives is another manifestation of Judaism in my respondents. This was not purely in a religious context, but also incorporated into everyday activities because of the way lessons taught at camp are made to be accessible in real life. Finding meaning in everyday emotions and feelings, and just not things that are regulated to a certain setting or group of people makes incorporating aspects of Judaism more applicable to daily life. Tzachak's leadership gratefully understood the need to facilitate ways to incorporate Jewish values in ways outside of structured prayer; on their website, it notes that "Through daily experiential programming, we build camper connections to Judaism and their Jewish community. Each morning, campers and staff share Z'man Kodesh and take a deep dive into Jewish values, prayer, and Torah." Camp's approach to Judaism allows a foundation to be built regarding my respondents' understanding that there is not one prescribed approach to religion. For Bailey, Tzachak's offerings of different kinds of religious services allowed her to create her own framework for having a relationship with God through "practices of continuing to be a good person and kind of give back to community when you can," rather than connecting through "a prayer book."

Jonah also shared more about his experience in learning how to connect with the Torah and other holy books in-depth through lessons that stemmed from camp:

"I started learning about the character traits and just self-improvement, and Judaism has so much writing on that, which just blew me away. Right now I'm actually learning about why we have every character trait and why it's important to experience not only the good ones, like happiness and love and whatnot, but also why we need to have anger and sadness, and why it all balances each

other out. The fact that we have a book that was written thousands of years ago that touches on all that and can be applicable to modern day issues just really binds me to it and connects me to it.”
 – Jonah (18, Embedded)

A key aspect of incorporating Jewish values, especially for the Self-Determined, was questioning the status quo and what exactly they were taught; the Talmud, a holy Jewish text, insists that people question. After all, a key component of the Passover Seder is the singing of the Four Questions, where the youngest person at the table asks why the Passover customs are the way they are. Outside of the holidays, my respondents often questioned how the lessons of key texts informed their lives; at the time of our interview, Emma was meeting weekly with her college’s Chabad Rabbi to “read word for word what the Torah says, not an interpretation of what...honestly an Orthodox male wrote.” As mentioned above, there are plenty of ways to incorporate these values into day-to-day activities, but through questioning them, it felt more salient, as Emma shared when she said “I don't think I'm ever going to become more religious in a sense, but I think that understanding why all these beliefs are the way they are and where they came from is really important to me, versus kind of blindly following, and I've felt more connected to the culture.”

Finally, a way that my respondents connected to their Judaism in their post-camper years was through fostering a connection to Israel, whether it be through education or political engagement. Because Tzachak identifies with the Zionist movement, campers have extensive education and engagement with Israeli culture and staff while they are at camp, which lays the basis of a connection. However, passion regarding Israel tended to develop in tangible manners after youth group-sponsored Israel trips and through the college years rather than at Tzachak itself. However, the Embedded see Israel more as a place of “Jewish happiness” and utopia-

esque, while the Self-Determined worked to educate themselves and think about the country more critically, as Amelia did for a year-long project as a senior in high school:

“I wanted to learn about Israel because where I live my school...we have Ilhan Omar as our representative, who is very openly anti-Israel, tries to pass anti-Israel legislation through like it's...yeah. And a lot of people in my school are supportive of her and supportive of that and so yeah, I really wanted to learn about what actually had gone on, how the land was distributed when making Israel. And so I did like a year-long project on it. It was really cool because I had no opinion going into it, I had no idea, I had never heard anything, really. I'd heard things but I never learned anything from either side.” – Amelia (18, Self-Determined)

Overall, outside of the camp experience, there were many ways that my respondents chose to interact with their Judaism. Some did so with more intensity, but generally there was not a huge difference in the activities that the Embedded and Self-Determined chose to pursue regarding Judaism, but rather how to approach it.

Anti-Semitism and Structural Assimilation

In an ever-connected world, my respondents are tuned into the rise of anti-Semitic acts and sentiments both nationwide and worldwide. However, I was surprised to hear that the level of empowerment from it outweighed anticipated fear. On a general level, many of my respondents believed that anti-Semitism stems not from hate of the Jewish people, but rather from a lack of education and exposure. Because of the lack of exposure, they believe that people who hold anti-Semitic views stereotype because they do not have anything evidence to disprove it until they meet Jews. However, this sentiment was approached in different ways by the Self-Determined and the Embedded.

The Self-Determined are often engaged outwardly: because of their being less integrated into and isolated by the Jewish community, they have more experience with a wider range of people other than “White Jewish hegemony,” meaning that their social networks and surroundings are mainly other White Jews, and know that they need to expand in order to make change; they are also of the understanding that an isolationist approach may drive people with differences away. They view their Judaism from a wider angle and know that it can be used as a powerful tool outside of religiosity. Anti-Semitic experiences were met with more empathy towards the experience and a desire to educate, as Leora did:

“My friend brought her boyfriend up, and they are from a tiny town, that if I told you you probably never would have heard of, and probably never will hear of...my friends always like to just joke, they tell everyone I'm Jewish. Like, that's just how they are. But he was like, ‘Oh, you're Jewish,’ whatever, asked me a few questions, and I was like, ‘Oh, yeah, I went to Jewish school.’ And he was like, ‘Did you have to pay for that?’ I was like ‘Yeah, it was a private school, I had to pay for it.’ And he was like, ‘Well, that doesn't make sense, because Jewish people are so cheap. They don't want to spend money, why would you pay for your education?’ And then I told him, I was like, ‘And how many successful businessmen and doctors and lawyers are out there that are Jewish’, and he kind of looked at me, and I was like, ‘That's because we pay for our education, and we want a good education. And we want to be educated and we're smart.’ I was like, ‘Don't say that, it's not true.’ It just was annoying because, it's not even like that it's rude. It's just you totally, you don't understand, you know, especially if they've never been around Jewish people.” – Leora (21, Self-Determined)

However, the Embedded tend to look more inwardly, and isolate when aspects of their identity are threatened. Yes, both groups felt some resentment, but the Embedded tend to attach blame to those who are unaware, rather than approaching them with empathy. Feeling as though

they may not be accepted by others drives them to move closer towards the Jewish community that they feel most comfortable with. As mentioned in “The Embedded and The Self-Determined”, anti-Semitic or generally negative experiences pushes these respondents to stay closer to their Judaism, as perhaps they perceive themselves as threatened and are choosing to embrace the privilege to be fully Jewish. Camp influences this, as for many people who come from communities with a small Jewish population, camp is “really the only place where they can be fully Jewish...without any kind of doubt or question,” according to Bailey. Having a space where Judaism and its traditions will always be embraced rather than “having questioning behind it” gives Jewish youth the strength to maintain their confidence and to embrace Judaism, even when harmful rhetoric is shared publicly or personally.

However, some of the Self-Determined knew that they sometimes needed to exert caution when it came to expressing their Judaism to other people outside of their circle in a way of preemptively protecting themselves against anti-Semitism. This is a form of using symbolic ethnicity to one’s advantage to avoid absolutely having to embrace one’s ethnicity in a potentially negative situation. Amelia explained that in high school, she “didn't really tell people [she] was Jewish until later on. They knew [she] was friends with a lot of Jewish people. And they would be like, "Oh, you're Jewish? You don't look Jewish." Like stuff like that.” She then shared that this made her uncomfortable due to believing she may have been perceived differently by her peers going forward, and that that should not have been the case. Bailey echoed this, noting that “the way I would portray Judaism with myself outside of camp would be a little bit held back, I guess. Just because you don't really know the people around you...their understanding, appreciation...or lack of, you know, Judaism. I was always taught not to, like, be secretive with it. But just be aware of who you're talking to when you're bringing forward your

aspects of Judaism, just because there's a lot of different interpretations of the Jewish people.” Code-switching also came up as a common thread between Jewish and non-Jewish spaces, as Rebecca explained, “with Jewish people at school, I feel very comfortable, and like the camp side of me comes out. And then being with non-Jewish people at school, I feel like...I don't know, it's just like being Jewish isn't really an essential part of my identity with those people. And so it's not a big deal to me.” Not many of these sentiments were shared verbally by the Embedded, so if they engaged in similar behavior often enough to be brought up, it was not discussed.

In the case of stereotyping, which did sometimes occur to or were perceived by people of both typologies, it often came from people who were not very educated regarding Judaism or the Jewish people. For example, Ezra goes to a state college where “there's a lot of Jewish people here, but then there's a lot of people who have never seen a Jewish person. And so that's why there's like a weird dynamic.” He then went on to describe a scenario where “the second day I was here...I was with my roommate. We both have chain stars. And we were walking with this guy and he was like...we were talking about the weather or something. And he was like, "Don't you guys control the weather or something?" Which I didn't know...I didn't know that was a derogatory thing to say to Jewish people. But apparently it is.” However, in most cases people seem to be aware of the stereotypes that they possibly had to contend with. There were several scary incidents that occurred in the towns or universities that my respondents lived in and attended, including the presence of Neo-Nazis, bomb threats, and hearing of attacks further away. If things were related to an institution, such as a synagogue bombing, people generally felt safe because they knew there were systems in place to protect them. However, without formal systems in place, things like Neo-Nazis and random attacks were unsettling.

But most cases of anti-Semitism that were noted by my respondents were hardly about Judaism itself; rather, negative sentiments about Israel both from fellow Jewish people and non-Jews (ranging in severity) oftentimes made my respondents uncomfortable, “because we all grew up and went to the Day School and we were taught to be Zionists. And we were taught to love Israel unconditionally, and always stand up for Israel. And then when you see that not happening, it's really frustrating,” according to Anna. For the Embedded, Israel in particular was a topic they felt very strongly about, and any negative sentiments towards it or its existence were seen as anti-Semitic. The Anti-Defamation League, an international Jewish non-governmental organization whose mission is “to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment for all,” has a definition of anti-Semitism that includes certain types of remarks made about Israel, such as rejecting Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state or holding all Jews responsible for the actions of the Israeli government (Anti-Defamation League, 2022). This comes both from educational experiences in early childhood, and the connection that attending a Zionist-affiliated camp forms in campers; Tzachak maintains a commitment to incorporating Israel education into its curriculum, as Anna emphasized when she explained “I think Israel was something embedded in everything we did at Tzachak. Every morning, if it wasn't services, it was an Israel activity or like an Israel program or with the Israeli scouts...we would constantly be bringing in Israelis, and having Israeli campers.” Repeated exposure to a group of people or facets of a culture makes it familiar and “instills a pride.” Even though none of my respondents besides Levi were from Israel, a fierce connection is the product of the way programming is incorporated into camp, as well as the variety of experiences that my respondents have with it outside of camp.

While for all types of anti-Semitism there was a sense of responsibility to actively fight against it, for Israel-related topics, Jews would go against other Jews who did not feel the same as them or wanted to come to their own understanding of it, as Amelia noted:

“My Jewish peers were extremely frustrated with me, because I wouldn't post the AIPAC thing on my story. Or stuff like that. Literally, just because I didn't think I understood enough. Like if someone were to ask me about like, okay, why'd you do that? I wouldn't know...with my Jewish peers, like if something was going on, and everyone was posting like Israel's doing this, Israel's doing this, like whatever, and I didn't post something about like being pro-Israel, my peers would be very frustrated with me.” – Amelia (18, Self-Determined)

Negativity towards Israel could be perceived as a threat to being able to express one's identity freely, and the idea of boycotting a country that continuously makes them feel accepted and safe makes these experiences another example of my respondents feeling threatened and consequently embracing Judaism to a greater degree. The fact that Ilhan Omar (who is many of my participants' local representative) has so much support from other people their age as well makes them feel even more alienated due to wanting to be involved in social justice, but feeling like if they support Israel, they cannot, making it feel like a conflict of interest between their other circles and their Judaism. Many of them have at least some education on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but the education they received growing up leads to them having trouble comprehending that Israel is a safe haven for Jews while simultaneously discriminating and denigrating Palestinians (as well as, increasingly, non-Jewish unauthorized immigrants from Africa and Asia, too); in many socializing institutions, the conflict is rarely or never mentioned (Willen, 2019; Willen, 2007). While this widespread mobilization was not necessarily a goal of

summer camps considering access to endless information is a relatively new concept, camp laid the foundation for feeling a responsibility towards advocating for Israel.

Ensuring the Jewish Future

Maintaining Judaism in all facets for the next generation was important to all my respondents, both by virtue of socialization and intrinsic desire to preserve tradition. Because most had a lot of exposure to formal Jewish education, they hold a thorough understanding of the struggles that the Jewish people have undergone over thousands of years, and know that it is a major privilege to express Judaism as they can, and want to instill that with their children, even if they do not necessarily enact those actions at the current moment. As the last generation that will have had first-hand exposure to Holocaust survivors and their stories, and the first to grow up with Israel as a given, these experiences in and out of camp instill a desire to maintain the culture for their children as well. Even though in their childhoods they were taught to equate their level of religiosity with observance, it was noted by my respondents from both groups that for their generation, it is not necessarily the religious traditions that matter, but rather contributing to and supporting their community. Coming from a family that is deeply embedded in the Twin Cities Jewish community, but also maintaining some separation from it on his own accord, Elijah was able to give a nuanced take:

“I would say Judaism in general is definitely a dwindling community. And I don't think that's necessarily due to Judaism, I think it's due to modernization of religion in general. I think it's really been turning people in our generation off to religion overall. And I'm concerned that when we're adults, when we're forty, religion is going to be getting close to obsolete. I think...and I think the continuation of Judaism in general is important. I don't know, if religiously -- like religiously to me, I don't really care that much. But as a community, and as a people, there's a lot of history. And I

think it's definitely important to keep that history living. Not that I think anything like another Holocaust is gonna happen. But I think it's like...you're not gonna remember if Jews aren't there anymore.” – Elijah (22, Embedded)

Even though many of my respondents had moved away from heavy involvement with institutional Jewish life as they went through college and into their twenties, this seems to be something that they believe will change when they get married and have families, because that is what their parents did. Typical of the Jewish lifecycle, engagement with formal Jewish institutions such as synagogues tends to drop in a person’s twenties, and people find their own ways to incorporate Judaism into their lives (Shain et. al, 2013). For many of my respondents, they hope to marry another Jewish person and raise their children Jewish, which manifested across both typologies. Judaism as a practice and culture is tiny compared to the rest of the American population, with a population of approximately 7.5 million in a country of over 300 million people (Alper et. al, 2021; United States Census Bureau, 2022). However, as the world becomes more globalized and interconnected, some wondered if the pattern that their parents and grandparents experienced would be the same for them. Rebecca, who is currently dating a non-Jewish person, questioned this, saying “there's an expectation to marry Jewish and to raise your kids Jewish. And so I've kind of grown up with that idea, and anticipate that it'll happen again at some point...I think that part of me wants to, but I think that part of me also wants to, like...I don't know, experience other things. And part of it is just that White Jewish hegemony isn't really my thing anymore. And I wonder if that'll change or go back, but it might not.” Rebecca illustrates the desire to have a strong sense of ethnic identity in case she decides to have children, but simultaneously navigates the desire to structurally integrate in ways separate from her Jewish peers. In the eyes of my respondents, Jewish socializing institutions exist for the purpose of

having young Jews meet each other to understand the foundations of what a Jewish relationship entails, but because of the shifts in society since their parents were growing up, the efforts may not have the same long-lasting effect.

Even though a lot of my respondents had stepped away from participating in religious activity very often, they still felt a sense of responsibility to do so occasionally in order to maintain existing traditions for their children's generation. This active intention to tie themselves to tradition in ways that work best for them allows them to have agency over their history, and they do so in a variety of ways, a tactic taught to them through camp's approach to Jewish freedom. When talking about religious traditions and how she maintains them, Leora illustrated that "I can't fast because of my diabetes, so that's out of the picture for me, so I always make sure like Passover, I keep Passover...ever since I got diabetes when I was nine, and that's kind of just the one thing that I make sure I do every single year. Because it's you know, it's easy enough to do for a week. It's not a big deal, so I make sure I do that." Shabbat and Jewish holidays were the easiest and most enjoyable way to integrate Jewish tradition into life: occurring often enough that it feels intentional and continual, but not so much that it felt like a chore. These are easy, fun, and require bringing people together, which fosters community and is important in maintaining a cohesive ethnic identity. Shabbat does not even need to be a fancy dinner, as Mike noted when he talked about weekly dinners with his grandmother, "you know, maybe it's just takeout. But you know, still Fridays, we'll light a candle or something."

Most of my respondents grew up in the Midwest, and as is typical for many people who grew up there, "people always move back, generally in a few years. It's kind of how it goes here," according to Orly, who did exactly that to work at Tzachak full-time after living on the East Coast for several years. Mainly my Embedded respondents felt an urge to return to the Twin

Cities after finishing college because the community has been so comforting and grounding for them; they hope to raise their families in the same manner, because “that community is just kind of what they know. So it's very comfortable.” Compared to the Embedded, the Self-Determined had more variety in their preferred location; career tended to take more precedence over comfort. Some had no desire to return to the Midwest, but the majority of them did; Levi explained that he is “seriously considering raising my children when it comes down to that, in the Midwest, because I want them to go to the same camps. I think that it was important for me to who I am. In a certain sense, I want to keep them distant from it. I want them to be aware that it's not the be-all-end-all of everything. But this is a key part of becoming a healthy adult and healthy human in my eyes.”

In the case of involving their potential children in the same institutions that they participated in, my respondents across both typologies noted that to be something that they plan to do as their parents did because it generally had such a large influence on their growing up, which could also be said for their parents. There are major benefits in passing the tradition on. When asked about the benefits of attending camp in the Twin Cities community specifically, Amelia shared that “I think there's a lot of growth in community. And I think there's a lot of growth in being empowered and being surrounded with Jewish people,” which for most people, is not the case in daily life.

As to what they hoped their children would get out of camp if they attended, it varied by respondent. For Hannah, it was to have a place where “they would make friends...a place where they're not on their phones or the TV. And just like really living in the moment and get some mentors, other counselors.” For Ryan, it was to “become more confident in themselves as an individual and explore more of their Jewish identity.” And for Ruby, she “hoped that they would

get something personal out of it. And that they would find meaning in Judaism, or you know, something interesting out of it, you know...learning something new or something that they thought was cool or interesting about Judaism. And also to make friends that are also Jewish. It's about community.” These are ways that camp influenced them, and as the Jewish value of ‘l’dor v’dor’ insinuates, it is figuratively and literally in their hands to pass on these lessons to the next generation.

Conclusion

In the present study, I have set out to answer two interconnected questions through my research: How do Jewish youth today understand, make sense of, and navigate the larger camp efforts to socialize them into Jewish faith and networks? Second, how do these experiences in turn shape Jewish youth's sense of ethnic and religious identity?

My literature review provided the historical context behind the rise and expansion of Jewish summer camps by the beginning of the 20th century. Jewish Americans' experience of structural assimilation and upward mobility over the mid to late 20th century, alongside ongoing experiences of social discrimination and lingering fears of ethnic annihilation borne out of the Holocaust, led Jewish leaders and elders to focus on the importance of religious and ethnic retention, including through primary and secondary institutions such as synagogues, families, schools, and summer camps. By 2019, at least 80,718 campers attended 164 Jewish summer camps across the United States (Foundation for Jewish Camp, 2019). Inculcating these youth with Jewish education in a "fun" setting and promoting the developing of social networks with other Jews, are key "top-down" goals and missions of Jewish summer camps. Still, few studies have examined how Jewish youth actually experience and navigate the camp experience, or how these camps shape youth's connections to Judaism and sense of ethnic and religious identity over time, as they grow up, from their own perspectives.

Through a content analysis of various types of publicly available promotional textual and visual camp materials, and 21 in-depth, semi-structured interviews associated with Camp Tzachak in the U.S. Midwest, I argue that Jewish summer camps allow youth to come together from a variety of Jewish backgrounds, and to have a common shared experience that encourages them to express their Judaism on their own accord. Though they vary in their motivations and

experiences, most do “like” camp and find and see it as a formative experience in their lives. As they grow older, most look back on it and understand that even though their initial experience most often came from their parents’ encouragement to do so to facilitate ethnic retention, the experience of being in a space where one can be ‘authentically Jewish’ sets a precedent for positive associations with living a Jewish life. This led to my respondents feeling empowered to engage with religiosity in a variety of manners that are not limited to institutional involvement. Camp attendance implores my respondents to find their own ways to make good for the larger Jewish community because of their developed understanding of what it means to be a member of one; while this manifests in many different forms, all lead back to the incorporation of Jewish values that were taught to them during their summers.

Overall, in this paper I argue that my respondents approach camp with a variety of backgrounds, which informs the ways in which they experience camp, including their likelihood of becoming a counselor (and therefore a leader in the community). Their experience as Jewish people is grounded in previously existing relationships in the community and institutions outside of camp. However, camp offers a uniform approach to Judaism and places all my respondents on the same level, exposing them to the same set of values, activities, and goals. My respondents internalized the goals of camp, suggesting that camp achieved its manifest and latent functions and still maintains itself as a viable tool for ethnic retention. Taking these lessons and goals into their daily lives, the ways they did so did not vary too much among the typologies I created, showing that Jewish educational values are accessible no matter what a young person’s religious and cultural background is. Though my data shows that Jewish summer camp manifests most often as a supplemental addition to other formal and informal aspects of Jewish education, no matter what, Jewish youth will reap invaluable benefits from attending camp.

Implications for the literature

As noted in my literature review, there is not much recent academic literature on Jewish summer camps specifically. The recent information that we have about the impact of the experience on campers and the communities themselves have come from the Foundation of Jewish Camp, a nonprofit aiming “to lead the Jewish camp field to adapt its successful, immersive learning experience to a rapidly changing world” (Foundation for Jewish Camp, 2022). There are also several reports that were supported by the Cohen Center of Modern Jewish Studies, housed at Brandeis University (Saxe and Sales, 2002; Sales et. al, 2011). However, much of the data comes in the form of surveys, and there is still a dearth of qualitative data on the impact of Jewish summer camps, especially from the perspective of the youth themselves. Surveys are useful for collecting a larger quantity of data points in a shorter period, especially for young adults. While surveys are a powerful tool for supporting generalizations, there is a limit to the depth that they can go into regarding opinion-based questions, save for write-in options that not everyone takes up.

Though field observations have been conducted, the last (and only) major undertakings of this took place in the summers of 2000 and 2008, almost fifteen years ago. Smaller-scale field observations have been conducted as well, particularly on the impact of the Ramah Camping Movement, which in sum can contribute to a greater understanding of the impact of summer camps due to Ramah’s widespread influence in the Jewish camping world. However, qualitative research oftentimes only captures the status quo in one given place, illustrating the need for more research to be able to develop generalizations that can be proven amongst a multitude of qualitative studies. There are few studies relating to Jewish summer camps that use semi-structured interview data; while there is a difference between discussing one’s experience

retrospectively and seeing how people feel and act in the moment through field observations, interview data that is collected after the fact can provide insight into how youth perceive their camp experiences after taking part in other aspects of Jewish life. My study builds on this existing gap and adds to the small body of qualitative data on Jewish summer camps, bringing the field one step closer to understanding the impact of summer camps as a larger entity. To fully understand the ways in which summer camps influence youth, especially over time, more research needs to be conducted; though understandably, because this is a niche topic of study, the number of scholars and institutions who have pursued research on this is quite small.

Most of the existing literature about Jewish summer camps also comes from the ‘top-down’ perspective of Jewish leadership, rather than those who are experiencing the camps themselves today, in the current social and cultural environment. The research comes from the perspective of adults who have a different type of investment in the variety of forms of ethnic socialization, and oftentimes feel more strongly about topics such as intermarriage and the fear of annihilation than their younger counterparts. My respondents grew up in a very different context than their parents and grandparents, with different kinds of fears, but also a freedom that previous generations were not able to experience in full due to large-scale structural assimilation. As this generation begins to enter the workforce in larger numbers and can place themselves in the context of a new kind of Judaism, more research on this topic may appear in the body of academic literature.

Ideas for Future Research

As previously mentioned, the academy does not have a large body of qualitative data regarding the lived experience of Jewish youth at camp. We have quantitative data from surveys such as the Jewish Americans in 2020 report from Pew Research Center (Alper et. al, 2021) and

various studies on the topic from Brandeis University. These reports give researchers a multitude of generalizations about certain age groups and demographics, but not necessarily details about the lived experiences, which as a qualitative researcher is important to me.

While it is difficult to get widespread interview or observation data without large amounts of funding, as a society our lives have begun to migrate online to a more immersive degree. Today, people of all ages use social media to share updates about their lives, careers, and creations, among countless other niches, but members of Gen Z (who accounted for all but one of my respondents) embrace this to a greater degree than their older counterparts. Because every person can now theoretically maintain a public platform through social media accounts, we have greater insight into their lived experiences on whatever topic they may choose to post about, and there is the benefit of it being public access, meaning that an Institutional Review Board (IRB) may not have to be used to conduct research on social media posting. However, social desirability bias likely influences what is shared on these accounts. Since we have access to a wider range of people through social media though, participants for qualitative studies may be more accessible, though the sampling method would not be random. Sampling for studies through online channels has become increasingly common and could continue to be used when looking for respondents for both qualitative and quantitative research studies.

Being able to conduct these interviews on a somewhat wide scale with my respondents coming from a variety of backgrounds illustrates the success of summer camps, and could easily be expanded to larger studies, both for studies that use a case study model as well as those that do not. My research has informed the literature that these summer camps work, but mostly supplementally. Further research could be done on what aspects of summer camps are most influential rather than looking at them holistically (this is a small amount of the available

research, and could be added to), or to understand what aspects of Jewish education are most formative and necessary in order to maintain ethnicity. This could also be explored through sorting respondents by demographic traits to see what types of people summer camp is most influential for, rather than just those who are already involved in the larger Jewish community.

Finally, the case study model is beneficial for a multitude of reasons and can be used in a variety of both academic and nonacademic ways. These can be conducted to examine a specific Jewish community or institution and its constituents. There are already studies done in similar manners, such as the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis' Community Studies, but these are also more general surveys that aim to understand the overall sentiments that certain populations have towards camp. However, if a camp itself is trying to figure out how their campers and alumni are taking away the lessons that they aim to teach, the case study model could be helpful in figuring out how to readjust programming to meet the needs of campers or leadership.

There are many possible next steps that could be taken using a similar case study model, all of which would develop understanding of a variety of different subtopics under the umbrella of Jewish summer camping. One that could be beneficial to the majority of U.S. Jews and their families could be to study a larger number of Reform and Conservative summer camps to examine the similarities and differences between the experiences, as well as on their alumnus' takeaways; as 54% of American Jews identify as either Reform or Conservative (37% and 17%, respectively), this is a beneficial population to target through research (Alper and Cooperman, 2021). The Ramah Camping Movement, which is associated with the Conservative branch of Judaism, has already piloted studies like this on their campers and alumni, but these are mostly studying the impact of the larger institution rather than the individual summer camps under their

umbrella. Camps could also be studied through a case study model by geographic region, especially the in the U.S. Northeast, where there is a higher concentration of Jewish people and consequent attendance of summer camps. While there are also Jewish summer camps in other countries, it would likely be a difficult undertaking to study them in comparison to American camps due to contextual and cultural variances. Studying youths' experience attending these camps, however, could be useful for understanding the way today's youth navigate developing their religious identity throughout the Jewish diaspora, especially outside of countries with large Jewish populations.

There are many things I wish I had known when initially framing this study that will be taken into consideration for the next one. While I did not have the resources, time, or research background to do so at the time of starting this project, a more widescale comparison study would have clarified how summer camps influence the development of ethnic and religious identity by various categories: age, geographic location, denominational affiliation, or even by whether a given respondents had attended camp or not. With more time, I also would have been interested in studying different types of camps, such as Zionist camps such as Young Judea or Habonim Dror, or more camps under the URJ or Ramah umbrella. I would also be intrigued to learn about the role of summer camps in the Orthodox Jewish community. A longitudinal interview-based study also holds the possibility of being informative regarding perceptions of the camp experience over time; with the condensed time frame that a senior thesis entails though, it would have been impossible to do one for this project. Due to being significantly older than summer camp attendees combined with the insular nature of summer camps, I believe that conducting field observations has the potential to be more disruptive than helpful in terms of understanding the day-to-day influences of camp. A possible experiment in the realm of field

observations, however, could be observing similarities and differences between how camps perform certain traditions; several examples could be Shabbat, the camp's version of Color Wars, a camping or service trip, or an Israel celebration day.

Jewish Life Outside of Academia

There are a lot of implications for my study outside of academia. While my research will not necessarily inform policy, it does have the possibility to inform aspects of youth-centric Jewish institutional life and to influence its leaders. The oldest members of what is colloquially called Gen Z, those who were born between 1997 and 2012, are in the early stages of entering the real world. In adulthood, they are given the agency to make choices about their Jewish life on their own accord, rather than under the influence of their parents and other Jewish institutions. While many of them are still consciously keeping their families' wishes in mind due to their relatively young age, for Jewish leaders it is incredibly important to know how they view their early-age Jewish socialization as adults, as they and Millennials are the next major age groups to begin starting families. To ensure the future of Judaism for the next generation, it is pertinent to know what works and what does not in institutional Jewish life.

It is known and proven that before they get married and start families, Jewish adults in their twenties and thirties have historically moved away from formal Jewish life and participated in what scholars call 'DIY Judaism,' informal and independent ways of engaging in tradition. We also know that if a Jewish person without much religious or cultural upbringing does not have an intervening experience in their early twenties (such as Birthright), the likelihood of them embracing their Judaism down the line shrinks drastically (Shain et. al, 2013). Straying away from institutional religious life in young adulthood has been a lifecycle pattern for some time, and before the COVID-19 pandemic, seemed to be repeating itself. However, my findings show

that being a part of the community that develops at camp is transformative for my respondents. In the era of COVID-19, where it has become more difficult to form connections with new people, the possibility exists that institutional Jewish life may be sought out more often because of its structure. My respondents also noted more often than I anticipated that they were members of a formalized Jewish organization, whether that was a college-based institution like Hillel or Chabad, a program through their local Federation, or an Israel advocacy group. This finding raises a question for Jewish leadership: do they need to find new ways to make formal Jewish life accessible for young adults due to most widely available options being adolescent-centric (Fox, 2018)?

Some people might be afraid to send their kids to camp or go to camp themselves because they do not approach the experience with a strong Jewish background. However, my data shows that this should not be a concern, as in the context of certain camps (mainly ones that are Reform or Independent), this lack of background may not matter because camp gives a uniform education and puts campers on an equal playing field, which can be an inspiration to try to educate oneself outside of the given space. In fact, my findings illustrate a key way that camps can improve their accessibility: finding ways to incorporate those who consider themselves to be ‘outsiders’ into the ‘inner circle,’ which is important for summer camps to acknowledge as well as other institutions that are geared towards children and adolescents.

A report released in April 2022 by the CDC noted that 44% of high school students have reported poor mental health since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a devastatingly high number (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; cited in Charbonneau, 2022). It is crucial that the leadership of youth-oriented institutions understand this and shift their strategy of facilitating connections amongst their constituents accordingly. Total institutions like summer

camp offer a unique window of uninterrupted time where deep and authentic relationships can develop quickly. Creating a space where ‘outsiders’ are made to feel like ‘insiders’ regardless of their life outside of camp has the possibility of being incredibly beneficial in improving youth mental health, especially in the context of losing the freedoms and formative experiences that were afforded to youth before COVID-19 induced lockdowns. The changing landscape must be taken into consideration when structuring programming in the coming years, as the cultural context that my respondents attended camp in has now shifted. Nevertheless, summer camps and other adolescent-centric institutions can use their influence to provide supplementary framework to improve the current mental health crisis through relationship building.

Finally, on a larger level, my respondents felt like camp supplemented their Jewish knowledge and fostered a curiosity, rather than it being the impetus that created it. This can lead us to consider where we place camp in the hierarchy of Jewish educational spaces, and question ways in which Jewish leadership can bring things that happen at camp into formal Jewish education. The data shows that overall, camps are accomplishing their larger goals, and illustrates that the framework elders and leadership have put down in the last several decades is working in having young people find ways to incorporate Judaism in their life.

Final Remarks

The week I completed the first draft of this paper, I found myself as a visitor in a Jewish community yet again, this time at the Tremont Street Shul in Cambridge for Purim services. I attended these services with two friends from my job at the Cohen Center, people whose paths would have never crossed with mine given I had not written my original Qualitative Research Methods paper using Brandeis’ research. Through spending time with those friends over the course of writing this paper, I have begun to meet other members of their social networks, people

who I do not yet know well but can tell their values align with mine. As costumed members of the congregation went up to the *bimah* to read the *Megillat Esther*, the Purim story, instead of feeling uncomfortable as a visitor in ways I had in the past, it felt okay to be an observer, similar to feelings I had experienced last summer while observing Birthright.

Three little girls dressed as princesses ran up and down the aisles, excitedly using their groggers with the rest of the congregation when the dreaded *Haman* was named, and memories of my own Jewish upbringing came flooding back. I thought of myself as a young girl at Jewish Day School doing the same thing during our own Purim assembly, and then running around the subsequent Purim carnival fueled by the sugar in the countless *hamantaschen* eaten throughout the day. I thought of a classic Jewish saying when it comes to describing how we celebrate the holidays: They tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat! I thought of my respondents hoping to pass Judaism on to their children, and how with masks on, these girls' parents did not look that much older than myself. I thought of the responsibility my generation holds to make sure those girls and their peers have a chance of their own to develop their Jewish selves, to give our religion and culture a fighting chance to stay alive for thousands of years to come, just like our ancestors did for us.

Looking at the Hebrew language side of the *siddur*, or prayer book, I thought of learning to write Hebrew cursive in workbooks, and how today I wish I had not let it fall to the wayside when I switched to public school in fifth grade. I thought of this last winter break, attempting to gain those skills back through Duolingo and spending hours reading through an Israeli friend's tweets written in Hebrew, trying to revive any sense of understanding that was once present. Herbert Gans' and Richard Alba's theories on maintaining ethnic identity came into my mind, how we forge a connection to the mother tongue and homeland to keep us grounded in our past

in some way. I thought of a moment during my Birthright observation, where one of the Israeli women in my group pulled me aside and noted how much she appreciated that I said ‘*todah*,’ the Hebrew word for ‘thank you,’ to everyday Israelis that we interacted with; that it showed the ways in which I understood the nuances of where we were.

I thought of the countless number of times I pushed down and even resented my Jewish identity, thinking that it was a burden and set me apart. I remembered the boy in my ninth grade Geometry class who made constant unsolicited stereotyping comments about my nose and my clothes, and how powerless I felt in those moments. I remembered how I couldn’t wait until I did not have to be Jewish anymore, until the constant recruitment to join the local BBYO chapter and Wednesday night Teen Torah Study at my synagogue would dissipate, and how grateful I am today that I didn’t follow through with letting it go.

I thought of how in my childhood and adolescence, even though I went to Jewish Day School, summer camp was the one place where engaging in Judaism was always *fun*. A place where prayer turned into song and dance, a place where Shabbat was a true respite, a place where I was surrounded by other Jewish people that led me to feel empowered to be myself. I thought of the countless lessons that my respondents and I had taken away from our experiences, and how today we navigate our world as independent souls, tied to each other by shared cultural norms, values, and history.

My most treasured memory from my last summer at camp crossed my mind towards the end of the service. The incoming ninth graders put on a play each year; my year, it was *Annie*. They also go on a three-day canoe trip each year, where the counselors wrangle ninety fourteen-year-olds down a river for miles on end. Halfway through our first day on the canoes, it began to rain, ever so softly. And then suddenly, it started pouring, with several hours to go before we

reached our campsite. We all looked at each other for a minute or so, unsure of what to do, looking for direction from our counselors, who then motioned for us to keep paddling. After some grumbling amongst ourselves about how soaked we were to become, the words “the sun will come out tomorrow,” came from someone up the river. “Just thinking about tomorrow, clears away the cobwebs and the sorrow, ‘till there’s none” came from a few more of us. By the time we got to the chorus, just about all of us were belting the words so loudly into the rain that people miles away must have heard us. And we sang *Tomorrow* again and again until the rain began to fade.

Though we came from a multitude of different upbringings, camp had made it so that we found ourselves a part of that moment on the river, experiencing the same thing at the same time. Several of the people that I interviewed for this project were there on the river with me that day, and memories of that canoe trip came into conversation at points. We all recalled it happily. Perhaps it is in these moments, grounded in religious Judaism and in a love for community, that camp encourages us to imagine what can be for the youngest people of today. It allows us to imagine an even better tomorrow.

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Respondent Guidebook

Jewish Youth (Pseudonyms)

Name	Age	Summers at Camp	Counselor?	Denomination
Ryan	21		9 Yes	Modern Orthodox
Bailey	21		6 No	Reform
Emma	19		2 No	Reform
Mike	21		7 No	Conservative
Levi	26		5 Yes	Conservative
Ruby	21		7 No	Conservative
Leora	21		2 No	Reform
Anna	21		11 Yes	Conservative
Hannah	21		13 Yes	Conservative
Elijah	22		9 Yes	Conservative
Rebecca	20		9 Yes	Conservative
Evan	22		8 Yes	Conservative
Jonah	18		9 No	Modern Orthodox
Grant	19		8 Yes	Conservative
Ezra	19		9 Yes	Conservative
Danielle	18		8 Yes	Conservative
Amelia	18		3 No	None
Benjamin	18		9 Yes	Conservative
Sasha	21		11 Yes	Conservative

Key Informants (Pseudonyms)

Name	Denomination	Why a Key Informant
Dexter	Conservative	Director of Jewish Education
Orly	Conservative	Assistant Director

Appendix B: Jewish Youth Interview Guide

PART 1: DEMOGRAPHIC/GENERAL BACKGROUND INFO

1. Please tell me a little bit about who you are in general!
 - a. How old are you?
 - b. Where are you from?
 - i. Where did you grow up?
 - ii. Where are you living now, if that's changed?
 - c. Where do you go to school, if you do?
 - i. If not, what have you been doing during the year?
 1. What are you studying if you go to school? Why so?
2. What do you like to do during the 'regular' year?

PART 2: FAMILY, ETHNIC, AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

1. Growing up, what ethnic or religious group would you say that you were the most consistently surrounded by?
 - a. In your neighborhood?
 - b. In your school?
2. Describe to me your relationship with Judaism.
 - a. Has it changed over time, or has it stayed stagnant?
 - b. How so?
3. Were you raised in a religious home environment? Did you like growing up like this? What did you like the most or least?
 - a. If so, what denomination?
 - i. Did you feel connected to it?
 - ii. What were your customs?
 1. Were they more cultural or traditional (i.e. attending religious services)?
 - iii. Did they differ from how you approached Judaism at camp?
 - b. If not, did you consider yourself Jewish? Why or why not?
 - c. How was this similar or different to your friends?
 - i. Query to see if the people in their life growing up were Jewish.
4. In what contexts have you felt the most Jewish?
5. In what contexts have you felt the least Jewish?
6. Religiously, how were your parents raised?
 - a. Where were they raised?
 - b. Did they go to camp/were part of a Jewish community?
 - c. Did they raise you in a similar fashion to the way they were?

- i. How so?
 - ii. Why or why not?
- 7. Do you belong to any Jewish organizations or clubs?
 - a. What about your family?
- 8. What types of community opportunities were there available to Jewish people where you grew up?
- 9. Can you tell me about the most influential Jewish experience that you have had outside of camp?
 - a. In what context/where did they take place?
 - b. How did you feel that you were initially impacted?
 - i. [X amount of time later], how do you view it now?
- 10. In what contexts outside of summer camp did you find yourself surrounded by other Jewish people?
- 11. In what contexts were you surrounded by people of different ethnicities/religions than you?
- 12. Did you ever feel as though your Judaism set you apart from others?
 - a. Was this a positive or negative thing?
 - i. How? Why?
- 13. Did you feel as though you were part of a Jewish community when you were growing up in the 'real world' (by which I mean outside of camp)?
 - a. How or how did that not manifest itself?

PART 3A: SUMMER CAMP [IF THE RESPONDENT WAS A CAMPER]

- 1. How long have you/had you been going to [Tzachak]?
 - a. How many years as a camper?
 - b. As a counselor?
- 2. Why did you start going to camp?
 - a. Why did you continue?
- 3. **[IF TALKING TO A COUNSELOR]** Why did you decide to become a counselor instead of taking on other opportunities during the summer?
- 4. What do you enjoy the most about camp?
- 5. What do you enjoy the least?
- 6. Can you describe a typical day at camp in your experience?
 - a. Does this differ in your experiences as either a camper or counselor?
 - b. How so?
- 7. How many hours a day would you say you were involved in Jewish activities?
- 8. What kinds of activities were these?
 - a. Did you enjoy them? Did you not? How do you feel about them?

- b. Did any stand out to you or feel quintessential for the camp experience, either in general or for [Tzachak] specifically?
 - i. Does this differ in your experiences as either a camper or counselor?
 - ii. How so?
- 9. Do you feel close to your camp friends? Why or why not?
 - a. Do you feel closer to them than your friends in the ‘real world?’
 - i. If so, why do you think so?
 - b. Would you say the relationship has different parameters?
 - c. What are they?
- 10. How were activities at camp tied into Judaism?
- 11. Did you enjoy them?
 - a. Why or why not?
- 12. How would you describe the Shabbat experience at [Tzachak]?
 - a. What are your favorite/least favorite parts?
- 13. How would you describe the tefillah (morning prayer) experience at [Tzachak]?
 - a. What are your favorite/least favorite parts?
 - b. Do you feel a connection to traditional aspects of Judaism? Why or why not?
- 14. In what contexts at camp are you the most proud to be Jewish?
- 15. Have there been conclusions that you have come to about your Judaism specifically at camp that would not have happened anywhere else?
- 16. How would you explain the magic of camp to someone who has never been?
- 17. Would you say you think your experiences are fairly common for Jewish youth who go to summer camps, or distinctive in any way?
 - a. How so?
 - b. Can you give me an example?

PART 4: TAKEAWAYS FROM CAMP/RELATIONSHIP WITH JUDAISM NOW

- 1. How Jewish would you say you feel?
 - a. This can be on a scale of 1-10, qualitatively, etc.
- 2. Would you say that being Jewish is important to you?
 - a. Can you think of times in your life that it has been more or less important?
- 3. Currently, how do you maintain your connection to Judaism in settings outside of camp?
 - a. Give me some examples?
- 4. What would you say you have learned from camp, both in regards to yourself as a person and in regards to your relationship to Judaism?
 - a. Do you think about these things a lot?
 - b. Why do you think this is?
 - c. How do you think things would be different had you not gone to camp?

5. **[IF TALKING TO COUNSELOR]** How do you view yourself as a role model for other young Jewish people?
6. Do you think camp affects other youth similarly? Or differently?
 - a. Can you give me any examples?
7. Do you think that attending a pluralistic Jewish summer camp impacted your experience, compared to attending a camp with denominational affiliation?
 - a. Why?
 - b. How so?
8. Why are summer camps, in your mind, so central for so many people's experiences? What do they help do or offer that other groups or places may not be able to do?
9. What role do summer camps play in a geographical area that does not have as many Jewish people as say, the East Coast?
10. Is this comparable to other youth-driven Jewish spaces, such as youth groups, or Jewish schools?
11. Do you want or plan to send your own kids to camp one day?
 - a. How come or why not?
 - b. What do you hope your kids would get out of going?
12. How would you compare your relationships with Jewish people versus yours with non-Jews?
 - a. Do you feel more comfortable with other Jewish people?
 - b. How does this manifest?
13. What is your number one takeaway from your years at [Tzachak]?

Appendix C: Key Informants Interview Guide

PART 1: DEMOGRAPHIC/GENERAL BACKGROUND INFO

1. Please tell me a little bit about your background:
 - a. Your hometown?
 - b. Where do you live now?
 - c. Schooling?
 - d. Your occupation?
 - e. Your ethnicity?
2. What are your ties to the Jewish community?
 - a. Were you raised Jewish?
 - i. In what denomination?
 - ii. Has this changed over time?
 - b. If you aren't Jewish, how did you come to be connected with the Jewish community?
3. How are you connected to the Jewish camping community?
4. What was your path to this connection to the Jewish community?
5. In regards to Jewish camping, where does your expertise lie?

PART 2: ETHNICITY

1. Generally, how do you think that Jewish communities in the United States function?
 - a. Where are the spaces/contexts that are the most pertinent in building community?
The least?
2. Are there any tangible differences that you've seen between Jewish communities in different geographic areas?
 - a. How so?
 - b. Is this in how they operate? In how they express themselves?
3. Based on your knowledge, in the United States, where have Jewish people had the easiest time expressing their ethnicity?
 - a. Where have they had the most difficult time?
4. As a whole, what role do Jewish socializing institutions play for youth?
5. What about adults?
6. Generally, which age groups are most proud of their ethnic/cultural/religious background?
7. How do they express it?
8. How do they not express it?
9. In which contexts do they express or not express their Judaism?

10. If you know, can you tell me about your knowledge on the Twin Cities Jewish community?
 - a. How does it differ from other Jewish communities?
 - b. How is it similar?
11. **[IF IT'S A TZACHAK INFORMANT]** Can you describe the experience of being a Jewish person in the Twin Cities?

PART 3: SUMMER CAMPS, AND TAKEAWAYS/BENEFITS

1. Did you attend Jewish summer camp?
 - a. If you did, how was your experience?
 - b. How long did you attend for?
 - c. Was it positive/negative? Why?
2. Would you recommend that all Jewish youth attend Jewish summer camp?
 - a. Why or why not?
3. Why are summer camps, in your mind, so central for so many people's experiences? What do they help do or offer that other groups or places may not be able to do?
4. Is this comparable to other youth-driven Jewish spaces, such as youth groups, or Jewish schools?
5. What aspects of Jewish summer camp most positively contribute to Jewish identity?
6. What aspects of Jewish summer camp most negatively contribute to Jewish identity?
 - a. This would be things that turn campers away from Judaism/the camp experience.
7. Has this changed over time?
8. What types of Jewish education can be taught/done at summer camp that cannot in other contexts?
 - a. Which traditionally Jewish camp experiences have been the most influential on campers' identity?
9. How can a Jewish educational curriculum shape a camper's experience?
10. How do you think that Jewish summer camps help build on social skills?
11. What about leadership skills?
12. What are the long-term benefits of Jewish summer camp?
13. In your experience, what are the greatest takeaways for campers?
14. How does cultural/religious/ethnic pride change based on attending summer camp?
15. Is there a noticeable difference in how Jewish youth who did not attend summer camp approach their Judaism versus those who do? How does it manifest itself?
16. How does the influence or need for camp change in an area where the Jewish population is highly salient versus less salient?

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