

# EMERGENT JEWISH COMMUNITIES and their PARTICIPANTS:

Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study

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Sponsored by The S3K Synagogue Studies Institute & Mechon Hadar



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November 07

## The Growth of Emergent Spiritual Communities, 1996 – Present

The last decade has witnessed an explosive growth of NGOs – thousands of voluntary, public sector non-governmental organizations that operate on behalf of a wide variety of cultural, educational, political, and social causes all over the world. The reasons for this sharp growth are not entirely clear, but many observers credit the Internet and other technological advances for reducing the cost of organizing and helping people of particular inclinations to find each other and to remain connected. They also credit commensurate shifts in the wider culture for making the idea of self-organizing among like-minded individuals more acceptable, expected, and feasible. Thus, creative and energetic social entrepreneurs have been reaching and organizing those around them in newly initiated groups, large and small, dedicated to serving the interests and realizing the values of specific constituencies with distinctive purposes, interests, values and aesthetics. Just as niche marketing has made numerous specialized goods and services available to specialized consumers, so niche organizing has brought together networks and communities to an unprecedented extent, in ways that were hardly imagined just ten or fifteen years ago (for parallel developments in the Jewish world, see Greenberg & Cohen 2005; Cohen & Kelman 2007a; Windmueller 2006).

In this context of niche-marketing and niche-organizing, it should come as no surprise that for the past decade younger adult Jews in North America have been at the forefront of establishing dozens of what may be called “emergent sacred communities.” (The term, only recently coined, has been advanced by the S3K Synagogue Studies Institute to encompass this new phenomenon and to highlight characteristics shared by the Emerging Church among American Christians (see Landres 2006b; Landres and Bolger 2007a, 2007b). Though they may be subsumed under a single rubric, these new spiritual communities do vary among themselves in form, mission, culture, and nomenclature. Often they call themselves “spiritual communities” (or frequently just “communities”); others identify as “independent minyanim” but these terms do not always capture the important variations within the broader category. Whatever they are called and whatever they call themselves, on one point of terminology they all seem to agree: they tend to avoid the terms “synagogue” and “congregation,” thereby signaling their interest in differentiating themselves from previous generations’ regnant forms of local Jewish community building (on the ethos of this phenomenon, see, for example, Avedon 2005; Bronznick 2007; Kaunfer 2005; Kurshan 2007; Prell 2007; Tucker 2007).

By our count, more than 80 functioning communities founded since 1997 are now operating in the United States and Canada. Some others are found in Israel and such places as London, Sydney, and Zurich. In addition to the 80 communities that we believe currently to be operational, at



## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

least 12 others have formed and disbanded between 1997 and 2007. These communities may be categorized in a number of ways. In this preliminary report, we type them in broad strokes according to their leadership and organizational structures, cognizant of all their variety and commonalities.

Some are led by rabbis functioning as rabbis – these we call “rabbi-led emergents.” Some are led by a core group of highly engaged and Jewishly well-educated individuals, some of whom may be rabbis or graduate students, but no one serves as the rabbi of the community. These are the “independent minyanim.” Still others qualify as spiritual communities, but gathering for prayer is not the central and defining feature of these communities; we call these, “alternative emergent communities.” The rabbi-led emergents, the independent minyanim, and the alternative communities all fall under the more general rubric of “emergent Jewish spiritual communities,” which can also be extended to include conventional synagogues that have been transformed under the leadership of an emergent rabbi, a group that falls outside the purview of this report (but see Belzer & Miller 2007).

Emergent communities display considerable diversity in location, religious ideology, aesthetic style, missions and, as we show presently, in their constituencies as well. Their number includes Kehilat Hadar, an independent minyan on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, and IKAR, a rabbi-led spiritual community that meets in, alternately, a Los Angeles Jewish Community Center, a Beverly Hills park, and members’ homes; they also include Seattle’s Kavana rabbi-led co-operative, Boston’s Moishe/Kavod House, a residential intentional community with a strong social justice orientation, and other groups found not only in major centers of Jewish population, but in such places as Lynchburg, Virginia; Falls Village, Connecticut; Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Boca Raton, Florida.

Notwithstanding the several differences among them, the vast majority hold several features in common. Emergent communities see themselves as meeting needs not being met elsewhere, by providing experiences and activities that they believe to be unavailable in conventional congregations and other such settings. Many owe their origins and continuity to a single entrepreneurial individual (often a rabbi) or to a small hard-working core group of highly educated and motivated individuals. While they cannot be called a movement—and certainly do not think of themselves as such—they constitute a networked set of conversations taking place among and within identifiable social networks. Following are some of the family resemblances that appear more frequently throughout the emergent world:



## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

- Institutionally, there is a shift from location- and function-based institutions toward action- and mission-based institutions. Communally and socially, they are marked by and prize frequent house visits, socializing, celebrations, and comforting in times of stress or sorrow.
- Politically, the communities are experimenting with a wide range of authority and legitimacy. They are reinventing “citizenship” by doing away with conventional forms of congregational membership. Independent minyanim use a variety of decision-making methods to determine questions of halakhah, ritual, and practice. Rabbis leading emergent communities tend to exercise moral authority by modeling it rather than prescribing it, but at the same time they are asserting executive powers usually retained by boards in more conventional synagogues.
- Experientially and spiritually, they seek to create intentional, “authentic” experiences, whether those are defined in terms of greater liturgical virtuosity or in terms of deeper meaningfulness.
- These communities share narratives. Their community stories have common elements around a group of previously disengaged Jews, dissatisfied with existing communal offerings, working together to establish a new platform for Jewish liturgical, educational, and social activist expression. Participants in these communities resonate less with 20th-century collective narratives of ethnic self-preservation than with classic Jewish master narratives such as the Exodus liberation and the covenant at Sinai.
- For these communities, the twin pillars of the inherited American Jewish collective identity—the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel—are history, rather than memory. Emergent leaders are far more likely to invoke collective memories of the civil rights movement, the labor movement.
- Ritually, emergent communities evince musical and interpretative innovation, but tend to prefer traditional liturgical forms.
- Materially, these communities place much less stress on capital ownership (few, if any, own their own buildings), and more broadly have developed a culture of paper-free communication via the internet.
- Ethically, emergent communities stress living out Jewish values in the non-Jewish world, and place a strong emphasis on acting Jewishly in support of both Jewish and non-Jewish causes. They tend to be politically progressive.
- Philosophically and theologically, emergent communities tend to evince more God language, and they encourage participants not only to bring their faith commitments into the secular



## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

world, but also to use "secular" culture and issues as sources for religious reflection and spiritual growth.

Perhaps most critically, they express and appeal to defined and highly specific (or some might say, idiosyncratic) needs, tastes, and styles. Distinguishing policies and purposes abound. Many independent minyanim demand high proficiency to lead their fast-paced services and eschew the announcing of page numbers, signaling a differentiation from suburban congregations. A few blocks away, a rabbi-led emergent community, in the Renewal ethos, features prolonged melodic-rich prayers, meditative moments, and several worshippers gyrating their bodies much as they might in the yoga classes that some attend or even lead. Some spiritual leaders repeatedly encourage their worshippers to engage in locally sponsored social justice activities, while for others, social justice engagement figures far less prominently in the rhetoric and ethos of their communities. Some of their worship services make use of a full range of musical instruments; others avoid them entirely while turning to their own voices to provide musical innovation; and still others insist that only percussion instruments are religiously permissible or aesthetically desirable.

An important pattern which appears is one of religious traditionalism and social progressivism. One minyan, for example, demands the highest standards of Kashrut for pot-luck lunches (vegetarian and under rabbinic supervision) and bans the communal consumption of foods that have been transported on Shabbat; at the same time its website proclaims that it is "queer-friendly," that "the LGBT community is a visible, welcome and involved part of the Minyan." This new phenomenon of the "observant liberal"—or rather, this decoupling of religious and social traditionalism—is an important aspect of contemporary religiosity among Generation Xers and Millennials. Younger people who are more observant tend to be more liberal on social issues than older people who are equally as observant (see Cohen 2007, which finds that younger Conservative rabbis are both more ritually observant and more accepting of ordaining gay rabbis, an indicator, albeit an imperfect one, of social progressivism).

Against the context of ongoing, and possibly intensified, concerns for the Jewish engagement of the younger generation of American Jews (see Cohen 2005; Cousens, forthcoming; Greenberg 2005, 2006; Ukeles et al. 2006), this phenomenon of diverse emergent Jewish spiritual communities certainly raises hopes for new sources and expression of Jewish engagement, as well as some skepticism from some established leaders who dismiss these new communities as ephemeral and unstable over the long term. Denominational leaders have their own objections: Orthodoxy refuses to recognize the innovations of Darkhei Noam-style independent minyanim, while Conservative leaders claim these communities are "Conservative congregations flying a Liberian



## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

flag.” This report indirectly addresses those concerns by measuring to what extent and in what way do these communities present a viable and genuine alternative, meeting unmet needs, further diversifying the communal options available to American Jews, particularly those who find currently available communal opportunities less than appealing? (For analyses of the contemporary synagogue, see Hoffman 2006 and Wolfson 2006; for a broader discussion of the implications of “leaving religion” see Roof & Landres 1997.)

From another quarter, members of the chavurah movement of the 1960s and 1970s, will no doubt seek and perceive parallels with their own endeavors a generation and more ago. At the same time, leaders of emergent communities are just as likely to see and emphasize that which differentiates current efforts at Jewish spiritual community-building from those that their parents' generation initiated. The new phenomenon raises questions regarding the extent of similarity and difference between the two innovative turns in Jewish community-building remains to be explored and examined in depth (for treatment of this issue, see Prell 2007).

To address and other related questions, this study focuses upon the people who participate in these communities, asking: What are their demographic characteristics, their Jewish backgrounds and their inclinations? How do they differ from “regular” congregants? Why and how do they participate in these newly formed communities? And, by extension, what are they seeking in these communities that they have not found in conventional congregations? (On younger adults' religious motivations, see Belzer et al. 2006.)

These questions about the participants, interesting in their own right, can shed some light upon the larger questions of the meaning, implications, and directions embodied in this growing number of several alternative, emergent spiritual communities. And it is these questions that we address in this overview of recent research.

Here we present the very initial and preliminary findings related to the broad phenomenon of the Jewish emergents, the 80+ alternative spiritual communities that have sprung up in just the last few years. Future reports planned by the S3K Synagogue Studies Institute will focus on the major streams under the general rubric of Jewish emergent spiritual communities: the independent minyanim, the rabbi-led emergent communities, and other alternative emergent communities.

### ***Methods: Compilation of Communities and Survey of Participants***

We gathered the data for this study along two channels: a compilation of communities and a web-based survey of participants.

For the purposes of this report, we define a qualifying community as one with the following features:

- ◆ All communities
  - It was founded in 1996 or later.
- ◆ Independent minyanim
  - It exists independently of the denominational movements.
  - Participants affiliate with it directly rather than through a larger entity (this criterion excludes alternative worship services that are part of existing congregations but includes independent communities that meet for worship in the physical facilities of established congregations).
  - It meets minimally once per month for worship, and may also meet for learning and service.
- ◆ Rabbi-led emergent communities
  - It resists identification as a typical synagogue (this is most clearly measurable through its self-description and in its mission statement, which does not include the phrase, “serve its members”).
  - It wears its denominational identity lightly, frequently only through its rabbi or professional leader.
  - It meets minimally once per month for worship, and typically also meets for learning and/or service.
- ◆ Alternative emergent communities
  - It self-defines at least in part as a spiritual community.
  - Its participants generally identify it as their primary spiritual community, but it is not easily classifiable as a synagogue, minyan, or chavurah.
  - It meets episodically, often for learning or service rather than for worship.
  - Among synagogue satellites (Riverway, ATID/Friday Night Live, Brooklyn Jews), it has dedicated staff members (whether rabbinic or professional) who engage participants autonomously, rather than through the sponsoring synagogue.



## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

The compilation aimed at providing a comprehensive list of communities, including information on: name, location, website, year of founding, year of closing (if applicable), frequency of worship (Friday evenings, Saturday mornings, both), and other information. We started our task through informal networks, as both Shawn Landres and Elie Kaunfer are professionally engaged in establishing and maintaining relationships with, respectively, the full range of emergent Jewish communities and the independent minyanim. To ensure comprehensive coverage, we took advantage of existing web directories: Shulshopper.com, the National Havurah Committee directory, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance directory, and others. In addition, Michelle Shain scanned the web to expand the roster of known communities, and enrich our understanding of their important characteristics.

We also conducted a web-based survey of participants and contacts in these communities. With the help of Research Success, Inc. of Jerusalem, we posted a survey on the web in mid-May 2007 and kept it up and running through early August 2007. A key feature of the survey was that we permitted respondents to name and identify their primary communities themselves, using their own definition of “primary.” While we reached out through several dozen cooperating communities, we instructed respondents to enter the names of the communities with which they identified, regardless of how they found out about the survey. As a result, we became aware of a number of emergent communities about which we had had no prior knowledge.

We invited potential respondents by way of several dozen cooperating communities that sent e-mail invitations to people on their lists. These lists generally comprise leaders, partners, members, worshippers, participants, donors, supporters, and a loose collection of other interested parties. Beyond those reached by way of their communities, others interested in the study found their way to our website, alerted by word-of-mouth, bloggers, and other channels. A small number of communities declined to cooperate with the survey for a wide variety of reasons; we have no way of knowing the extent to which their absence may have affected the results.

In all, 1898 respondents completed the survey. Of these, 1354 respondents regarded themselves as “part of or a member of” or “connected to” a qualifying community. In all, 58 qualifying communities were represented in the survey. Of these, we find the following distribution across the three categories of emergent spiritual communities:

- 813 from “Independent Minyanim” (e.g., Kehilat Hadar, New York)
- 423 from “Rabbi-led Emergent Communities” (e.g., IKAR, Los Angeles)
- 118 from “Alternative Emergent Communities” (e.g., Moishe House Boston/Kavod Jewish Social Justice House, Boston)



## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

A flavor of the nature and diversity of respondents can be obtained from this list of the 15 communities with the largest number of participants in the survey. Eight of them are independent minyanim, five are rabbi-led, and two are alternative communities; together they account for three quarters of the 1354 qualifying responses. (The number of respondents is not uniformly proportional to the number of people on their respective contact lists):

15 Communities with Largest Number of Respondents in the Survey				
Name	Location	Type of community	# of respondents	# on Email list
Hadar	New York, NY	IM	182	2800
IKAR	Los Angeles, CA	RLE	135	1600
DC Minyan	Washington, D.C.	IM	96	500
New Shul	Scottsdale, AZ	RLE	73	700*
Kehillat Romemu	New York, NY	RLE	69	2400
Darkhei Noam	New York, NY	IM	68	650
Mission Minyan	San Francisco, CA	IM	61	600
DAT Minyan	Denver, CO	RLE	48	150
Tikkun Leil Shabbat	Washington, D.C.	IM	44	342
Kavana Cooperative	Seattle, WA	RLE	43	511
Shtibl	Los Angeles, CA	IM	42	216
Kavod Social Justice House	Boston, MA	ALT	39	475
Washington Square Minyan	Brookline, MA	IM	38	288
Kol Zimrah	New York, NY	IM	36	500
ATID/Friday Night Live	Los Angeles, CA	ALT	31	2,000

LEGEND: IM = Independent Minyan RLE = Rabbi-led Emergent ALT = Alternative Emergent

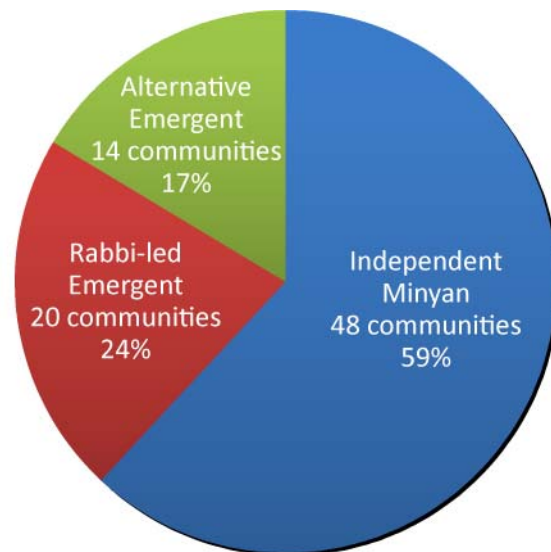
- The New Shul distributed the survey only to its members, rather than to its entire 700-address email list

## Findings

### *Results from the compilation: The communities*

**More than 80 communities, in 28 states and provinces:** The compilation of communities points to a growth both in their number and their diversity. As of this writing, we have identified 82 emergent spiritual communities in the United States and Canada (though the Canadian communities did not participate in the survey). Of these, 48 or 59% qualify as independent minyanim; 20 or 24% are rabbi-led communities; and the remainder, 14 or 17% fall under the “other” rubric.

Breakdown by type  
of community:  
Independent Minyanim,  
Rabbi-led Emergents, and  
Alternative Emergents



NOTE: Data in this report not from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study is from the following sources:  
NJPS = National Jewish Population Study, 2000-01, sponsored by UJC  
ACBP = Andrea & Charles Bronfman Philanthropies National Survey of American Jews, 2007  
NSAJ = National Survey of American Jews, 2004

In most instances, one cannot speak of formal membership, as these communities maintain porous boundaries to insure ease of entry. The only countable number of participants, and a very crude approximation of participant numbers, is found in the number of entries on these communities' e-mail lists. The largest communities report almost 3,000 entries, while some of the smallest communities can have lists as small as several dozen.

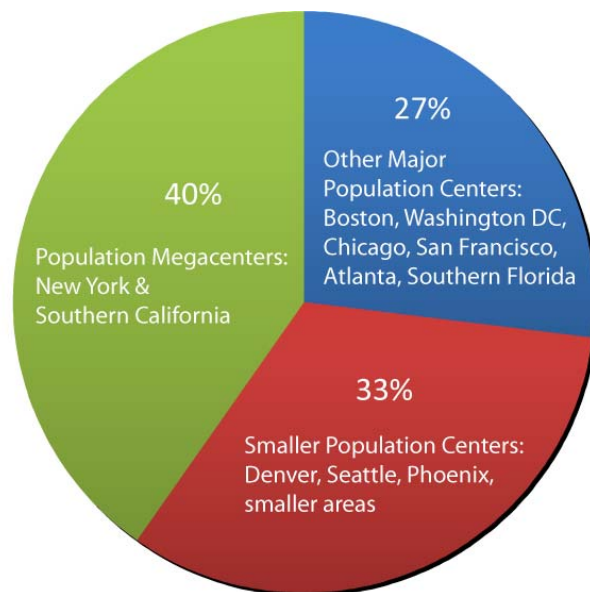
As an estimate of number of participants, the number on the email lists should be expanded to account for other members of the household (where all members do not appear on their communities' lists), and expanded as well to account not only for occasional worshippers and

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

other participants who never bother to enter their names on the lists but also for those participants who interact exclusively via the communities' websites, rather than by email. On the other hand, the number should be reduced by some unknown factor to account for the presence of those who may have expressed some interest, but never take part in the life of the community, or ceased doing so some time ago. Finally, we must account for prior members of email lists: because people move in and out of the urban areas where many emergent communities are located, and the communities experience more population turnover than do established suburban congregations. These variations make it impossible, at this point, to make an accurate estimate of the total number of people encompassed by these dozens of communities.

The compilation also provided an understanding of the communities' geographic distribution. Of the 80, 33 (40%) are located in the major Jewish population centers of the New York area or Southern California; 22 (27%) are found in other major Jewish population centers (Boston, Washington DC, Chicago, San Francisco, Atlanta, and Southern Florida); and the remainder (27 or 33%) are located in areas of smaller Jewish population (e.g., Denver, Seattle, Phoenix and smaller Jewish population centers).

Geographic Distribution of  
Emergent Communities,  
by Size of Jewish Population Center



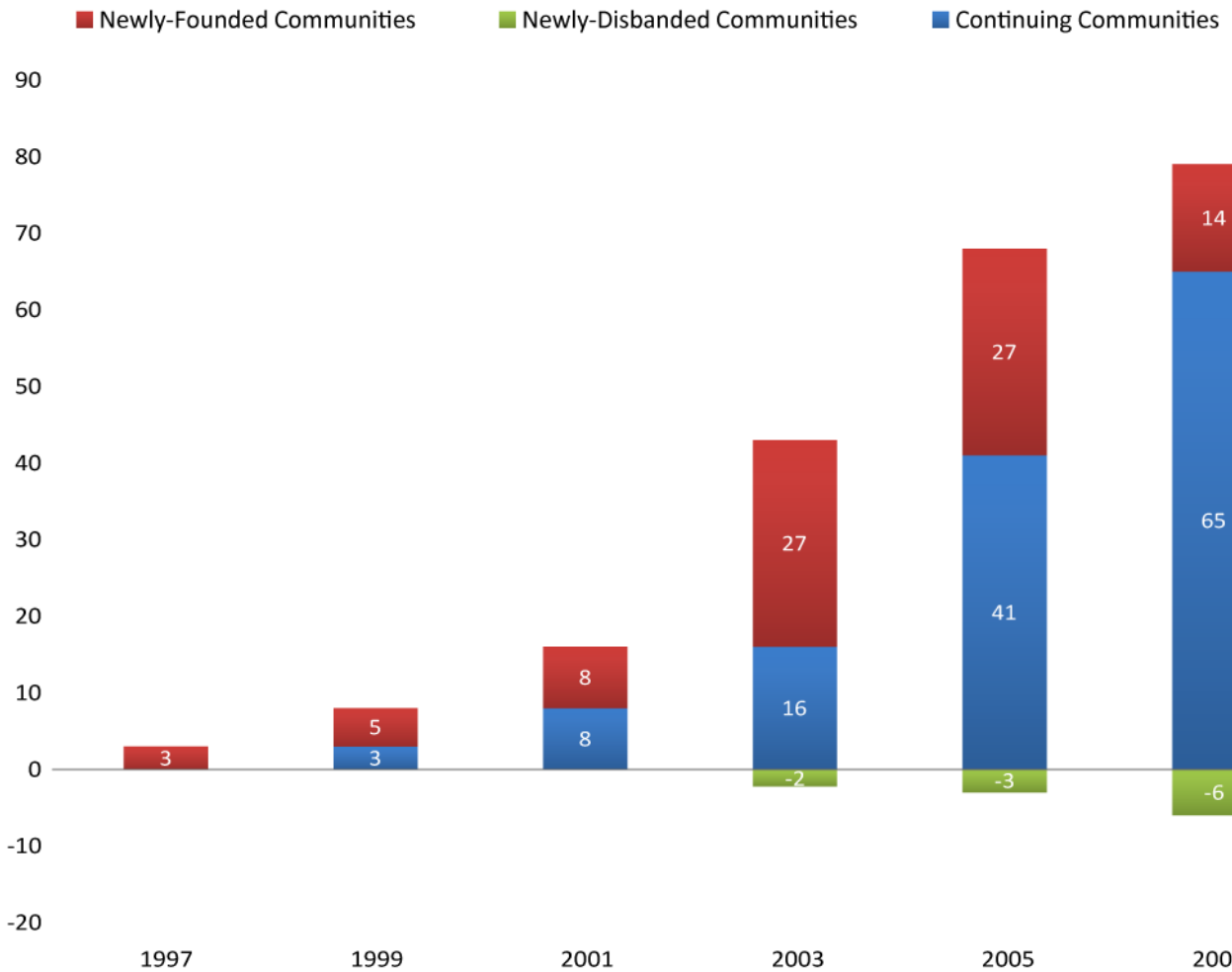
Of those whose schedule of worship services could be ascertained, about half meet on Friday evenings, a quarter meet Shabbat mornings, and a quarter meet on both Friday evenings and Shabbat mornings.

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

About four fifths maintain websites.

Among those communities that were functioning in 2001, we find some telling differences with the characteristics of those currently in operation. In 2001, about 15 communities were functioning. Of these, about 60% were independent minyanim, 13% were rabbi-led emergent communities, and 27% fell in other categories. Of all communities, 60% were located in the New York or Southern California areas.

**Cumulative Growth of Emergent Communities, 1996-2007**  
(Excludes 14 Communities Whose Founding or Disbanding Dates Are Unknown)



Thus, the intervening years, between 2001 and 2007, have seen changes in the number, type, and geographic distribution of these communities. They have grown in number more than five-fold but have maintained a similar proportion of independent minyanim, while a growing fraction are rabbi-led emergent communities. Geographically they have dispersed, with the proportion outside New York and California growing from 40% to 59% in the last six years. In other words, while these communities are growing everywhere, they now are popping up even more frequently outside the major areas of Jewish population and somewhat more likely than in the past to take place under the leadership of a rabbi than an informal network of highly motivated and skilled organizers; moreover, perhaps these two trends are related.

### ***Results from the survey: The participants***

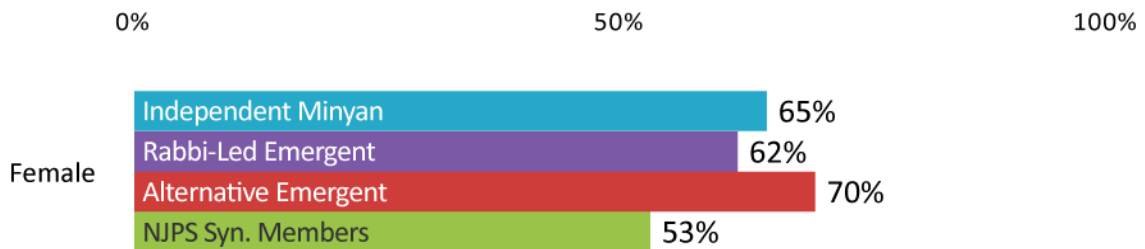
American Jews who join congregations differ markedly from the unaffiliated. Nationally, synagogue members, as compared with non-members, are more often: older, married, parents of school-age children, denominationally identified, Jewishly committed, Jewishly educated, in-married, and affiliated with other institutions (JCCs, federations). With respect to these and other characteristics that distinguish congregants in the national population, how do the participants in the emergent spiritual communities compare with their counterparts who belong to conventional congregations? Moreover, along these lines, how do participants in independent minyanim resemble and part company with the participants in the rabbi-led emergent communities? To what extent are constituents in these two distinct streams drawn from the same pool with respect to demography and Jewish identity, and to what extent do they differ in distinctive ways? Understand the demography and Jewish identities of these participants is the first step toward understanding their reasons for joining together to form and participate in emergent spiritual communities.

To learn how participants in these communities differ from members of “regular” congregations, we draw upon a sub-sample of the National Jewish Population Study 2000-01 consisting only of those Jewish adults who are synagogue members. The narrative below discusses how the NJPS sample compares with the sample of participants in emergent communities. Where appropriate, the analysis also notes distinctions between the independent minyanim and the rabbi-led emergent communities. The analysis devotes less explicit attention to what we call, “other alternative emergent communities” in part because of their small number (both in the sample and in the population from which they were drawn), and in part because the category consists of such a varied collection of highly idiosyncratic communities that generalizations are hard to make with any certitude.

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

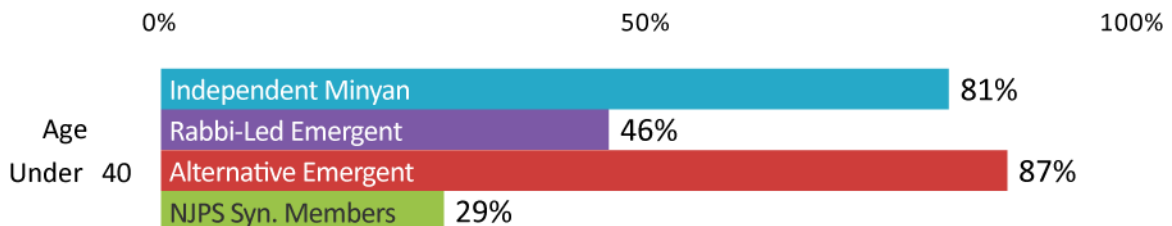
**More Women:** According to the NJPS, a little more than half of the nation's congregants are women, with the nearly even gender balance due in part to the large presence of married couples in the conventional congregations. In contrast, nearly two thirds of the emergent community participants are women, outnumbering men by nearly 2-to-1. The gender gap in religious participation in general, and in Jewish life in particular, is well-documented in the research literature, but it is striking among participants in emergent communities because they draw so heavily upon younger, unmarried adults where the gap in religious participation is especially pronounced (women are more Jewishly active than men). Given women's higher levels of Jewish engagement overall, among all but the Orthodox, it comes as no surprise to see so many women in the emergent communities.

### Women



**Many more younger adults:** Among the nation's Jewish adult congregants, just over a quarter (29%) are under the age of 40. This rate contrasts with 45% for the rabbi-led emergents, and an astounding 81% -- nearly triple the national average among Jewish congregants -- for the independent minyanim, with the other category of emergent communities recording even more, 87%, under age 40. Clearly, these communities are appealing to a very youthful clientele, one that hardly affiliates with conventional congregations. Conversely, congregations appeal especially to married couples with school-age children.

### Young Adults



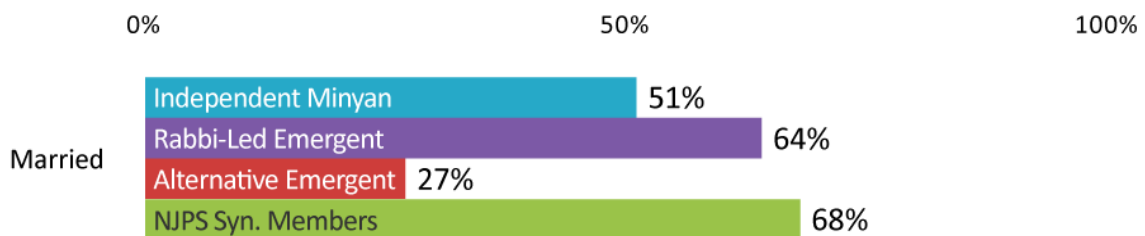
And herein lies one of the reasons for the recent growth of Jewish emergent communities, coming at a time when most young adults are neither in-married nor out-married, but non-married. When

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

younger adults, largely unmarried and largely without children look at conventional congregations, they see a demographic and cultural configuration that is somewhat alien at their current stage of life. The emergent communities, with their large number of young, unmarried, and non-parent participants, offer a demographically distinctive alternative to the regnant model of congregations oriented to married couples with school-age children. And the difference in demography means a difference in culture, style, substance and appeal.

**More unmarried, fewer married:** Of the adults in American synagogues, over two thirds (68%) are married. The comparable rates are 64% for the rabbi-led communities, and just 51% for the independent minyanim, with the residual “other” category reporting only 27% of its participants as married. These simple figures mask another distinction: many of the unmarried in standard congregations are widows and widowers. Hence, the gap between the congregations and emergents in terms of the unmarried younger adult is truly enormous. The emergent communities, then, exert particular appeal to non-married young adults, a demographic segment that is relatively under-represented in conventional congregations. If many American Jews join congregations for their children, to see them educated and undergo a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony some years down the road, then, by extension, these youthful, often unmarried, and mostly non-parents are joining emergent communities to satisfy different needs, perhaps their own needs, which they feel for themselves.

### Married



**Comparable profiles of denominational upbringing:** The presence of alumni of the Conservative educational system (Schechter, Camp Ramah, USY, Nativ, JTS & Ziegler) in the more visible leadership of emergent communities has prompted many observers to see the movement as drawing primarily from the Conservative demographic heartland. Indeed, more than 40% of the respondents in this sample report Conservative upbringing in their childhood years, more than any other denomination. However, despite these widely held impressions, the distribution of denominational upbringing among the independent minyanim and rabbi-led emergents is not all that different from those found in the NJPS (for analysis of inter-denominational variations, see Cohen 2006). In short, in terms of upbringing, there is not much exceptional about the emergent



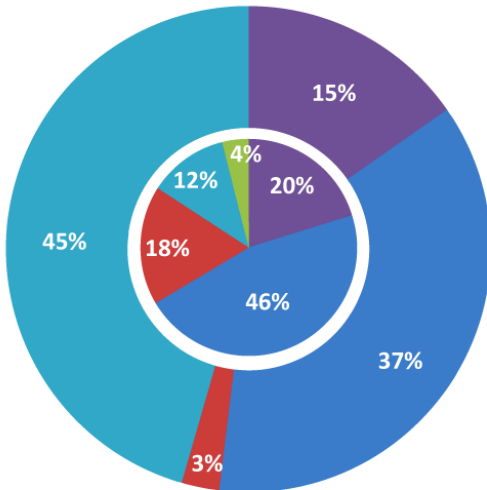
## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

communities' denominational profile, with participants' background spanning the denominational spectrum, including those raised Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and other ways as well. The true denominational distinctiveness these emergent participants relative to the national segment of congregants lies not in the denominational identities of the past, but in their self-declared affinities of the present.

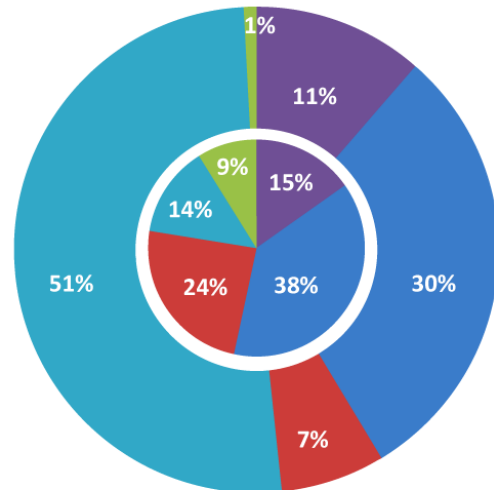


**Shifts in Denominational Affiliation**  
raised (inner ring) vs. current (outer ring)

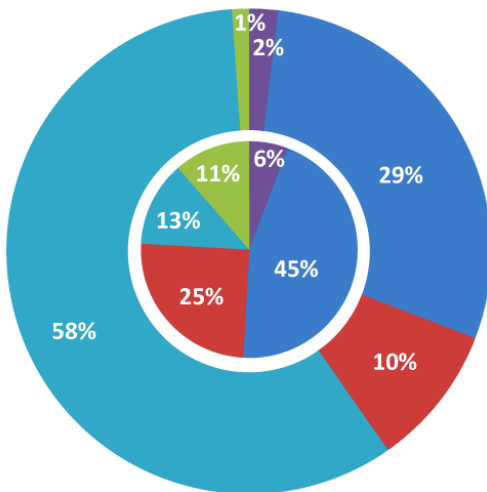
**Independent Minyan**



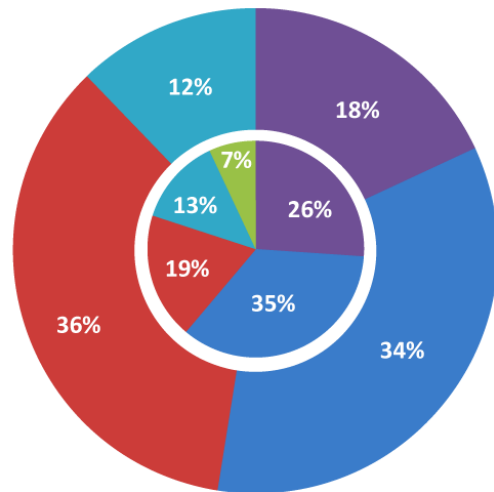
**Rabbi-Led Emergent**



**Alternative Emergent**



**NJPS Synagogue Members**



**Many are non-denominational, very few are Reform:** As many as 90% of members of standard congregations identify with a conventional denomination (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist). In contrast, only about 60% of emergent participants are so inclined. Put another way, only about 10% of NJPS Jews who are affiliated with synagogues abjure any personal identity with a denomination; in contrast, the comparable figure is roughly four times as high (about 40%) among the emergent participants. While the non-denominational figures marginally surpass those for Conservative Judaism, the next most popular alternative, it is still the case that those with some denominational preference outnumber those with none.

The popularity of the non-denominational response parallels and may be encouraged by the institutional stance of the vast majority of emergent communities. By and large, they strongly resist denominational labeling or movement affiliation. The few rabbi-led communities that do affiliate opt predominantly for Reconstructionism and Renewal. Most emergent community leaders see formal denominationalism as a barrier to entry and as connoting the types of congregations from which they seek to differentiate themselves. Apparently, this non-denominational stance is shared by at least a substantial minority of the people these communities attract and indirectly influence, while at the same time we must recall that most participants still see themselves as denominationally identified in some way.

**Gains in converts and non-denominational, losses for Reform:** On the national scene, according to the NJPS, the largely middle-aged and older congregants in the United States consist of substantial numbers of ex-Orthodox and of newly Reform Jews. From childhood to adulthood, we have witnessed out-migration from Orthodoxy by those raised as non-observant Orthodox (a dying breed today), in an earlier era, along with substantial gains for Reform, and a small number of converts to Judaism (about 7%). Among the congregationally affiliated nationwide, these three groups (ex-Orthodox, newly Reform, and converts) are the major populations that have shifted denominational identities from childhood to adulthood.

The emergent communities, though, present quite a different picture. In the transition from childhood upbringing to current self-professed identification, all denominations, and not just Orthodoxy, lose out to the surging non-denominational option. But contrary to the impression of some that Conservative identity is the major “victim” of this process of rising non-denominationalism, within the emergent population, the decline in fact is most severe in Reform identification. That is, ex-Reform outnumber ex-Orthodox and ex-Conservative.

The independent minyanim are especially emblematic of this tendency. The percentage identified with Orthodoxy declines from 20% for childhood upbringing to 15% for current identity; for



## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

Conservatism, the comparable numbers slide from 46% to 37%. But for Reform the drop is nearly total: from 18% in childhood to under 3% today.

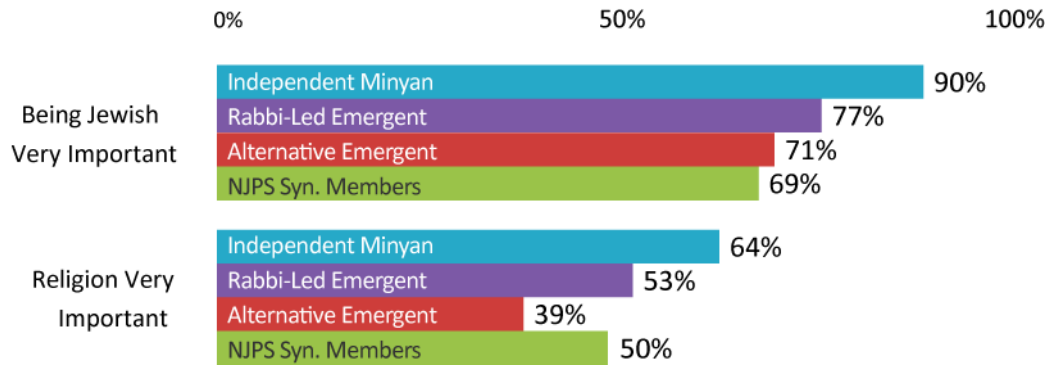
These patterns do not suggest merely that many young adults in these communities are unhappy with denominational categories. They also suggest a basic incompatibility between Reform identity and emergent participants' Jewish identity. One reason is that few emergent communities take a Reform-style approach or are heirs to Reform prayer groups. Another is that, typically, participants in emergent communities see themselves as highly committed and highly identified (with good reason, as we demonstrate below). In contrast, Reform, as the movement with the largest number of least committed Jews – by their own testimony – may find it difficult to meet the needs of those of its young adults who seek to intensify their Jewish identity, and many of those young adults may perceive their new commitments as incompatible with those of the vast majority in the Reform movement.

Not only do we find a large number of denominational out-migrants, especially ex-Reform Jews, we also find that these communities also pick up their share of converts. With 7% of their participants having at one point converted to Judaism, the participant population equals the national average for the presence of converts among conventional synagogue members. Of the converts in such communities, only half are married to Jews with the rest non-married or, in a few cases, married to non-Jews. The number of converts to Judaism in these communities who converted for reasons other than marriage to Jews may also distinguish the emergent communities from their conventional synagogue counterparts.

**More Jewish salience, more religious importance:** In the NJPS and other surveys of American Jews, members of congregations more than non-members report that being Jewish is important to them. After all, the salience of being Jewish and of religion is what, in part, draws people to congregations, and in part is fed and augmented by congregational involvement. This pattern raises a question about the importance of being Jewish among participants in emergent communities. Are they “less Jewish” because they seem to reject formal membership in congregations? Are they “just as Jewish” because they belong to worshipping communities, albeit of a nature different from established congregations? Or are they “more Jewish” because they belong to distinctive, intentional communities that draw upon a highly motivated constituency with strong connections to other like-minded Jews?

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

### Salience of Jewish Identity



By their own claims, being Jewish is, on average, more important to participants in emergent spiritual communities than it is to members of American congregations. While 69% of members of American congregations say that being Jewish is very important to them, even more, 76% of the participants in rabbi-led emergent communities make this claim, as do fully 90% of independent minyan participants. When asked a parallel question about the importance of religion, we see the same pattern of results, respectively: 50% in the NJPS, but 53% in the rabbi-led communities and 64% in the minyanim, say that religion is very important to them.

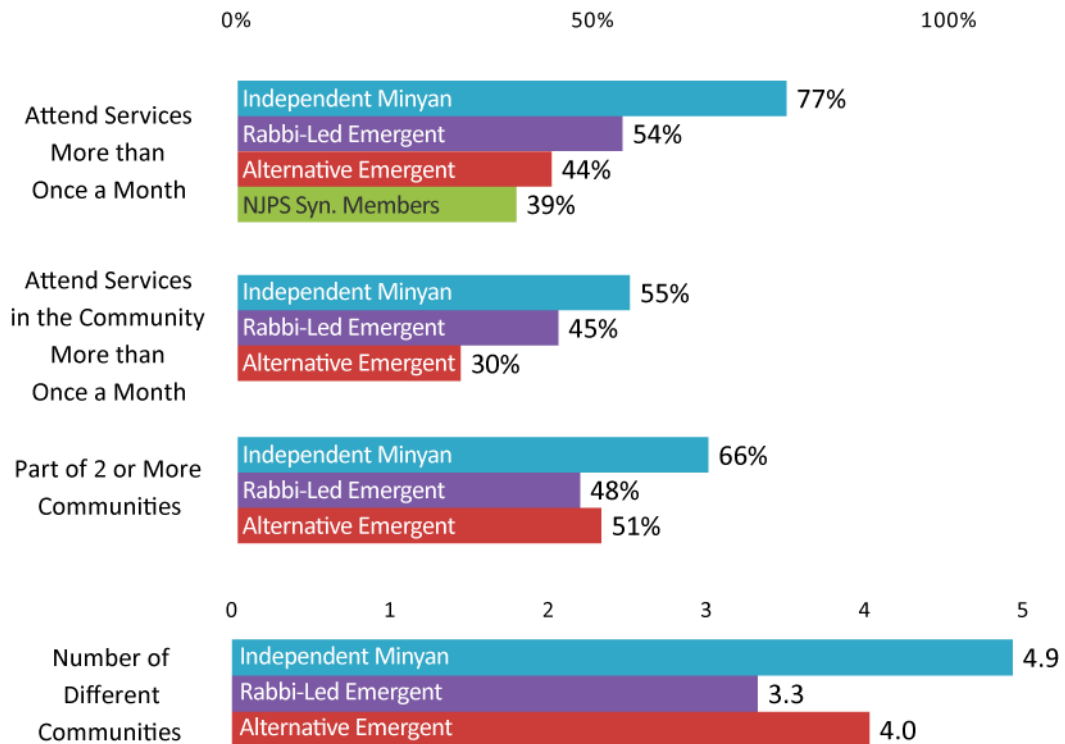
Indeed, with respect to a variety of other indicators presented below, we find the same pattern of results: Participants in rabbi-led emergent communities equal or surpass indicators of Jewish involvement among American Jews who belong to congregations. At the same time, participants in independent minyanim, as a group, out-score even those in the rabbi-led communities and, of course, American Jewish congregants as a whole.

While the averages point to somewhat higher, to significantly higher, rates of Jewish engagement in these groups, both types of communities do manage to attract significant numbers of young adults with weaker Jewish backgrounds and, at least initially, weaker Jewish and religious commitment. About 30% of those raised Jewish went to day schools in their youth (about half to Orthodox and half to non-Orthodox schools). But, at the same time, 70% experienced less intensive forms of Jewish schooling, with about 30% reporting just one-day-a-week school or no school whatsoever. When asked if they had been participating in a conventional congregation before they started coming to their emergent community, 46% responded affirmatively. Yet, this results also means, that most participants in emergent communities were not previously engaged in a religious community. In all likelihood, their emergent Jewish communities are the first Jewish prayer communities in their adult lives, or at least since their undergraduate years.

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

**Big on worship:** Research on church-goers finds fairly conclusively that they over-report attending services (perhaps by a factor of two), consistent with the tendency of survey respondents to exaggerate their performance of socially desirable behavior. No doubt Jews are as given to over-reporting as their Christian neighbors. But while we may be skeptical of the absolute levels of service attendance, we can have more confidence in the variations of those levels across different groups and variables, on the assumption that the tendency to exaggerate service attendance is fairly evenly spread through the population.

### Religious Service Attendance



With that note of caution, we find that among members of conventional Jewish congregations in the United States, 36% claim to attend services more than once a month. In contrast, the number of people attending services more than once a month reaches 54% among participants in rabbi-led emergent communities, and goes even higher, to 77%, among participants in independent minyanim.

Apparently one thing can be said for sure about participants in emergent communities: they like to daven. They gather for religious services often, both in their alternative communities and elsewhere, choosing to attend services in several places over the course of the year. While they

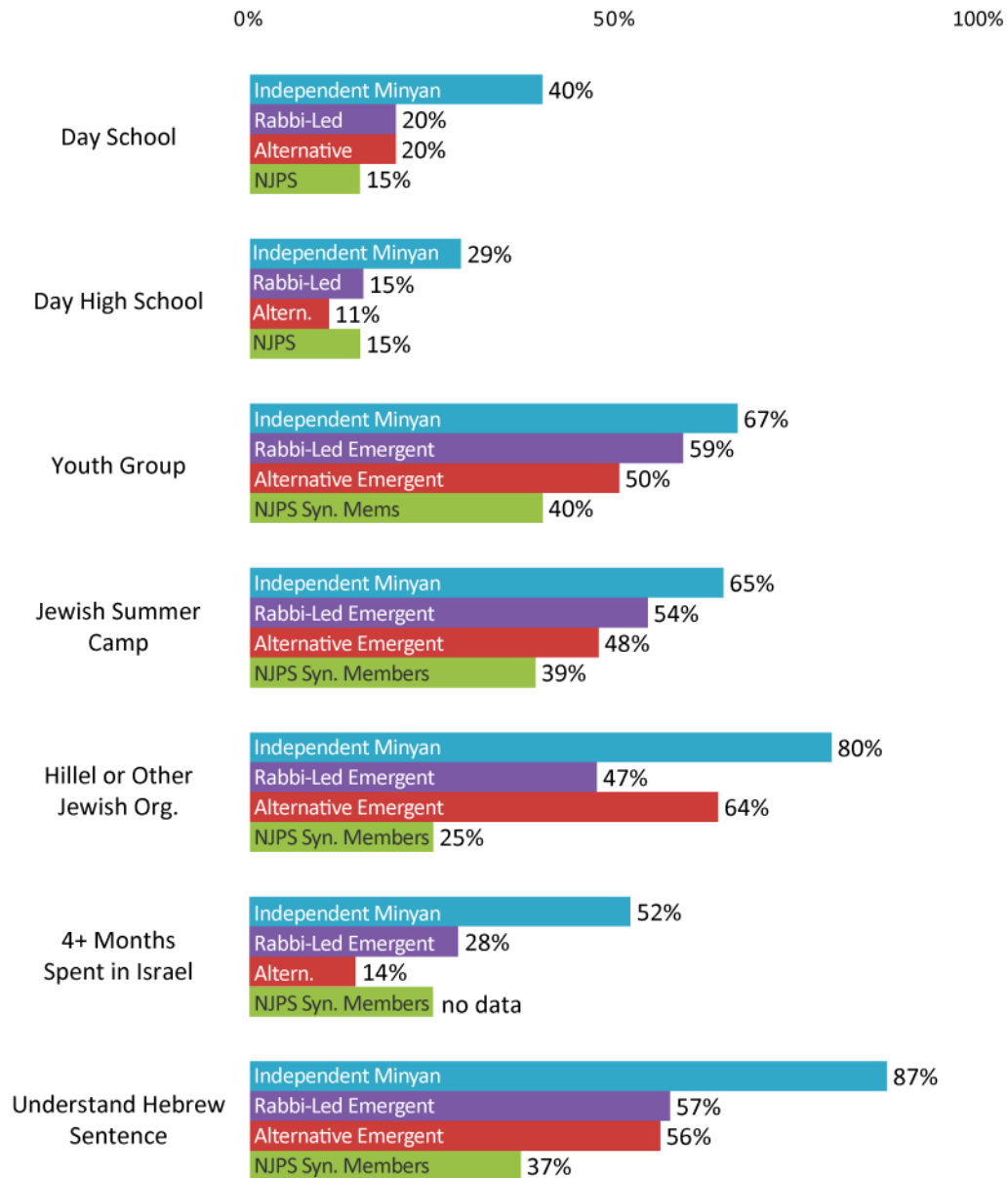
engage in most their davening in what they regard as their primary worship community, they also, at times take their davening elsewhere. In fact, about half regard themselves as attached to two or more spiritual communities – and among independent minyan people, two thirds so report. Over the course of the year, they have worshipped, on average at about four different communities. Those at rabbi-led emergent communities pray at three communities, on average, as contrasted with nearly five prayer communities among the independent minyan participants.

Clearly, this is a population interested in, committed to, and engaged in frequent worship attendance – and these are communities organized around worship. Certainly, some do attend for reasons other than prayer – whether to see friends, to be part of a community, or to engage in Jewish learning. But they accomplish those objectives at activities whose primary purpose is worship.

**Day schools, camps, Hillel and Israel:** Over the last few decades, American Jews have expanded effort and investments in a variety of Jewish educational experiences for children, adolescents, and university-age young adults. Day schools expanded considerably in the 1980s and 1990s, including a surge of non-Orthodox day high schools. Jewish camping came to be increasingly recognized as places of powerful Jewish socialization. The Hillel system underwent a dramatic transformation in the 1990s. And opportunities for experiencing Israel grew and multiplied over the years, capped by the startling innovation of Taglit-birthright israel initiated in the late 1990s.

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

### Jewish Educational Background



The impact of these and other developments in the system of Jewish education is readily observable among the typical participants in emergent communities. Day school alumni amount to 15% of all synagogue members in the United States (and most of them are Orthodox); but they amount to 19% of the participants (largely non-Orthodox) in the rabbi-led emergent communities, and an

astounding 40% in the independent minyanim. Rates for day high school attendance are equivalent (at 15%) for the US synagogue population and the rabbi-led emergent communities, but nearly double (at 28%) among the independent minyanim. Similarly, previous participation in youth groups is about one-and-a-half times as frequent among emergent community participants as among their older synagogue member counterparts. The pattern extends to Jewish summer camps with the same rank order: independent minyanim (64%), rabbi-led emergent communities (54%), followed by U.S. synagogue members (49%).

Anecdotally, some of today's leaders of these communities report that their Hillel participation in college provided them with opportunities to form prayer communities on campus and to establish social networks that they would utilize in founding emergent communities. Thus, with respect to regular participation in Hillel, we find very dramatic differences: 25% among synagogue members, almost twice as frequent (47%) for the rabbi-led communities, and more than triple (79%) in the independent minyanim.

The role of Israel experiences in adolescence and beyond, as well, cannot be ignored in shaping the population that would then participate in these new spiritual phenomena. Indeed, one of the most striking features in the upbringing of participants in emergent communities is the extent to which they have not only been to Israel, but also have spent long periods of time there, such as junior year abroad. This is even truer of the independent minyanim. Thus, among synagogue members in the NJPS, 55% have ever been to Israel, and 29% have been there twice or more. Among participants in rabbi-led emergent communities, comparable figures reach as high as 80% for one-time visitors and 58% for visiting twice or more. For the minyanim: 96% have been to Israel at least once, and an astounding 82% have been there twice or more.

But as much as these figures point to very high rates of Israel experience in this population, even more striking differences appear with respect to sojourns in Israel lasting four months or more. In the US synagogue population, no more than 11% have been on programs lasting two months or more, and thus the number going for four months or more is lower still. When asked if they have ever spent four months or more in Israel at one time, as many as 28% of the rabbi-led community participants responded affirmatively. For the independent minyanim, the comparable figure amounts to an absolute majority: 52%. In simple terms, if one worships in an independent minyan the chances are excellent that the person to the right or left has not simply visited Israel (a la birthright or a high school summer program), but has participated in long-term study or volunteering, much like those now supported by the Masa initiative, a joint project of the Jewish Agency and the Government of Israel aiming to increase the number of Diaspora Jewish young adults to Israel on long-term programs.



Some of the benefits of these Israel experiences can be seen in the high levels of Hebrew competence in the emergent communities. Just about a third of American synagogue members claim to understand simple Hebrew. Among those in rabbi-led emergent communities most (57%) understand a simple sentence in spoken Hebrew. In the minyanim, the vast majority (87%) claim that competence. Where two generations ago, the utterance of a Yiddish sentence could be widely understood in Conservative or Orthodox precincts, the same can be said with Hebrew today in the emergent communities, and especially in the minyanim. The widespread competence in Hebrew is important not only in its own right; it serves as a telling indicator of the Jewish educational divide that separates participants in emergent communities, and especially in the minyanim, from their parents and peers who populate most American synagogues today. The Jewish educational divide, in turn, may help explain why thousands of Jewish young adults have turned to worship-oriented communities that place a premium on liturgical virtuosity.

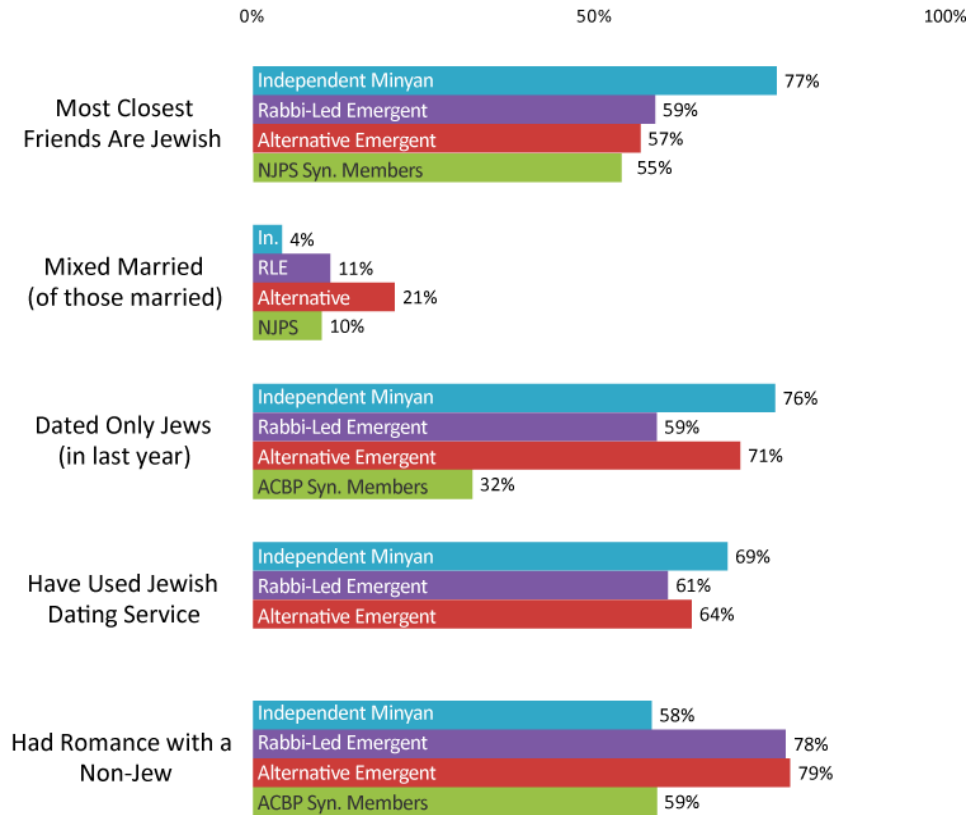
**Friends and lovers, Jewish and non-Jewish:** Numerous social scientific studies demonstrate the powerful, and often unanticipated, impact of social networks upon a wide variety of behaviors and attitudes. Most recently, to take a particularly communicative illustration, a well-reported study determined that relationships with obese friends at one point predispose one to becoming obese some years later. Certainly, spouses, family, friends, and associates all influence what people know and think, how they feel and what they do in numerous and diverse ways.

In this context, intermarriage – a critical feature of Jews’ social networks – both reflects and influences a wide variety of Jewish beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. While in-group marriage understandably has received a significant amount of attention from both researchers and interested observers at large, owing both to its symbolism and its influence, much less attention has been paid to Jewish in-group friendship. Just a few studies have explored the role that having Jewish friends, or that having many Jewish friends, plays in the development, nurturance and sustenance of Jewish identity and engagement. In point of fact, Jewish friendship – the extent to which one’s close friends are found among other Jews – may be more effective than is in-marriage / intermarriage in predicting (and perhaps affecting) a wide variety of Jewish identity indicators.

For these reasons and more, understanding the ways in which the emergent communities’ participants experience and relate to Jewish in-group marriage and friendship takes on some significance. Jewish social networks are critical to understanding the nature of the participants’ Jewish commitment, to say nothing of the likely impact of their emergent communities.

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

### Jewish Social Networks

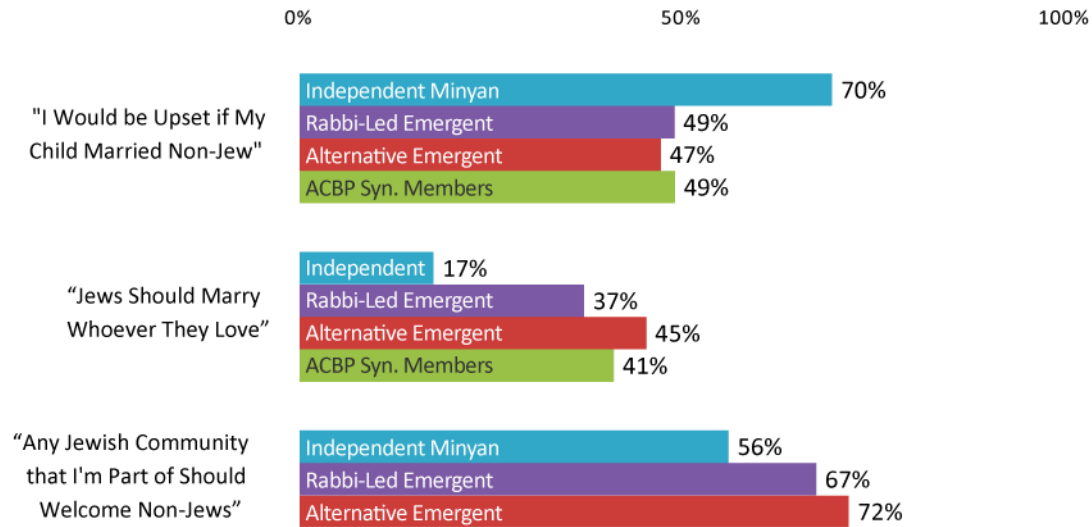


As might be expected, when compared with the unaffiliated, synagogue members score far higher on measures of in-group marriage and friendship. The in-married, and others with strong Jewish social networks, are more likely to join congregations; and, in turn, those spending time in and with congregations are more likely to develop strong Jewish social networks, owing to the ties and friendship they form in the congregations. Moreover, those with stronger Jewish social networks are more inclined to endow such networks with importance, viewing marriage and friendship with other Jews as preferable, or even essential. In other words, Jews who are in-married and Jews with many Jewish friends (and these are frequently the same people) think that in-marriage and having Jewish friends are highly desirable.

How do the emergent communities stack up on these issues? How do they compare with the national population and how do they compare with each other?

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

### Attitudes toward Inter marriage and Non-Jews



On such matters as the number of closest friends who are Jewish, the level of mixed marriage, and attitudes toward in-marriage, the participants in rabbi-led emergent communities very closely approximate synagogue members, that is, they score high on Jewish social network indicators. On the same measures, participants in independent minyanim are even more engaged in and committed to Jewish social networks than those in the rabbi-led communities, who themselves already are more engaged than most of their peers.

The comparisons between the two constituencies are quite telling. For the minyanim and the rabbi-led communities, we find the following results, respectively: most closest friends Jewish (77% for the minyanim, vs. 59% for the rabbi-led); intermarried (4% vs. 11% of those married); upset if their children married non-Jews (70% vs. 49%); and agree that Jews should marry whoever they love, even if not Jewish (17% vs. 37%). Clearly, the minyanim evince even stronger embeddedness and commitment to Jewish social networks than the already strong networks within rabbi-led communities. But strong majorities of both groups' non-married people are interested in finding Jewish spouses: about two thirds of the non-married individuals in both types of communities have used JDate-like services (see Gubkin 2000).

With all that said, as much as they are committed to Jewish marriage and friendship, the non-married are not at all totally removed from the prospect of falling in love with non-Jews. Substantial minorities of the non-married in these communities have recently dated non-Jews (24% in the minyanim and 41% in the rabbi-led communities); and, during the course of their lives, most have had a romantic relationship with a non-Jew (58% in the minyanim and 78% in

the rabbi-led communities). Even with the presence of strong Jewish social networks, and even with their involvement in spiritual communities, dating non-Jews is a fairly widespread reality, especially in light of the lengthening time of single adulthood from just a few years to as long as two decades. Certainly, inter-dating does not always lead to intermarriage, as Jews and other ethnic groups have long engaged in higher rates of inter-group relationships for less intimate than for more intimate relationships.

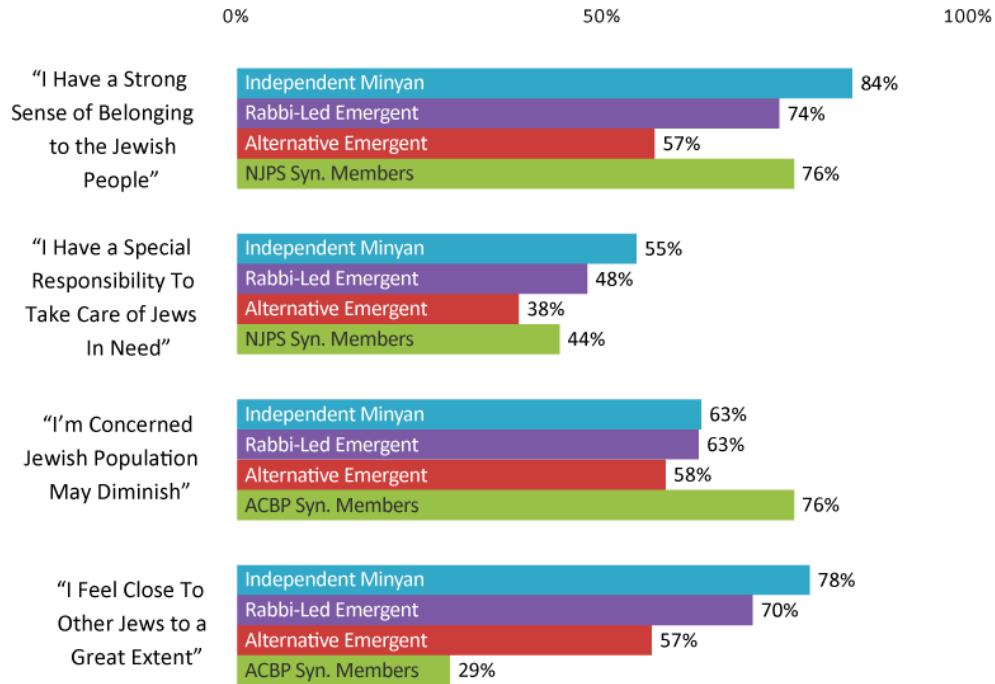
One implication of these patterns relates to the concerns of some Jewish leaders that focus upon the marriage prospects of the younger generation. Some of these advocates of in-marriage have implicitly, if not explicitly, assumed that people who are so committed that they daven in these specialized, culturally proficient emergent communities are virtually guaranteed of marrying Jews. However, the results strongly suggest that some non-married participants will marry tomorrow the non-Jews whom they are “just” dating today. But even as inter-dating occurs, emergent communities and the social networks they establish, foster, and nurture, work to promote Jewish in-marriage. In fact, 30% of the never married report that they have gone out on a date with someone whom they have met in their emergent community, an impressive finding in light of the relative youthfulness of these communities and the short period of time that many participants have been coming to them. (Moreover, 40% of the men have done so, as contrasted with 25% of the women, perhaps reflecting the imbalanced sex ratios in these communities.)

In short, the presence of well-functioning spiritual communities with large numbers of young Jewish adults can only serve to strengthen Jewish social networks. In so doing, they elevate the probability of in-marriage not only for their members, but for their friends who utilize such networks for romantic referrals, as friends ask each other to make introductions to dating partners and eventual marriage prospects.

**Jewish people versus Jewish population:** To an extent commensurate with those of with members of conventional congregations nationwide, the participants in emergent communities report high levels of psychic connection with Jews and the Jewish people. About three quarters (and even more in the independent minyanim) agree strongly that they have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people (almost all the others agree); and as many feel close to other American Jews to a great extent. About half agree strongly about having a special responsibility to take care of Jews in need. These results parallel those found in national sub-samples of synagogue members.

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

### Attitudes toward Jewish Peoplehood



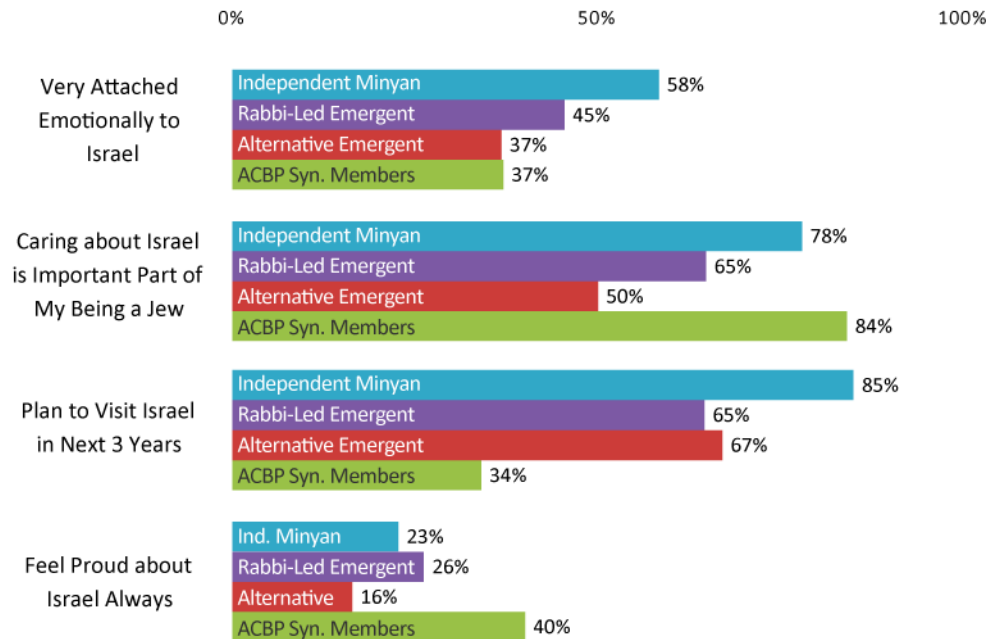
In contrast with these patterns, on one question emergent community participants actually trail American congregational members. Over three-quarters (76%) of congregants in the nation's synagogues are concerned "that the number of Jews in the US will diminish over the next couple of generations." In contrast, only 63% of the participants in rabbi-led communities and independent minyanim feel likewise. The gap is particularly intriguing precisely because it runs counter to the usual pattern where these younger adults tend to equal or out-score their elder congregational counterparts on measures of Jewish engagement and concern.

The gap on this particular question points to an inter-generational tension over issues of marriage and children. Here, the anxieties of the older generation around such issues have provoked befuddlement, amusement, ridicule, resistance and annoyance among members of the younger generation, even among leaders of emergent communities. The generations of Jewishly engaged leaders think somewhat differently about collective issues, such as group continuity, demography and so forth. The patterns in this survey, then, may point to a declining sense of investment in collective notions of Jewish Peoplehood for its own sake, notwithstanding a more focused and explicit attention to Judaism as a value system and the spiritual needs and growth of Jewish individuals.

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

**High engagement with Israel:** Commensurate with their higher levels of Jewish involvement in several domains, synagogue members nationwide are far more engaged with Israel than non-members. At the same time, younger Jewish adults are decreasingly attached to Israel (Cohen and Kelman 2007b). These contrasting trends raise an immediate question about how the participants in emergent communities relate to Israel. Do they more closely resemble their older counterparts who are members of congregations, nationwide? Alternatively, do they resemble their age peers who, as a group, are relatively distant from Israel? Their relatively high levels of engagement in Jewish life and their very high rates of prior travel and study in Israel, of course, argue for anticipating high levels of attachment to Israel.

### Attitudes toward Israel



In fact, the results do point to high levels of attachment, albeit with some qualification. While 37% of synagogue members nationally say they are very attached to Israel, the figures are even higher for the rabbi-led communities (45%), and higher still for the independent minyanim (58%). At the same time, with respect to agreeing that “Caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew,” synagogue members outscore the emergent participants (84% versus 65% and 78%). Yet, still, reflecting their history of extensive prior trips to Israel, the emergent respondents report extraordinarily high rates of plans to visit Israel in the next three years. Only a third of synagogue members have such plans as compared with nearly twice as many among participants in the

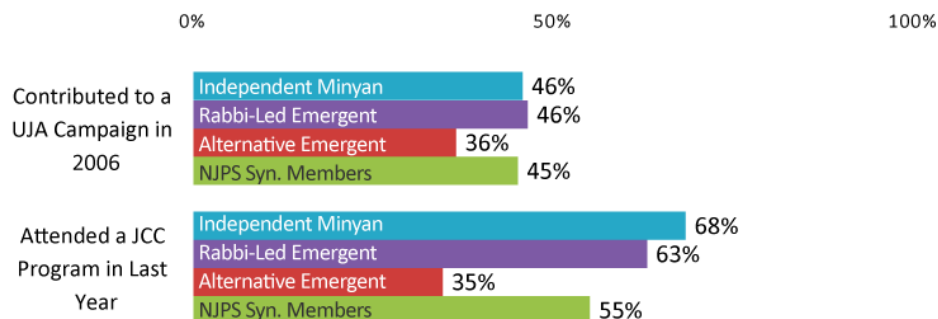
## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

rabbi-led communities and a remarkable 85% (!) of those in the minyanim. The results suggest that most people in the minyanim are either coming from or going to Israel.

As attached as they are to Israel, emergent community participants' feelings about Israel are neither unqualified nor unconditional. Their nuanced approach may reflect greater experience in Israel and generational shifts, if not also a retreat from investment in Jewish collective identity (see Shneer & Aviv 2006). Still, at a time when leaders rightly express concern over the limited attachment of Jewish young adults to Israel, the emergent communities offer environments where the Israel-connected can connect with each other. These are people for whom Israel is important, and more distinctively, people who, overwhelmingly, have spent time in Israel, have Hebrew familiarity (or comprehension), and who plan to return to Israel shortly. In all likelihood, these communities represent a hopeful exception to the general impression of an Israel-detached younger generation of American Jews.

**Connected to UJA and JCCs:** About half of American Jews are affiliated with any formal Jewish institution. Those who are affiliated with one conventional Jewish institution, such as a synagogue, have a good chance of affiliating with another, such as a JCC. Thus, among synagogue members nationwide, 45% claim to have donated recently to the local UJA/Federation campaign, and 55% have attended a JCC program or used a JCC facility in the past year, perhaps attending a lecture or concert, or an event sponsored by another organization.

### UJA and JCC Connections



Younger Jews, in general, are increasingly distant from institutionalized Jewry (Cohen 2005). They are under-represented both among UJA donors and JCC users. In light of these patterns, where do the participants in emergent communities stand with respect to involvement with UJA and JCCs?

As with their involvement with Israel, they resemble the synagogue members more than they resemble their young adult age peers. In fact, they are just as likely to donate to UJA/Federation campaigns as are congregants nationally, and they are even more likely than synagogue

members to have attended a JCC program in the last year – about two-thirds have done so. Significantly, some emergent communities use JCCs facilities for their worship services and other activities, further demonstrating the Jewish Community Centers are not entirely foreign ground to these communities.

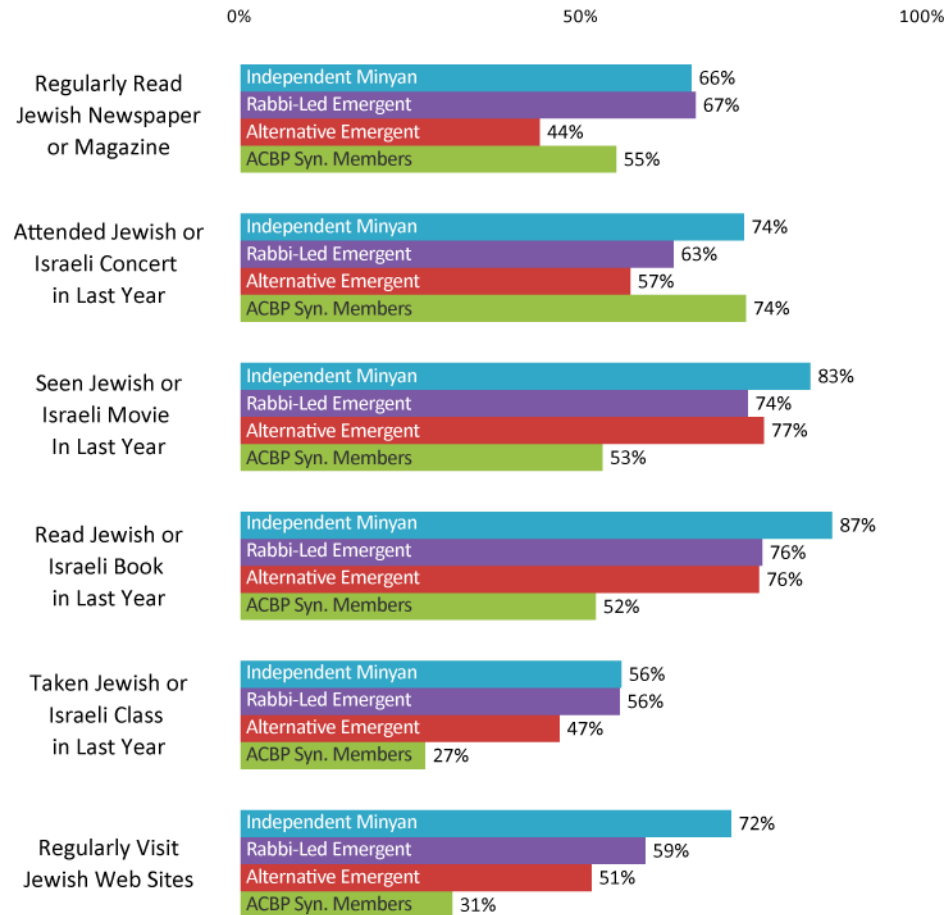
Unlike their generally unaffiliated age peers, participants in emergent communities remain relatively in touch with institutional Jewish life – or so the limited indicators available in this study seem to suggest.

**High levels of Jewish cultural engagement:** Participants in emergent communities are rather heavily involved in Jewish cultural pursuits. About two thirds regularly read a Jewish newspaper or magazine, and about as many have attended Jewish or Israeli concerts in the last year (the rates are somewhat less in the rabbi-led communities, somewhat more in the minyanim). Three quarters or more have seen a movie related to a Jewish or Israeli them in the last year, and as many have read Jewish/Israeli books in the same period. Most, in fact, have taken classes in some area of Jewish or Israeli life, and about two thirds regularly visit Jewish-oriented websites (again, somewhat less in the rabbi-led communities, and somewhat more in the minyanim).



## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

### Jewish Cultural Engagement



This level of across-the-board engagement in a variety of Jewish cultural pursuits reflects several factors at work: the participants' overall high levels of Jewish engagement, their youthful age, their stage in life as singles and non-parents, their generation (or "birth cohort"), and their distinctive Jewish concerns and interest. Accordingly, it is noteworthy that their levels of cultural engagement in each area equal or surpass those reported in a national sub-sample of synagogue members in a study conducted in 2007 for the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies (Cohen and Kelman 2007b).

But while they match or surpass the typical congregants across America, the gaps between the people in emergent communities and those in congregations are not all the same, and their variations are significant. The rates for congregational members and emergent participants are roughly equivalent for use of print media and attending concerts; and they widen, in favor of the

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

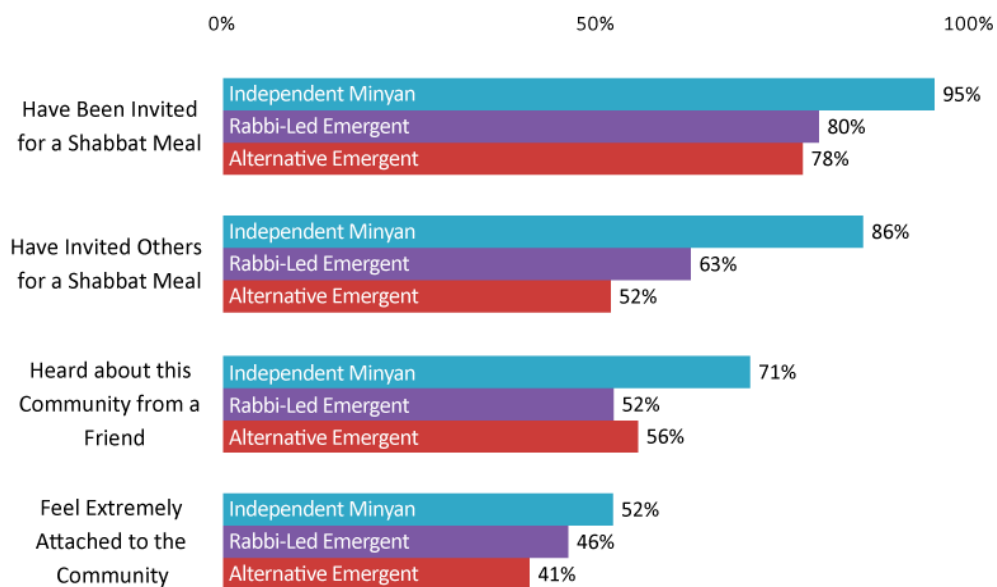
emergent participants, for movie-going and book-reading. The gaps are most pronounced for going to classes and visiting Jewish Web-sites. In these two areas, rates of activity for the emergent participants are as much as double those of their older congregational counterparts in the national sample.

The more widespread attendance of classes reflects both the interest these participants display in Jewish growth, and perhaps the leisure time available to those without child-rearing responsibilities. Their frequent Jewish website use, of course, reflects their relative youthfulness in that every study of Internet use generally, and in Jewish life, shows a strong relationship between age and use of the Internet.

In any event, these participants, while very involved in their emergent communities, are also very involved in other aspects of Jewish engagement, be they in other communities or in recreational and cultural pursuits of a Jewish orientation.

**Attachment to the emergent communities:** The survey we fielded also explored several areas of engagement with the emergent communities, areas of inquiry with no extant basis for comparison with national sample of synagogue members, but which nevertheless lend further insight into the motivations for participation in such communities.

### Social Ties in the Spiritual Community



Quite striking are the large numbers who engage in inviting one another for meals on Shabbat. In the independent minyanim, in the last year, almost everyone (!) – 95% – have been invited to a Shabbat meal by someone from their community; and 86% have invited others from their community to their homes for a Shabbat meal. Not surprisingly, most (52%) feel “extremely attached” to their respective communities. The role of friends is further evident in the extent to which friends, by far, functioned as the principal way in which participants heard about their minyanim (71%, far greater than any other channel of communication). On all these measures, the rabbi-led communities somewhat trail the minyanim, but even in the rabbi-led communities, the figures are truly substantial: as many as 80% have been invited for a Shabbat meal by someone in their community, and 63% have invited others for Shabbat.

We have no comparable data for conventional synagogues; but, impressionistically we can surmise that outside of Orthodoxy, few congregants engage in Shabbat meal socializing with their fellow congregants. Perhaps life imitates art: Shylock says to Bassanio, "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you." Shakespeare understood that eating, drinking and praying together are emblematic of intimate social relations. Apparently, participants in emergent communities share the same sensibility as they frequently combine Shabbat prayers with eating and drinking around the Shabbat table.

The power of social ties in these communities is palpable. They are critical for recruitment; essential to the ongoing life of the community; and effective in begetting a strong sense of attachment.

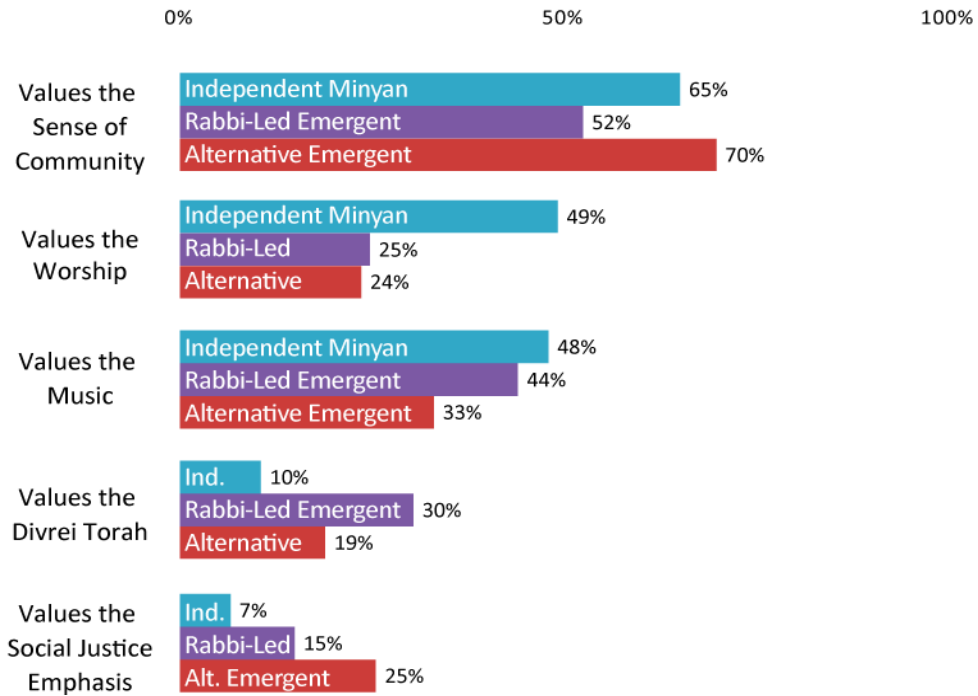
**It's the community – and the music, worship, and divrei Torah:** In line with the foregoing, when we asked respondents to select two choices from a list of features that they value about their community, they most frequently chose “sense of community.” The strong sense of friendship, warmth, belonging and community suffused with higher sacred purpose undoubtedly underlie this particular survey response, and, more importantly their motivation for participating in the collective endeavors. Consistent with the findings reported immediately above, participants in minyanim cited the community somewhat more frequently than those in the rabbi-led communities (65% vs. 52%).

Aside from community, they also highly valued aspects of worship. In the independent minyanim, almost half cited each the worship and the music (or singing) that takes place during services. In the rabbi-led communities, second and third place after community belonged to the music and divrei Torah. Other items, such as a social justice emphasis, substantially trail community and worship as valued features in the independent minyanim and rabbi-led communities. With that

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

said, on every measure of social justice interest or engagement, those in the rabbi-led and alternative emergent communities outscore those in the minyanim.

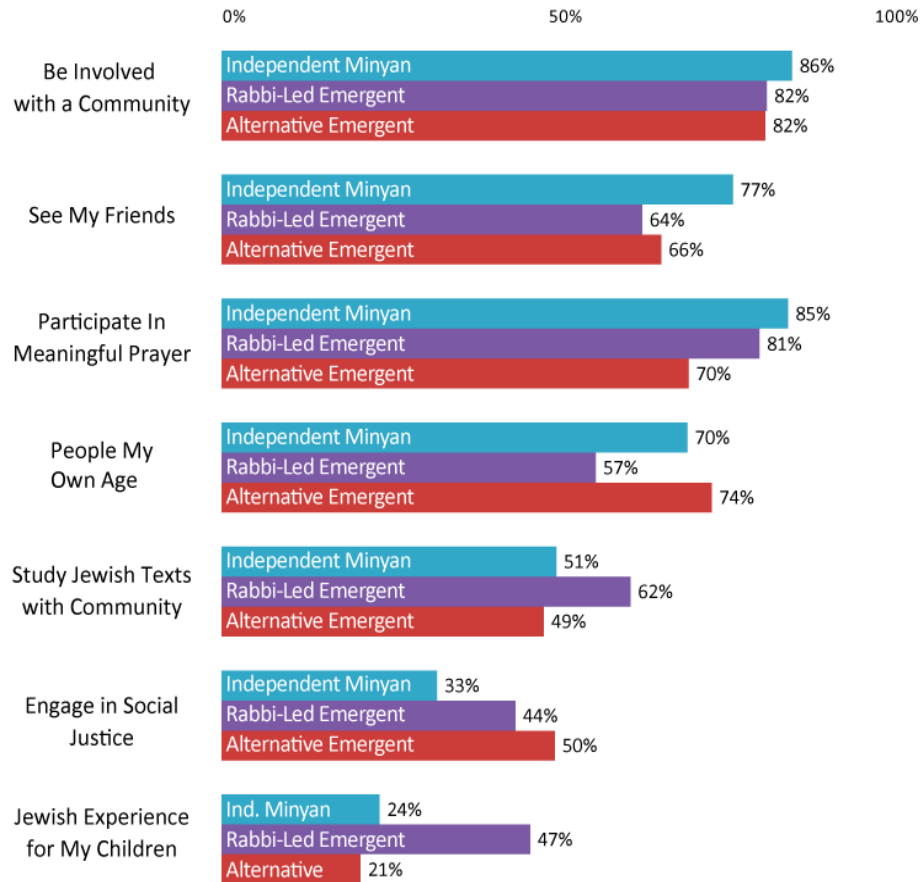
### Aspects of the Community Most Valued



More direct testimony as to why they attend activities at their community is provided in answer to several alternative motivations for participation. Heading the list were two choices: to be involved with a community (widely shared among Americans, Jews and non-Jews alike) and participating in meaningful prayer (which, anecdotally, at least, does not seem to strongly motivate many American Jews). Not far behind was, “I can see my friends there,” and “I like to be in a community with people my own age,” as well as to study Jewish texts with the community (see Morrison & Cousens 2006). Social justice opportunities and providing for one’s children were also in the mix, but lower down. Trailing far behind were connecting with old friends, or meeting new friends, be they for romantic purposes or otherwise.

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

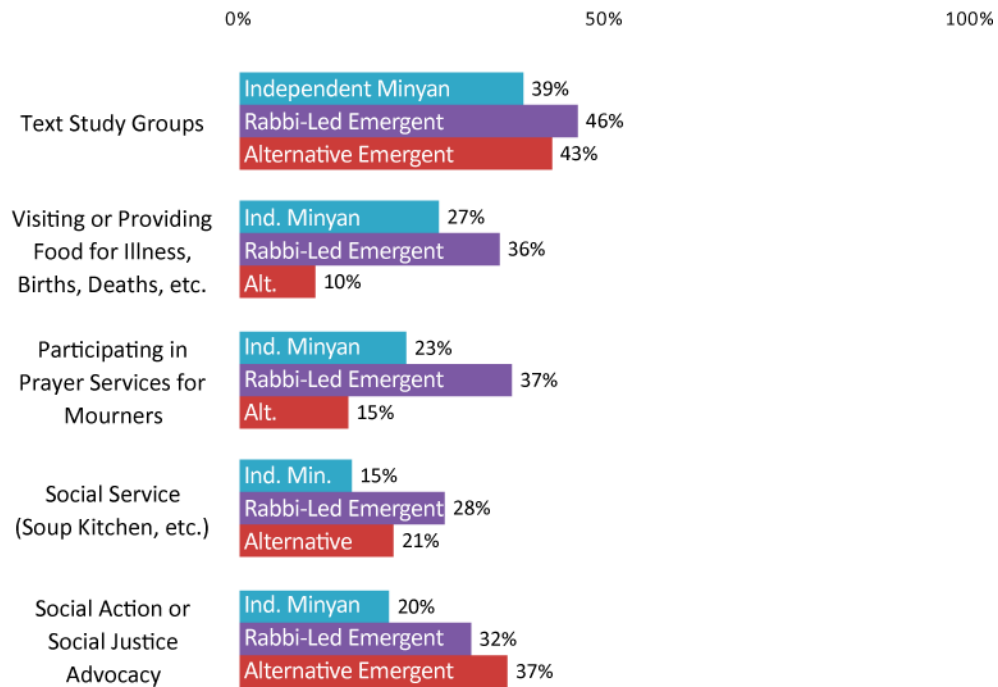
### Motivation for Attending Activities of the Community



The minyanim and rabbi-led communities parted ways somewhat with respect to the relative priority of these motivations. Both types of endeavors emphasized community and meaningful prayer. But, in relative terms, the minyanim, more than the rabbi-led, cited being with people their own age and seeing friends. The rabbi-led participants placed more emphasis than those in minyanim upon their children (more are parents), text study, and social justice.

## 2007 NATIONAL SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY: Report of Preliminary Findings

### Involvement in Selected Activities of the Community



In any event, the answers do point to the widespread appreciation for one or another aspect of the worship service, combined with the positive feelings for several features of community. If we were to translate these survey results into a single constructed answer to the question, “Why do you participate in these communities?” the most common response might well be: “I want to engage in meaningful davening in a warm and engaging sacred community.”

## Summary and Conclusions

The last decade has seen a proliferation of emergent sacred communities. While initially somewhat more concentrated in New York, Los Angeles and other areas of high Jewish residential concentration than elsewhere, they have spread throughout the U.S. and Canada. They now appear in smaller Jewish communities, and not just those regarded as culturally “hip” or avant-garde.

The communities, with all their diversity, share some features in common. Most meet regularly for prayer and they often gather for other activities; all place emphasis on warm sacred community and meaningful prayer; and nearly all reject formally identifying as a community with a denominational body or affiliation.

That said, they come in four main varieties, or so we believe. Some are independent minyanim, in that they choose not to recognize a rabbi (or equivalent) as a main, designated spiritual leader. Others are rabbi-led emergent communities where a rabbi does in fact occupy a fixed position as chief spiritual leader. Still others defy simple classification; many of them place primary emphasis on aspects other than regular prayer as the chief defining characteristic of the community. The fourth variety, which we do not discuss in this report, consists of conventional synagogues that have been transformed under the leadership of an emergent rabbi; while most visible in the Modern Orthodox world, they include Conservative and Reform communities as well.

In many ways, the participants in these communities (many prefer to avoid the word, “member,” associated with more formal and established congregations) differ from congregational members nationwide; so too do participants in independent minyanim and rabbi-led emergent communities differ somewhat, in the aggregate, from one another.

The emergent communities’ participants, relative to congregants nationwide, are more often female, youthful and non-married. Minyanim, more than rabbi-led communities, draw even younger and even more non-married people.

In terms of their denominational upbringing the communities and the established congregations report, more or less, similar distributions by denomination in childhood, albeit with a slight overrepresentation of Conservative upbringing in the emergent communities. However, with respect to current denomination (as adults), the emergent communities consist of a large number of people with no self-declared denominational identity. In this, they contrast sharply with synagogue members, almost all of whom accept a denominational label. Of the 60% with a professed denominational identity in the emergent communities, Conservative Jews vastly outnumber both Orthodoxy and Reform combined. Moreover, in the transition from childhood

to now, almost all the participants who were raised Reform have dropped their identities as such. In contrast, Conservative-raised and Orthodox-raised participants generally retain the denominational identities in which they were raised.

On average, as compared with congregants, participants in these communities claim that being Jewish and their religion as somewhat more important to them. Indeed, they give credence to this claim by their very frequent attendance at worship services as compared with synagogue members nationwide. Moreover, participants in emergent communities generally attend services at several communities. Overall, the participants in independent minyanim are even more active in worship, and in diverse worship communities, than their counterparts in rabbi-led communities.

One reason these worshippers are so active is that many of them have benefited from a variety of intensive Jewish educational experiences. Far more than the average congregants in the United States, the emergent communities' participants are day school products, took part in Hillel, and experienced a long-term program in Israel. Gaps between them and the conventional congregants are also pronounced, but not as much so, with respect to youth groups, Jewish summer camps, and short-term visits to Hebrew. As a result of all these experiences, the participants in emergent communities are more conversant in Hebrew and, presumably, other Jewish subject matter and areas of competence as well. In all these areas, minyan participants report even higher rates than those in rabbi-led communities. But with all this said, both sorts of communities manage to attract a good number of participants with weak to average levels of Jewish educational experiences in their childhood and adolescent years.

These participants report relatively strong Jewish social networks, and share with congregants an interest in and preference for Jewish in-marriage. They have relatively high rates of in-group Jewish dating. That said, substantial minorities date non-Jews and majorities have had romantic relationships with non-Jews. Certainly the non-married among them stand a good chance of eventually marrying Jews; but just as certainly, a good number will marry non-Jews. Presumably, the intensive Jewish social networks in and around these communities substantially alter their marriage prospects, and, by extension serve to connect friends of the participants with one another, further producing Jewish-Jewish romances and eventual marriages.

Not surprisingly, these participants, on average, feel closely connected with Jews and the Jewish People. However, they are not as anxious as are congregants nationally with matters of Jewish demography, marriage, and fertility.



Given their extensive experiences in visiting Israel and studying there, it follows that they score high both on feeling attached to Israel and on planning to visit there, though they feel freer to express their attachment through a wide range of emotions.

Their unconventional behavior, in starting and populating non-conventional spiritual communities, might suggest a distancing from conventional Jewish life. Contrary to that inference, the participants in emergent communities report as frequent ties, albeit loose, with UJA-Federation campaigns and their local JCCs as do members of established congregations nationwide.

Befitting their high levels of Jewish engagement, the participants in these communities report high levels of Jewish cultural involvement in amounts that equal or surpass their counterparts in established congregations. In fact, they are especially active, in comparative terms, with respect to taking classes (reflecting both the cultural competence and interest in Jewish growth) and in visiting Jewish websites, commensurate with their youthfulness.

Two key motivations are central to their interest in their emergent communities, be they independent minyanim or rabbi-led. First, they seek (and find), warm communities in which they are deeply involved and socially connected, and in which they can see their friends of their own age. The frequent hosting of each other at Shabbat meals suggests a rich community life that exists around and alongside of these emergent communities. Second, they seek (and appreciate) meaningful worship experiences, characterizing by appealing music and divrei Torah.

Undoubtedly, there is more – much more – that can be said about the independent minyanim and the rabbi-led emergent communities across the continent. Indeed, these will be the focus of at least two planned in-depth reports we plan for the coming months. But, for the moment, these initial findings provide a first glimpse into the people who are leading, supporting and attending the several dozen emergent Jewish communities in North America. Their efforts, aimed at addressing the own needs for certain type of communal and spiritual experiences, also serve to add to the diversity of Jewish life in North America. Their appearance signifies the emergence of yet one more model of Jewish community organizing, one especially suited to younger Jewish adults, but one which appeals to Jews from many demographic and ideological configurations. The story of independent minyanim and rabbi-led emergent communities is a new one; but it is one whose impact and outcome are still very much in the making and yet to be fully realized or, we suspect, appreciated.

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## **Appendices**

Appendix A: The Survey Instrument

Appendix B: A Sampler of websites

Appendix C: Communities and bloggers who promoted the survey

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## **The S3K Synagogue Studies Institute**

The S3K Synagogue Studies Institute ([institute.synagogue3000.org](http://institute.synagogue3000.org)) works with scholars, clergy, and communal leaders to promote greater understanding of Jewish congregational life and to increase the value and stature of Synagogue Studies as a key field for academic research and seminary education.

## **Mechon Hadar**

Mechon Hadar ([www.mechonhadar.org](http://www.mechonhadar.org)) seeks to empower young Jews in America to deepen their connection to prayer, study and social action. It strives to achieve this goal by providing:

- Yeshivat Hadar: the first full-time independent egalitarian yeshiva in America.
- The Minyan Project: Education, consulting and resources for independent minyanim (prayer communities).

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Revised 12.04.07

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**[www.jewishemergent.org/survey](http://www.jewishemergent.org/survey)**