



Family Education @ B-Mitzvah:

A Moving Traditions White Paper

SEPTEMBER 2021

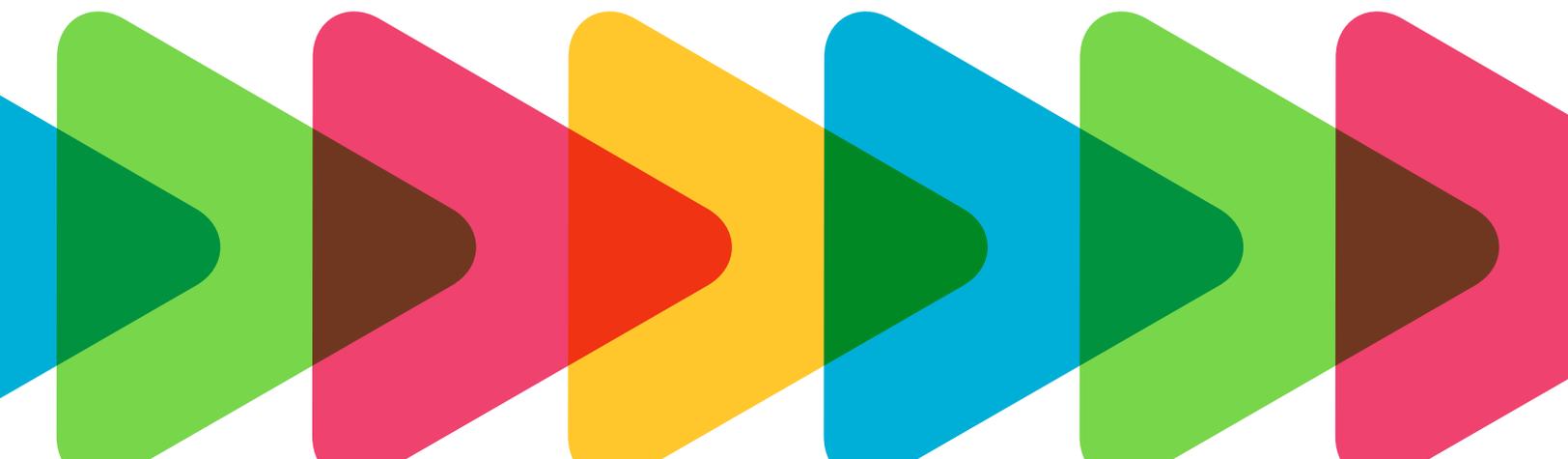


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Executive Summary: The Call to Action

Moving Traditions calls on the Jewish community to join us in addressing the often-challenging transition from childhood to the teen years, made more stressful by the pandemic, by offering Jewish preteen family education at this stage of life. To strengthen Jewish families and Jewish life, family education in the preteen years needs to become as normalized as family education for preschoolers.

Adolescence can be a fraught stage of life for many families, and even more so now. The opportunity is ripe for a new timeframe and approach to Jewish family education. Jewish family education at adolescence provides support and community belonging—which are needed more now than ever, as more preteens today struggle with mental health.

Preteens—and by extension, their parents—face unique opportunities and challenges: omnipresent technology and new ideas about gender, sexuality, race, and other layers of identity bring greater complexity. Preteens must also navigate achievement culture, virtue signaling, Instagram envy, hyper-sexualized content, and polarized political discourse.

These factors were already present before COVID-19; the pandemic has only heightened them. While some have grown their resilience, with social isolation, there has been a surge in the number of preteens and teens needing psychological and psychiatric support.

The collective challenge and opportunity—as proposed by Moving Traditions—is to offer Jewish experiences where preteens and their parents are supported in making sense of the world, confirming their values, and communicating with clarity and empathy.

Fortunately, we have the perfect opportunity: the years leading up to and through the b-mitzvah¹, when most Jewish families are still engaged in Jewish life.

Moving Traditions was created with the understanding that Jewish people and practice will thrive as Judaism continues to evolve—as it always has—to meet the changing needs of Jewish people. Grounded in this belief and the desire to meet the growing need, we conducted research into best practices for supporting preteens and their families, created a new framework, and in 2018 launched the “[Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education Program](#).” As with our Teen Groups, we implement the B-Mitzvah

¹ Moving Traditions is now using b-mitzvah in place of b'nai mitzvah, changing the name of our program to the “Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education Program.” The decision honors emerging understanding of gender fluidity and the need to continually refine our offerings so that all people feel seen and embraced by Jewish life. See more details below, in “The Path to B-Mitzvah.”

Program mostly in partnership with synagogues and other organizations, and the curriculum reflects their input and creativity, as well. Since the B-Mitzvah Program was launched, Moving Traditions has partnered with 110 congregations and other organizations, touching the lives of nearly 13,500 preteens and parents.

To deepen our capacity to meet the needs of preteens and their parents, and to advance this new frame for Jewish family education, on June 10, 2021, Moving Traditions virtually convened 50 leaders with expertise in Jewish education, practice, and community. Together, we considered how the Jewish community—collectively and within our areas of expertise—could best support preteens and their parents at this life stage, while they are open to engaging in Jewish practice. We looked at a range of issues central to Jewish families today: identity, in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and religious traditions; mental health, wellness, and resilience; and feminism, spirituality, and activism.

Jewish Preteen Family Education

At the convening, we heard from experts who described the emotional, spiritual, and developmental realities for preteens and families. We considered the Moving Traditions framework and our evaluation findings as a point of intervention and inspiration.

The Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education Program is based on a SEL-model of Jewish family education that balances preteen self-reflection and peer discussion with parent-child explorations of family dynamics and Jewish ethics, both within a communal setting and in private conversations.

Our evaluation research found that when families participate in this educational experience:

- 1. *Jewish wisdom speaks to families in this life stage—especially during the pandemic:***
Preteens and parents find support, relevance, and meaning in experiences integrating Jewish teachings with secular wisdom on social-emotional learning and well-being.
- 2. *Hevruta strengthens connections between parents and children:***
Preteens and parents value the opportunity to be in meaningful dialogue with each other, drawing on Jewish and secular wisdom about issues of concern to them at this new stage of life, as children become teens.
- 3. *Jewish community supports families when it relates to their lives:***
By effectively addressing the joys and challenges of preteens and parents, clergy and Jewish educators demonstrate to families that Jewish community is a place for support and connection.

With these findings, and after more than 18 months of the pandemic, Moving Traditions feels even more urgency to build this new frame of Jewish family education for families in adolescence.

The discussions at the convening affirmed Moving Traditions' commitment to innovating this new approach—and the discussions inspire us to work in partnership with those who were present, and others who could not participate on June 10.

Moving Forward

Moving Traditions commits itself to building the field of Jewish preteen family education and invites you to join us.

We will continue supporting clergy, lay leaders, and educators with training to meet the challenges facing preteens and families with Jewish social-emotional learning through the Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education Program. We invite Jewish leaders to help bring this experience to more families and communities, and we commit to enrich our offerings in three ways, as informed by experts at the June convening.

Together, we believe that Jewish education and engagement will have greater impact if we:

- ▶ **Affirm the Jewish community's diversity by expanding narrow conceptions of "Jewish identity"** that exclude preteens and parents based on their racial, gender, sexual identities, disabilities, or the multiple faith traditions within their families.
- ▶ **Help preteens and parents to navigate the challenges of adolescence today**, including puberty, stress and emotional well-being, gender expression and identity, and early adolescent sexuality, in a Jewish framework.
- ▶ **Deepen the opportunity of the "mitzvah project"** by linking it to systemic social change, inspiring preteens and their parents to initiate a longer-term engagement in mitzvot (good deeds) and tzedek (justice), including learning about large-scale changes needed to address social inequities and to protect the planet.

Please reach out to partner with us—Moving Traditions and a growing community of educators, activists, academics, and funders. Together, we are committed to creating Jewish experiences where preteens and their families will learn, explore, and feel more connected to each other, and to Jewish life. We look forward to creating the Jewish future with you.



Deborah S. Meyer
Founder and CEO, Moving Traditions



The Path to B-Mitzvah: Coming of Age in Jewish Community

Each child preparing for their b-mitzvah is asked to explore relationships with the past—to connect to stories, prayers, and ritual objects from another time—and to find their place in the chain of tradition. Alongside honoring the past, a new story unfolds.

This is the “coming of age” journey of the once-child, now freshly minted teen, who enters a life stage of self-discovery and social development, spurred by the emotional rollercoaster of adolescent friendship, the biological changes of puberty, and the push-pull of dependence and independence.

The journey is both wonderful and challenging. It is a time when many preteens begin to develop a more realistic understanding of their parents, and many parents recalibrate their expectations for their children. For most families, it is a time of intense negotiation of new boundaries. In almost all families, fundamental questions arise—What does it mean in our family to honor or respect parents and children? How do we speak to one another? What values are communicated and lived out within our family? How do we interact with other families? How do we participate in community?

Jewish communities have the opportunity to help families as they navigate these questions, and to bring Jewish wisdom to bear on these conversations.

A New Model of Family Education in the Preteen Years

Family education connected to b-mitzvah is not a new idea. In the early 1990s, Cantor Helen Leneman, author of [*Bar/Bat Mitzvah Basics: A Practical Family Guide to Coming of Age Together*](#), pointed to family education—and specifically family education during bar and bat mitzvah preparation—as a site of potential “intergenerational dialogue” in Jewish life. Leneman’s recommendation was informed by research she conducted with 116 Jewish educators across the U.S., all of whom reported that

“For a majority of Jewish families, the two-year period leading up to the b-mitzvah is the time when families are most engaged, most connected to clergy, most eager to seek out Jewish wisdom, and most open to the power of Jewish ritual in their lives.”

Rabbi Daniel Brenner
Chief of Education
Moving Traditions

“Family education at b’nai mitzvah is a site of potential ‘intergenerational dialogue.’”

Cantor Helen Leneman

lack of parental involvement was a core obstacle to their success in reaching educational objectives. She and others developed dialogues on Jewish identity and Jewish ethics to fill this gap, which some communities adopted.

However, research conducted in 2017 by Moving Traditions with educational consultant Micol Zimmerman Burkeman found that, in b-mitzvah preparation with preteens and parents, fewer than 20% of educators and clergy were addressing elements beyond the religious rituals of the synagogue service. Rabbis prioritized skills involved in writing a d’var Torah and cantors focused on the prayers, chanting, and musical elements. A few clergy focused family-based events on social action or a volunteer project. But very little of the dialogical model was applied to Jewish identity, ethics, or any other issues related to adolescence, or the preteen-parent relationship.

Filling the Gap

Moving Traditions set out to fill this gap, to develop a model of family education infused with Jewish wisdom, at this stage of development. Our aim was to meet the authentic needs of the family with Jewish and secular wisdom. As another important outcome, preteens and parents would derive more meaning from their encounters with the Jewish community.

Developing such a model required paying close attention to how preteens, parenting, and the parent-preteen relationship have shifted in the last decade. Dr. Jean Twenge², professor of psychology at San Diego State University and author of [*iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*](#) has chronicled many of these changes. Twenge argues that a profound shift occurred in 2012, when the iPhone and other smartphones came to dominate middle school life. That year, an increasing number of preteens and teens reported that they felt left out or lonely, and started exhibiting depressive symptoms. When Twenge looked at a large dataset from children aged 12-17, she found that between 2011-2019, clinical depression rates doubled, with a higher rate among teen girls. The self-harm rate tripled.

²Dr. Jean Twenge, Dr. Jess Shatkin, and Dr. Arielle Levites participated in the keynote panel discussion at the June 10 Moving Traditions convening.

These trends, unfortunately, were also found in the Jewish community, reflected in the 2019 report [GenZ Now: Jewish Teen Research Study](#). In response to the prompt, “Teens I know need help with...”

- 69% of teens answered “anxiety and depression”
- 61% said “academic pressure”
- 51% said “learning how to speak to others face-to-face.”

Although Twenge dubs the generation “iGen,” and alerts us to the emotional challenges inherent as adolescents engage with social media, she does not place the blame on smartphones alone, suggesting that we widen our lens to include the dynamics at play in the family system. While many GenXers and Boomers encouraged children to walk to and from school and afterschool activities by themselves, today’s preteens and parents are pursuing what Twenge calls a “slow-life strategy,” with smaller families, in which kids are more cautiously nurtured and monitored. Parents see their children as “friends” and, before the pandemic, often failed to make space in children’s lives to spend time in-person with their peers. Twenge argues that as a result, today, developmentally, “age 18 is the new 15, and 13 is the new 10.”

Dr. Jess Shatkin, MD, Professor of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry and Pediatrics at the NYU School of Medicine, has pointed to the ways that such strategies impede the psychological development that preteens and teens need to thrive. Shatkin argues that today’s risk-averse parents need encouragement to provide “appropriate risks” for adolescents, such as outdoor adventure, sports, and the arts, to counter an achievement culture overly focused on academic success.

Dr. Arielle Levites, Managing Director of the Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education, at George Washington University’s Graduate School of Education and Human Development, has pointed to particular challenges in the Jewish community. Jewish teens are typically from relatively affluent communities with higher educational attainment. Levites argues that Jewish teens

“Parents can prepare their adolescents for the inevitability of risky situations by helping them plan responses before they find themselves knee-deep in doubt and peer pressure.”

Dr. Jess Shatkin

believe that their academic success in high school will set their path for the rest of their life, and that “If they don’t get it right now, they are doomed forever.” Levites adds, “Jewish teens don’t just tolerate their parents, they love their parents and depend on them to help them make sense of the world.”

After NYU experienced a series of suicides on campus, Shatkin and others developed a course for first-year students to teach basic resilience skills, using the acronym CHARM—Communication, Healthy habits, Anxiety management, Risk-taking, and Mood awareness— to describe the five elements of social-emotional learning that every person needs to thrive. What is clear to Shatkin, and others, is that we should be working on social-emotional skills well before teens are sent off to college.

The years of preparation for b-mitzvah are the ideal time for preteens and parents to start to prepare for the journey from the *bimah* to the dorm room. Rather than see the b-mitzvah as an end to Jewish education, today’s families need the support of Jewish activities that speak to their needs as parents, preteens, and teens, as they go through middle school and into high school, and, eventually, to young adulthood.

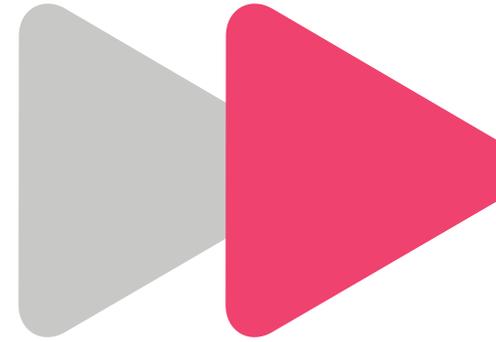
For this reason, Moving Traditions emphasizes the themes “becoming a teen” and “parenting a teen” as central to our B-Mitzvah Family Education Program.

To address the opportunity, we designed a curriculum and the Carol Lowenstein Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Training Institute, a day of training to prepare the educators and clergy who partner with us to implement the program. In the training, clergy and educators explore three important models to understand the journey of adolescence:

- **The task-based model** of adolescence describes key milestones, such as navigating the physical changes of puberty, learning to think critically, becoming independent of parents, and overcoming adversity. This model is based on the work of psychologist [A. Rae Simpson](#) and the Harvard Parenting Project.

“We identified an opportunity through Jewish family education to strengthen the family and the relationship between parent and child, in a cohort, thereby strengthening the family’s relationship to Jewish community through this opportunity for meaning making around key issues in their lives.”

Rabbi Tamara Cohen
VP, Chief of Program Strategy
Moving Traditions



- **The identity-based model** considers the ways in which gender codes play a central role in two key functions for adolescents: navigating social situations and regulating emotions. This model is grounded in the work of the late Cornell University psychology professor [Sandra Bem](#).
- **The spiritual journey-based model** focuses on the concept that adolescence begins with grief—mourning over the loss of childhood—and moves toward healing, as new friends and new relationships develop. This model is inspired by the work of practicing clinical psychologist and educator, [Brad Sachs](#).

As part of the Moving Traditions training, clergy and educators reflect on their own journeys through adolescence, examine the parent-teen relationship, learn about pressures on today's preteens, and discuss how Jewish wisdom and Jewish ritual can speak to today's Jewish families.

An Evolving Ritual

The power and popularity of the b-mitzvah ritual continues to grow both within and beyond synagogue walls. Over the past two decades, many families who are not associated with Jewish institutions have found alternative paths to prepare their children for and to celebrate b-mitzvah. This trend is detailed in the 2015 study, [A Closer Look at Independent B'nai Mitzvah in the Chicagoland Area](#), conducted by Abigail Pickus for the Community Foundation for Jewish Education of the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago.

While a prayer service followed by large-scale, themed parties for out-of-town guests and friends are still seen as must-haves by many b-mitzvah families, many preteens and parents today are finding alternative ways to celebrate.

The move to more family-focused and creative b-mitzvah was amplified by the pandemic. Many Zoom b-mitzvah became—like Passover seders—home-based Jewish rituals, with living rooms and outdoor decks becoming sites for poetry reading,

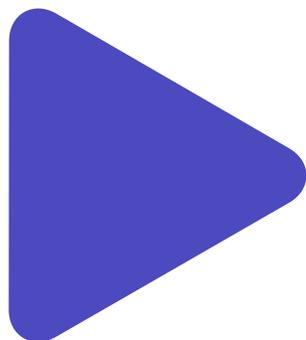
prayer, Torah chanting, song, Jewish learning, and other types of meaningful activities, documented by Moving Traditions in [Zoom Mitzvah 101: A Moving Traditions Guide](#).

As we emerge from the pandemic, thousands of families now have new ideas about what may be possible for their preteens' b-mitzvah. While these innovations may have been motivated by lockdown, in many cases, these adaptations ultimately may provide more personalized and meaningful b-mitzvah experiences.

Gendered B-Mitzvah Traditions

B-mitzvah observances have, for decades, operated both as an anchor to tradition and as a rite of passage that help families mark the end of childhood for their preteens, launching them into the world of peer-based, teen culture. In [The Wonders of America](#), historian Jenna Weissman Joselit describes the post-war American practices of Ashkenazi Jews who used these celebrations to reinforce social and gender codes in line with parental and communal expectations. Preteen boys were initiated into the idea of dressing “like a man” and later, when girls were allowed to stand on the *bimah*, they were encouraged to dress “like a woman.” At catered, thematic parties, preteen boys and girls were encouraged to dance with each other or play games in gendered competition with one another.

The story of gender codes and social expectations was developed further in 2015 in [Bat Mitzvah Comes of Age](#), the traveling exhibit and short film created by Moving Traditions and the National Museum of American Jewish History. The project chronicled the introduction of the bat mitzvah and the young women who pioneered bat mitzvah in Jewish communities across denominations. The stories from *Bat Mitzvah Comes of Age* illustrate that becoming a bat mitzvah was about preteen girls changing tradition, and becoming young women who could use their voices, challenge authority, and change the world.



Moving Beyond the Binary

For a growing number of Jewish preteens, the categories of “bar” and “bat” fail to capture their lived experiences of gender. In support of these preteens and with respect for inclusiveness, “[b-mitzvah](#)” can serve as a Hebrew abbreviation that alludes to the multiple gender specific terms already coined.

In the Moving Traditions @13 podcast, which premiered in 2017, one episode highlights the story of a nonbinary preteen’s coming-of-age and how they navigated ritual and social aspects of the celebration. Hearing the voice of a nonbinary preteen helped listeners to understand the ways in which a growing segment of today’s preteens express their gender identities and question traditional gender conventions, and how parents and communities can better support and affirm these preteens. Later in 2017, Moving Traditions partnered with Keshet to launch Tzelem, an online teen group for trans, nonbinary, and gender diverse teens. The program has since expanded to meet the needs of Jewish teens online and now also in person in six cities.

The number of preteens who feel safe to openly identify beyond the binary is growing. Preteens tend to follow cultural changes initiated by older teens; two major studies by researchers for the Trevor Project show that more teens today are openly expressing a LGBTQ+ identity and are advocating for gender diversity. Tracking 16-year-olds in America in 2019 and comparing their survey results with 2015, the researchers found a [significant increase in teens identifying as LGBTQ+](#). Among those who were male assigned at birth, the number rose from 4.5% to 5.7% and with female-assigned respondents the numbers rose from 12.2% to 17.8%. In a study of LGBTQ+ teens conducted in 2021, the Trevor Project found that one in four LGBTQ+ teens now identify themselves as non-binary.

Given these shifts, it is not surprising that a [recent poll by Innovation Group](#), an independent marketing firm, found that 56% of today’s teens know someone who identifies as nonbinary. Clearly, it is time to ensure that Jewish coming-of-age rituals are relevant to all families.

Check out [@13](#), Moving Traditions’ six-episode podcast series that is pitch-perfect for preteens and parents going through the sometimes confusing, likely emotional, and certainly triumphant process of planning and becoming a b-mitzvah.



TEEN

attitude

moody
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younger than
they

Puberty

Hard

identity

annoying

Cool
interesting

Video games

Smelly

Pressure
Anxiety

independent

Window into the Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education Approach

Our B-Mitzvah Program enables clergy and Jewish educators to help families navigate this life stage by addressing the joys and challenges of becoming and parenting a teen. Through informal education games, discussion, and Jewish text-study, we help parents to understand and discuss with their preteens the current challenges facing adolescents and explore ideas of personal growth, self-reflection, and communication through a Jewish and gender lens. The family and the preteen curricula—available in online and in person formats—progress through 6th and 7th grades.

Session	6th grade	7th grade
Family Session 1	“Today you are an adult”: What does it mean to become a teen?	Fitting in & Standing Out: How will I navigate the teen years?
Family Session 2	B-Mitzvah: Why am I doing this?	Now what?: Deepening friendships and creating community through Rosh Hodesh & Shevet (at end of year)
Family Session 3	Repairing the World: What’s a mitzvah?	“You just don’t understand”: How do parents and teens talk to each other?
Preteen Session 1	Growing up	Teen Stuff
Preteen Session 2	Center of Attention	Friends
Preteen Session 3	Why Get Dressed?	Posting (Social Media)
Preteen Session 4	Simcha: Where’s your joy?	Money & Gifts

The following five examples illustrate how Moving Traditions integrates Jewish wisdom and social emotional learning for this life stage.

▶▶ **Example 1:** This text frames the first family education session, with Talmudic sage Yehudah Ben Teima discussing the significance of age 13. The rabbi defines age 10 as the time to study the Mishnah, 13 as the time for “mitzvot,” 15 for the study of Talmud, 18 for standing under the wedding canopy, and 20 for pursuing a trade. After reviewing the text, preteens and parents are asked what happens today at these ages, with specific attention on what is expected of teens ages 13, 15, and 18. Families are then invited to explore what is helpful and what might be counter-productive about having a one-size-fits-all definition of an expected milestone at a specific age, given the diversity of our actual life experiences and realities.

▶▶ **Example 2:** The preteens learn about how their parents experienced their own preteen years. In this section of the curriculum, the facilitator asks the parents to respond to prompts about their experiences as 12- and 13-year-olds. The list of prompts, which were answered on a spectrum of ‘disagree’ and ‘agree,’ includes:

- I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up.
- I felt pressure to succeed.
- I was living in a strict household.
- I had a crush on someone.
- I spent time taking care of someone in my family.
- I experienced some type of sexism or gender discrimination or felt pressure to conform to ideas in my community, school, or family about what it meant to be a boy or a girl.
- I faced some serious challenges personally, in my family or in my school.

After observing their parents responding to these prompts, preteens and parents reflect together on the similarities and differences from being 12 or 13 today. Preteens have the opportunity to learn more about their parents as preteens—which they love—and to move into a more mature understanding of their parents’ lives.

▶ **Example 3:** Parents are asked to reflect on a number of approaches to Judaism, connected to a variety of issues that arise at this life stage.

We offer a range of texts that we hope will speak to the range of parents—some of whom are still making peace with their own Jewish upbringing, or who are not currently or may not plan to become Jewish. For instance, we use the following quotes from American Rabbi Sandy Sasso and from Israeli Rabbi Naamah Kelman.

“In a world that seeks single solutions, the Jew asks questions. In a world where people are dangerously pre-occupied with finding divine answers, the Jew is more concerned about struggling with the hard questions about life and death, about good and evil, about God and humanity.” - Rabbi Sandy Sasso

“Being Jewish has taught me how to laugh! First and foremost, to laugh at myself and at my situation. More important, to laugh in order to act in the world.” - Rabbi Naamah Kelman

▶ **Example 4:** In one element of the curriculum, preteens use traditional Jewish wisdom, like this short text from Maimonides, as a lens on current social pressures:

“What should a righteous person wear? Not a garment of gold or purple wool that everyone will stare at and not a garment so poor in quality that it is an embarrassment to its wearer. One should strive for balance in all things.” - Maimonides, Hilchot De’ot

After reading this text, preteens discuss the value of balance. What does Maimonides mean by ‘balance’? What balance do they want to strike when making decisions about clothing and fashion for their b-mitzvah?

▶ **Example 5:** In a session on parent-child communication, preteens and parents reflect on the things that cause the most stress within their families. They study a Hasidic text about listening to the suffering of others:

“You should receive every person with warmth, understand the suffering that the person has undergone, and treat the person with gentleness ... it is part of human kindness to listen to others talk, even if they overdo it.” - Zot Zichron (18th-century work on Jewish ethics)



Learning What Works

Since it was launched in 2018, the Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education Program has been implemented in partnership with 110 synagogues and other organizations. Our partners have engaged nearly 13,500 preteens and parents in conversations and activities focused on the journey into the teen years. The upshot? Preteens and parents highly value the experience. Jewish preteen family education provides support and community belonging—which are needed more now than ever, as more preteens struggle with mental health and social isolation.

To develop the program and evaluate its outcomes, Moving Traditions works with the consultancy Informing Change, using a text-message based assessment tool for preteens and parents, and an online survey for clergy and educators. To date, Moving Traditions has collected more than 4,500 survey responses from parents, preteens, clergy and educators. In addition, in 2021, Rosov Consulting LLC conducted an independent program evaluation of the Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education Program.

“In increasingly busy and tech-mediated lives, parents and kids value the opportunity to slow down and communicate openly about Jewish values and social-emotional issues. Many need a framework and tools to do this effectively.”

Rosov Consulting LLC

Evaluation Findings

Together, the evaluation research supports three major findings about Moving Traditions’ model of Jewish family education in adolescence:

- 1. *Jewish wisdom speaks to families in this life stage—especially during the pandemic:***
Preteens and parents find support, relevance, and meaning in experiences integrating Jewish teachings with secular wisdom on social-emotional learning and well-being.
- 2. *Hevruta strengthens connections between parents and children:***
Preteens and parents value the opportunity to be in meaningful dialogue with each other, drawing on Jewish and secular wisdom about issues of concern to them at this new stage of life, as children become teens.
- 3. *Jewish community supports families when it relates to their lives:***
By effectively addressing the joys and challenges of preteens and parents, clergy and Jewish educators demonstrate to families that Jewish community is a place for support and connection.

In the next three pages, we share findings from Moving Traditions’ most recent surveys: 2020-21 year-end clergy and educator evaluation and 2020-21 family session survey responses; and from the Rosov research.



Finding 1: Jewish Wisdom Speaks to Families in this Life Stage

The first important learning from the Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education Program is that preteens and parents find support, relevance, and meaning in experiences integrating Jewish teachings with secular wisdom on social emotional learning and well-being—especially during the pandemic.

This learning recalls a midrashic teaching about the manna—the miraculous life-saving food that the Israelites ate in the Sinai desert—that tasted different based on the life-stage of the eater:

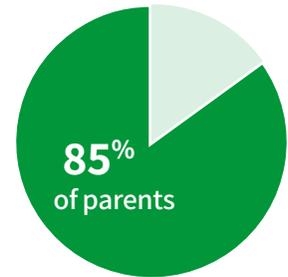
“For the elders it was like wafers with honey, for the youth it was fresh bread... for babies it was like milk.” (Exodus Rabba 25:3)

All ages were nourished, but for each age the experience was different.

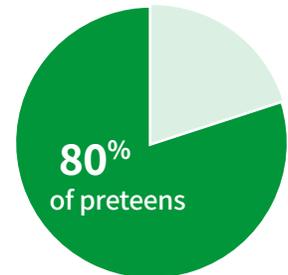
This also reflects the work of the late Dr. Jonathan Woocher and his call to center Jewish education on the “human questions.” For Woocher, that meant shifting education from asking, “How can we keep Jews Jewish as they go through the process of embracing American life?” to “How can we help Jews find, in their Jewishness, resources that will help them live more meaningful, purposeful, and fulfilling human lives?” (Reinventing Jewish Education for the 21st Century, 2012).

“So much of the b’nai mitzvah experience is not relevant to preteens’ lives,” said Rabbi Noah Arnow, Rabbi of Kol Rinah in St. Louis, MO, a Moving Traditions partner. By contrast, in the Moving Traditions curriculum, Arnow says, “The topics are things they’re either experts in themselves, because of their age, or things they’re interested in dealing with.”

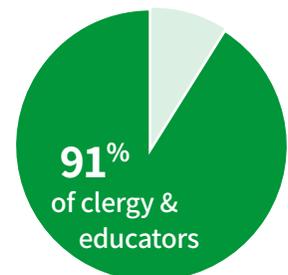
Arnow summarizes, “There’s nothing here that they’re not interested in.”



The Jewish components of this session were relevant to my life



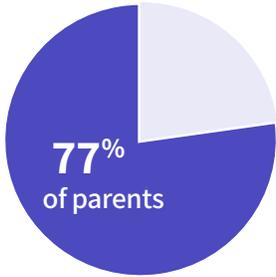
The Jewish stuff in the session is relevant to my life



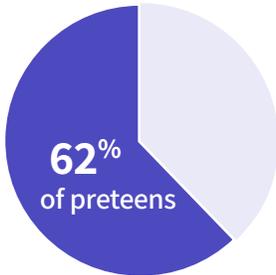
The program aided me to help preteens connect Jewish wisdom to their social-emotional development

“I enjoyed starting to discuss with our child our decisions related to gender norms and influences for raising him. He was surprised to learn our decisions and what influenced our choices.”

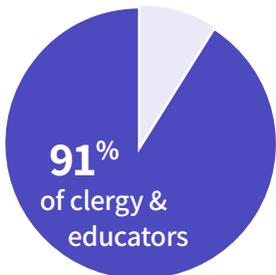
Parent



At today's session my child and I had a valuable conversation



At today's session my parent and I had a valuable conversation



The program strengthened my overall work with preteens and their parents

Finding 2: Hevruta Strengthens Connections Between Parents and Children

A second component highly valued by clergy, educators, and families, is that the program facilitates the preteen and parent being in dialogue. This experience reflects the relational pedagogy of Jewish learning and outcomes described by Dr. Orit Kent and Allison Cook in the traditional hevruta model: two learners building a relationship with one another that is mediated through text, which extends beyond the text to include empathic listening and mutual concern.

This finding also reflects the generational shift in the parent-teen relationship. In the 2020 article, [Educating and Engaging Jewish Teens: Research for Building a Field](#), authors David Bryfman, Arielle Levites, and Alex Pomson reflect, "Today's generation of teenagers are not seen as rebelling against their parents as much as previous generations; and knowing that teens respect and want to learn from parents much more than we initially thought opens up the possibility of more intergenerational Jewish learning."

Findings on this model of family education at b-mitzvah affirm the power of intergenerational learning. Preteens and parents value the opportunity to be in meaningful dialogue with each other, drawing on Jewish and secular wisdom about issues of concern to them at this new stage of life, as children become teens.

"During the pandemic more parents participated in Jewish education with their preteens and many of them have asked me to continue to do family education this way in the coming year." Rabbi Matt Shapiro, Los Angeles

"I liked how we shared what we were most nervous about. Even though my parents knew, it felt good to say it again." Preteen

Finding 3: Jewish Community Supports Families When it Relates to Their Lives

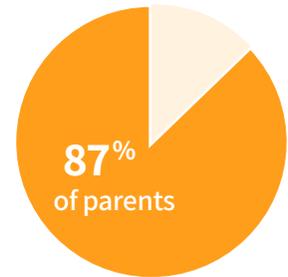
The third key finding of the Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education Program is that it helps families to feel that they are part of a supportive Jewish community. One parent remarked that the last time that they felt this way was “ten years ago, when we would come for Tot Shabbat and all sit on the floor.”

In the [Jewish Americans in 2020](#) study by the Pew Research Center, where interviewers asked people to define the essential elements of Jewish identity, the desire for connection to Jewish community varied by denomination. “Being Part of a Jewish Community” was ranked as “essential” by 70% of Orthodox respondents, but by only 40% of Conservative Jews, and just one-quarter of Reform Jews.

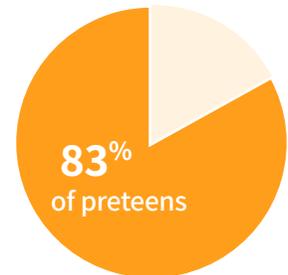
Helping both preteens and parents of preteens to experience a positive sense of Jewish community—and see that Jewish community can meet their needs as families—is critically important. In a time when more Jewish families are disconnecting from congregations, these conversations are vital.

By effectively addressing the joys and challenges of preteens and parents, clergy and Jewish educators demonstrate to families that Jewish community is a place for support and connection. This program brings meaning and a sense of community to families while they are engaged, in hopes that they will remain connected and engaged for years to come.

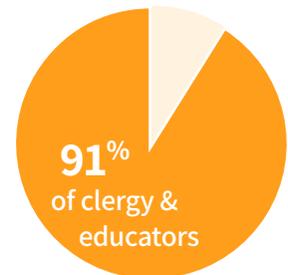
“It was nice having something that gave preteens and parents an opportunity to think about what it means to be a part of the Jewish community, particularly when everything has been virtual.” Parent



Today’s session helped me feel like I am a part of a Jewish community that supports me as a parent



Today’s session helped me feel like I’m part of a Jewish community that supports who I am



The program enhances b-mitzvah education in my community

“This is only the beginning. We are eager to partner with you, to continue to create a new framework of Jewish family education for preteens and their parents.”

Rabbi Darcie Crystal
Board Chair
Moving Traditions

Moving Forward

Moving Traditions is heartened to see the extent to which our approach to Jewish preteen family education is already strengthening families and their connection to Jewish community. It is our hope that family education in the preteen years will become as normalized as family education for preschoolers, as our network of partners and the reach of the program continue to grow.

Moving Traditions commits itself to building the field of Jewish preteen family education and invites you to join us. We will continue supporting clergy, lay leaders, and educators with training to meet the challenges facing preteens and families today with Jewish social-emotional learning through the Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education Program. We invite Jewish leaders to help us bring this experience to more families and communities, and commit to enrich our offerings in three ways, as informed by experts at the June convening.

Together, Strengthening Jewish Families and Jewish Life

We believe that Jewish education and engagement will have greater impact if, together, we:

▶▶ **Affirm the Jewish community’s diversity by expanding narrow conceptions of “Jewish identity” that exclude preteens and parents based on their racial, gender, sexual identities, dis/abilities, or the multiple faith traditions within their families.**

There is growing awareness across the Jewish community that our organizations and institutions have [marginalized or excluded Jews of Color](#), and others, conveying the sense that their Jewish identity is “less than” that of others. In response, communal leaders and participants from a variety of backgrounds are taking steps to ensure a future Jewish community enriched by a diversity of voices.

As we collectively advance this work, we need to look at underlying biases that perpetuate narrow conceptions of “Jewish identity,” which demean and turn away preteens and parents—Jews of Color, those from multiple faith homes, those who identify as LGBTQ+, and/or those who identify in new ways around aspects of mental health, disability, and neurodiversity.

The diversity of American Jews is only increasing. The 2020 Pew study found that, in the past 15 years, 45% of Jews (of religion) who got married wed someone of another faith, and a majority of these couples are raising children with a Jewish identity. Moreover, 17% of U.S. Jewish adults live in a household where at least one person (adult or child) is Hispanic, Black, Asian, another race, or multiracial. More than 10% of young Jews identify as LGBTQ and/or non-binary and the number of teens with LGBTQ parents is growing.

Many individual Jewish leaders and institutions have done important work in celebrating the diversity of American Jews, but we are only at the beginning stages of reflecting this diversity in Jewish learning and practice.

Moving Traditions will continue to work in partnership with experts in the areas of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice. Our goal is to deepen our programs’ educational frameworks so that all participants will be able to bring their complex identities into Jewish conversations, rituals and communal life. Ultimately, we seek to help the Jewish community change and evolve, so that it truly models inclusion, and so that all preteens and parents will be able to belong, with their whole selves.

▶ **Help preteens and parents to navigate the challenges of adolescence today, including puberty, stress and emotional well-being, gender expression and identity, and early adolescent sexuality, in a Jewish framework.**

Adolescence is a time of “becoming,” a time for trying new things, making new friends, experimenting with self-expression, and taking on new challenges. On a physical level, their bodies enter a second stage of rapid growth, and hormones begin



to pump through their bodies, causing new sensations and feelings. This can be both energizing and terrifying.

Today, two profound changes are reshaping adolescence.

First, especially in more liberal communities, we are moving from a world of “fixed” gender categories to a world where gender is more “fluid,” and more preteens are identifying as nonbinary.

Second, as Peggy Orenstein describes in her books [Girls and Sex](#) and [Boys and Sex](#), pornography has become the de facto sex education for adolescents today. Many preteens and teens are struggling with some of the most basic relationship skills: flirting, experiencing crushes, pursuing first kisses, and other pleasures. The issues become even more complicated as teens get older and struggle to navigate the challenges of communication and consent, the differences between giving and receiving pleasure, and setting boundaries.

Moving Traditions believes that the Jewish community is uniquely positioned to facilitate honest and values-based conversations about gender expression and identity, and early adolescent sexuality. This is critical to help build the social-emotional skills needed to develop fulfilling relationships. We are already pioneering Jewish sexuality education in our teen group curriculum, and we are exploring how we might partner with health and sexuality educators, clergy, and Jewish educators to meet the needs of preteens and parents in this life stage.

▶▶ Deepen the opportunity of the “mitzvah project” by linking it to systemic social change, inspiring preteens and their parents to initiate a longer-term engagement in mitzvot (good deeds) and tzedek (justice), including learning about large-scale changes needed to address social inequities and to protect the planet.

A silver lining of the pandemic and the past months of political upheaval was the awakening and greater involvement of people of all ages to social justice activism.

In his 2003 book, [*A Species in Denial*](#), Australian biologist Jeremy Griffith defines adolescence as the time when issues regarding equity and fairness are amplified. He posits that the entrance to the teen years coincides with the awakening of political consciousness. Paying closer attention to these factors provides an opportunity for Jewish leaders to raise up Jewish values of tzedek (justice) and tikkun (repair).

For decades, clergy and educators have incorporated into b-mitzvah preparation mitzvah projects and volunteering. This is important work, meeting real needs and giving preteens an opportunity to express chesed (kindness) and engage in tzedakah (charitable giving). Society, and preteens themselves are calling on us to expand this vision to include the work of tzedek—of addressing wider concerns about our society and planet, including growing economic inequity, systemic racism, and environmental degradation.

Dr. Dana Edell, of Emerson College and co-founder of the SPARK Movement suggests that, “Jewish institutions should be offering resources, training, and support to consider ways to reimagine mitzvah projects away from solitary endeavors and into collaborative community action for systemic change.”

“We look forward to imagining and building Jewish preteen family education with you. Together we will create Jewish experiences where preteens and their families can learn, explore, and feel more connected to each other, and to Jewish life.”

Deborah S. Meyer
Founder and CEO
Moving Traditions

Appendices

We invite you to continue your learning online with additional resources and valuable information, available at movingtraditions.org/familyedu@b-mitzvah.

About the Convening: Participants

On June 10, 2021, Moving Traditions virtually convened 50 leaders with expertise in Jewish education, practice, and community. Together, we considered how the Jewish community—collectively and within our areas of expertise—could best support preteens and their parents at this life stage, while they are open to engaging in Jewish practice. We greatly appreciate the participation and contributions of the participants.

About the Curriculum: Session Descriptions

In addition to the window into our curriculum provided in this publication, the Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education Program offers a variety of session options for preteens and parents, which partners can choose from to best fit their community's needs. You can learn more about the session options and read descriptions of each on our website.

About the Program: Our Partners

We are proud to partner with synagogues and Jewish institutions across North America to offer the Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education. The extensive list of partners that have sent professionals to the Carol Lowenstein B-Mitzvah Training Institute and have engaged their communities in the program can be found on our website.

About Moving Traditions

Moving Traditions inspires Jewish youth of all genders to pursue personal wholeness, healthy relationships, and a just and inclusive world.

We advance our mission by investing in the Jewish community, partnering with synagogues, JCCs, camps, and other institutions, and by training clergy and Jewish educators to implement our programming so that preteens and teens will grow and thrive. We:

- 1. Connect Jewish wisdom to social-emotional learning and contemporary understandings of gender and identity** to help Jewish youth figure out who they are, relate to others with compassion and respect, and work for social justice.
- 2. Research issues and create resources** imbued with our unique approach, to help preteens, teens, and their parents explore and navigate the joys and challenges of their daily lives.
- 3. Train clergy, Jewish educators, and other adult mentors to facilitate** open and honest conversations and transformative Jewish experiences, both in person and online.

We help Jewish youth to flourish through a suite of programs including the Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education Program for preteens and parents; Teen Groups including Rosh Hodesh for teen girls, Shevet for teen boys, Tzelem for LGBTQ+ teens, and Kulam for everyone; and the Kol Koleinu Teen Feminist Fellowship. Through the CultureShift initiative, Moving Traditions prepares camp leaders to train counselors to prevent sexual harassment and assault and to promote a culture of safety, respect, and equity at Jewish camp.

Since it was established in 2005, Moving Traditions has emboldened more than **28,000** preteens and teens by partnering with more than **500** Jewish institutions across North America.

Thank You

We would like to express our deep gratitude to the Moving Traditions Board and the many Moving Traditions staff, partner educators, and funders who have helped to build the framework and the Moving Traditions B-Mitzvah Family Education Program into a new pillar in the field of Jewish family education.

Special thanks to the Moving Traditions team for their contributions to the white paper: coauthors, Chief of Education Rabbi Daniel Brenner and Communications Consultant Esther Kustanowitz; contributor, VP/Chief of Program Rabbi Tamara Cohen; editors VP/Chief of Advancement Brian Mono and CEO Deborah Meyer; copyediting, Director of Marketing & Communications Debra Michael, and Graphic Designer Davyd Pittman.

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