

GEOGRAPHIC VARIATIONS IN PARTICIPATION IN ISRAEL EXPERIENCE YOUTH PROGRAMS

The CRB Foundation Geo-Coded Survey

STEVEN M. COHEN, Ph.D.

The Melton Centre for Jewish Education in the Diaspora, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Participation of American teenagers in short-term Israel experience programs is affected not only by the characteristics of the individuals themselves but also by the region or community they come from. There are wide variations among communities in terms of their Israel program yield—the number of participants per capita. Those communities with relatively smaller Jewish populations, higher incomes, and higher rates of synagogue affiliation have the highest yields.

In the last few years, prompted in part by the work of the CRB Foundation, the organized Jewish community has increasingly emphasized the Israel experience as an important component in the Jewish education of North American youngsters. The increased efforts at recruiting Jewish adolescents for Israel experience programs raise the need for a close look at the factors that promote or impede participation in these programs. Such information can be useful in planning continental marketing policies and in setting reasonable community goals for recruitment. What may be a satisfactory level of participation in one community may be disappointing in another community or totally unrealistic in yet another context. Knowing which sorts of Jews and which sorts of communities produce the highest rates of Israel youth travel is critical to setting attainable and useful goals for market-

ing and recruitment.

To date, most of the research on Israel program participation has focused on the individual (e.g., S. Cohen, 1986; E. Cohen, 1993). That research has documented what has been long suspected. Participation is highest among those who are 15 to 17 years of age, day school students or alumni, members of synagogue and Zionist youth movements, Jewish summer campers, ritually active, wealthier, and, most critically, children of parents who have been to Israel. This study adds to the previous literature by focusing on community-level variations. As we shall see, differences in Israel experience participation across communities seem to reflect the influence of both community and individual factors.

The numerous Jewish population studies conducted locally and nationally over the last decade have clearly demonstrated what Jewish communal professionals and lay leaders have long understood: Jewish communities vary widely and systematically in terms of several measures of Jewish life.

Intermarriage, for example, varies by both region and size of Jewish population (Rabinowitz, 1989; Rabinowitz, et al., 1992). It is less frequent in areas of high Jewish density, such as New York, and far more frequent in areas with smaller Jewish populations (Horowitz and Solomon, 1992). Within metropolitan areas, intermarriage

Research for this paper was supported by the Israel Experience Research Project, jointly sponsored by the CRB Foundation, Mandel Associated Foundations, and the Melton Centre of The Hebrew University. Jay Levenberg and Peter Geffen of the CRB Foundation collected some of the data utilized in this study. Uzi Rebbun, of the Avraham Harman Institute for Contemporary Jewry of The Hebrew University, provided valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Additional data were supplied by a survey of American Jewish parents and teenagers supported by the Joint Authority for Jewish-Zionist Education of the WZO.

grows as one moves outward, away from older, established, and more densely Jewish areas to the more sparsely and more recently settled suburban and exurban areas. Across the United States, intermarriage varies regionally. The West has the highest rates, followed by the South (excluding South Florida); next in line is the Northeast quadrant of the United States (the Midwest, Northeast, and New England), with New York City at the lowest level.

Communities also vary considerably with respect to per capita contribution to UJA/federation campaigns, as well as levels of synagogue affiliation (Rabinowitz, et al., 1992; Tobin & Lipsman, 1984). As a general rule, these key measures of formal Jewish affiliation are higher in smaller communities and lower in larger communities. They are also higher in more residentially stable, more well-established Jewish communities and lower in areas where Jews have arrived only recently in large numbers (S. Cohen, 1983). In line with these generalizations about size, stability, and recency of settlement, it comes as no surprise that such places as Cleveland, Detroit, Baltimore, St. Louis, Minneapolis, and Pittsburgh—to name just a few representative communities—enjoy reputations in federation, synagogue, and Jewish Community Center circles as highly organized, well-functioning, and professionally desirable Jewish communities. These communities are smaller, more stable, and of older vintage than such places as Denver, Phoenix, or, most recently, North Broward County, Florida.

In light of these patterns, it stands to reason that communities should also vary in terms of per capita participation in Israel experience youth programs. Accordingly, this study seeks to begin to understand geographic variation in participation in Israel experience programs, those short-term programs that take place during the summer months. Excluded from consideration are individual or family tours, long-term programs (more than ten weeks), or those oc-

curring outside the summer. This study addresses the following related questions:

- To what extent do per capita participation rates vary across the United States? That is, which communities produce higher “yields” of participation, and which are least productive in terms of youngsters traveling to Israel in organized programs?
- Why do some communities generate far more Israel experience participants than others?
- To what extent do certain programs recruit more successfully in certain regions than in others—and why?

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this study derive from several sources. At the core is a roster of home zip codes of Israel experience participants in 1991 and 1992, gathered in a survey of program directors conducted by Jay Levenberg and Peter Geffen for the CRB Foundation. Professional leaders from 28 of the larger short-term Israel experience program sponsors (some of whom run several programs) supplied their participants’ addresses including zip codes. The responding agencies included all the major Zionist and synagogue youth movement programs, several locally sponsored programs, and a few special interest programs, such as Bronfman Fellows and Nesiya. (Although the Alexander Muss High School program lasts for seven weeks, and therefore does not qualify as a short-term summer program, it does compete in the same market as the short-term programs. Excluding this program would cause a significant drop in participation levels in the Miami-South Florida area, where about half of the Muss students reside.)

Table 1 reports levels of participation for 25 national and local programs and a few smaller ones collected under the rubric “other.” In 1991, these programs reported 2470 participants; in 1992, the comparable figure rose to 4404, for a total of 6874 in

Table 1. Number of U.S. Participants in Selected Programs, 1991 and 1992*

	1991		1992		Both Years	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<i>National Programs</i>						
USY	332	13.4	570	12.9	902	13.1
Masada of ZOA	230	9.3	655	14.9	885	12.9
NFTY	200	8.1	657	14.9	857	12.5
Muss High School	318	12.9	248	5.6	566	8.2
Camp Ramah	231	9.4	296	6.7	527	7.7
Young Judea	131	5.3	305	6.9	436	6.3
BBYO	79	3.2	225	5.1	304	4.4
Betar	117	4.7	135	3.1	252	3.7
Young Israel	81	3.3	157	3.6	238	3.5
NCSY	61	2.5	169	3.8	230	3.3
B'nai Akiva	116	4.7	110	2.5	226	3.3
CJF	73	3.0	97	2.2	170	2.5
Pardes	67	2.7	98	2.2	165	2.4
Oren	77	3.1	79	1.8	156	2.3
WUJS	74	3.0	78	1.8	152	2.2
AZYP	47	1.9	60	1.4	107	1.6
Nesiyah	28	1.1	42	1.0	70	1.0
Bronfman Fellows	23	.9	25	.6	48	.7
Amer-Isr Hi Sch	19	.8	26	.6	45	.7
<i>Community Programs</i>						
LA BJE	49	2.0	152	3.5	201	2.9
Shorashim	28	1.1	95	2.2	123	1.8
UJA Fed of NY	19	.8	44	1.0	63	.9
JCC-Chicago	16	.6	19	.4	35	.5
JCC-LA	14	.6	14	.3	28	.4
Cleveland BJE	10	.4	13	.3	23	.3
Other	30	1.2	35	.8	65	.9
	2470	100.0	4404	100.0	6874	100.0

*Canadian participants in these programs have been excluded from the tabulations above.

both years. The Gulf War depressed the 1991 levels of participation, but participation rebounded in the more tranquil 1992 season. Among the larger programs were those sponsored by USY, NFTY, and Masada of ZOA. These three sponsors account for about 40% of the participants in this study. Taking into account programs that did not participate in the CRB Foundation survey, the three sponsors are respon-

sible for almost one-third of all young participants in Israel experience programs.

In 1992 and 1993, Eric Cohen of Jerusalem, in studies supported by the CRB-Mandel-Melton Israel experience research project, surveyed nearly the entire universe (98 to 99%) of summer programs. On the basis of his research, we are able to estimate that over two-thirds of those North American Jewish youngsters who participated in

Israel summer programs were included in the 28 programs surveyed by the CRB Foundation staff in 1991 and 1992. The most significant programs not included in the 1991 and 1992 surveys include the university summer courses, the Gadna paramilitary programs, a small number of yeshivahs, and several private sector initiatives, as well as multinational programs where North Americans make up only a minority of participants. Other exclusions bear mentioning. By focusing on short-term, summer programs, this study overlooks programs that serve predominantly Orthodox clientele. Orthodox youth—who have very high rates of travel and study in Israel—tend to participate in long-term programs, such as a year of yeshivah study. This tendency diminishes the level of participation in short-term programs in those areas where Orthodox Jews are highly concentrated, such as parts of New York. This consideration must be borne in mind when examining the results presented below.

This study is built around a key statistic: per capita rates of participation by community—the number of youngsters who attended summer programs per 1,000 Jews aged 14–21. The number of students participating in Israel experience programs was taken from the CRB Foundation geo-coded survey; that is, the analysis used the participants' zip codes to count the number of participants in 32 regions. The 1993 *American Jewish Year Book* provided the estimates of each region's Jewish populations. These figures were multiplied by the fraction of the population aged 14–21 as estimated from published Jewish population studies conducted during the 1980s and 1990s, or from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) itself, where published studies were unavailable.

A recent national survey of American Jewish parents and teenagers supported by the Joint Authority for Jewish-Zionist Education found that the \$50,000 income level represents a significant threshold in participation in Israel experience youth programs.

Families above that level are far more likely to send their youngsters on these programs than those earning less than \$50,000. Accordingly, this analysis measures the financial capability of the local Jewish populations in terms of the percentage of households reporting incomes of at least \$50,000. The NJPS and several local studies provided these figures for much of the country, and the recently conducted New York Jewish Population Study (Horowitz, 1993) supplied income estimates within the New York metropolitan area. For some smaller communities, the small number of NJPS cases makes the data unreliable. Recognizing the approximate nature of these data, the analysis avoided the fallacy of excessive precision and simply distinguished among three broad categories of income (high, moderate, and low), as determined by the proportion of families with incomes of at least \$50,000.

The levels of synagogue affiliation were taken from published recent Jewish community surveys where available or the NJPS where they were not available. This too allowed for division of the 27 regions into three broad categories.

The analysis also examined the impact of other community-wide aggregate data on levels of Israel experience participation. These include the proportion of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, as well as the proportion of mixed married couples, again using local studies where possible or the NJPS where local studies were unavailable. These variables have an insignificant influence upon per capita Israel experience participation, once we control for population size, income, and synagogue affiliation.

FINDINGS

Table 2 provides the detailed raw data on program participation by community for 1991 and 1992. Areas with the largest shares of participants are Long Island (9%), Northern New Jersey (8%), Miami-South Florida (7%), Los Angeles (7%), Philadelphia (5%), and Chicago (5%). These six areas are home to over 40% of Israel pro-

Table 2. Number of U.S. Participants in Selected Regions, 1991 and 1992

	Number of Participants			Percentage		
	1991	1992	Both Years	1991	1992	Both Years
Long Island	196	414	610	8.0	9.5	8.9
Northern New Jersey	172	380	552	7.0	8.7	8.1
Miami-South Florida	198	308	506	8.1	7.0	7.4
Los Angeles	180	273	453	7.3	6.2	6.6
Philadelphia	127	203	330	5.2	4.6	4.8
Chicago	114	204	318	4.6	4.7	4.7
Brookly, Queens, Staten Island, and Bronx	112	173	285	4.6	4.0	4.2
Westchester County	85	179	264	3.5	4.1	3.9
Southern New Jersey	74	176	250	3.0	4.0	3.7
Baltimore	99	144	243	4.0	3.3	3.6
Manhattan	58	133	191	2.4	3.0	2.8
San Francisco Bay Area	67	113	180	2.7	2.6	2.6
Boston	49	115	164	2.0	2.6	2.4
Connecticut	42	109	151	1.7	2.5	2.2
Cleveland	55	92	147	2.2	2.1	2.2
Rockland County	47	96	143	1.9	2.2	2.1
Detroit	35	92	127	1.4	2.1	1.9
Atlanta	53	65	118	2.2	1.5	1.7
Minneapolis-St. Paul	53	62	115	2.2	1.4	1.7
Dallas	25	64	89	1.0	1.5	1.3
Rockville-Silver Spring	26	59	85	1.1	1.3	1.2
<i>Other, Smaller Communities:</i>						
Mid-Atlantic	158	269	427	6.4	6.2	6.3
Mid-West	150	213	363	6.1	4.9	5.3
Mountain, Southwest	115	159	274	4.7	3.6	4.0
Pacific	86	114	200	3.5	2.6	2.9
New England	48	91	139	2.0	2.1	2.0
South	28	71	99	1.1	1.6	1.5
	2452	4371	6823	100.0	100.0	100.0

gram participants. Not surprisingly, these are areas of major Jewish populations, comprising 37% of the national total.

Wide Variations in Yields

Although these areas provide the largest absolute numbers of Israel program participants, they are generally not among the leaders in terms of population yield; that is, the number of participants per capita. As

Figure 1 demonstrates, communities vary widely in terms of their Israel program productivity. To illustrate, we may compare the most productive communities with those with lowest yields. Those with very high yields include Westchester County (New York), Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Baltimore. At the other extreme—with the lowest yields—are Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island; Boston; Los Angeles; and other communities. The former

group, with a total population of 19,000 Jews aged 14 to 21, supplied over 600 teen participants in the responding Israel experience programs. The latter group, with a total population of nearly 180,000 young Jews, supplied just 1200 participants. Comparing the two groups of communities, the latter—with nine times as many youngsters—produced only twice as many teenagers as the highest performing communities. On a per capita basis, the very high-yield communities outperformed the very low-yield communities by a factor of over four to one.

In other words, a Jewish teenager living in places like Westchester or Baltimore had a four times greater chance of going on an Israel experience program than his or her counterpart living in the four outer boroughs of New York City (not Manhattan), Los Angeles, or the Boston area.

Accounting for the Variations

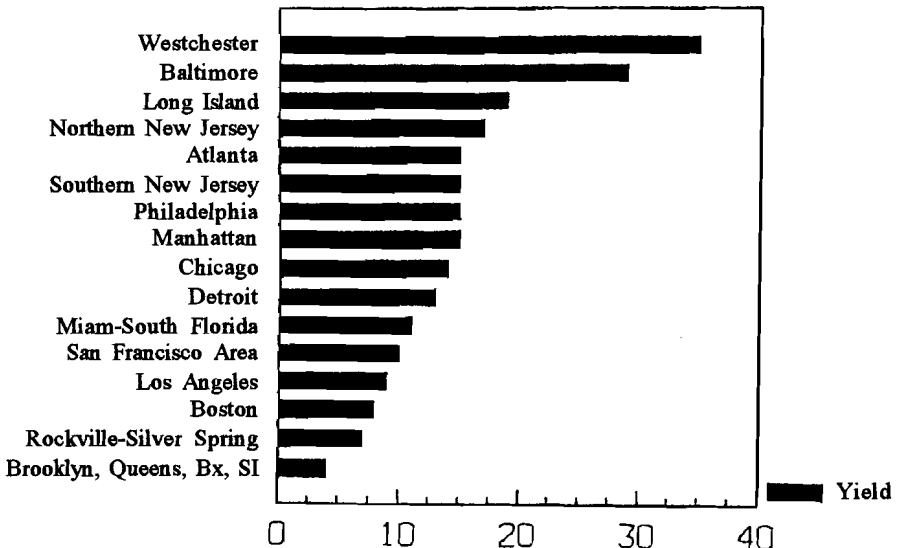
Why are some communities so much more productive than others in recruiting Israel experience participants? To some extent, local peculiarities may explain some of the

variation. However, the analysis demonstrates clear patterns of relationships between the per capita yield in program participation and certain community-level factors. In particular, the analysis uncovered three critical variables that go a long way to explaining inter-regional variation in yields: (1) population size, (2) income levels, and (3) synagogue affiliation rates.

That is, yields are higher in communities with relatively smaller Jewish populations, higher incomes, and higher rates of synagogue affiliation. The analysis divided communities into high, moderate, and low levels on each of these variables and found that, on each of these three variables, the difference in yields between communities with the high and low rankings is on the order of roughly 2:1. For example, communities with high rankings on income reported average yields about double those with low rankings on income. The same can be said for synagogue affiliation rates, and in reverse for population size.

The explanation for the impact of income is rather straightforward. Wealthier Jews are more able to contemplate spending

Figure 1. Yield (number of participants per 1,000 local Jews, aged 14-21) in 1991 and 1992 for selected Jewish communities.



\$4,000 or more on their children's trips to Israel; they themselves are more likely to have traveled internationally and to Israel, and they are more likely to have friends who have traveled abroad and to Israel. All of these factors relate directly to Israel program participation.

The association with synagogue affiliation operates on both direct and indirect levels. High rates of synagogue affiliation mean that there are larger pools of teenagers who can be identified and recruited for Israel travel. Indirectly, the high rates signify a more involved and cohesive Jewish community, one that is broadly more equipped to mobilize to achieve a variety of Jewish communal objectives, including Israel travel. (Recall that communities with higher synagogue affiliation rates also boast high per capita federation campaign levels, signifying greater communal cohesion more generally.)

The explanation for the inverse association of Israel experience participation with Jewish population size flows from the general finding that affiliation declines with increases in population. All other things being equal, smaller Jewish communities enjoy higher rates of formal affiliation, be it with UJA/federation campaigns, synagogues, or Jewish Community Centers. The analysis finds that, even, when taking income and synagogue affiliation rates into account, smaller and moderate communities enjoy higher Israel experience yields than larger communities; namely, New York City, Los Angeles, and South Florida.

Regional Concentrations of Specific Programs

The impact of region is felt not only in terms of the sheer number of youngsters who sign up for Israel experience programs. It also affects which programs youngsters choose. In general, the findings point to areas of concentration for specific programs that correspond to the relative institutional strength of the programs or of the larger ideological movement with which they are

affiliated.

Most of the larger programs seem to do better in certain markets than in others. The pairing of programs with their key regional markets can be summarized as follows (the areas, listed below are not necessarily the areas with the largest number of participants for a particular sponsor; rather they are those where the proportion for the program significantly exceeds that of other programs):

- Young Israel (Orthodox): the entire New York metropolitan area, but especially Brooklyn and Queens
- B'nai Akiva (Orthodox, Zionist): Los Angeles, Brooklyn and Queens, and Baltimore
- Betar (Zionist, Likud-oriented): Brooklyn and Queens, Long Island, and smaller California communities
- USY (Conservative): Long Island and Minneapolis
- Camp Ramah (Conservative): Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Minneapolis.
- NFTY (Reform): Dallas, smaller communities in the Mountain states and Southwest, and Boston.
- Young Judea (Zionist, Hadassah-sponsored): Philadelphia, San Francisco, and New England
- Masada (ZOA): Long Island, Northern New Jersey, Rockland County, and Westchester County, i.e., the suburbs of New York
- BBYO (B'nai B'rith): Detroit, Dallas, and smaller Jewish communities throughout the United States
- Muss High School: Miami (by far) and Baltimore

These patterns ought to be readily understood by practitioners in the Israel experience field. Orthodox-sponsored programs do well in areas with larger Orthodox proportions; the same can be said for programs sponsored by the Conservative and Reform movements. B'nai B'rith lodges are strongest in the smallest communities. The

Muss High School was founded by Miami-based individuals. There are no real surprises here. The key point is that recruitment for Israel experience programs conforms to larger patterns of institutional affiliation. Jewish communal variations influence both the total number of participants, as well as those attracted to specific programs.

IMPLICATIONS

With respect to the objective of expanding the number of Israel experience participants, these results point—albeit not always clearly—to some critical analytical and policy implications.

First, they reinforce the observation that American Jewish communities vary widely in their overall cohesiveness and in terms of specific dimensions, be they Israel experience participation, synagogue affiliation, intermarriage, or philanthropic behavior. Just as Canadian Jewry has been shown to differ sharply from American Jewry (Cohen, 1993) and New York Jewry has been shown to differ markedly from Jews in the rest of the country, this research underscores the diversity of an American Jewish population numbering close to six million.

Second, specifically with respect to marketing the Israel experience, the results suggest that standards for success and expectations need to take the community factor into account. The variations among communities are both wide and predictable based on just a few key indicators—size, income, and synagogue affiliation. At one extreme are smaller, wealthier, and more highly affiliated communities with a history of high rates of participation; at the other extreme are larger, poorer, and less affiliated communities with a history of low rates of participation. Expectations need to take note of prior Israel participation, size, wealth, and affiliation. A certain per capita level of participation could be judged a success in one sort of community and a dismal failure in another community. To draw an imperfect analogy, a Democratic presidential can-

didate who fails to carry Massachusetts easily or a Republican who squeaks by in Utah is certainly destined to go down to defeat.

Third, and most critically, the results have implications for which communities should be targeted for special Israel program recruitment efforts. Yet, here, the precise implications are more murky. We know which communities specifically and which attributes generally are associated with higher (or lower) rates of Israel experience participation. Assuming that we divide the country into thirds—that is, into high-yield, moderate-yield, and low-yield markets—which market demands the most attention? Which most warrants the expenditure of limited financial and personnel resources?

An argument in favor of low-yield markets, such as Boston or Los Angeles, would emphasize that these are the areas with the largest number of youngsters who are currently unlikely to participate in Israel programs. The field here is the most wide open. The moral necessity of providing the Israel option is the most pronounced.

The argument for the moderate-yield markets, such as Chicago or Philadelphia, resembles that made on behalf of triage, be it in a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital or in other contexts. Thus, the high-yield markets—the argument goes—are succeeding adequately without special assistance. The low-yield markets are low yield for good reason: they lack the appropriate size, affluence, or affiliation patterns to make good use of external assistance. By this logic, the moderate-yield markets are “just right.” Unlike the high-yield markets, they have a distance to travel; unlike the low-yield markets, the communities are sufficiently fertile to respond to targeted assistance.

The argument for focusing on high-yield localities, such as Baltimore or Westchester, draws upon that made for the moderate-yield markets. The key consideration here is that the high-yield markets are far from saturated. Even in high-yield environments, the vast majority of Jewish young-

sters will never participate in an Israel experience program. However, by definition, these are the communities with the best track record thus far in recruiting participants. Additional resources directed toward high-yield communities stand the best chance of producing tangible results. On a dollar-for-dollar basis, numbers of participants will increase the fastest if resources are invested where there is already a significant community history of Israel experience participation.

A last option would seek to focus on communities whose characteristics would seem to predispose them to producing relatively large numbers of participants, yet for some unknown reason have failed to do so. In this regard, most striking are Rockville-Silver Spring (the suburbs north of Washington, D.C.) and the greater Detroit area. These communities are highly affiliated, reasonably affluent, and not exceedingly large, yet they are not among the leaders in terms of per capita yield.

These findings do not, cannot, and ought not dictate which strategy should be adopted by national and local agencies. They can and should inform the deliberative process by clearly laying out possible policy alternatives to allow key decision-makers to arrive at well-informed, reasoned judgments.

REFERENCES

- Cohen, Eric H. (1993). *The 1993 North American Summer Israel Experience Participants: A preliminary report*. Jerusalem: Youth and Hechalutz Department, WZO.
- Cohen, Steven M. (1983). *American modernity and Jewish identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Cohen, Steven M. (1986). *Jewish travel to Israel: Incentives and inhibitions among U.S. & Canadian teenagers and young adults*. Jerusalem: The Jewish Education Committee of the Jewish Agency.
- Cohen, Steven M. (1993). An overview of the Canadian Jewish community. In Robert J. Brym, William Shaffir, & Morton Weinfeld (Eds.), *The Jews in Canada*, (pp. 39-57). Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Horowitz, Bethamie. (1993). *The 1991 New York Jewish Population Study*. New York: UJA-Federation.
- Horowitz, Bethamie, & Solomon, Jeffrey. (1992, Summer). Why is this city different from all other cities? New York and the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 68(4).
- Jaret, Charles. (1978). The impact of geographic mobility on Jewish community participation: Disruptive or supportive? *Contemporary Jewry*, 4(2).
- Rabinowitz, Jonathan. (1989). The paradoxical effects of Jewish community size on Jewish communal behavior: Inter-marriage, synagogue membership and giving to local Jewish federations. *Contemporary Jewry*, 10(1), 9-15.
- Rabinowitz, Jonathan, Kim, Israel, & Lazerwitz, Bernard. (1992). Metropolitan size and participation in religio-ethnic communities. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 31(3), 339-345.
- Tobin, Gary A., & Lipsman, Julie A. (1984). A compendium of Jewish demographic studies. In Steven M. Cohen, Jonathan S. Woocher, & Bruce Phillips (Eds.), *Perspectives in Jewish population research*, (pp. 137-166). Boulder: Westview Press.