

# Exploring Synagogue Vitality

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**Commissioned by:**  
**The Jewish Leadership Council**

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# INTRODUCTION

*Eleven years ago, the UJIA published an illuminating booklet entitled “Beyond Belonging: The Jewish Identities of Moderately Engaged British Jews”.*

Combining quantitative and qualitative information, statistics and stories, the study examines essential features of identity in British Jews in the 21st century. The research suggests that one quarter of the community was intensely engaged in Jewish life, one half was moderately engaged and, sadly, one quarter were less engaged or not engaged at all.

The reports’ authors, Professors Steven Cohen and Keith Kahn-Harris, portray the moderately engaged British Jews who account for one half of the community as exhibiting “high levels of ethnic belonging” but “low levels of religious piety. “At their core, the authors suggest, moderately engaged British Jew’s “identity is oriented to family, community, peoplehood and Israel, as well as more broadly, group membership, belonging and difference – in a word, “ethnic”.

The authors go on to assert, as if they were writing today, the vitality of British Jewry depends crucially on the future of the moderately engaged.

“Beyond Belonging” concludes that ethnicity alone cannot serve as a sustainable basis for Jewish commitment when unaccompanied by other forms of Judaic commitment. The report emphasizes that “the emerging younger generation – one more highly educated and culturally cosmopolitan than its parents and grandparents – may need an explicit rationale for Jewish involvement and commitment. To be compelling and effective, the rationale will need to be more developed and more articulated than those offered in the past. Ethnic attachment for ethnic’s attachment’s sake,

continuity for continuity’s sake, runs the risk of being seen as meaningless.”

In other words, in order to sustain itself the community must add meaning to belonging and the authors rightly sense that synagogues have a vital role to play. “Any comprehensive and ambitious strategy aimed at enriching Jewish lives of the moderately engaged will need to recognize the centrality of congregations and rabbis. Congregations remain ideal locations for reaching and teaching the moderately engaged... The potential for changing the Jewish lives of the moderately engaged individuals, and the congregations they inhabit, ought not be ignored or underestimated.”

Although filled with insightful analysis and important policy prescriptions, “Beyond Belonging” acknowledged the “the problem with Jewish research... is the tendency to sit on the shelf”.

The purpose of this newer study, “Exploring Synagogue Vitality”, commissioned by the Jewish Leadership Council, is to rescue the earlier work from the shelf and to pick up where “Beyond Belonging” left off. The mission of the JLC is to work, through its member organisations, to ensure the continuity in the UK, now and in future generations, of the mainstream Jewish community. In addition to its efforts protecting the interest of British Jews, the JLC seeks to promote the vibrancy of the community of the future. The Trustees believe that given the extent to which synagogues touch the lives of so many Jews, and given their role in reaching out to the moderately engaged, the community needs thriving Jewish congregations if we are to have a vital British Jewry in the years to come.

By surveying more than 200 synagogue lay leaders and professionals across the country, studying in depth six highly successful communities including a survey of 1200 congregants, this research should clarify our understanding of and appreciation for the

most salient features of some of our most vital congregation, how they are created and how they are sustained. Doing so will help synagogue leaders grapple more effectively with building vital communities, provide ideas for generating and broadening vitality and inspire leaders to invest time and resources in building congregations for British Jews.

The report will be judged a success if it stimulates greater community wide discussion on the importance of synagogue life and how to strengthen it, if the criteria employed to evaluate synagogue life are used in this discussion and, most importantly, more of the currently moderately engaged enter the doors of our synagogues to experience the joy of prayer, study and communal life.

I would like to thank Professor Steven M Cohen and Michelle Terret for their enthusiastic dedication to this project. The effort has also benefitted from the wise input of the Synagogue Vitality Steering Committee and the generosity of the JLC and its community chest. Finally, the JLC professional team, ably led by Simon Johnson has provided invaluable management and support.



**Bill Benjamin**  
Chair, Synagogue Vitality Project  
of the Jewish Leadership Council

## FOREWORD

*Among its objectives, the Jewish Leadership Council (JLC) seeks to coordinate activities which help to deepen engagement with Jewish life and Jewish identity. This report on the distinctive role of vital Synagogues is very timely.*

If we aspire to ensure the continuity of a mainstream UK Jewish community which is vibrant, vital, and proud of its Jewish identity and culture, then understanding the role that synagogues can play is essential. This report provides an incisive yet accessible analysis of good practice from around the UK Jewish community and draws fascinating findings and conclusions.

Having served as an Honorary Officer and, latterly, Chairman of a major Modern Orthodox community in London, I have seen the deep and integral role that a vibrant synagogue can play in the overall life of a community. The value of Professor Cohen's report is that he draws a wide range of conclusions and learnings from around the UK of the rich variety of positive experiences and interventions that synagogues and their leaders are able to make. Even if one's involvement is with a synagogue in a small or declining community, there are conclusions here which provide numerous sparks of ideas of how to increase vitality.

What has been particularly fascinating is to see the breadth of services that synagogues provide. The challenge that this creates for a strategic leadership body such as the JLC is to take the learnings and explore how synagogues can tie in with other communal institutions to ensure that our community is knitting together the services that it provides for its members. In this way, can we grow and thrive as a vibrant UK community.

At the JLC, we willingly accept the recommendations that this Report makes. We will now undertake a process to turn these recommendations into concrete actions which will enable us to deepen affiliation with Jewish life and identity. We will ensure that the recommendations are considered alongside the other areas of JLC work which touch on Jewish vitality and identity: Jewish schools, informal provision for young people, and the home. Only by looking at good practice in all of these areas will we be able to create the interventions which will have a tangible impact.

This Report will form a valuable guide to those involved in synagogue communities, and it will play a key role in the strategic planning for the UK Jewish community. I trust you find it rich, engaging, and worthwhile.



**Simon Johnson**  
Chief Executive,  
The Jewish Leadership Council

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*We thank the several reviewers who offered us very helpful advice on earlier drafts of this paper. They include Bill Benjamin, Mijal Biton, Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner, Simon Johnson, Dr. Helena Miller, Prof. Stephen Miller, and Prof. Linda Woodhouse. In addition, Dr. Jonathan Boyd read several drafts of this document and provided especially detailed and valuable corrections and comments, both stylistic and substantive.*

*We also thank our 250+ interviewees, whose names are listed in the Appendix.*

*And, of course, we also thank the 1,209 respondents to the survey of the five congregations.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This report seeks to identify and explore characteristics that define successful synagogues in Britain, with the aim of informing lay leaders, clergy, and other professionals engaged in leading today's congregations<sup>1</sup> in Great Britain.*

The specific questions are:

- What is “synagogue vitality?”
- Why is congregational vitality important?
- How does vitality happen?
- How can vitality be furthered?

[Throughout the report, key passages are **highlighted**.]

To address these questions, we began with a survey of 200+ synagogue leaders throughout Britain. Then, we observed six congregations in action, selected so as to provide diverse arenas for seeing vital features of synagogue life. Finally, we surveyed congregants in five of the six synagogues observed.

**What is synagogue vitality?** Vital congregations...

- Are welcoming and inclusive
- Extend caring to people in need
- Sponsor quality programming for adults, young people, and children
- Adapt to meet new challenges
- Develop future leaders
- Support innovation and empowerment
- Inspire children and young adults, and
- Provide a strong sense of belonging for all.

<sup>1</sup>We use “synagogue” and “congregation” interchangeably.

Vitality plays itself out in several domains. **Prayer services are moving**, conveying transcendent meaning and producing feelings of belonging. Vital congregations **excel in chesed** – human kindness to those in need. They comfort the bereaved; visit the sick; assist and support the carers; and organise lay volunteers to provide meals and comfort to mourners and to struggling family members. Of all the domains of synagogue activity, **programming for adults** (classes, lectures, etc.) is most closely tied to the leaders' reported sense of overall synagogue vitality. Vital congregations create opportunities for congregants to meet, socialise, and act out relationships, while also helping them grow as Jews and contribute to making the world a better place. Last, vital congregations invest in their **youth**.

**Why is vitality important?** Vital congregations touch their congregants. They develop them as people and as Jews. They create feelings of belonging to a community with value, purpose and meaning. Vitality is “good for business.” Vital congregations promote higher rates of congregational retention, as well as involvement and support.

**How is vitality created?** Vital congregations don't come about by accident. They require **reflective leadership**. To take one example, welcoming demands intention, attention, and execution.

Rabbis in vital congregations need strong people skills – to reach and serve congregants, to develop leaders, and to connect individuals and groups to one another.

In vital communities, leaders and members evoke widely shared **narratives** of their community's mission, purpose and boundaries. Leaders relate renditions of their communities' past, envision their future, and express pride in their progress and distinctive features.

Leaders in such communities construct **cultures of giving**. Critical to these cultures is that leaders help make people feel recognised for who they are as well as needed for what they can contribute.

Vital communities effectively **recruit volunteer leaders and raise philanthropic contributions** (and the former is more critical). They allow leaders to emerge and take charge. They manage change and conflicts in a respectful fashion. They motivate people to donate time and money. To fundraise, they train fundraisers, match the right fundraisers with the right contributors, develop the appropriate “ask,” and appropriately recognise contributions. Vital synagogues are characterized by **growth in active members**, or at least growing in terms of their “market share” of the local active Jewish population.

**How vitality can be furthered:** Given all of the above, congregations indeed are worthy of investment. Policy interventions can enlarge elements of vitality throughout synagogues in Britain. All these suggestions build upon our repeated finding that volunteer leadership is critical to synagogue vitality. Among several possibilities for investment:

**“Best Practices in Synagogue Vitality Project.”** The objective here is to identify and elucidate the specific practices that promote and enhance synagogue vitality. One way to start would be to convene both clergy and lay leaders from the six congregations to review this report, and delineate the specific practice recommendations that emerge.

A **“Learning for Congregational Leadership Cohort.”** This innovation would bring together a cross-communal group of about 20 leaders, consisting of likely congregational lay leaders and rabbis for an 18-month period of joint learning, relationship-building, visioning, and skills enhancement. We anticipate monthly meetings and an intensive week-long learning period over the summer. It would require the dedicated attention of a Jewish educator who

would in turn coordinate a programme of guest lecturers, text-learning, skill sessions, and group reflection.

The project would aim at developing congregational vision, spiritual commitment, collaborative capacities, and other elements of commitment and capacity that are critical for creating vital congregations.

Inspired by the Wexner leadership programme in the US, it would seek to forge ongoing relationships and commitment that would endure well past the conclusion of the learning experience. If successful, this programme will add a pipeline of inspired leaders. It may well be repeated in subsequent years.

A **“Congregational Innovation Fund.”** This fund would provide grants to inspire and enable congregations to take on new initiatives. We may specify the general direction of the grants, such as helping congregations enhance home-based practice, and/or demonstrably deepen affiliation with Jewish life, or some other specific purpose. Indeed, this report can serve as a roadmap for the types of congregational innovation that ought to be supported. For example, we can imagine endeavours aimed at promoting an ethos of welcoming, or stimulating leadership reflection, or improving the delivery of *chesed*, or enhancing youth participation, or enriching the culture of giving.

Ideally, the programme would serve to create laboratories for successful and replicable innovation, modelling effective approaches that can be scalable. In addition, the fund’s very existence will provoke congregational leadership to deliberate, collaborate, and innovate – all in themselves positive and vital leadership outcomes.

A **“Congregational Leadership Mission.”** One element in developing organisational, and specifically congregational, leadership is to expose them to others’ approaches to tackling comparable

challenges and achieving extraordinary results. Accordingly, lay and clergy leaders would travel to congregations elsewhere (such as New York and Boston, or Israel) to meet with counterparts and study models of congregational vitality in other contexts. The experience would aim at provoking new thinking and sparking reflection on the part of the leaders going forward.

**A “Congregational Leadership Mentoring Programme.”** Veteran and experienced congregational leaders would engage in a year-long series of one-on-one encounters with potential leaders in their congregations. In fact, graduates of the congregational cohort leadership program could serve in such capacities. Past chairs who might team with incoming Board members. The mentoring program would be supported and guided by a professional staff person who would serve to train and support both mentors and mentees.

**A Congregational Caring Initiative:** Congregations identify and assist members and their families in times of need, vulnerability, and hardship. They rely primarily upon volunteer commitment. However, their chesed capacity can only be enhanced by internally placed social service professionals and by improved relationships with the several major Jewish social services operating in this area.

**A Congregational Youth Initiative:** The significant energy and investment in youth programming in congregations provides a platform for enhancement of quality and expansion of numbers. Additional resources can not only help congregations internally, but can serve to more fruitfully link them with the highly developed Jewish youth culture in Britain.

**Synergy:** The seven prongs of the proposed JLC Congregational Leadership Development Programme would work in synergy. If launched simultaneously or in quick sequence, the five initiatives could well combine to provide a “leadership lift-off” propelling congregational leaders – both lay and rabbinic – to levels of greater learning, prestige, relationships, commitment, vision, and, ultimately, effectiveness.



**Steven M. Cohen**

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## BACKGROUND

Synagogues are the one formal Jewish institution in Britain that touch more Jewish lives than any other. About 59% (or more) of Jewish households in Britain belong to a congregation<sup>2</sup>, far more than among their counterparts (39%) in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Rabbinic sources use three terms to refer to synagogues: *Beit Kneset* – House of Assembly; *Beit T'filah* – House of Prayer; or *Beit Midrash* – House of Learning. As a *Beit Kneset*, it serves as a place of community, where ... people commemorate significant life cycle events (birth, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, marriage, death); they regularly see family and friends; they help each other in times of illness and

need; they engage in politicking, fundraising, and administering; and they relate to the wider community. As a *Beit T'filah*, synagogues bring together members on Shabbatot, festivals and High Holydays. And as a *Beit Midrash*, synagogues they run *chedarim*, youth programmes, classes for adults, lectures, cultural programmes, family education, and numerous other activities.

### Very diverse patterns and levels of participation:

The sheer variety of ways in which people engage in the synagogue can be seen in the wide diversity of responses to the survey question we asked on congregants' areas of involvement:

**Over the last 12 months, about how often have you been involved in each of the following areas of activity in your congregation, if at all? [Ordered from high to low, in terms of frequent involvement]**

	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Social activities (e.g., Kiddush, celebrations, oneg Shabbat)	28%	33%	19%	20%
Lectures, educational programming	9%	30%	24%	37%
Social action	9%	28%	25%	38%
Engaging with issues around Israel	7%	22%	25%	46%
Service to people in need (e.g., mourners, visiting the sick)	7%	18%	20%	55%
Adult text study (Torah, Talmud, etc.)	10%	15%	17%	58%

Now, these answers are from those select respondents who volunteered to take the time to complete the surveys. Accordingly, it is somewhat striking that **even in vital congregations, many congregants rarely or never participate in major aspects of congregational life.** Even social activities attract only a quarter of the respondents frequently, with another third participating sometimes. The findings ought to serve to remind leaders that they draw their impressions from people who show up, and

quite naturally overlook the congregants who hardly ever set foot in the synagogue.

Additionally, the patterns of participation remind us that **synagogues are not only about prayer.** And that prayer participation is also arrayed across a very wide range. Notably, even in these high-performing synagogues, (just) a quarter attend weekly, another quarter a couple times a month, and almost as many just on the High Holy Days or less often.

<sup>2</sup>David Graham and Daniel Vulkan. *Synagogue membership in the United Kingdom in 2010*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research and Board of Deputies of British Jews. 2010.

<sup>3</sup>Pew Forum. *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*. 2013. <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>  
Figure calculated by the author for all households with a Jewish adults present.

**About how often have you attended religious services in the past 12 months?**

Every Shabbat or more often	24%
A couple of times a month	24%
About once a month	19%
On High Holy days and other festivals	10%
On High Holy Days	7%
Just a few times a year or on special occasions	13%
Not at all	3%
Total	100%

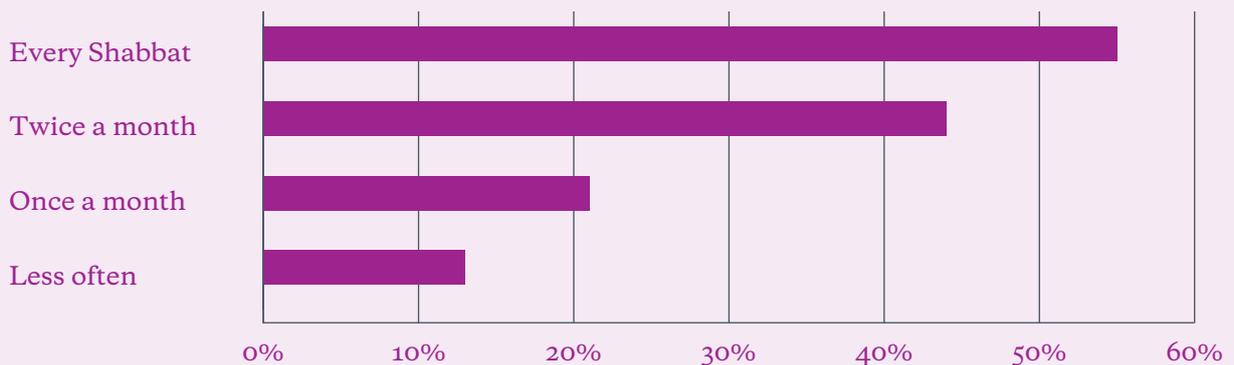
And just as we see a wide range of service attendance, so to do **the congregants report highly varying levels in the extent to which they draw their friends from the congregation**. While a third say that many of the people in the congregation are friends of theirs, just as many say a few, hardly any or none:

**About how many people in the congregation are among your friends?**

Many	32%
Some	35%
A few	23%
Hardly any or none	10%
Total	100%

**Service attendance produces greater numbers of friends within the congregation** (and the reverse is true); but some fairly frequent attenders have few friends in the congregation and some non-attenders maintain a large number of friends within the synagogue:

**More frequent attendance at services means more friends in the congregation**



In short, people find various ways to relate to their congregations. And, it follows, we cannot view congregations only – or even primarily – as a Beit Knesset (community), or a Beit Midrash (learning centre), or a Beit Tfillah (prayer sanctuary). Synagogues are all these things, and for some congregants, they serve only some of these purposes and not others, while for other congregants, synagogues serve multiple purposes.

The research literature on congregations testifies to great complexities in the way synagogues can be effectively conceived and measured.<sup>4</sup> A synagogue may succeed in outward ways: increasing membership, high rates of attendance at services and programmes, balanced budgets, lack of conflict, and other features of apparent success. Yet at the same time, it may fail to inspire, instruct, comfort, cohere, and evolve.

A recent examination of successful congregations in the United States distinguished between “functional” and “visionary” synagogues.<sup>5</sup> Visionary synagogues, in contrast with (simply) functional synagogues, operate out of a sense of “sacred purpose”<sup>6</sup> that infuses all aspects of their operation. They achieve high rates of lay participation in governing and enacting synagogue activities, from which the congregants derive great meaning and growth. Such communities are led by change-oriented, self-reflective leadership. Functional synagogues may well succeed institutionally (balanced budgets, steady membership), but they fail to inspire; routinized and unreflective leadership manage to produce congregations with relatively meaningless participation and a generally limited sense of belonging.

This report identifies the characteristics that define truly successful synagogues in Britain. It aims not to assess current synagogue performance, but to highlight features that point the way to opportunities to encourage congregational vitality.

<sup>4</sup>Nancy Tatom Ammerman, Arthur Emery Farnsley, *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997. Isa Aron, Steven M. Cohen, Lawrence A. Hoffman, and Ari Y. Kelman, *Sacred Strategies: Transforming Synagogues from Functional to Visionary*. Herndon VA: Alban Institute, 2010.

<sup>5</sup>Isa Aron, Steven M. Cohen, Lawrence A. Hoffman, and Ari Y. Kelman, *Sacred Strategies: Transforming Synagogues from Functional to Visionary*. Herndon VA: Alban Institute, 2010.

<sup>6</sup>See pp. 26-29, *ibid.*

## METHODS

The Synagogue Vitality Project entailed three phases of research:

- A national survey of rabbis, chazanim, and congregational leaders.<sup>7</sup>
- A qualitative investigation of six congregations identified as centres of vitality.
- A survey of members of five of these congregations.<sup>8</sup>

### PHASE ONE: THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS

In the spring of 2014, we conducted a survey of synagogue rabbis and other congregational leaders, embracing congregations throughout the UK. We excluded Haredim from our purview, as well as non-synagogue minyanim and other innovative ventures that sponsor prayer services. The 230 leaders who responded represented 137 congregations. The congregations derive from all the major movements.

### PHASE TWO: THE IN-DEPTH STUDY OF SIX CONGREGATIONS

We closely examined six congregations with reputations for excellence.

The six synagogues we selected are: Alyth (London, Reform), Beth Hamidrash Hagadol (Leeds, Orthodox), Brondesbury Park (London, Orthodox), Kinloss (London, Orthodox), Menorah Synagogue (South Manchester, Reform), and New North London Synagogue (London, Masorti). They present considerable diversity with respect to location, denomination, and size.

To be clear: We make no claim whatsoever that these are the “best” Jewish congregations. To be sure, many other congregations are reputed to abide excellence as well, and many of them could easily have substituted for the six shuls we selected. Rather, the six we chose are among some of the very good ones.

Nor do we claim to have represented the full diversity of British congregations. We wished we could have included synagogues from the Haredi, Sephardi and Liberal streams, as well as those found outside of London, Leeds and Manchester.

Our intent here is to illustrate, not to fully represent. We interviewed and observed (primarily) leaders and engaged congregants. We sought to identify some of the most attractive features of numerous counterparts throughout Britain, fully cognizant that other congregations could serve this objective as well or even better.

Over the course of eight months (February to September 2014), we interviewed 257 people, both individually and in focus groups in the six synagogues.<sup>9</sup> We spoke with congregants and leaders, including members across generations. These included: rabbis; chazanim; other professionals; chairs, officers and other lay leaders; volunteers; both long-standing and new congregants, as well as some who have left the synagogue. We even interviewed non-members who utilise synagogue services. We generally use pseudonyms for interviewees, except for rabbis and some professionals.

Beyond the interviews, we also attended services, events, classes, and meetings; participated in services; observed staff and Council meetings, learning, social events, welfare meetings and social action projects; and joined members for Friday night dinners and Shabbat lunches.

<sup>7</sup>Steven M. Cohen, *Exploring Synagogue Vitality in Britain: Report on a National Survey of Rabbis and Congregational Leaders*. Jewish Leadership Council, 2014.

<sup>8</sup>Beth Hamidrash Hagadol chose not to participate, leaving Alyth, Brondesbury Park, Kinloss, Menorah, and New North London Synagogue.

<sup>9</sup>Michelle Terret spent a total of 4-6 days at each congregation. Steven M. Cohen made 1-2 visits. All instances where personal impressions or anecdotes are recounted are those of Michelle.

### PHASE THREE: CONGREGANTS' SURVEY AT ALYTH, BRONDESBURY PARK, KINLOSS, MENORAH & NEW NORTH LONDON SYNAGOGUE

We conducted a survey of congregants affiliated with five of the six congregations: Alyth, Brondesbury Park, Kinloss, Menorah and New North London Synagogue. The sixth, Beth HaMidrash Hagadol of Leeds declined to participate. Conducted between May 14, 2015 and July 17, 2015, a total of 1,209 respondents completed the on-line questionnaire, with the following distribution among the five congregations:

	Frequency	Percent
Alyth	299	23%
Brondesbury Park	113	9%
Kinloss	175	14%
Menorah	264	21%
NNLS	415	33%
Total*	1266	100%

\*Excludes two respondents with missing information on congregation.

The congregations themselves handled the survey invitation process. All congregations sent a dedicated email to their congregants, usually signed by the rabbi or clergy, and followed with publicity about the study in the congregational newsletters. Some sent follow-up emails while others did not, resulting in highly varying rates of participation in the survey.

While interest in the survey and connection to the congregation may well have influenced survey participation, the survey does seem to have reached substantial numbers of congregants with no leadership or volunteer connection with the congregation. Just 7% now hold a leadership position in their respective congregations (Honorary Officers, Board members, committee chairs), 14% are previous leaders, 19% are currently active in some volunteer capacity, and most (61%) are not now active and have never served in any formal leadership capacity:

	Percent
Never leader or volunteer	47%
Previously active volunteer, not now	14%
Currently active volunteer	19%
Previously leader, but not now	5%
Current leader (honorary officer, Board member or committee chair)	15%
Total	100%

And while actual age and gender distributions for the congregations are not available, the survey did seem to generate reasonable distributions among these two major demographic features:

<b>Age</b>	
Under 35	7%
35-44	18%
45-54	22%
55-64	20%
65-74	22%
75+	11%
Total	100%
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	44%
Female	56%

In addition, given the range of synagogues and the variations in denominational identity within them, the study population contains a reasonably diversified denominational distribution (by self-definition), as follows:

Orthodox	5%
United Synagogue	13%
Traditional	8%
Masorti	33%
Reform	32%
Liberal or Progressive	1%
Secular	3%
Just Jewish	4%
Other	1%
Total	100%

We make no claim to represent the British Jewish population as a whole, insofar as the sample derived from five selected congregations.

# THE FINDINGS

## SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS FROM THE SYNAGOGUE VITALITY PROJECT:

- A working **definition of a vital synagogue** emerges from our observations and interviews.
 

Vital synagogues:

  - Are welcoming and inclusive,
  - Extend caring to people in need
  - Sponsor quality programming for adults, young people, and children
  - Adapt to meet new challenges
  - Develop future leaders
  - Support innovation and empowerment
  - Inspire children and young adults
  - Provide a strong sense of belonging for all
  
- **Welcoming is central:** Vital congregations establish a deeply rooted and widely shared **culture of welcoming** that permeates every aspect of the synagogue, from what happens when people call up to join the shul, to how often visitors and members are habitually invited to meals, and how people are continually empowered to contribute to the community in whatever ways they can. In short, welcoming is not merely the product of an ethos. **Welcoming demands intention, attention, and execution.**
  
- **Warmth and Welcoming:** Congregants who are most active in synagogue life perceive their congregation as warm and welcoming, while the reverse is true for the least active. This stark variation in perceptions in part explains why synagogue insiders find it hard to understand why the inactive perceive their congregation as unwelcoming and unfriendly.
  
- Size, minority status, denominational growth, and veteran status – contribute (or detract from) the extent to which congregants see their synagogues as warm, welcoming, engaging, and user friendly.
  
- Even in vital congregations, many congregants rarely or never participate in major aspects of congregational life.
  
- Vitality plays itself out in several domains: **prayer services, *chesed* (caring activities), and programming for adults.**
  
- **Prayer:** There's **no one recipe** to providing stimulating prayer experiences. Perhaps the one common feature is that the service leaders are sensitive to the mood and tastes of the congregants, and the congregants, in turn, come to appreciate the services they experience repeatedly, and the community with whom they regularly worship.
  
- **Praying and participating:** The relationship between shul-going and shul-doing, so to speak, is rather dramatic. Sharp rises in activity levels are associated with every increase in religious service attendance, such that, the more congregants go to services, the more likely they are to participate in synagogue life outside of services, but they are not necessarily more satisfied with the congregation.

- **Friendships:** Service attendance produces greater numbers of friends within the congregation.
- There's a strong relationship between having friends in the congregation and engaging in caring activities.
- **Youth Programming:** Vital congregations attend to and invest in their programming for young people (age 0-18).
- Strong **programming for children helps engage their parents** in congregational life and Jewish growth. Parents with congregationally active 12-17 year olds participate in a greater variety of congregational activities.
- **Components of good youth programming** include: leadership from the top (rabbi, lay people); strong professional assistance (e.g., youth leaders), mobilizing teens to lead their own groups and activities, and lay involvement.
- **Counterintuitive finding:** While many congregational leaders think it's critical to attract young families, our research determined that the presence of younger members (or, older members, for that matter), per se, is not related to various measures of vitality.
- **The "Why" of Vitality: Making Connections & Building Belonging** – People embark upon **upward Jewish journeys** as a result of involvement with vital communities, testifying to good practice by rabbis and lay leaders: They see their mission and interest, as intimately tied to making connections and building belonging.
- **Key to the "How" of Vitality is Leadership:** The presence of quality volunteer leadership is relatively more critical than extraordinary financial health. Adequate funds are essential, but a surfeit of money alone is inadequate to ensure vitality.
- Vital congregations require **reflective leadership**. Vitality demands intention, attention, and execution. Leaders and active volunteers perceive and confront shortcomings in the congregations in which they are invested is impressive.
- **Rabbis as vitality-builders:** Rabbis shape and communicate vision; lead prayer; teach; administer; manage; and offer pastoral care. Rabbis are the key personality in congregational leadership, even as the laity is absolutely essential for long-term stability, growth, and transitions.
- **Well-functioning relationships among key leaders** are critical to the success of any organisation, congregations included. Given the variety of personalities, of models of successful leadership, and of effective collaborations, we should not at all be surprised to learn that each synagogue exhibits distinctive ways in which leadership partnerships are actualised and conducted. Trust, communication, flexibility, imagination, and humility characterise, in varying degrees, all six congregational leadership structures and cultures.

- **Leaders relate congregational narratives:** In vital communities, leaders and members evoke widely shared understandings of their community's mission, purpose and boundaries. Leaders relate somewhat idealized renditions of their communities' past, conveying pride in their progress and distinctive features. They implicitly and explicitly tell visitors and newcomers who we've been, who we are, and where are we going.
- Vital communities effectively **recruit volunteer leaders** and **raise philanthropic contributions** (and the former is more critical).
- **Recruiting leaders and raising money:** As a general rule, vital congregations more easily recruit volunteer leaders and attract philanthropic contributions. Of course the reverse is also true: Congregations rich in people and money stand a better chance of producing vitality.
- **Space for congregants to develop as leaders:** Some leaders emerge from the ranks of activists, as well-functioning congregations allow for leaders to make contributions and to identify themselves. They enable and empower congregants to become leaders in their own way at every level – and not just at the top.
- **Culture of Generosity:** Vital congregations contend with a somewhat inhospitable philanthropic culture and try to construct a culture of generosity.
- **Vitality is “good for business.”** Vital congregations promote higher rates of congregational retention, as well as involvement and support.

# WHAT IS SYNAGOGUE VITALITY?

Our observations and interviews yielded a working definition of synagogue vitality. “Vital synagogues,” ...

- **Are welcoming and inclusive**
- **Extend caring to people in need**
- **Sponsor quality programming for adults, young people, and children**
- **Adapt to meet new challenges**
- **Develop future leaders**
- **Support innovation and empowerment**
- **Inspire children and young adults, and**
- **Provide a strong sense of belonging for all.**

Leaders’ comments add some depth:

*This is a community which is open, honest and inclusive. It is a group of people who value the idea of community, wish to spend their time together and are willing to work hard to create exciting programming to enjoy together and be enriched by each other.*

*It is a warm and welcoming community, where people genuinely care about each other.*

*Friendly welcoming atmosphere and wide variety of social, educational and religious activities. New ideas for any of these are welcomed and leadership encouraged.*

Other comments emphasise how their communities care for their members:

*They support members give to one another in times of need.*

*That there are people who are willing to support individuals at times when they need it.*

*Our care team is second to none.*

## WELCOMING IS CENTRAL

The leaders we interviewed repeatedly asked: Does the synagogue shout WELCOME with its signage and smiling faces as soon as one enters? Alternatively, is it hard to find one’s way upon stepping in for the first time?

An implicit invitation inside encourages outsiders to enter. Through introductions, small acts of loving kindness (*gmilut chassadim*), brief conversations with a new face, invitations to a meal, or even helping a visitor find the place in the *siddur*, a synagogue encourages people to walk through the door.

NNLS leaders pride themselves on its warmth and the sense that the people act as an extended family. Rabbi Wittenberg<sup>10</sup> talks of the congregation as family:

*This is family. There’s never been a case of them and us. I care about the people who are part of the community. I know the range of people and the things they do with their lives, the values of the people in this community, and many of them are my inspiration.*

One new NNLS member (and a convert to Judaism) found this home through the synagogue’s conversion she took with her Jewish husband:

*We wanted somewhere that was very welcoming and inclusive. Even though it’s absolutely massive, within the synagogue it’s a very close-knit community. Through the conversion we found our much smaller group to link up with weekly and we’ve met really good friends there, friends for life now. NNLS was the most welcoming shul we’ve been to – we felt at home straight away... During the conversion course we had lots of people around us who wanted to talk to us about our journey, invite us to dinner. It made us feel like we belong.*

Rabbi Levin at Brondesbury Park tells a similar story about the importance of a welcoming atmosphere:

<sup>10</sup>We cite the actual names of informants when doing so helps convey the meaning of their comments and where issues under discussion are not particularly sensitive or potentially offensive.

*Warmth, and hospitality are key in what a community should look like. The litmus test of whether we are succeeding as a community is if a new face goes unwelcomed. If that happens, then we've failed as a community. The minute we stop welcoming in new faces, we stop practicing what we're all about.*

And, in the words of a congregant:

*The moment you step in, it just feels like a family, you're welcomed straight away. You're accepted for who you are. You don't get judged. There's no question about how often you come to shul, what you do, don't do.*

Brondesbury Park's new members not only get a phone call welcoming them into the community – they also get a visit in their home to talk them through what's available to them and help them find their individual entry point. *We have a Shabbat lunch rota, where every week someone volunteers to have people in their home who have nowhere to go.*

Kinloss hosts a monthly Shabbat lunch in the synagogue to which members are invited or can come along following a service. One volunteer observed:

*This is a fantastic way to get people together who may not have anywhere to go. Part of the enjoyment of Shabbat is the fun of gathering together for lunch. I love feeling like I can help and give something back to my community. Even though I work, I can spend a Saturday afternoon serving people lunch. I could never have fifty people in my home, but here I feel like I can be a good host.*

Menorah hosts vegetarian potluck Friday night *chavurah* dinners in members' homes, combining sociability with intimate prayer, often attended by twenty people or more. At one such dinner (about thirty minutes away from the synagogue), one interviewee noted, *"This is a way of bringing people from the far reaches of our membership together in a more intimate environment in people's homes."*

Providing hospitality is not without its challenges. NNLS Rabbi Wittenberg, someone known to his congregants as always somewhat dissatisfied with existing realities, remarked:

*Hospitality is not as much as I would like it to be. There are large numbers of groups who look out for each other, invite each other, and ask around if they have a Seder to go to. However, how much is there a culture of somebody seeing someone they don't know and asking them back for lunch? I'm not sure how much, but it's not enough. For a while we had people on a rota, but it didn't really work ... It's important to have more meals in the synagogue, but it's not an area I feel content with.*

When visiting BHH, we were warmly welcomed into the rabbi's home for Shabbat meals and invited to stay in a couple's home as long as we were in Leeds. When speaking with the youth director for the three Orthodox synagogues in Leeds, he explained how the hospitality he encountered from BHH members and the rabbi eased his transition from his life in north Manchester:

*When I first came here, everyone told me that I had to go to Sharon and Michael's. There's an open house. I've been living there ever since. Rabbi Kleiman has also made it very welcoming for me here. I have a good space to work and so I spend most of my time working from the BHH office.*

After Friday night dinner, Rabbi Kleiman and his wife opened their doors to eight teenagers for the youth director to host a meetup. Uncaring of the late hour and increase in noise level, the rabbi and his family were happy to see them.

On Saturday morning at BHH, the president can be found at the front door greeting familiar and non familiar faces alike, often with a handshake and a smile. While Rabbi Sufrin remains in the main shul, Rabbi Kleiman can be seen hurrying from one service

to another to ensure that all have been welcomed in a spirited way throughout the morning.

In Alyth, the clergy team has developed a strategy for approaching a new face on a busy Friday night. Rabbi Levy remarked:

*If there is a strange face in the shul, they are going to get leapt on by one of us. Because either they are a potential friend, a potential member, a visitor (and visitors need to be looked after), or they are a member and we better know them because they're ours. We've got some little tricks...like on Friday night, we're out in the congregation handing out the Kiddush glasses, so it's quite nice. Everyone's sitting there singing, we've got the trays with the Kiddush glasses together with other members, just casually saying hi.*

Rabbi Goldsmith of Alyth emphasises that the ongoing partnership between the rabbis and cantor makes the communication system work:

*We always work together to make sure that we have our bases covered. With the help of our lay leadership and dedicated staff, we are kept informed about what's going on in congregants' lives so we know when we're needed.*

**Welcoming in Practice:** Several layers of welcoming are at play. Congregations put people near the entry ways to welcome people into the synagogue when they walk through the door. Others help worshippers by handing them a *chumash* and *siddur*, and telling them the current page number. Congregations maintain rotas where someone hosts a meal each week. Above and beyond these individual actions, **welcoming congregations establish a deeply rooted and widely shared culture of welcoming that permeates every aspect of the synagogue, from what happens when people call up to join the shul, to how often visitors and members are habitually invited to meals, and how people are continually empowered to contribute to the community in whatever ways they can. In short, welcoming is not merely the product of an ethos. Welcoming demands intention, attention, and execution.**

**The More Active, the More Welcome:** To understand how the feeling of welcoming varies across a variety of population characteristics, we constructed an index consisting of four highly correlated items from the survey. (Their high correlations suggest that all four are, in effect, measuring a shared underlying concept, one which we label, "Warm and welcoming."). The four items are as follows:

To what extent do each of the following apply to your congregation?				
	To a great extent	To some extent	A little	Not at all
Warm	59%	32%	6%	3%
Engaging	55%	34%	9%	2%
User friendly	53%	37%	8%	2%
Welcoming	50%	37%	10%	3%

We divided congregants according to the number of congregational areas in which they are active and also created an index of welcoming built upon the extent to which they see the congregation as warm, welcoming, engaging and user friendly (all are well-correlated with each other).

As can be seen below, the third of congregants who are most active in their synagogue see the

congregation as far more welcoming than those in the least active third of the congregation.

**Those who are most active perceive the congregation as warmest and most welcoming, while the reverse is true for the least active. This stark variation in perceptions in part explains why synagogue insiders find it hard to understand why the inactive perceive the congregation as unwelcoming and unfriendly.**

		Number of areas in which active			Total
		Many	Some	None	
Warm, engaging, user friendly, welcoming	High	47%	37%	32%	38%
	Moderate	31%	32%	23%	30%
	Low	22%	31%	45%	32%
Total		100%	100%	100%	100%

The perceptions of congregations as warm and welcoming vary strongly over the five congregations:

		Synagogue					Total
		Alyth	Park	Kinloss	Menorah	NNLS	
Warm and Welcoming Index: Warm, engaging, user friendly, welcoming	High	34%	74%	11%	55%	33%	39%
	Moderate	33%	23%	16%	27%	34%	29%
	Low	33%	3%	73%	18%	33%	32%
Total		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

**The advantage of small size for generating perceptions of warmth is apparent.** The smallest congregation (Brondesbury Park) reports the highest levels on the “Warm & Welcoming Index,” while next smallest congregation (Menorah) is not far behind. The three Finchley-area large and established congregations report far lower levels of warmth and welcoming.

Among the three larger congregations, the two which are not United Synagogue enjoy advantages of

“minority status.” Both NNLS and Alyth are flagship synagogues for numerically smaller denominations that have experienced demographic growth in recent years. Kinloss, in contrast, is among the largest congregations in the United Synagogue and the prior home to the current Chief Rabbi. **All of these factors – size, minority status, denominational growth, and veteran status – contribute (or detract from) the extent to which congregants see their synagogues as warm, welcoming, engaging, and user friendly.**

## PRAYER AS A CENTRE OF VITALITY – FOR DWELLERS AND FOR SEEKERS

*In tefilah, congregations engage in their most dramatic rituals, the more intentional presentation of their sense of identity... In a powerful sense, worship is an event that is meant to express the unifying vision of the congregation.*<sup>11</sup>

Prayer vitality in action can be seen in the many worshippers feeling moved and developing a commitment to the community over time. One survey respondent remarked:

*We have a genuinely joyous prayer experience most of the time. We are a shul that loves praying together and it's the togetherness we love really. We have a rabbi that can't sing, and we don't have a chazan. It's not that it's a particularly great service, but the members love praying together as an activity.*

One Brondesbury Park congregant reports that prayer is his primary form of engagement in his synagogue. He regularly attends services, organises children's services, and helped his wife organise the first women's *megillah* reading at the synagogue (Purim 2014). For him, synagogue involvement is critical to his spiritual and social life:

*Prayer is about the emotional uplift, a place of safety. The repetition of prayer, the rhythm, the song, the lyricism, the iambic meterage represent a place which I've always felt safety in a sea of my personal life where often I've felt chaos and complexity. There is serenity in it. The unchanging nature of that prayer from my infancy to my middle age, that feeling of connection to a chamber of prayer and speech and pattern that hasn't changed for centuries fills me with a deep sense of connectivity and a feeling of spiritual rootedness.*

When observing a Shabbat service at Brondesbury Park, we sensed a moving element to the prayer, a

feeling that they pray in unison, particularly at the beginning of *Mussaf*. During *Adon Olam*, fathers lift children onto their shoulders as they march their way to the *Kiddush*. When a synagogue gets its prayer right, spirits can soar:

*On Kol Nidre Yom Kippur, it's one of those moments where everyone is on a complete high. When I visit my parents' shul, I feel like I'm totally not included, there the rabbi feels like a showman, here it's not like that.*  
– Brondesbury Park member

Uplifting prayer experiences occur across the ideological spectrum – in Orthodox, Masorti, and Reform services. In fact, the variety across and within congregations serves to maximise opportunities for experiencing spiritual vitality. By way of context, British Jews more often see themselves as religious “dwellers” rather than religious “seekers.”<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, more traditional congregations produce vitality in prayer by offering familiar religious prayer experiences. In contrast, more liberal congregations engage in innovation, consonant with their less traditional congregants' approach to *davening*.

The Reform movement's Alyth offers diverse prayer in trying to run something for everyone. Their Kollot service encourages participation with accessible Hebrew melodies. The Tefilah Laboratory on the first Shabbat of each month offers:

*Prayer experiences which push the boundaries of Jewish spirituality for adults and families in order to develop meaningful tefilah for the future. So far the Tefilah Laboratory has included our Shira U'Shtikah service of song and silence, our Healing Service where prayer helps us to meet the challenges in our lives together and, for families, our Horrible Histories Service where the Scary Shema and the Brutal Bar'chu have provided learning and gory spiritual delight for young and old (Alyth website).*

<sup>11</sup>Nancy Tatom Ammerman. *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999: 55.

<sup>12</sup>Steven M. Cohen and Keith Kahn-Harris. *Beyond Belonging*. London: United Jewish Israel Appeal. 2004. Citing others, they write: “Dwellers are loyal to, and content with, established modes of religious practice. To dwell is to be content with current modes of Jewish engagement. It is to be anchored within a strongly-felt sense of what is Jewishly authentic. In contrast, seekers search for personal meaning through religious involvement and are less bound to established ways of doing things. To seek is to constantly search for new modes of experience and to see Jewishness as a negotiable and dynamic process. It is to treat the quality of Jewish experience as importantly as its authenticity.”

At one Tefilah Laboratory service, a group of about twenty members used silence, singing, and meditation to feel connected both to one another and to God. Alongside the Classical service in the main sanctuary, the clergy offer alternative prayer services on a rotating basis. Every week is different as the three clergy people take turns leading services. Rabbi Levy explains: *We're not dividing the community. We're multiplying. There are a good 40-50 people coming to shul who wouldn't dream of coming to anything but Kollot.*

For Alyth, prayer diversity is central to its identity. One congregant notes:

*We are a diverse community offering something for everyone. We are never afraid to try something new. Just look at the different tefillot. They all operate under the same roof, they are all Alyth, but they attend to so many different needs, so many different desires.*

**There's no one recipe to providing stimulating prayer experiences. Perhaps the one common feature is that the service leaders are sensitive to the mood and tastes of the congregants, and the congregants, in turn, come to appreciate the services they experience repeatedly, and the community with whom they regularly worship.**

Prayer engagement varies widely by both denomination and – as a corollary – by congregation. **People who identify with more traditional denominations attend services more frequently and, as a result, congregations serving different denominations experience different levels of service attendance.** Even within congregations, those aligned with more traditional denomination identities attend more often. Not surprisingly then, frequencies are highest for the Orthodox, followed by United Synagogue, Masorti, Reform, and other denominational identities:

### Attendance at services frequency by Denominational Identity

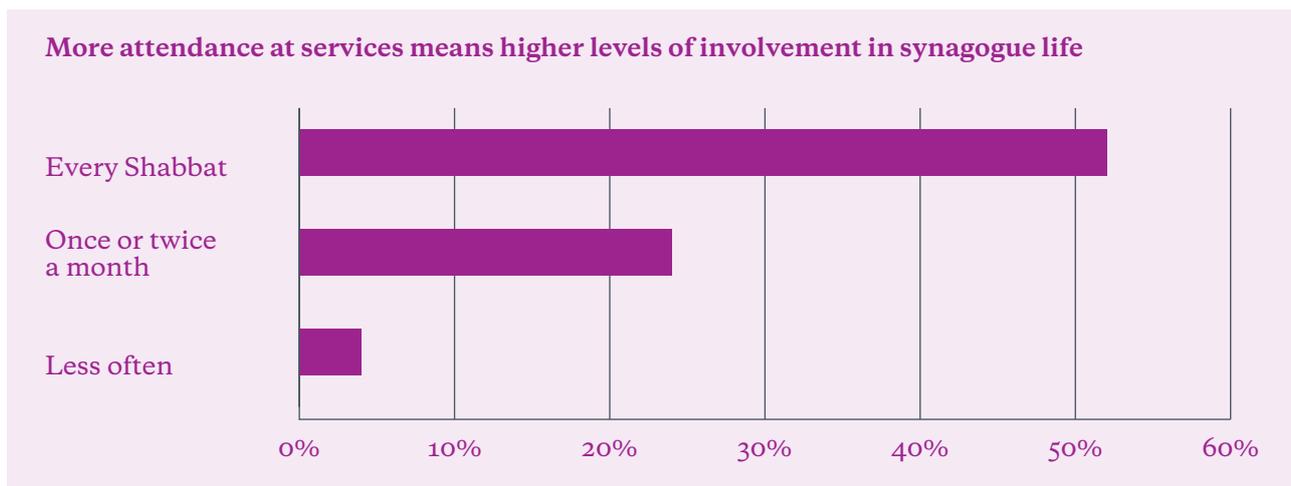
Denomination	Attendance at services frequency				Total
	Every Shabbat	Once or twice a month	Less often		
Orthodox	74%	24%	2%		100%
United Synagogue	51%	34%	15%		100%
Traditional	21%	48%	31%		100%
Masorti	24%	44%	32%		100%
Reform	13%	48%	39%		100%
Other	13%	35%	52%		100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>32%</b>		<b>100%</b>

Accordingly, the congregations also vary dramatically in average levels of religious service attendance, largely reflecting the distinctive denominational populations to whom they appeal.

**Attendance at services frequency by Synagogue**

	Attendance at services frequency			Total
	Every Shabbat	Once or twice a month	Less often	
Alyth	14%	39%	47%	100%
Brondesbury Park	41%	39%	20%	100%
Kinloss	62%	28%	10%	100%
Menorah	8%	58%	34%	100%
NNLS	23%	44%	33%	100%
Total	25%	43%	32%	100%

Attendance at prayer services stands at the centre of active involvement in the synagogue. Those who attend services more often also participate more often in other synagogue activity domains such as lectures, learning, social programmes, and caring for people in need. **The relationship between shul-going and shul-doing, so to speak, is rather dramatic, with sharp rises in activity levels associated with every increase in religious service attendance:**



**But while service attendance generates – or reflects – levels of activity and involvement in congregational life, it seems to have little relationship with how people feel about the congregation.**

The survey allowed us to measure several major dimensions of affect (feeling) and construct corresponding indices, each consisting of answers to several questions. One such index – Warm and Welcoming – was described earlier. A second major index, entitled, “Excited and Empowering,” consists of several related questions below:

**To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements about your congregation?**

	<b>To a great extent</b>	<b>To some extent</b>	<b>A little</b>	<b>Not at all</b>
Provides congregants with a strong sense of belonging	60%	32%	7%	1%
Is pretty boring a lot of the time [reverse coded]	4%	15%	29%	52%
Is a place where something is always happening	64%	29%	6%	1%
Nurtures innovation and empowerment	39%	43%	15%	3%
Recognises and uses members talents and skills	44%	42%	11%	3%

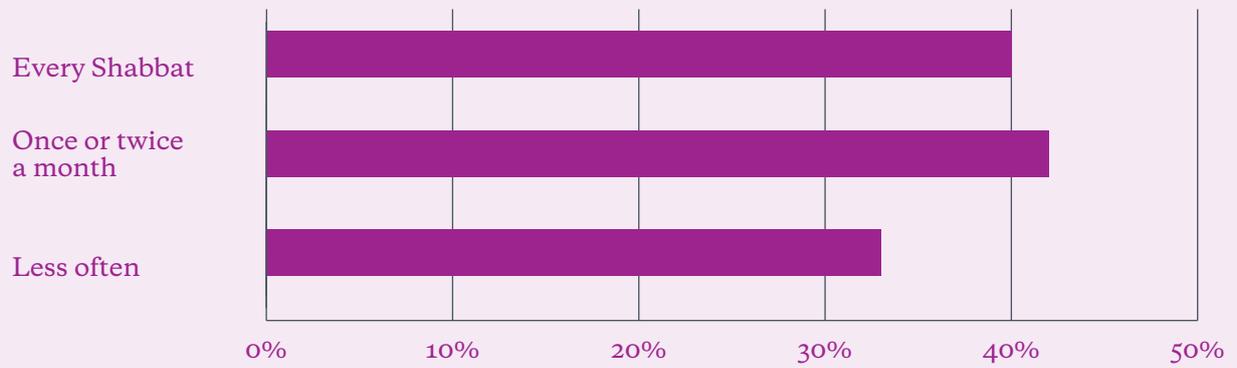
A third index measures overall satisfaction, combining reactions to a wide variety of aspects of the synagogue as follows:

**To what extent are you satisfied with the functioning of your congregation in each of the following areas or activities? (If the area isn't offered in your congregation, or if you're unfamiliar with it, please skip.)**

	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Religious school / cheder	43%	44%	9%	4%
Youth (teen) activities	44%	44%	10%	2%
Adult text study (Torah, Talmud, etc.)	48%	44%	6%	2%
Lectures, educational programming	50%	44%	5%	1%
Engaging with issues around Israel	38%	51%	9%	2%
Social action	54%	39%	5%	2%
Social activities (e.g., Kiddush, celebrations, oneg Shabbat)	62%	34%	3%	1%
Service to people in need (e.g., mourners, visiting the sick)	58%	39%	2%	1%
The religious services on Shabbat	64%	30%	4%	2%
The High Holiday services	63%	30%	6%	1%
The extent of welcoming	54%	36%	8%	2%
Opportunities to make and meet friends	40%	45%	13%	2%
The lay leadership	53%	40%	6%	1%
The clergy team	74%	23%	2%	1%

Perhaps surprising, the indices bear weak and uneven associations with religious service attendance. **The extent to which one attends services, then, has relatively little bearing upon whether one sees the congregation as warm and welcoming, exciting and empowering, or satisfying overall. Service attenders are more active, but not necessarily more satisfied.**

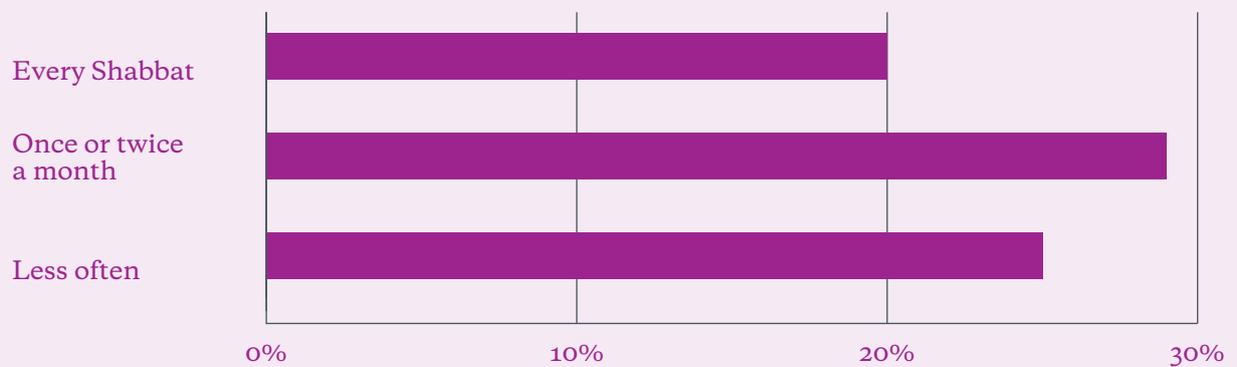
### High perceptions of a synagogue's warmth by service attendance



### High perceptions of a synagogue as exciting and empowering by service attendance



### High overall satisfaction by service attendance



The results are curvilinear, with somewhat better feelings among those who attend once or twice a month as opposed to those who attend every Shabbat or those who attend less often.

Why are the two ends of the attendance spectrum less enthusiastic about their congregations? As expected, those who attend the least often are the least pre-disposed to think well of the synagogue. Their lack of attendance betokens lack of interest in synagogue involvement (and maybe Jewish engagement) in general.

The lower levels of enthusiasm among the weekly shul-goers must point to a different explanation. These people – heavily although not exclusively Orthodox and more observant – often attend synagogue out of traditional religious obligation. As a corollary, they may expect less of the congregation overall, not necessarily seeking the other ways in which congregational involvement may enrich their lives, and not particularly attuned to their congregations' distinctive features.

In a sense, the only-somewhat-frequent, though not constant, shul-goer may be congregation's "best customer." They want more, and if they stay, they get more from their congregational affiliation.

**Sermons matter:** Just as some people engage with synagogue through prayer's liturgy, often people appreciate the value of a good sermon. Rabbis certainly know this, as one notes: *If the sermon is good the sun shines. In the broad scheme of things if I've given a good sermon, if it's been well-received, I'm well received.*

A congregant at Brondesbury Park makes a similar observation:

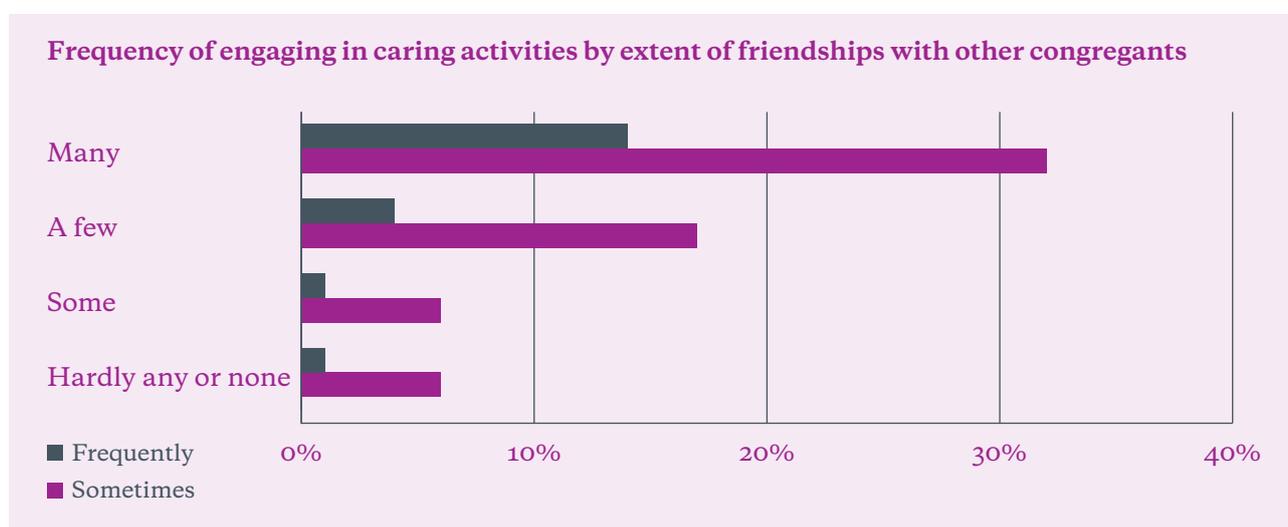
*The sermons relate to moments in one's life, decisions, pathways that you choose. The rabbi views everyday life decisions with how you can make that moment more holy. It makes you think about the ways you make your own Judaism come to life.*

## CARING FOR MEMBERS AS A CENTRE OF VITALITY

In his work on social capital – the networks of people who know each other, trust each other, and care for each other – social scientist Robert Putnam ventures that about 50% of social capital in America is generated and located in churches and other houses of worship.<sup>13</sup> Whether his estimates would extend to Britain (or to Jewish Britain) is a matter for speculation. However, for those who do participate in church (or

synagogue) life, we do suspect that religious communities provide relationships, sharing, and caring.

Indeed, **the survey results demonstrate a strong relationship between having friends in the congregation and engaging in caring activities. Those with more congregation-affiliated friends engaged in more caring, and, no doubt those with more caring activities may well have developed more such friends**, as the following graph seems to indicate:



Among those with many congregational friends, 45% sometimes or frequently engaged in service to people in need, as contrasted with just 22% among those with some friends in the congregation, and just 8% among those with few congregational friends or less.

To provide some concrete illustrations, we turn to the congregations we visited, all of which excel in *chesed* – Hebrew for acts of human kindness to those in need. They visit the sick and the frail, and organise lay volunteers to provide meals and comfort to mourners and to struggling family members.

While visiting BHH for four days, we witnessed Rabbi Kleiman making frequent trips to hospital and a member's home who had recently lost a loved one,

including the day that the rabbinic team and a life member of BHH drive to London for the day to sit *shiva*.

Kinloss Cares, the congregation's volunteer group, makes birthday phone calls to older members, slipping in the occasional question to see if they need anything or could use help in some way.

At Brondesbury Park, according to one congregant...

*When we have new babies in the community, there's a meal rota which will make sure as a new mum, you have hot meals initially after you have a baby. The community seems to really care about what's going on and who needs what support.*

<sup>13</sup>Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

The Brondesbury Park Welfare Coordinator noted how in addition to practical support like the meal rota and challah delivery, people take the time to ask about each other's well-being:

*There are two midwives in the community. One approaches all the expecting mums and checks up on us, asks "are you okay? How was your last appointment?" She does it just because she cares.*

And they regularly conduct visits to aging congregants:

*It goes from fine to bad quickly. We discovered that one ailing member wasn't eating. We set-up an emergency rota to take turns to make sure he eats his lunch. And now visits are much more social. On the whole it's one volunteer visiting and forming a relationship with another ageing member.*

At Alyth, Valerie (pseudonym for a member) told an unusually moving story of how the congregation mobilised to support her and her family during particularly trying times. Given its power, we recount it in some detail:

### **"Stay there!"**

Gideon, my husband, was very, very ill five and a half years ago. He had a stroke between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I went to the hospital on Yom Kippur, and the kids went to synagogue; they were completely overwhelmed by everyone's concern. People created a fence around them to make sure that it all wasn't too much for them. That was the sense of community, that fence of support physicalised.

The community were unbelievable and that has completely changed my attitude - because we were just supported on a bubble of love. He was in hospital for 6 months. I don't think I cooked a meal in those 6 months. They organised a rota, people came round and dropped off food every day.

Gideon was in intensive care for six weeks. In those six weeks, there was a rota to take me to the hospital, drop me off and take me back again. It was all organised and it was unbelievable - the people who came out of the woodwork because they wanted to help was incredible. It happened for us because we are known as a family. My husband was young when it happened, so it was particularly scary for everybody.

As the person in need, you also need to be open to it. Yom Kippur morning, the kids were at shul and there was someone to take me to the hospital. I decided I was fine, could go myself. I got as far as the station, completely went to pieces and phoned [the volunteer]. I said 'I can't do this'. She said 'stay there' and came right away.

The support I received was typical of those who are known in the community and they make it their business to know as many people as possible. There is a comprehensive system in place which successfully enables Lynette (the life cycle and welfare coordinator) to be at the centre of welfare support.

The key take-away from all these incidents, large and small, is that congregational helping behaviour does not come about spontaneously because of warm, family-like feelings alone (although they help). Rather, people are assigned (or assume) roles; and tasks are responsibly undertaken. Like so many other enactments of vitality we report in this section and beyond, the desirable behaviour derives from reflection, intentionality, planning and implementation.

## ADULT PROGRAMME AS A CENTRE OF VITALITY

*In addition to education, congregations also engage in activities explicitly designed to strengthen the bonds of members... Both in shared tasks, where a sense of kinship is the by-product, and in small groups intentionally formed for fellowship, the congregation's members forge bonds of mutual identification.<sup>14</sup>*

**Of all the domains of synagogue activity, programming for adults (classes, lectures, etc.) is most closely tied to the leaders' reported sense of overall synagogue vitality. As with caring, patterns of excellent practice are critical to overall performance.**

As one example, Alyth's leadership often brings in controversial speakers to appeal to audiences with unconventional views and interests. In preparation for welcoming the feminist Judaic scholar Rachel Adler<sup>15</sup> as a guest speaker in Alyth, the clergy built up excitement and the congregation's desire to hear her by teaching about who she is and what she does. "You have to build up to her coming. Otherwise people won't feel like they want to come."

At Beth Hamidrash Hagadol, in Leeds, a relative newcomer from London offered an assessment of adult programming that underscores its magnitude and diversity:

*There's loads going on in the shul, when compared to some other London shuls. In this shul, there's a role for everyone. There's things for teenagers, the leisure club for older people, there's something for everyone here all under one roof. Every time we put an event on there's always a clash with something else. On Hannukah, the teenagers have a show, the kids have a show, plus the Welfare Board do stuff and it's all on the same day. We couldn't believe how many things go on. We've got a bakery, a high school, and a kollel coming.*

At Menorah, we spoke with a woman who became highly engaged in Menorah after having moved from another congregation:

*After lots of moving around in my 20's and 30's I saw the connection between being Jewish and my left and feminist politics through my involvement with the Jewish Socialist Group and later with the Jewish Women's Network. My husband started teaching a Yiddish class at the synagogue and shortly after that we joined. I've become more involved over time, and I'm now the Rep for the Jewish Representative Council, and I'm also on the Board, and more recently I've become the Outreach Director Coordinator, organising activities around supporting asylum seekers and refugees. I'm also involved in the Israel committee and help organise discussions and events.*

Similarly, a member of Alyth told of her plans for an asylum-seekers drop-in facility over Kiddush. With little interest in prayer, social action is her primary way of engaging in the synagogue. Her broader goal is to bring people completely disassociated from the shul through the doors through social action, much like her own family:

*My husband and son would never set foot in services. It's just not their thing. But they would come to help out with this when I ask them to. It's a way to get more people involved.*

Members of NNLS spearheaded a drop-in asylum-seekers programme in March 2006. The monthly drop-in is fully led and operated by passionate volunteers – which according to the synagogue's website – support more than 800 asylum-seekers from over 50 countries whose claims have failed and who are destitute. Once a month, a large team of volunteers provide counselling and referrals to legal advice, medical treatment, and counselling, as well

<sup>14</sup>Nancy Tatom Ammerman. *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999: 57.

<sup>15</sup>Prof. Rachel Adler, of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles is a highly regarded feminist scholar who has authored several landmark works challenging Jewish law and traditional practice.

as a cooked meal, a basic food parcel and nearly new clothes and shoes, operating out of a local school. They also provide a supermarket voucher and travel expenses. One professional heavily involved in *tikkun olam* projects, remarked:

*I was completely blown away by the dedication and effort members have put into the asylum-seekers programme. They open the synagogue's doors and spend countless hours making sure they can offer support to these people in need, all out of the kindness of their own hearts.*

*We set the drop in up because we became aware of the desperate needs of destitute asylum seekers, many of whom go hungry, sleep in doorways or on buses and survive on the kindness of friends. Large numbers of the asylum seekers move from one friend's floor to another.*

### CHILDREN'S EDUCATION AND YOUTH WORK AS A CENTRE OF VITALITY

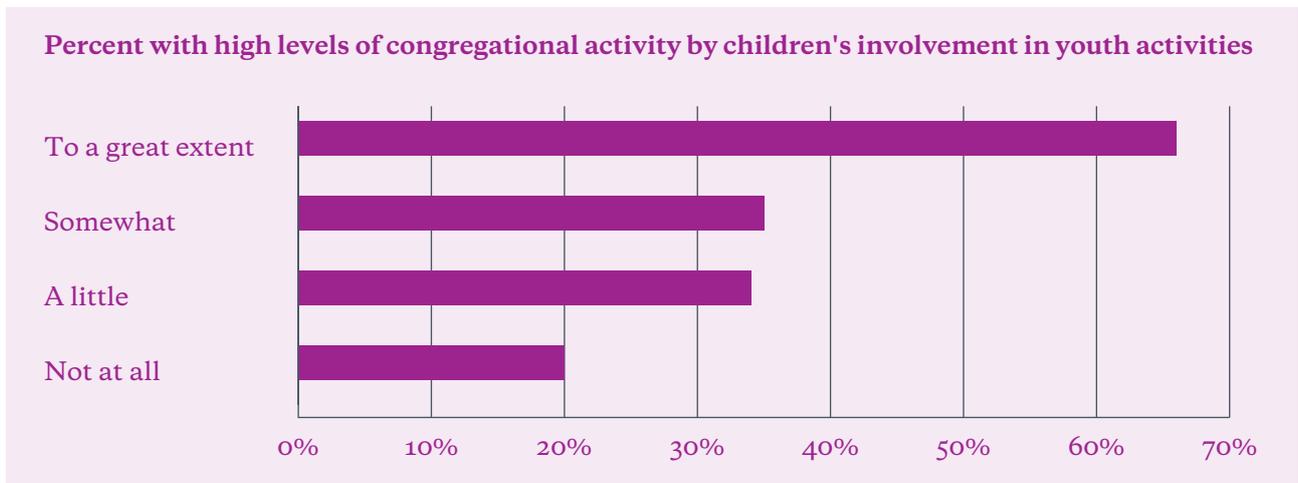
We were impressed with the amount of thought and activity connected with youth of all ages.

The attention to youth involvement extends to the congregations where we saw some extraordinary

work with toddlers, school-age children in *chedarim*, and post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah youngsters, often recruited to assist in teaching and mentoring the younger children. Congregational leaders are especially proud of their efforts to involve young people (and their parents), encompassing activities for infants, toddlers, school children, and teenagers.

**One immediate benefit of strong programmes for children is that they serve to engage their parents in congregational life and Jewish growth. As the following graph demonstrates, among those parents with 12-17 year olds, those who report more congregation-based youth activity on the part of their children also report participating in a greater variety of congregational activities as adults.** In comparing those who report their children participate not at all with those where children are participating to a great extent, we see that high levels on congregational activity by the parents basically triples, moving from 21% to 66%.

Causes and effects are difficult to disentangle here as elsewhere. But it is certainly reasonable to assume that one's children's congregational participation at least sustains or even encourages one's own participation – and vice versa.



A member of Kinloss spoke to the connection between children's and adult engagement:

*The services involve the kids in davening as much as possible. There are four children's services on a Shabbat morning in addition to the toddler service. I've started taking my daughter since she was eight months old and the basis of that has taught her so much. She's four now. In the older children's service, they use real siddurim and go through the service. She sings the songs at home now.*

At a Brondesbury Park mother-and-toddler group now in its tenth year, the group is closed to nannies so as to give mothers the chance to speak openly about issues they may be having at home. It also enables strong friendships to form among the mothers. One mother remarked:

*We started here by sending our child to nursery, then we went to shul, and now we're starting again with our new baby here. There is a progression of things to do and places where you just fit in.*

Another mother talked about the impact that this group has had on her Jewish life:

*I became involved through the mummy and me toddler group. I began sending my husband to shul with the kids for the children's service, which is very common here (the children's services are run by the dads). And now my kids attend the local Jewish school, which we would have never considered before.*

For many, the comfort of the group, which is so crucial to forging bonds with the community, starts in the earliest years:

*When my girl was born, she was only a couple of weeks old when I left the house, and the first place I came was this toddler group. It felt so good to get out and speak with people who knew what it was like to be a new mum.*

Not only does youth programming lift individuals' involvement; it can have wider impact on the congregation more generally. At Kinloss, leaders claim that the focus on adolescents played a key role in producing the turnaround in dwindling numbers during the 1990s:

*About fifteen years ago, they tried to make an evening drop-in youth club. Around that time, the crowd started to get bigger. Rabbi Mirvis came...slowly there were more people around. As I got older, more families started turning up. Maybe a generation of students came back to the area and started having young families. By the time I was in Year 11, there was a Shabbat afternoon club with pool, snacks...it was quite buzzing. By the time I was 18, people would walk from miles away from places like Borehamwood to come to Kinloss. It seemed to be a hangout, the place to be. The youth directors reengaged with the kids. As I was finishing high school, Tribe was starting and they started to put in youth directors.*

The adolescent years represent a challenge, not only for British synagogues, but for churches and other houses of worship throughout the West – most of whom bemoan the low participation rates of adolescents. The feeling that not enough young people have a strong presence in synagogue relates to a bigger concern that many people have about assimilation. Rabbi Kleiman of BHH feels that without the synagogue as a meeting place, young people are more likely to marry out:

*I'm concerned about assimilation and I'm concerned about people marrying out... there's a certain mindset of "why can't they just meet in a shul hall like we used to? Why do we have to send them to Israel?" I got a bit of that when I first pitched the idea of YJS [a national weekend away for young Jewish professional singles, started by a BHH congregant and financially supported by the synagogue in its first year]. Parents of people like the YJS founder get it.*

At Alyth and NNLS, leaders are especially proud of their bnei mitzvah programme where adolescents tutor the pre-teens. Brondesbury Park’s two youth directors recently introduced a youth minyan and often host movie nights and social events.

Several lessons can be drawn from this discussion of youth provision in vital congregations:

**Vital congregations attend to and invest in their programming for young people (age 0-18).**

**Such programming, particularly for children before Bar/Bar Mitzvah, has the potential for stimulating the involvement of parents as well as the youngsters.**

**Among the components of good programming: leadership from the top (rabbi, lay people); strong professional assistance (e.g., youth leaders), mobilizing teens to lead their own groups and activities, and lay involvement.**

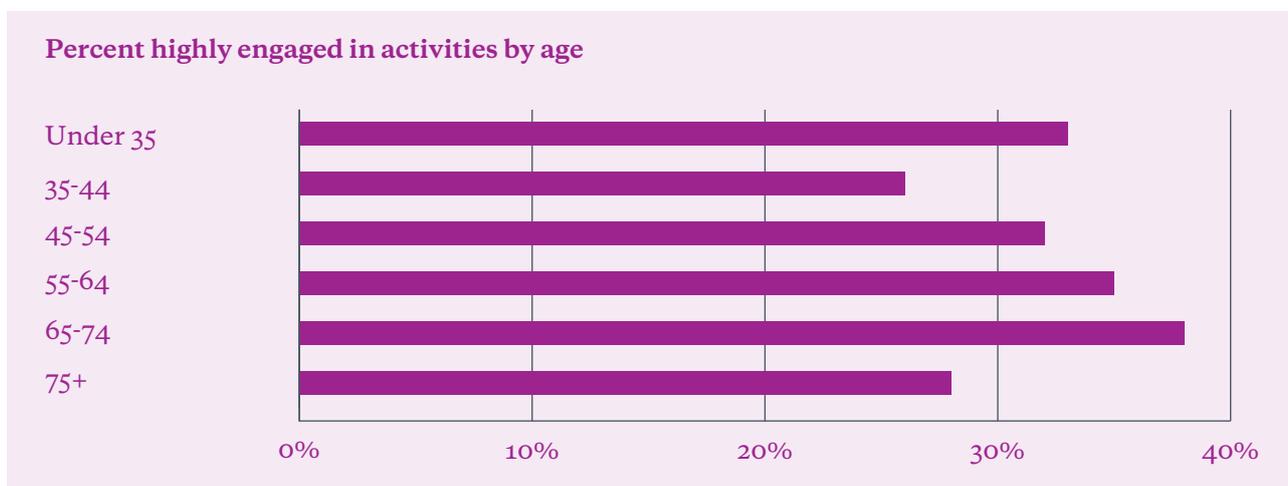
### SOME COUNTERINTUITIVE FINDINGS

Our research also arrived at some counter-intuitive conclusions. In particular, we found areas that are less critical (even non-critical) to creating or constituting congregational vitality.

Israel engagement, while noted as one of six critical factors in a prior JLC study of vitality,<sup>16</sup> failed to emerge as a key distinctive locus of congregational vitality, at least insofar as the survey of leaders or our on-site observations could discern.

To cite another unexpected inference: age of the congregants in and of itself matters little. That is, **while many congregational leaders think it critical to attract young families, our research determined that the presence of younger members (or, older members, for that matter), per se, is not related to various measures of vitality.**<sup>17</sup> Rather, younger members (themselves a reflection of local demographics) usually mean growing membership and numbers of participants in congregational activities, and it is the latter which predicts – or fosters – vitality. Similarly, an aging or aged congregation itself is not an obstacle to vitality. Only when an older membership is also accompanied by declining membership and participation do we see lower vitality scores statistically and a depressed mood among the leaders and inner circles.

Further evidence of the very limited impact of age can be seen in the relationship between levels of congregational activity and age. Basically, older people are no less active than younger congregants in the broad swath of congregational life, as the graph below details:



<sup>16</sup>Keith Kahn-Harris. *The Jewish Leadership Council Community Vitality Initiative: Report of Initial Research Phase*. London: Jewish Leadership Council, 2013.  
<sup>17</sup>In the survey analysis, the key measure of vitality we used was a multi-item index consisting of answers to the following questions: *Our congregation or synagogue*. 1) *Is a place where something is always happening* 2) *Is unwilling to change to meet new challenges [reverse coded]* 3) *Is pretty boring a lot of the time [reverse coded]* 4) *Has a vital atmosphere* 5) *Inspires our children and youth toward Jewish engagement and commitment* 6) *Nurtures innovation and empowerment* 7) *Provides congregants with a strong sense of belonging*.

The overall level of congregational activity across six domains hardly varies by age. In other words, older people are just as active as younger people within the congregation.

Another notable finding is that it seemed to us that **the presence of quality volunteer leadership is relatively more critical than extraordinary financial health. Adequate funds are essential, but a surfeit of money alone is inadequate to ensure vitality.**

### Both large and small can build community

Size of community clearly influences chances of individual engagement. **Larger communities benefit from their greater resources and the more diverse offerings they can and do deploy. At the same time, owing to the difficulties in forging and sustaining connections with hundreds of families, larger**

**communities need to work harder to give their members a sense of recognition, connection, belonging and investment. Smaller congregations find it somewhat easier to affect such relationships with their members.**

Although we have just five congregations, the extent to which congregants are involved with each is nevertheless pertinent and instructive. We constructed an index of involvement consisting of three questions – one on the importance of the synagogue, a second on the number of friends in the congregation, and a third on how often the congregant sets foot in the synagogue aside from attending services. The variations we see point to considerable diversity and patterns that are hardly related, if at all, to size of congregation:

Percent with high involvement by congregation



The extent of involvement seems more driven by denomination than anything else, with the two United Synagogue congregations containing larger proportions of involved congregants than the other three. As for size, the smaller Brondesbury Park does slightly outscore Kinloss, and Menorah only marginally outscores Alyth. If size matters, it matters very little.

On the putative advantages of smaller communities, Rabbi Levin from Brondesbury Park remarked:

*Where people really struggle is in larger communities; you can be affiliated to a community but you don't necessarily have an affinity for it. In Brondesbury Park because of our age profile, warmth, and informality, it's very easy to feel part of it. Too many communities succeed in providing services to their members, but are not necessarily good at engaging them.*

Whilst engagement may be easier in small to mid-sized synagogues, at least some of the larger congregations in Britain evidently manage to form cohesive communities – although their reach, extent to which they engage a large fraction of the membership, is a subject of inquiry for our forthcoming survey. A co-chair of NNLS speaks to their success in this realm:

*We have grown significantly from the founding members of like-minded people – through our huge range of programming both cultural and social, we are creating communities within communities.*

## THE “WHY” OF VITALITY: MAKING CONNECTIONS & BUILDING BELONGING

Throughout our observations, **we were struck with how often people told us of how they embarked upon upward Jewish journeys as a result of involvement with these vital communities. Their stories testify to good practice by the rabbis and lay leaders: They see their mission, as well as institutional and professional interest, as intimately tied to making connections and building belonging.** In other words, helping people develop their engagement as Jews is not just the right thing to do; it’s “good for business” – the business of building vital communities by building vital Jews.

### JOURNEYS TO ENGAGEMENT

To take an example ... Around a Shabbat lunch table, a Brondesbury Park member spoke about how he and his wife helped found the children’s services when there weren’t any. He’s now heading up fundraising to raise millions of pounds for a new building, and balancing volunteering with his professional life as a partner at a prestigious City law firm. His secondary school-age daughter feels his synagogue involvement has brought their family closer together.

The chairman of Brondesbury Park told of how he and his wife couldn’t find the spiritual life they were looking for when they lived in Golders Green. Though surrounded by synagogues and provisions conducive to Jewish life, they still felt something was lacking. When this couple were introduced to their synagogue through a relative, they immediately knew that they had found what they were looking for:

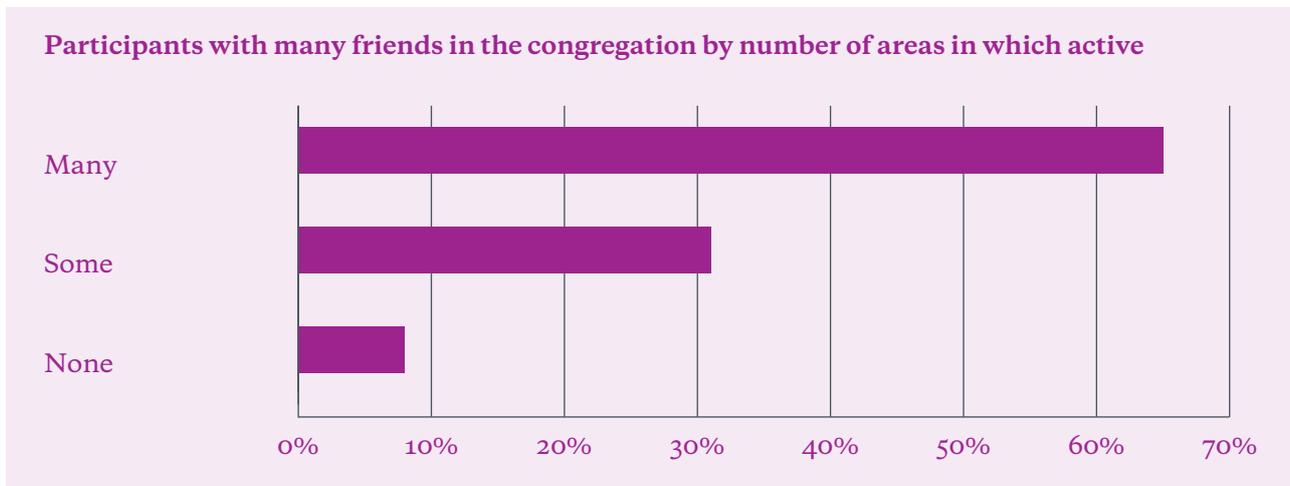
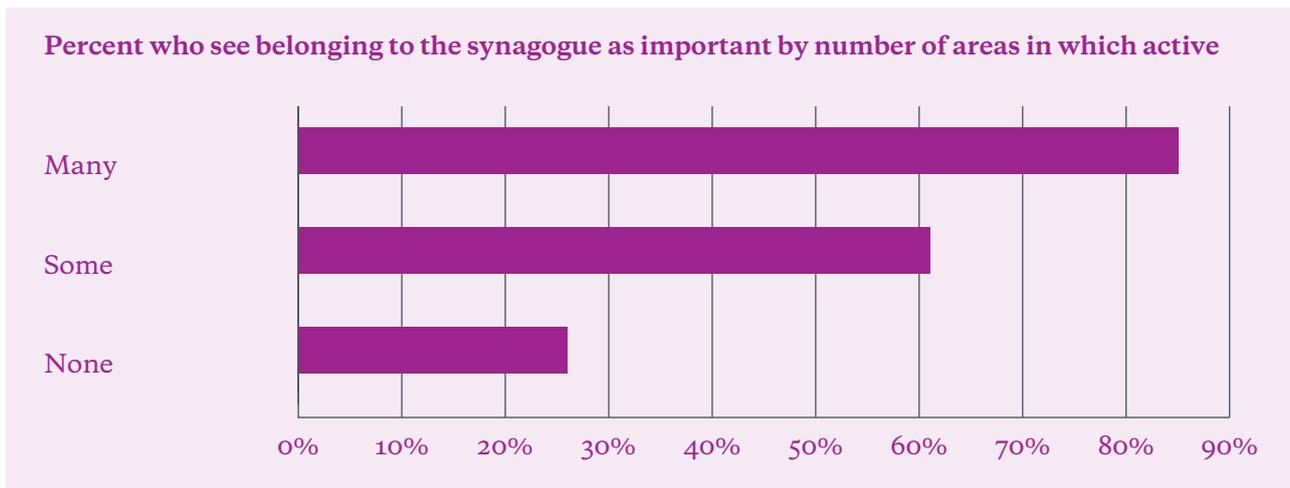
*I went from a three-day a year Jew to three times a week. It’s a very rewarding experience. Like most things when you’re surrounded by your peers you almost unconsciously share a common ethos. You become more attuned. You do more things. Your level of observance increases. Going three times a week is considerably easier than going on Yom Kippur once a year. The more you go, it’s not just easier, it’s more enjoyable.*

### ABC – ACTION BEGETS CONNECTION

The stories of increased belonging result from the interplay of the congregation, the individual and his/her family. People engage because they see themselves as involved in a worthy Jewish enterprise with others whom they come to like and respect. In sports and business, team-building comes through joint endeavour.<sup>18</sup> These well-known observations apply to congregations in general, and to the six synagogues we studied. We found that **belonging to a synagogue (if not more broadly to Jewish life) is engendered through participation and repeated practice.** Rather than ideological espousal, creating a sense of belonging to a synagogue community comes from engaging in activity with others.

<sup>18</sup>See, for example: Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990.

The powerful relationship between activity and connection can be seen in how closely levels of activity are related to the sense of importance attached to congregational membership and to the extent to which people find friends in the congregation:



**As activity increases, the rise in importance and in number of congregation-based friends is truly startling. Again, causal order is difficult to determine. No doubt more activity generates more feelings of importance and more friendship ties, just as pre-existing feelings of importance and number of friends probably induce more activity.**

Yet, the connection between these domains is powerful, impressive, and undeniable.

In accord with these generalizations, a Kinloss leader opined that what defines Kinloss as a community are its actions rather than an ideology:<sup>19</sup>

*The Kinloss community is understood as a practical concept, not ideological. Projects are ways to rally people around. The building was something to rally around. An event or things are raised so that people rally – we say what we’re about not in a conceptual sense, but through events and things going on. We want to update our facilities so we look like the multiplex of the 21st century. You can say that, but if you build it then it actually happens and it becomes part of the identity. We brought in women educators. Those were public statements by action. How are we modern? We have women doing things. You tell people what you are by what you do, not by what you say. We identify by the actions we’ve done and that brings people together.*

At Beth Hamidrash Hagadol, leaders and congregants seek to create a space for synagogue as a place for action. For Rabbi Kleiman, “It’s about getting people involved, about getting them through the door to feel welcomed and comfortable enough to come to shul.”

He consistently emphasises the need for practicalities, as projects and events give people a sense of belonging. Leaders work towards putting BHH at the centre of Leeds Jewish life, whether it be a place for a Shlock Rock concert, a Jewish Mean Time (JMT)<sup>20</sup> sushi night, or a meeting place for the Bnei Brith music society.

At Menorah, the extensive activities and programming bring people through the building each day. From the ACT II Drama Matters group on a Thursday to the family bar and bat mitzvah education programme on a Sunday, opportunities for variety of engagement reinforces Menorah’s identity as a community of doers:

*On a Sunday morning, you’ll find a parking lot full of cars. The atmosphere is absolutely buzzing. There’s always something to do.*

– Menorah congregant

<sup>19</sup>These comments also align with the tendency of British Orthodoxy to downplay strong ideological demands in favor of a pragmatic concern for retaining affiliation of a less observant laity.

<sup>20</sup>A young adult group, mostly twenty-thirty somethings who meet for social events, Friday night dinners, and more recently a parallel Shabbat explanatory service held monthly at BHH.

# THE “HOW” OF VITALITY: LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

## LEADING FOR VITALITY

**Vital congregations don't come about by accident. They require vital leadership.** Research on such communities in the United States dubbed, “Visionary communities,” which were contrasted with “functional communities,” identified two critical qualities for congregational leaders.<sup>21</sup>

One is “innovative disposition;” and the other “reflective leadership and governance.”

An innovative disposition is ...

*Marked by a search for diversity and alternatives, a tolerance of failure, ability to address and overcome resistance to change, and a willingness to abandon less functional ways of doing things.*<sup>22</sup>

Reflective leadership is ...

*Marked by careful examination of alternatives, a commitment to overarching purpose, attention to relationships, mastery of detail, and a planful approach to change.*<sup>23</sup>

Throughout our observation of rabbinic and lay leadership at the six vital congregations we intensively observed, we saw these leadership qualities in action.

## True partnerships: Clergy, lay leaders, and professionals

*We just don't have a hierarchy. Other synagogues aren't on a first-name basis as we are with the rabbi.*  
– Brondesbury Park member

**Well-functioning relationships among key leaders are critical to the success of any organisation, congregations included. Given the variety of personalities, of models of successful leadership, and of effective collaborations, we should not at all be surprised to learn that each synagogue exhibits**

**distinctive ways in which leadership partnerships are actualised and conducted. Trust, communication, flexibility, imagination, and humility characterise, in varying degrees, all six congregational leadership structures and cultures.**

## BHH

At BHH, leaders and congregants report that Rabbi Kleiman is the personality who pushes most of the change forward, albeit with his active executive board. Also critical is the working relationship between Rabbi Kleiman and Rabbi Sufrin, his colleague at BHH. As Rabbi Kleiman reports:

*There used to be rumblings about, “What do we need two rabbis for?” But like I said to the president, “Would you rather have complaints why rabbi x didn't show up or why z wasn't done?” Do you ever hear that? “Never”, he replied.*

*Rabbi Sufrin was already in the community, as he came 25 years ago to study in a kollel and teaches in the school. I was very much in favour of him applying because he's such a pleasure to work with, and he's brilliant with people. He's caring, loving, will do anything for anybody.*

The original plan was to engage Rabbi Sufrin so as to give Rabbi Kleiman the time and space to focus on outreach, but the plan wasn't working because people expected ‘their rabbi’ to officiate at major life-cycle events:

*Inevitably, I'd be planning a programme, and someone would want me for a stone setting: ‘But I want Rabbi Kleiman, he knew my mother’. So I said to the shul, what we really need is to be a team. So for a while both Rabbi Sufrin and I were officiating together. Now, depending on what's needed, either of us will do it. We can step into each other's shoes. My overall role is to make sure everything's covered, and I'm line managaing; but in everything else, we're a team.*

<sup>21</sup>Aron, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. Page 44.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

*Even though I'm a senior rabbi, I never use the title. It's Rabbi Kleiman and Rabbi Sufrin.*

## Menorah

Menorah emerged from a grassroots initiative to create another option for Jews in South Manchester. Those who remain on the board today derive from both the newer generation and the founders. They make decisions together in their executive board of 22 members, and prefer not to let things come to a vote. But, it's not actually the board as a formal entity that shapes the collaborative atmosphere in Menorah – it's the personalities that comprise the board, as Rabbi Shalom observes:

*The board as the board doesn't play much of a role. The board as that group of people has a huge role. The people on the board are those people who built the shul out of enlightened self-interest. They do it because they want a Jewish community – and they want the Jewish community that they want.*

Rabbi Shalom spoke about his role as someone present more for spiritual support than guidance. Time and time again, he and lay leaders spoke about how they make their own way. He further comments on the way lay leadership makes the big decisions without his vote:

*I attend board meetings, I don't have a vote. The board doesn't vote very much – we try and do things by consensus. The board is very respectful of the idea that they hired me to be a Jewish expert. My point is followed if I make a good case.*

## New North London Synagogue

The congregation's professionals and lay leaders talk convincingly about how well the rabbi and management team work together:

*We are valued for what we do here and we continue to be well-supported from all sides. If I have an issue or need help, I know that my voice will be heard and*

*respected. Rabbi Wittenberg supports us and Claire's door [NNLS Executive Director] is always open. Their enthusiasm is contagious.*

– NNLS professional

*People are prepared to participate and it's a thoughtful community, not at all frivolous. Everyone is behind the rabbi and was behind us when we were chairs.*

– Former NNLS Co-Chair

At a staff meeting we observed, we saw that the good and the bad were brought to the table and taken seriously. It wasn't just a pro forma meeting; it was really a chance to voice opinions and dissenting views. At one Council meeting we observed, the chair handled conflicts with a delicate balance of authority and respect.

## Brondesbury Park

Brondesbury Park prides itself on its strong lay leadership. It was the leadership in 2004 which appointed Rabbi Levin to actualise the regeneration. In the view of both the lay leaders and Rabbi Levin, their achievements over the last decade owe much to their partnership. Ambitious projects, like the Park Build (synagogue renovation), plans to build an eruv, and further developing the adult education and bnei mitzvah programmes, could not come to fruition without the positive working relationship between laity and rabbi. One board member exudes enthusiasm about the collaborative leadership atmosphere:

*From the executive level, the process is very collaborative. There's no holding back on opinions. We collect ideas and insight around whatever the discussion is at the time. The chair likes to kick off a debate or conversation on any given issue and we openly share our thoughts. He wanted me to get involved as part of that debate process because decisions can be made between too small a group, and we want to avoid doing that.*

We first met the Brondesbury Park rabbi and some lay leaders on a Wednesday night. Through the months as we interviewed each of them, we were impressed with how they relate to and treat one another. They work together and form relationships beyond the business. They are not only synagogue leaders, but friends. As one board member noted:

*The lay people have made it a very enticing, welcoming place from the get-go. As a result of their filial nature and their openness in allowing those involved to have space to grow, the demographics have mushroomed and has taken on a snowballing effect. People want to be here because they've heard of our positivity.*

### Alyth

At Alyth, openness, mutual respect, and having fun characterise working relationships, as noted in these remarks by a clergy team member:

*We know that relationships are what makes a shul work. Our relationships with each other, our relationships with our lay people, and our relationships with our members.*

The two rabbis at Alyth share a vision, so much so that they sometimes finish each other's sentences. It's obvious that this clergy is on the same page, with that aligned vision extending to the lay leadership, professionals, and rank-and-file volunteers. It's not a top-down process, and everyone feels they have a stake in the place.

Each member of the clergy maintains quality control of specified areas of programming and oversees certain members of staff. But while maintaining some separate domains of responsibility they also make the big decisions collaboratively:

*We're all in this together. When one of us is at a meeting, our members know that it's as if any one of us is there. We each have our strengths and each*

*of us plays on that. But if there's something another would be better at, we're happy to hand over the reins.*  
– Cantor Wunch

### Kinloss

*In the past, different chairmen have had different ways of running the shul. I've been on the board several times. At all times, the board's been very cohesive, we've always had discussions and worked well together. When you go on the board, long-term friendships across ages form.*  
– Co-Chair

Rabbi Mirvis clearly has shaped the organizational ethos of the congregation he led. Though physically absent by the time we conducted our interviews, we could still hear his mottos and beliefs permeating the words of the assistant rabbi, laity, and professionals. In the months since his absence and before a new rabbi was appointed, lay and professional figures have been leading in what they view as his image. The key phrase many ask is, "What would Rabbi Mirvis do?"

In recounting how the once severely fractured community rebuilt itself, a past chair notes that the readiness to self-identify as a community was a critical factor of the positive transformation:

*The shul is committed now to a long-term series of things which otherwise it wouldn't have had. In terms of what we've been able to achieve in programming, in affecting people's lives, in recruiting volunteers, in doing things different things in the community, we've done very well. We have a community which is settled, which doesn't have terrible conflict; which has a structure of authority allowing it to get through the issues.*

In examining the leaders contained within our survey of congregants, we found that **leaders in these congregations are quite capable of holding critical views of the congregation. As we see below, levels of leadership and volunteer activism are only loosely related to overall satisfaction with the congregation:**



Whether leaders in other congregations are as ready to express dissatisfaction, of course, is unknown. But **the implied readiness of the leaders and active volunteers to perceive and confront shortcomings in the congregations in which they are so invested is impressive – and a component of their successful leadership.**

### Rabbis as vitality-builders

Rabbis perform critical leadership functions in congregations. They shape and communicate vision; lead prayer; teach; administer; manage; and offer pastoral care. **Rabbis are the key personality in congregational leadership, even as the laity is absolutely essential for long-term stability, growth, and transitions.** One communal leader offers this appreciation for the multi-faceted role of the rabbi:

*It starts with the rabbi. He embodies the values. He's very learned. This is a fully integrated human being. His public self and his private self seem to be very much the same. If you go to him for moments of counselling in small private moments of crisis, he's wonderful and authentic. And you see that same*

*person up on the bimah. Some rabbis are great on the pulpit and terrible at pastoral, and some are great at pastoral and horrible on the pulpit. There are many forms of good rabbi. A good rabbi needs chassidim in the pew – people who are on the same page with him to move things along; he needs to cultivate opinion leaders or doers who will work with the rabbi in fulfilling an agenda. And you have to have the vision that the congregation buys into.*

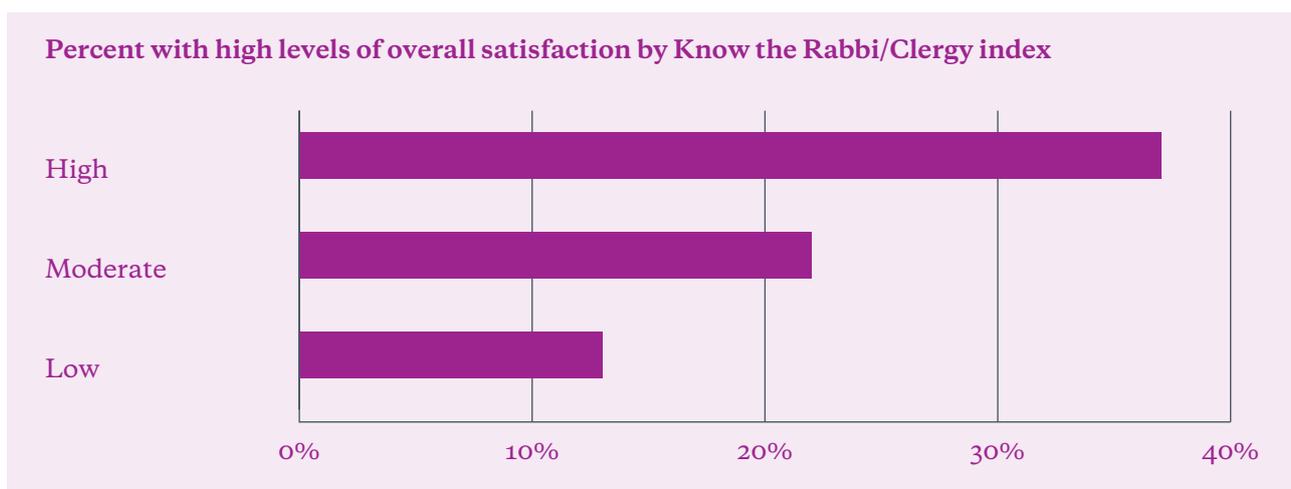
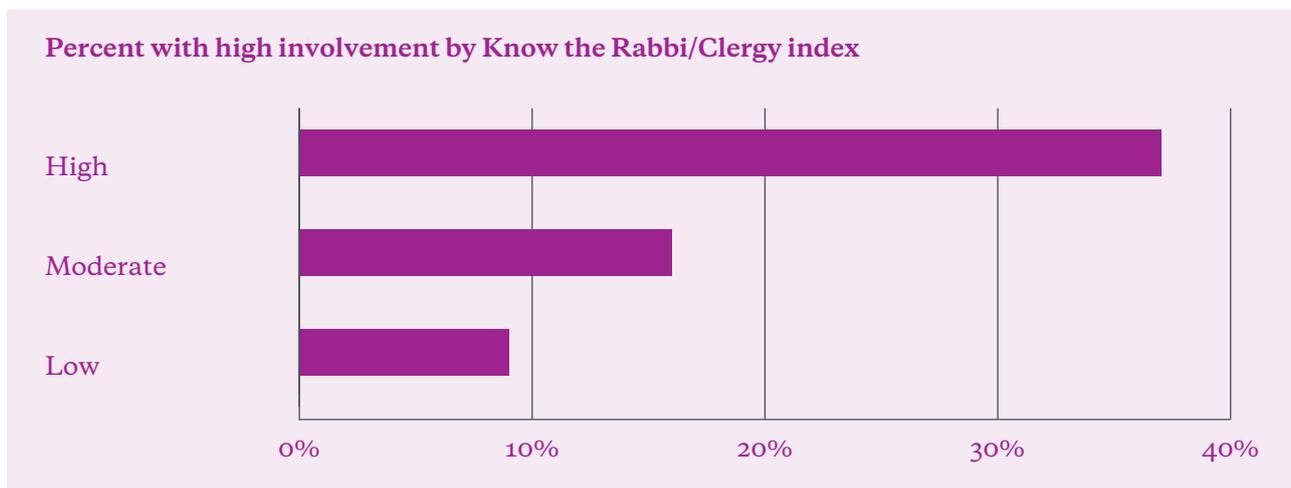
One rabbinic activity that is critical to building vitality was readily visible to us: their penchant for connecting individuals and groups to one another. To illustrate, Rabbi Shalom of Menorah spoke about his predecessor's skills in connecting people to the community:

*Possibly the greatest success of my predecessor was in the communal/social area. Rabbi Fox was seemingly never in this office. I don't know how he did it because I feel like I'm chained to this desk. He managed to go out visiting people all the time. The pastoral side which is all about giving the people who can't make it physically to this building ties to the shul. His great gift was giving people that sense of connection. That was his thing.*

At Brondesbury Park, one interviewee talked about Rabbi Levin’s approach: *“He’s always trying to put people in contact with each other. All the people who might be thinking of Jewish schools, he’ll gather together to have a discussion about it.”* Rabbi Levin reports that he systematically records when someone’s been to his home for Shabbat, their interests, and with whom they could connect.

The critical importance of knowing the rabbi/clergy can be seen in so many aspects of the relationship

with the congregation. Those with better such relationships are not only more active in the congregation (which is certainly one reason they know the clergy), but are also more invested in the congregation, more likely to see it as warm and welcoming, feel more engaged and empowered, and express higher levels of satisfaction – and especially with respect to religious services where the clergy’s role is most evident. All of these relationships can be readily observed below:



Clearly, where relationships of the rabbi with congregants are strong, congregants’ involvement, attachment, and satisfaction are strong as well.

## LEADERS RELATE AND RE-TELL THEIR COMMUNITIES' HISTORY AND ASPIRATIONS

*There are stories that transmit the lore of the group. These tales may be of its founding, but they are also likely to be about times of great success or about crises overcome, stories passed on from old members to new as a way of telling what this congregation is all about. Which stories get told at which time depends in large part on both the needs of the hour and the memories of those present.*<sup>24</sup>

**In vital communities, leaders and members evoke widely shared understandings of their community's mission, purpose and boundaries. Leaders relate somewhat idealized renditions of their communities' past, conveying pride in their progress and distinctive features. They implicitly and explicitly tell visitors and newcomers who we've been, who we are, and where are we going.** Compelling community narratives characterise each of the six vital congregations we studied:

### Wise Aging in Leeds: The BHH Story

BHH congregants recount their congregation's warmth and welcoming. Their narrative makes reference to success in meeting the challenge of a dwindling local Jewish population. To cope with this challenge, Beth HaMidrash Hagadol is reinventing itself as a central hub of activity in the Leeds Jewish community. Over just the past three years, BHH (in partnerships with two local Orthodox synagogues) has hired full-time staff focused on family education and youth education, as well as hosting a new kosher bakery that serves all of Leeds Jewry. A member and Rabbi Kleiman, with the help of Rabbi Pink from Chabad, initiated JMT (Jewish Mean Time), the young Jewish group.

As one member remarked, their goal as they see it is to “keep Judaism alive in Leeds, not only for the engaged members of our community but for our future generations as well.” Leaders expect BHH

to be around for many years, even as the moving demographics may require a different site.

### Masorti and Growing

At NNLS, congregants and leaders tell a consistent tale of who we are, how we're doing, and how we got here. To start:

*New North London is heaving with young families. Our congregation is non-judgmental. Most are on a Jewish journey. We foster openness by asking deep questions about being Jewish.*

– NNLS professional

Lay and professional leaders see Rabbi Wittenberg as the centre of the community. “First of all what makes NNLS special is Rabbi Wittenberg. The rabbi is so charismatic, he's the most spiritual person I've ever met, it's just such a pleasure to know him” (NNLS member).

The social atmosphere is exemplified by the synagogue's makeshift café. The eatery, while not formally part of the congregation, is sometimes moved from its normal location at the Sternberg Centre and positioned instead in the synagogue's foyer, a place often packed with people chatting over a coffee before and after events. Newcomers are likely to be introduced to others and join in on a café conversation. The proximity of cognate Jewish communal facilities no doubt contributes to the community within and around NNLS, as the congregation is situated in the same compound with the headquarters of the Reform Movement, Leo Baeck College, Akiva School, the Strudel Café, a Judaica Shop, and other facilities.

NNLS has built what they call “communities within communities”. This approach often means that members feel connected to one minyan, one programme, or one group. This model enables people to find their space and feel involved. Thus, even as

<sup>24</sup>Nancy Tatom Ammerman. *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999: 6.

the congregation forges a strong collective identity, people do often say that they feel a particular affinity with their sub-group:

*I've been involved in NNLS for many years since moving from Israel. Because the synagogue has gotten so big, I now feel more like a member of Assif [Minyan] than of NNLS. But we come together for the kiddush and for chagim. It's important to maintain that connection as a whole, but within that, it feels good to know my place within a smaller group.*

One couple who recently joined NNLS in the past two years have been involved in bringing the Forum Lecture Series to NNLS from their previous involvement in Newcastle. When asked why they chose to be involved, they reply:

*We left Newcastle because the community had disappeared. Jewish people have this need to be in a community and once the community goes, we have to move on. The community here is wonderful. Life is with people. NNLS is friendly and we're not very religious and they're accepting of this.*

In short, the New North London Synagogue story is one of an inspiring rabbi, sociability, intellectuality, a commitment to multiple communities, and more.

### Rebirth: Brondesbury Unleashed

Rabbi Levin renders Brondesbury Park's historical narrative:

*What makes this community unique is that there is a sense that it was a great community once. There is an aspiration to make it great again and to put it on the map very firmly in every respect.*

The leadership of Brondesbury Park recount a shared narrative that runs along the following lines: Rabbi Levin was appointed in 2004 by a strong lay leadership. After five synagogues consolidated down to one, and it was on the brink of extinction by 2000,

the leaders have been dedicated to rebuilding their local Jewish community. Members of the community, both new and old, sought change and propelled the regeneration forward. The repopulation began with a few young couples who envisioned a close communal space for their future families in London. The success of their growth inspires them and others who have joined to keep them going and keep them growing.

Rabbi Levin notes that what makes Brondesbury Park special for him is a collective identity that conveys meaning, purpose and, most of all, belonging:

*For me, what makes Brondesbury Park unique is the sense that everybody counts, everybody makes a difference and we all muck in together to create the community that is **ours**. It's not my community, it's **our** community.*

### At Menorah: Taking Charge of One's Jewish Life

At Menorah, we hear a narrative that emphasises the role of lay leaders and a culture of autonomy. Rabbi Shalom cites the community's take-charge identity:

*The members want a Jewish life that they're in charge of. The reason why we're a Reform shul is not because everyone likes what they think Reform means, but because the Reform movement today has come to mean people taking charge of their own Jewishness.*

The self-image of Menorah emphasises dedicated members who believe in creating their own Jewishness with the support and inspiration of rabbinic leadership. Menorah laity credits the role of their rabbis as supporting and encouraging the congregation's dynamic and pioneering spirit.

### Alyth for All

Rabbi Levy at Alyth emphasises that what his synagogue offers is not a homogeneous culture, but a rare form of diversity.

*A true community is made up of people who are different to you. When you come to shul, you're going to be with different types of people, and that's a good thing. And it's that encounter that's important. It's that difference that makes community. Synagogue is a place where all types of people are together under one roof in a shared practice.*

The Alyth narrative emphasises autonomy and honours diversity. Both approaches are of a piece with Reform ideology, theology and culture. Not at all surprisingly, more traditional congregations are less intent upon recognizing diversity, choosing instead to underscore other positive features of their respective communities.

### The Kinloss Turnaround: A Narrative of Renewal and Redemption

The Kinloss story of turnaround is both remarkable and instructive. Twenty years ago, as some long-standing leaders relate, Kinloss was a struggling community. A significant section of the community was tired of the long-reigning lay leadership that acted as an exclusive club. They were also tiring of the cathedral-style shul hall where men and women alike felt like they could hardly hear the services. A section of the community created the Minyan, a parallel service, congregant-led. Some objected strenuously, seeing the move as splintering the unity of the congregation. Slowly, these divisions healed, partly because of the way Rabbi Mirvis would acknowledge both services and partly because of the generational shift:

*Rabbi Mirvis had this way of working around the problem. He didn't ignore it, exactly, but he didn't face it head-on – more like he worked around it. He would speak to us all as if we were one, as if everybody was happy. He would give two sermons in both services. I think that showed us, convinced us really, that everything was okay. And then when the Minyan hall was redone, that proved that we were equally valued.*  
– Kinloss congregant

*I still can't believe how freely people float between one service and another. That may have something to do with the new generation coming in. To them, it's history. The history of tension is still palpable sometimes but for many who've never experienced it, we're just a shul with one Sephardi and two Ashkenazi minyanim.*  
– Kinloss lay leader

Today's congregants tell a tale of institutional redemption. A community challenged by strife, disaffiliation, mismanagement and poor finances managed to re-make itself into what many Kinloss leaders see as one of the most vital congregations in the country. In different ways, we heard tales of how the present is so different from the past. From a 30-something congregant:

*When I returned from uni in 2005, the number of young families was exponentially growing...the eruv had launched. Suddenly, babies were coming and the whole make-up of the shul changed. They started to arrange a really good baby children's service. With the launch of Morasha [a Jewish primary school actualised by Kinloss congregants for their children], you've got another influx of families coming in. Until I got married in 2008 I lived at home and went to Kinloss. Previously when it had been a smaller shul and quieter shul, I knew everyone. When I came back, no one knew who I was. So many families had arrived. Suddenly it was a flourishing shul with three thriving minyans.*

A surge of younger congregants and an optimistic, unifying rabbi helped the community outgrow its strife. But, without a mission-driven, tight-knit laity who controlled change, the presence of a highly talented rabbi would not, in our view, have made as much of a difference. Until congregants could see that change really was in the air, they weren't able to be the change they wished to see.

While the specific institutional narratives differ across the six congregations, we do find several similarities in six:

- The narratives are widely shared, at least among the leadership
- They are imbued with optimism: We're on the upward path (even if, objectively, things may be different).
- They evoke pride in warmth, welcoming, activity and caring.
- They credit collaborative leadership with complementarities between rabbi and laity.

## VITAL LEADERS, CULTURES OF GENEROSITY

The findings certainly underscore the research that the quality and suitability of clergy is a critical *ingredient* to vitality. As one chair remarked:

*Rabbi has created the culture and the ethos and we buy into it. He's entrenched the investment of building a community into the culture so that it would propel forward.*

But as we saw in all six congregations, great achievements also depend upon the support and shared vision of the lay leadership.

All six synagogues feature passionate and industrious engagement of their leaders, where both leaders and congregants contribute time and money. Throughout our observations, we witnessed communities raising funds for synagogue buildings and programming, often £10 at a time. We heard of a community full of families who generously pledged tens of thousands for a new building; members who lead quality prayer services and participate in security and mid-week Shacharit rotas; groups who give their time to help those in need, organise social and educational events; individuals who run mother-and-toddler groups and

Shabbat services for children; and those who keep senior clubs and bridge clubs running. Indeed, given the pervasiveness of philanthropy and volunteering, one needs to speak not of individual congregants who happen to be mobilised to contribute. Rather, we should think of cultures of giving – a set of norms and expectations embedded in relationships articulated through shared visions and stories of generosity.

How did these cultures of generosity come about? Leaders' intervention helps make people feel recognised for who they are as well as needed for what they can contribute. Clergy and lay leaders convey the message that others are important and necessary to building and sustaining a vital community. Such interventions are both personal and individualised.

### Recruiting leaders and raising money

**As a general rule, vital congregations more easily recruit volunteer leaders and attract philanthropic contributions. Of course the reverse is also true: Congregations rich in people and money stand a better chance of producing vitality.**

Evidence from the survey of leaders demonstrated that the presence of volunteer leadership is relatively more critical to developing vitality than extraordinary financial health:

*If you want quality people, they're going to be busy people. You've got to do it in a way that the busy people can take part. You don't want the schlemiels running your community. You want the people who are busy fitting in around lots of things.*

*Our challenge is to attract, cultivate and retain active lay members.*

– Communal lay leader

Numerous studies have explored how leaders are identified, recruited, trained, and nurtured.

An arguably equally large literature is devoted to philanthropic fund-raising. Our work here cannot cover all that ground. Rather, we highlight some of the most distinctive lessons we learned from our observations of six vital congregations.

### The challenge of recruiting leaders

Every synagogue has expressed a challenge at one point in their histories of recruiting strong lay leadership, particularly quality people to stand as chairs. One former co-chair of NNLS says why:

*It's not a huge pool to choose from of people who become chairs because people get concerned of the responsibility and commitment.*

When one former co-chair of NNLS traced his path to leadership, he credits a leadership course called Atid, funded by the Masorti movement:

*I joined services committee, which managed all aspects of running religious services, and that was a feeder at the time into the chair route. Eventually I became chair of services. Then the movement put on a leadership training course and almost all the people from the shul who went on that course went on to become chairs. That really engaged us – none of us thought we'd be chairs when we went to that.*

A lay leader at BHH doesn't hide the fact that having a leadership role is a stressful post, one that he worries he won't be able to hand down to someone of necessary calibre as *"the next generation are too busy working and caring for their families. It's difficult to recruit volunteers."*

### Space for congregants to develop as leaders

**Some leaders are intentionally recruited. But, others emerge from the ranks of activists, as well – functioning congregations allow for leaders to make contributions and to identify themselves. They enable and empower congregants to become leaders in their own way at every level – and not just at the top.**

As Rabbi Kleiman of BHH points out, *"You don't always need to have a position on the executive committee to make a difference."*

To illustrate: Tom, a thirty-something new member of BHH, knew Rabbi Kleiman from his time raised in Leeds and attending another Orthodox synagogue nearby. As a young, single Jewish person he felt there wasn't a space for him and others of his young demographic in shul. People in their 20s-30s wanted a place to meet, socialise, and interact with peers of their age and BHH seemed lacking in that area. Tom worked with Rabbi Kleiman in partnership with Rabbi Pink from Chabad to create Jewish Mean Time (JMT), geared for young adults. The programme has been successfully running for four years, producing new relationships. But, while Tom's lay leadership was critical to the initiation of this programme, so too was rabbinic support, as Tom relates:

*The launch brought in about 150 participants. To maintain a level of 60 on Friday night or Purim events for Leeds is massive and has superseded anything that's gone before it and it has lasted longer. ... This was a great way for people my age to integrate and get to know each other. One of the reasons why JMT has succeeded is because of rabbinical involvement. We have two powerful personalities in the community who won't let it drop. Because of Rabbi Kleiman and Rabbi Pink's [Chabad] involvement, we're constantly developing, and they (and consequently we) are always asking, what's next?*

At Brondesbury Park, the first ever women's Purim megillah reading took place in 2014. The women who organised the event did so with the support and backing of Rabbi Levin. A participant excitedly speaks about the event: *"There's about 15 of us doing it. Kezi [the rabbi's wife] has been helping us and we've each been learning our part."*

Leadership development requires the space to cultivate and grow. As a past chair of Kinloss notes:

*Synagogues rely on a large number of volunteers and there is a liberating part of allowing volunteers to do more. Because not doing so is one of the reasons why synagogues are failing – they’ve got thin structures with boards who manage everything.*

At Menorah, Rabbi Shalom attributes the success of the synagogue to its dedicated volunteers who are supported in their desire to exercise individual initiative:

*Menorah is made up of people who through their various life journeys have come to say, “This is what I want in my life, and this is the role I want the community to play”. If one says about one’s Jewish life, “This is what I want Jewishly, and this is what I need from my shul”, that means that if the shul isn’t currently providing it, you need to become part of the provision. If someone wants something to happen, they’re going to get up to do it.*

Because volunteers invest their precious time for no financial reward, it is vital that they are rewarded in other ways. A feeling of social responsibility may be the impetus for some to get involved, **but idealistic commitment alone cannot sustain volunteering year after year. All six synagogues reward and recognise participation**, be it through a plaque, in a newsletter, from the bimah, or by way of a quiet word of thanks from a synagogue leader.

### Successful fundraising

*For us, we don’t see fundraising for short-term specific projects but more as part of the culture of the institution.*

– Rabbi Goldsmith

Synagogues in Britain face the challenge of a broader culture that is somewhat averse to funding synagogues (or, churches, for that matter) on top of membership fees. The contrast with American Jewish congregations is striking. Apparently, British Jewry is more willing to give their time than their money. Even

in relatively strong and passionate communities, leaders assume that fundraising presents a major hurdle, while often achieving reasonable if not considerable success in this realm. Accordingly, some stories we heard provide some helpful hints as to how to go about fundraising for Jewish congregations in the UK.

### *Motivating and training fundraisers*

Foundational to any fundraising effort is the job of identifying, motivating and training fundraisers, the people who do the “ask.” As Jim Collins advises in *Good to Great*:<sup>25</sup> get the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus).

For synagogues, the task of finding or creating good fundraisers is far from simple. Two major fundraisers and past chairs of NNLS recount the effort to turn some unlikely candidates into effective fundraisers:

*We had to raise £6–£7 million to buy the land, construct the new synagogue and the community centre rooms, offices, etc. 15 years ago. We had a conference call with a rabbi in Canada who was a fundraiser. He said, “The community has to raise the money – it’s better not to have professional fundraisers for that kind of ask. You have to do it yourself. Find someone who can train a few people and it will be successful.” We all went white and pale! All the blood rushed from our heads to our feet because everyone’s not a fundraiser! We put together a list of people who we thought might be able to help with fundraising and we had two sessions with a professional fundraiser from a Jewish charity. We did role play, and the sessions encouraged us to research the families we were asking, so as to meet them with some understanding of their relationship with the community.*

*We worked to get the seed money before the fundraising starting. We were able to raise the funds needed for legal fees, research, the planning process, and due diligence*

<sup>25</sup>Jim Collins. *Good to Great*.

*and that required people to give blindly at the beginning. People had to give money for something that may not have happened, so one needs to approach people who will understand and be willing to follow the dream.*

The fundraising team began the process by hosting informal tea parties to discuss the initiative:

*There were tea parties where we presented the case, the rabbi and others spoke, and participants were told they would soon be approached individually. There were people who would make appointments with those who were to make the approach. By and large, it worked well. It was over a long period of time. It was very hard work and we were brilliantly successful. About 60% of the community gave. We nearly always went out in pairs to fundraise and always in the evenings, hoping to get the attention of as many family members as possible.*

### *Crafting the “ask”*

Former fundraisers for NNLS shared what they called the “magic formula” of asking:

*The magic formula is: After the introductions and the soft “sell”, you say “I’ve given £20,000 and it would be really nice if you could match me.” Then, don’t say anything. Doesn’t matter how uncomfortable it is – the next word has to come out of the other person’s mouth. That was the best advice. It worked every time.*

*Anyone who went out to ask for money had to have given at the level they were asking. Where we went out to ask people who we wanted to ask for much more, we went with partners who had given much more.*

*We raised a large amount in a closed community. It’s Masorti – and therefore you’re very limited where you can go for outside funding because it’s very hard to do so. We really had to rely on the community, on our congregation to fund the project. 2% of the whole fundraise went to other good causes – charities, both national and Israeli projects.*

*The community also raised over £100,000 from various events and sponsorships. We offered people the opportunity to pledge over a five-year period, and that they, and we, should take advantage of gift aid.*

*People pledged for five years and, because the campaign was so long, we were able to go back and ask if they could keep it on for another year or two, which they often did, and this boosted our funds.*

*Towards the end of the campaign, a general meeting voted to put a levy on membership fees of £70. It was a packed meeting and some people had difficulty with the idea. It did eventually pass at this meeting.*

### *Recognising donors*

The former chairs also spoke about how donors are recognised in the building. Each synagogue has different techniques for handling this– NNLS had various levels of recognition, which were difficult to establish but proved successful, especially on the £18K level. NNLS has a simple tree of recognition and some named spaces in the building. Kinloss has a recognition board and plaques on rooms, and Alyth has names on bricks. **Congregations try to assure that everyone’s contribution is valued and that the recognition process is considered fair and appropriate for the ethos of the community.**

### *Enhancing the culture of giving*

Widely held expectations regarding congregational giving – or non-giving – pose a distinctive challenge to congregational fundraising. British Jews are certainly charitable to both Jewish and non-Jewish causes. Any glance at the recognised donors to Israeli institutions, as an illustrative piece of evidence, will find an excessive number of British donors, often way out of proportion to their American counterparts. Yet while American congregations can raise hundreds of thousands of dollars annually for programmes, special gifts, and operating expenses, the extent of giving among their British counterparts is far more limited (To be clear, we are focusing upon giving beyond subscription fees).

Some local observers speculate that charitable norms in Britain prioritise supporting causes that help others rather than one's own institutions. Another frequently offered explanation concerns the general lack of charitable enthusiasm among British Christians for churches and the clergy. A third reason pertains to United Synagogue and its constituent congregations: funds contributed for congregational use must flow through the central congregational body, somewhat inhibiting fundraising – at least according to the reports of local congregation fundraisers.

**Vital congregations contend with this somewhat inhospitable culture and try to construct a culture of generosity.** At Alyth, for example, the clergy team and professional staff member lead the way in fundraising for programming and improved prayer spaces. Last year, out of the total expenditure of the synagogue, 12% came from fundraising sources, just slightly below their ambitious goal of 14%. Rabbi Goldsmith discusses how their approach in changing the culture and inculcating the notion of giving to the synagogue has been an arduous challenge:

*We are beginning to change the culture of giving here. The culture of this community has been in the past that the only thing you raise money for is capital projects. We have begun to change the culture to recognise that programmatic costs are also important. It's been a cultural change. I think there is a reality in which people don't see their synagogue as being something to give money to. In this country, we've had to find a language, a case for support language which enables people to see that what we do matters beyond their subscription. I think there's some cultural stuff that is partly about being British that has something to do with that.*

*It's more like you don't give a donation to your golf club – you pay your subscription and you go to the golf club and the golf club isn't a charity. Now, we're a charity but there's an issue with the way that subscriptions work and the language of subscription and the language of membership and the language of burial schemes which means that people are almost inoculated against giving by their subscriptions.*

*We've been trying to work out ways to change that. The way we're talking about it is that the shul is at the heart of the Jewish community.*

In Brondesbury Park, the new Park Build project is at the forefront of many conversations. The consultation process about what the new building will look like has been open to the entire congregational community:

*In the new build, everyone has been involved. There's been a communal consultation. They're making sure the women feel very much included.*

– Brondesbury Park congregant

*They've come up with clever ideas about fundraising for the new building – like giving money in someone's name instead of a gift for Shabbat lunch.*

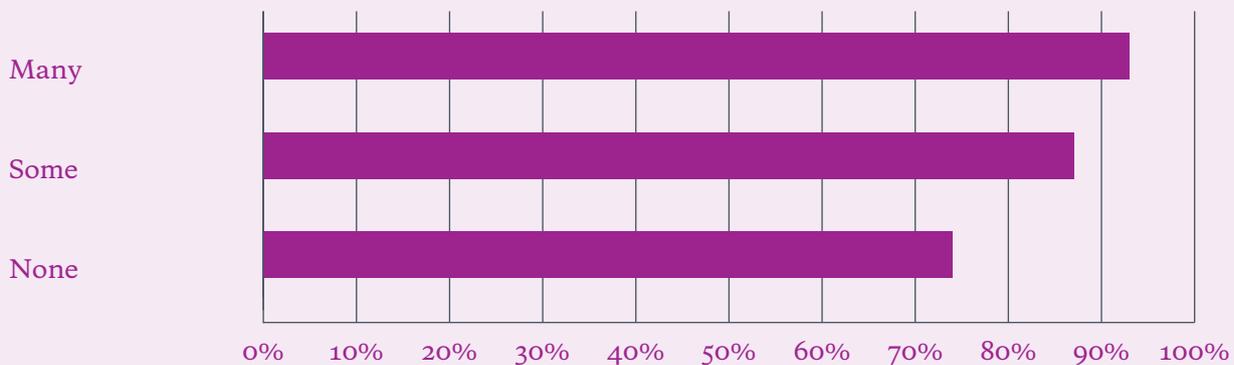
– Brondesbury Park congregant

### Synagogue Vitality is Good Policy

Faced with making difficult choices, or even making choices that require extra effort, leaders (and others, of course) wonder: Is it worth it? Aside from doing the right thing because it's the right thing to do, is there a concrete benefit to acting in accord with one's better instincts and values? **The survey data certainly demonstrate the value of pursuing synagogue vitality. Congregants who score higher on each and every dimension of vitality measured in the survey also expressed greater commitment to “re-up,” to renew their membership.**

As can be seen in the tables below, especially critical is the transition from low to moderate on each of the scales, more critical than the transition from moderate to high. In other words, **to hold congregational membership, leaders need to avoid situations in which congregants are disaffected in any of several respects: active engagement, feeling of belonging, perception of warmth and welcoming, feeling of excitement and empowerment, overall satisfaction and relations with the rabbi/clergy.** All are certainly related, yet all are distinct features of the relationship with the congregation. And, as we see below, all matter – all predict intent to renew:

Percent who will definitely renew by number of areas which active



Percent who will definitely renew by Warm and welcoming index



Percent who will definitely renew by Involvement index



Percent who will definitely renew by Exciting and empowering index



Percent who will definitely renew by overall satisfaction



Percent who will definitely renew by Know the Rabbi/clergy index



## FINAL WORD AND CONCLUSIONS

After surveying congregational leaders, spending nearly 30 days observing six congregations in action, interviewing over 250 rabbis and clergy, other professionals, lay leaders and congregants, and conducting a survey of over 1200 congregants in five congregations, we feel confident in concluding: **Congregational vitality is real. Vital congregations are unusually active, inspiring, engaging and stimulating of feelings of belonging – features which help members to grow and learn as Jews.**

**Vital congregations perform critical functions – for their members, Jewish life, and their local communities, if not the larger society as well.**

**Good leaders, resources, policies, and practices can sustain congregational vitality, or create vitality where it is inadequate and episodic.**

**Congregations are worthy of investment – of time, energy, passion and philanthropy.**

**Policy interventions** can well sustain and enlarge elements of vitality throughout synagogues in Britain. Among several possibilities, worthy of investigation and further discussion:

**“Best Practices in Synagogue Vitality Project.”** The objective here is to identify and elucidate the specific practices that promote and enhance synagogue vitality. One way to start would be to convene both clergy and lay leaders from the six congregations to review this report, and delineate the specific practice recommendations that emerge.

A **“Learning for Congregational Leadership Cohort.”** This innovation – fundamental to all the rest – would bring together a cross-communal group of about 20 leaders, consisting of likely congregational lay leaders and rabbis for an 18-month period of joint learning, relationship-building, visioning, and skills enhancement. The project would aim at developing spiritual capacity, congregational vision, and

collaborative capacities. We anticipate monthly meetings and an intensive week-long learning period over the summer. It would require the dedicated attention of a Jewish educator who would in turn coordinate a program of guest lecturers, text-learning, skill sessions, and group reflection.

Inspired by the Wexner leadership programme in the US, it would seek to forge ongoing relationships and commitment that would endure well past the conclusion of the learning experience. If successful, this programme will add a pipeline of inspired leaders. If well done, it will be long-lasting, and may well be repeated in subsequent years.

A **“Congregational Innovation Fund.”** This fund would provide grants to inspire and enable congregations to take on new initiatives. We may specify the general direction of the grants, such as helping congregations enhance home-based practice, and/or demonstrably deepen affiliation with Jewish life, or some other specific purpose.

Ideally, the programme would serve to create laboratories for successful and replicable innovation, modelling effective approaches that can be scalable. In addition, the fund’s very existence will provoke congregational leadership to deliberate, collaborate and innovate – all in themselves positive and vital leadership outcomes.

A **“Congregational Leadership Mission.”** One element in developing organisational, and specifically congregational, leadership is to expose them to others’ approaches to tackling comparable challenges and achieving extraordinary results. Accordingly, lay and clergy leaders would travel to congregations elsewhere (such as New York and Boston, or Israel) to meet with counterparts and study models of congregational vitality in other contexts. The experience would aim at provoking new thinking and sparking reflection on the part of the leaders going forward.

**A “Congregational Leadership Mentoring Programme.”** Veteran and experienced congregational leaders would engage in a year-long series of one-on-one encounters with potential leaders in their congregations. In fact, graduates of the congregational cohort leadership program could serve in such capacities. So could past chairs who might team with incoming Board members. The mentoring programme would be supported and guided by a professional staff person who would serve to train and support both mentors and mentees.

**A Congregational Caring Initiative:** Congregations identify and assist members and their families in times of need, vulnerability, and hardship. They rely primarily upon volunteer commitment. However, their *chesed* capacity can only be enhanced by internally placed social service professionals and by improved relationships with the several major Jewish social services operating in this area.

**A Congregational Youth Initiative:** The significant energy and investment in youth programming in congregations provides a platform for enhancement of quality and expansion of numbers. Additional resources can not only help congregations internally, but can serve to more fruitfully link them with the highly developed Jewish youth culture in Britain.

**Synergy:** In truth, the seven elements of the proposed JLC Congregational Leadership Development Programme would synergistically. People, financial resources, educational travel, and mentoring all play off of each other. If launched simultaneously (or in quick sequence) the four initiatives could well combine to provide a “leadership lift-off” propelling congregational leaders – both lay and rabbinic – to levels of greater learning, prestige, relationships, commitment, vision, and, ultimately, effectiveness.

# APPENDIX: THE SIX CONGREGATIONS

## THE SIX CONGREGATIONS<sup>26</sup>

As noted, we selected six congregations for intensive and extensive observation, as follows.

### Alyth (North Western Reform Synagogue)

North Western Reform Synagogue (commonly called “Alyth” after the road where it resides) is the third biggest synagogue of the Movement for Reform Judaism in the UK, catering to 1,400 family units. While the period between 1990 and 2010 saw a 7% decline in membership, leaders report membership growth over the past decade at about 1-2% annually. As local housing costs climb significantly and younger members are living farther afield, geographic dispersion challenges their efforts to create a cohesive community.

### Beth Hamidrash Hagadol (BHH)

Beth Hamidrash Hagadol (BHH) in Leeds serves 795 family units, reflecting a pattern of long-term decline in line with Jewish population trends in Leeds. It often works in partnership with two neighbouring Orthodox synagogues. BHH operates from a cathedral-style building, no longer located in the geographic centre close to where most Jews in Leeds live today. To contend with this geographic shift, BHH has recently launched a satellite *minyán* in Brodetsky, the local Jewish primary school. As there is no *eruv* (ritual enclosure) in Leeds, congregants often feel hindered by the location of the synagogue, an all-too-often rainy 30-50 minute walk from where the majority of the community lives.

Since 2001, the Leeds Jewish population declined by about 17%, dropping to about 7,000 Jews.<sup>27</sup> Evidence demonstrates that mortality in an aging population has played a greater role than out-migration in accounting for the population decline.<sup>28</sup>

### Brondesbury Park (Willesden and Brondesbury Synagogue)

Brondesbury Park, a member of the United Synagogue, rose from the ashes of a dying community in Willesden. At its heyday in the 1950s, the area had five synagogues which catered to a once thriving Jewish community that severely diminished in size. With the appointment of Rabbi Baruch Levin in 2004 by a core of lay leaders, and the banding together with the Cricklewood United community in 2005, membership has grown to over 300 family units. Its website notes: ‘In the last eight years, the community has experienced a revival and is currently amongst the fastest growing Jewish communities in the United Kingdom.’ <http://www.bpark.org/index.php/home/>

The congregation faces several challenges, including rising housing costs in the area and the need to expand its current building. With a mean adult age of 42, many members are young professionals working in the City. Brondesbury Park membership has banded together to launch the new Park Build project, through which the community aims to fundraise millions to renovate and expand the layout of the synagogue.

### Kinloss (Finchley Synagogue)

Finchley Synagogue (commonly called “Kinloss” after the road in which it resides), a constituent of the United Synagogue, grew out of a small membership in 1930 and, by 1935 opened a synagogue for 500 people.<sup>29</sup> This facility was replaced in 1967 by one on an adjacent site, for 1,350 members. Today, Finchley synagogue has 3,263 members in just over 1,169 family units. The congregation’s growth owes much to its location within the Northwest London *eruv* (erected in February 2003) and the once affordable housing around the area. A surge of families joined the synagogue from 2000 onward, although Jewish population growth in the area may have surpassed growth in membership, on a proportional basis.

<sup>26</sup>The sources of information for these context paragraphs come from interviews and conversations with leaders and members of the communities we visited.

<sup>27</sup>Graham, David. *Thinning and Thickening: Geographical Change in the UK's Jewish Population, 2001-2011*. Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR). December 2013: <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=18814>, page 6.

<sup>28</sup>See: Graham, D. and Caputo, M.L. (2014). Forthcoming.

<sup>29</sup>See British History Online, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=22512>.

Among the more notable factors in the last decade or so: the appointment of Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis (now the 11th Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth); the resolution of long-standing tensions centred on the divisions between congregants participating in The Minyan and the main service; the development of learning and community centres; and the opening of a Jewish primary school.

Today, membership displays only marginal growth, in part due to the boom in local housing costs, the Jewish Free School court ruling (which from 2009 requires that students are not discriminated against according to halachic definitions of who is a Jew),<sup>30</sup> and competition from Orthodox synagogues in the surrounding areas.

### Menorah (Cheshire Reform Congregation)

Since the first High Holy Day service took place at the back of Sharston Hall's fire station in 1953 to the founding of Cheshire Reform Congregation (branded "Menorah") in 1963, the synagogue in South Manchester has grown to serve about 550 family units. Congregations that cater to a "niche market" (such as the small segment identifying as Reform) tend to draw upon a geographically disparate membership.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, Menorah's population reaches as far as Liverpool and Wales. The congregants raised £1.7 million to erect a new building in 2008. According to its national parent body, the Movement for Reform Judaism, Menorah is "in the forefront of innovative and creative Jewish community development work."<sup>32</sup> They are now in the process of appointing Rabbi Fabian Sborovsky as its new rabbi.

### New North London Synagogue (NNLS)

New North London Synagogue (NNLS), Britain's largest Masorti congregation, caters to 1,200 family units with an annual net growth of 3-5%. Located in Finchley within the Northwest London eruv, its newly built facilities sit in the Sternberg Centre for Judaism. The NNLS community is generally made up of solicitors, businessmen, teachers, non-profit sector personnel (many in the Jewish community), and civil servants. NNLS managed to raise over £6 million from community members to build a new synagogue in 2011. With its 40th anniversary soon approaching, NNLS is developing its communal identity as it looks towards the future and is gathering members together for community conversations to help shape the synagogue's identity and programming.

<sup>30</sup>Prior to *R(E) v Governing Body of JFS* (2009), Orthodox schools were able to turn down families who were not *halachically* Jewish according to the Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue. When Morasha Primary School first opened, interested parties had to be a member of Kinloss to be accepted into the school. Today the school application process requires families to gain points by attending synagogue and/or volunteering in the Jewish community as criteria for school entry, thus eliminating what was ruled as "racial discrimination" based on matrilineal heritage.

<sup>31</sup>See, for example, Ebaugh, H. R., O'Brien, J. and Slatzman Chafetz, J. (2000), The Social Ecology of Residential Pattern and Memberships In Immigrant Churches. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 39: 107–116. doi: 10.1111/0021-8294.00009.

<sup>32</sup>Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner, Menorah Souvenir Brochure (7 July 2013), page 7.

## APPENDIX: VIGNETTES OF VITALITY

The following vignettes of vitality offer selected “action shots” – examples of vital occasions at some of the congregations we observed. Each illustrates in some rich detail some of the analytic points we make above.

### A SHAVUOT ICE CREAM PARTY AT BRONDESBURY PARK

I’m [Michelle Terret]<sup>33</sup> the first to arrive at Brondesbury Park at 4pm the first day of Shavuot. The chairs are all arranged in a circle around the periphery of the women’s section of the shul hall – to my right, a man in his 90s is sitting and talking to a mother with her 4 year-old son. As my boys run off and play with hers, the three of us sit and chat about what it’s like in Brondesbury Park, the closeness, the feeling of belonging. What comes out time and again is the warm atmosphere and consequential affinity people have for Brondesbury Park. I ask this fine gentleman why he thinks this is and he says, “*it’s simple really – you get what you give.*” By 4:30pm, kids with young parents are trickling in and mingling. As everyone sits and chats with someone they know, Rabbi Levin and Kezi arrive. The first thing he does is circulate. I can see that what he’s doing is not only taking the time to personally greet and chat to the room (and he really knows how to work a room), but he’s also working towards breaking down the cliques.

Rabbi Levin is under no illusion that all his members are at home sleeping off the cheesecake-filled lunch they had after spending all day in synagogue. He remarked:

*This is a chance for the cheder [religious school] kids who’ve just come out of their non-Jewish schools to experience Shavuot. Though it’s open to the whole community, that’s our key target group.*

During my chitchat with parents, I also hear about how they’re preparing for their annual Ruth awards lunch ceremony the next day. It’s a non-conventional spin on the Eishet Hayal awards, and strategically planned to bring a bigger crowd to synagogue on the second day of Shavuot.

The crowd of 20 children are called together to sit in the centre in preparation for what feels like a story hour. I watch while my toddlers are literally running circles around them, feeling on edge, expecting someone to be bothered by them; but all I get are beaming smiles and a “boys will be boys” attitude. As Rabbi Levin describes the meaning of Shavuot and does a question and answer session about the book of Ruth, the scroll, the pointer, and the significance of the wheat harvest festival. I can see that a lot of these kids know their stuff. All the kids gather around Rabbi Levin as he reads from the scroll. The up close and personal style of the event must make the kids feel special.

After the reading, we form a line and march the scroll back into its home in the *aron hakodesh* (Torah ark) while singing. The session is engaging and fun for the kids. I watch as Rabbi Levin splits them into teams to go on a scavenger hunt to collect coloured stones in the nearby field. As the hunt carries on and the kids work up an appetite, I’m introduced to a member of 5 years. “*Michelle, this young lady was asking me who you were. Hagit, meet Michelle.*” We got to talking about what makes Brondesbury special, why she comes here. She left her big community in another London area because she felt there was nowhere she could have an impact and despite going to shul every week, she never made friends. She’s happy at Brondesbury Park because it’s a great place for her kids to grow up:

*The stark difference between there and here is astounding. I was welcomed right away, made friends right away, and I’m happy for my kids to grow up here. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.*

I look out onto the field. I see mothers and fathers bent over searching for these miniature stones alongside their children. I see a daughter hurriedly running up to her mum with a handful of stones proudly sharing her fortune.

<sup>33</sup>All vignettes are observations by Michelle Terret, our qualitative researcher and co-author of this report.

As I scoop my kids up and head for home, I turn back and see ice cream filled bowls in the hands of children and happy faces on the parents, rewards for a job well done.

## AN ABUNDANCE OF ACTIVITY AT MENORAH

On a Sunday morning at Menorah, the open entry hall was full of people. On the right side of the hallway was a large table laden with coffee, tea, biscuits, fruit, treats, and smoked salmon bagels, manned by a few friends in their 70s. Sometimes they served passersby with food and drink, but most of the time they sat and chatted with each other. In the left corner of the room, a group of adults sat around a table with Jewish newspapers. They were the parents of the cheder children. Because they live far away from the shul, they don't drop off and collect their kids; they stay. Some take part in the social action group currently looking to mentor young people in their local community; others participate in an adult education course; and still others converse in Hebrew in the intermediate language course. Every room was full with something going on for any age.

While all of this was on offer, there was still a place for those who just wished to hang out with a cup of coffee and a paper: *"This corner is mostly the parents of cheder kids. It's nice being able to sit with a cup of coffee, read the paper, get chatting amongst ourselves."* One woman who came along with her friend appreciated the communal space: *"If you look at my synagogue, there's nowhere to meet, there's nowhere to hang out."*

As I spoke with these parents, I explored what makes Menorah special in their eyes.

One mother who was waiting for her son to finish cheder told me that it's ...

*The inclusivity – everyone is welcome here. Whatever your background. There are lots of mixed families, mixed couples. For us, the draw is there are a lot of families, a lot of children, a lot of things going on that we can't get anywhere else. We want our son to be in a cheder class of all children his age, not one of five kids across the years.*

Another congregant who finished her social action meeting said:

*I came because I'd like to do something practical through the synagogue. I'm not a particularly religious person, but I've got spare time to do something so the idea of social action appeals to me.*

*I am Jewish; this is my only link with other Jewish people, so to me it's important to have somewhere to go, not necessarily for a particularly religious point of view but just to meet with other Jewish people. I don't talk about anything to do with being Jewish but I like coming here but I don't go to services. I volunteer my time because I think it's important to have a Jewish community and I take from it and give but religion is not particularly important to me. I used to come to services – I don't feel a need to but I still identify as Jewish.*

One member sitting in the newspaper corner who was idly thumbing through the Jewish Chronicle looked up to explain:

*We all have different reasons for being here. What we do here is different and how we came here is different. I felt like I was coming home at Menorah because of the equality of women. I lead services and I read from the Torah. My husband's not Jewish but he's very welcome here. We have a community with plenty of ways to get involved.*

Just as the morning courses were wrapping up, a wave of cheder students entered the synagogue hall. It was time for choir practice. Lily, who had been meeting with a family to help them plan for their son's bar mitzvah, made her way out of the shul hall with a huge smile on her face. *"The continuity is awesome. The kids move from one activity to the other. They love singing and the parents are just so proud."*

Questions of morality. Social Justice. Jewish values. Love of Israel. Camaraderie and companionship. These are the buzz words heard on a typical Sunday at Menorah.

## SHUL IS FUN AT NNLS

It's the Shabbat before Purim at NNLS, and I eagerly enter the Assif service in the Beit Midrash at NNLS. I had heard so much about it before I arrived. I was expecting to encounter a sea of tie-dyed tallises and learned Jews quoting Gemara to one another in passing. I wasn't disappointed, despite the black-and-white tallit. Assif is an egalitarian service dominated by the 30-40 somethings, many of which I recognise from Limmud and the professional Jewish community. I walk in through the back with what must have been a confused look on my face, because a smiling woman approaches me, hands me a book, invites me to sit beside her and directs me to the right page. Flawless entry – none of that fumbling around that can happen when you don't know where to sit, aren't sure where to find a Chumash. The process of entering into this *davening* (praying) is seamless. Just in time for the Shemoneh Esrei, I look around in the silence and see men and women alike stepping forward and backward in almost perfect unison. As we approach the reading of the Kedushah it feels and looks like the kehillah prays with an embodiment of the meaning. This group is modern, intellectual, and faithful. It comes across in their prayers and in their speeches. I've been told that there's healthy competition between people in all three NNLS minyanim (the Traditional, Hakol Olin, and Assif) to lead services, a real bonus for a growing community.

It is obvious from the start that the congregants leading this service are highly Jewishly literate, but it's the blend of the contemporary within the tradition that strikes me. In the break between Shacharis and Mussaf, a well-known communal leader comes up to the bimah and hands around a sheet of three interpretations of megillat Esther. With a smile and cheerful banter coming to and from the audience, she talks about whether the story is one of wish fulfilment (destroying our enemies en masse). When she's finished, she closes with *and if that bums you out, don't forget to throw back another whisky this Purim* to which congregants respond with borderline raucous applause and cheers.

The point is: Shul is fun. It's lively, it's cheerful. I enter in time in the traditional service to hear Rabbi Wittenberg dressed as a genie also speaking about Megillat Esther and three different interpretations of the moment in which she enters King Ahasuerus's chambers uninvited. He discusses whether this moment renders itself to the feminist interpretation of a woman using her sexual prowess, or whether she is a meek servant, and brings the sermon to a close by discussing the morality questions within the megillah, asking us if we live in a moral world.

## TALMUD AT ALYTH

*We've got a complex tradition that's complicated and hard to grab hold of.*

*Let's explore our lives in the context of Talmud.*  
– Rabbi Goldsmith

On a Thursday afternoon, a table of 11 participants in their 70s and 80s gather for a Talmud class with Rabbi Goldsmith. The class began with a simple question – *how are you?* An Alyth professional told me about this common practice at the start of staff meetings and events, but seeing it in action betokens the caring nature of Alyth's team. The congregants spend about ten minutes discussing personal challenges and perceptions on the recent Shavuot activities. Rabbi Goldsmith later tells me that sometimes, *"we spend half the class just on listening to how everyone is doing. If something serious comes up, I ask them to stay on after so that we can talk about it. It's a necessary and valuable activity."* Opinions matter here, as getting the insights of congregants is important to the leadership. Feedback on the structure of the Shavuot services was taken into account (some didn't like that the baby blessing was in a separate service while others loved it), and others felt that the recent newcomer meeting had *"all the same people."* The remarks aren't just passing comments, but are genuinely considered in the reflective culture the clergy has created.

Similarly, the “Alyth at Home” sessions the clergy runs enable members to meet other members who live in the same postcode as they are asked to reflect on their Jewish identity as well as feedback insight into the running of the shul. Often this is where those on the periphery of engagement with Alyth come face-to-face with active members and clergy. The process can re-engage those who otherwise stopped participating in synagogue life for whatever reason. Some see these events as opportunities to meet local members you’re likely to bump into at the local shop while others also recognise the value of being consulted.

In the Talmud class, Joan, who recently lost her mother, spends time discussing what it’s like to go through all her mother’s things and mentions that there are some family artefacts which may be worth donating to the Jewish museum. Just by talking about the issues she’s facing, she seems comforted.

The introductions and opening discussion create a sense of intimacy. At this point, the class picks up looking at Kiddushin 30b, referring to the classic commentary of Rashi and Proverbs 7:4 in the Bible. A discussion around what tikun really means emerges which flows into a discussion of how to put the Shema into practice. We move on to the importance of rote learning, followed by exploring the phrase previously studied, *“the words in the Torah should be sharp in your mouth”* (Kiddushin 30b). As we discuss the significance of the personification of wisdom as a feminine trait – *“say to wisdom, you are my sister”* (Proverbs 7:4), someone playfully says *“the more synonyms in the book of proverbs, the more cool it is.”* The group knows how to have fun while they are learning. We discuss the importance of inviting tradition into our families and the emphasis that Torah is also meant to be part of our families. Rabbi Goldsmith comments: *“Torah was given to us. It’s our debt to pass it on. Great teaching is like receiving the Torah and passing it on.”* He then reflects on how their bar/bat mitzvah practice in shul reflects this. At the moment a child becomes bar or bat mitzvah, the Torah is passed on to them, in a moment that is always very emotional and significant.

After reading several lines of text, the conversation focuses upon the thought that *“you need to arm up the next generation against outside forces in a sharp way.”* Rabbi Goldsmith observes that young Alyth members are comfortable and confident in their Jewish identities when growing up in NW London and when away on Israel Tours, camps, and Gap Year. But as soon as they go to universities, young people are not as equipped to debate Jewish issues with others, and that they need to be better armed in their knowledge to do so. This observation then leads to food for thought: *“How do you strengthen the next generation to battle against the intellectual challenges?”*

The starting point, perhaps, for next week’s class and the future of Galim (youth) programming.

### YOUTH AT ALYTH: “MY SPEECH IS FOCUSED ON COMMUNITY”

Pairs of mentors and young students sit outside on a Friday afternoon, revising and practicing their bar mitzvah speeches. The concept was reinvented by a long-standing congregant and professional because to them the bar mitzvah prayer is outdated and didn’t speak to its members today.

One boy in his school blazer sits cross-legged on a bench, reading and re-drafting his speech aloud as his mentor encourages him and gently provides him with suggestions for synonyms.

*‘What is your speech about?’* I ask. *‘Well, I don’t believe in God, so my speech is focussed on community. I’m going to talk about how important being a part of the Jewish community is’.* The more I see, the more I realise that this drafting process empowers these young adults to voice their opinions confidently in preparation for standing on the *bimah* and speaking to hundreds of people in what some describe as a defining moment in their Jewish lives.

As I walked around and observed the pairs, it didn’t look like classroom learning. The pairing of teenagers together in a learning experience solves the issue of

keeping young people who want to be engaged, giving them a sense of authority and ownership. It also lets those learning see that there is something post bnei mitzvah – they don't just fall off the map until marriage. The model applies the peer mentorship model in place in youth movements and successfully uses it in innovative learning. It also encourages volunteerism from a young age.

### CHILDREN'S SERVICES AT KINLOSS

First day Shavuot at Kinloss with my toddlers. I first started in the main shul a little before 10am, where there were very few women. I took the kids up to sit on the balcony while I hoped to get some praying in. The chazzan sounds beautiful but it's hard to hear from up above. After the kids ran a few laps around the balcony, the little one soon figured out he could potentially throw books off the side into the centre, and I knew it was time to leave. Heading down to the children's service, I was told by a member to expect high quality. *"The children's services are all professionalised. That came from the ground up – the people wanted it, and the chair listened, paid for it, and made it happen."* Apparently, the leadership takes the desires of their congregants into account and acts on them. The 0-4 toddler service is run like a classroom – not surprising then that a head teacher runs them. It starts off with a Shabbat Shalom welcome song, followed by a baby-friendly version of the service with catchy songs and dances. It was the perfect blend of kinaesthetic learning and introduction of prayer for their age. It seems that every child is engaged – even mine who often lose interest in anything that takes over five minutes. Kids clapping, dancing, and marching in unison. Parents acting supportive and engaged. The parents are asked to remain quiet and people remove their children if they're getting grouchy or out of order. These moves keep the atmosphere playful and fun without resorting to the chaos that can come with tantruming toddlers and their embarrassed parents in one room.

Leaders claim that the children's services are one of the factors that draws new young members. It's very easy to turn to your neighbour and make a new friend.

When putting my eldest in a brief time-out for stepping on his brother, I met another mother in the hallway who was trying to make sure her daughter didn't disappear in the automatic lift. When I asked her about why she likes Kinloss, she looked around with a swooping arm and simply said *"This."* In the 0-4s alone, there were probably 40 children and 40 accompanying adults. In the four other children's services, numbers looked about the same. Children make up about one-third of the membership. The demographic turnaround is remarkable considering 18 years ago, two administrators from the United Synagogue were parachuted into Kinloss to keep things afloat in a community on the verge of dying out. To go from that to a place where I can run into a work colleague with her one-year-old and make friends with her sister-in-law while our kids run and play, then walk into a Kiddush in a banquet hall that holds at least 400 people across generations floating from fish ball to crisps and mingling easily with people from 30 to 90 is remarkable. All this makes Kinloss feel like a lively – and vital – place.

### MENORAH'S HAPPENING CHEDER

Sunday morning revolves around learning and activities for Menorah congregants. The cheder classes take place in partitioned corridors with groups of children learning and discussing Jewish ideas at varying levels. Many classes are led by young people, trained by the co-ordinator Emma and armed with a detailed lesson plan.

When visiting the first year group in reception, the kids were busy learning the aleph bet through visual flashcards and arts and crafts. Open another door and you find a group of Year 3 students tackling Hebrew sentences in workbooks. Sometimes they pair up and at other times it becomes competitive.

Moving from room to room makes apparent the progression of learning from one year to the next.

In one room, a group of Year 5 students were discussing Midrash Rabbah, Vayikra 4:6. When asked what the kids were learning, Sammy, the teenage teacher, excitedly responded: *“It’s rather complex and it has a lot of meaning.”* I asked, *“Have you been trained to teach this?”* To which he replied, *“I’ve had a couple of years’ experience as an assistant teacher so that helps inform me.”* Through student-led enquiry, he encourages his 4 students to dissect various interpretations of the Midrash. After the first read-through, the students don’t get it. The lesson is ambitious and the two teachers in the room often switch between groups and help each student move past the literal meaning and into the figurative. The teachers probe, make suggestions like *perhaps it’s a metaphor* and they read the passage once more:

*A group of people were travelling in a boat. One of them took a drill and began to drill a hole beneath himself. His companions said to him: “Why are you doing this?” Replied the man: “What concern is it of yours? Am I not drilling under my own place?” Said they to him: “But you will flood the boat for us all!”* (Midrash Rabbah, Vayikra 4:6).

Suggestions from the children were literal and practical as they initially tried to find loopholes in the problem. At first they debated waterlines and the likelihood that the boat will sink. Slowly with the support of the teachers, they began to process the figurative significance of the Midrash and consequently engage in the essential inquisitive debates and discussion required for learning Talmud:

*Sammy: What do you think? Any idea’s possible.*

*Child 1: Maybe it was a big boat like the Titanic and it had separate closed-off bedrooms so it couldn’t sink.*

*Sammy: What happens when you drill a hole in a boat?*

*Child 2: It sinks.*

*Sammy: Who’s going to be effected on the boat if it sinks?*

*Child 2: All of them.*

*Sammy: So are the actions of the one person going to affect the other people?*

*Child 1 and 2: Yes.*

*Sammy: So therefore is it wrong or is it right for that person to just behave however he wants?*

*Child 1 and 2: Wrong.*

*Sammy: It’s being selfish isn’t it?*

*Child 2: Yeah, because he’s potentially hurting everyone else on the boat.*

*Sammy: Yeah, so this can be referred to a lot of people in society. For example, if you think of politicians, they can make decisions that will affect other people badly. And you get plenty of people oat. who can act that way... And so on.*

Five minutes later, down the corridor, I walked into a family education session, a pre-bar/bat mitzvah family preparation course with Rabbi Shalom. I entered just as groups of parents with their children recounted their body biographies – images they had drawn of themselves with Jewish objects in response to the question, *“What does it mean to be bar/bat mitzvah?”* Six families of all shapes and sizes were seated in a semi-circle surrounding Rabbi Shalom’s writing pad as he documented key points the kids described – giving *tzedakah*, wearing *tefillin*, abiding by the Ten Commandments...each child had something new and interesting to say about their impending venture into Jewish adulthood. Their parents quietly sat by admiring their daughters and sons, approving smiles upon their faces.

# APPENDIX: FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS WITH LEADERS & KEY INFORMANTS

## INTERVIEWS

<b>Beth Hamidrash Hagadol</b>	<b>Role</b>
Rabbi Kleiman	Rabbi
Rabbi Sufrin	Rabbi
Rebbetzin Kleiman	
Leon Davidson	President
Richard Ellis	Vice-President
Yossi and Miriam Saunders	Chazan and Family Educators
Robert Marks	LJOY (Youth) Coordinator
Wendy Tobias	Administrator
Executive Board Members (3)	
Bnei Brith Music Society Participants (3)	
Youth Services Coordinator	
JMT Chairman	
JMT Participants (3)	
New Member	
Previous Members (2)	
Life Members (4)	
Toddler Service Coordinator	
Head of Kiddush Rota	
Members at Shabbat Kiddush (5)	
Teenage Members (3)	
Newly Married Members (2)	
<b>Total: 38</b>	

<b>Brondesbury Park</b>	<b>Role</b>
Rabbi Levin	Rabbi
Daniel Turner	Chairman
Mark Berg	Former Chairman
Daniel Bacall	Executive Board member
Shani Conway	Youth Director
Avi Korman	Youth Director

Catherine Charles	Welfare Coordinator
Head of Nursery (Volunteer)	
Nursery Professionals (3)	
New Members (2)	
Previous Member (1)	
Head of Children's Services	
Head of Fundraising	
Members (6)	
Teenage Members (2)	
Mother and Toddler Group Participants (8)	
Members at Shabbat Kiddush (4)	
Non-Members at Shabbat Kiddush (2)	
Long-standing members (2)	
<b>Total: 40</b>	

<b>Finchley Synagogue (Kinloss)</b>	<b>Role</b>
Rabbi Laitner	Assistant Rabbi
Elaine Renshaw	Co-Chair
Scott Saunders	Co-Chair
Barry Frankfurt	Vice-Chair and Past Chair of the Minyan
Lord Jonathan Mendelsohn	Past Chair
Ian Kamiel	Previous Transition Manager
Barry Colman	Youth Director
Kinloss Cares Professional	
KLC and KCC Professional	
Mother and Toddler Group Participants (5)	
Members at Shavuot Kiddush (3)	
Life Members (2)	
New Member (1)	
Previous Member (1)	
Children's Service Professional (1)	
Members in Minyan Shabbat service (3)	

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Non-Members (4)

Mother and Toddler Group Professional

Friendship Club Volunteer

**Total: 31**

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### Menorah Synagogue

### Role

Rabbi Shalom

Rabbi

Howard Barlow

Chairman

Jonny Becker

Honorary Treasurer, Subscriptions

Michael Colin

Vice-Chairman

Gita Conn

Past Chairman

Emma Caulfield

Head of Cheder

Eve Davidson

Social Action Coordinator

Executive Board Members (7)

Members at Chavurah Dinner (8)

Teenage Members (6)

New Members (2)

ACT II Drama Matters Group Members (4)

Uninvolved Member

Non-Members (3)

Members at Shabbat Kiddush (4)

Head of Fundraising

**Total: 43**

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### New North London Synagogue

### Role

Rabbi Wittenberg

Rabbi

Tamara Isaacs

Co-Chair

David Raff

Co-Chair

Claire Mandel

Executive Director

Barbara Stern

Director of Education

Rivka Gottlieb

Director of Programming

Zahavit Shalev

Conversion Programme Coord. & Rabbi's Asst

Rabbi Weiner	Scholar in Residence
Josh Cass	Tikun Olam Project Director
Past Chairs (2)	
Members (5)	
New Members (2)	
Previous Member (1)	
Non-Members (5)	
Members at Purim and Supper Quiz (8)	
Mother and Toddler Group Participants (4)	
Teenage Members (4)	
Talmud Group Participants (5)	
Forum Lecture Series Participants (3)	
<b>Total: 48</b>	

<b>North Western Reform Synagogue (Alyth)</b>	<b>Role</b>
Rabbi Goldsmith	Rabbi
Rabbi Levy	Rabbi
Cantor Wunch	Cantor
Harriet Radley	Past Chairman
Noeleen Cohen	Vice-Chair
Adam Martin	Community Director
Viv Bellos	Director of Music
Sarah Langsford	Fundraising and Development Coordinator
David Yehuda Stern	Rosh Chinuch
Cindy Summer	Head of Kindergarten
Josh Moritz	Head of Youth Engagement
Lynette Sunderland	Director of Welfare and Life Cycle
Past Chairs (2)	
Bridge Club Participants (2)	
Senior Club Participants (2)	
Mother and Toddler Group Participants (4)	
Kuddle-up Shabbat Participant	

Talmud Class Participants (2)
Shalom Supper Volunteers (3)
Teenagers in Bnei Mitzvah Programme (7)
Tefilah Laboratory Participants (4)
Non-members (2)
Non-Involved Members (5)
Members at Shabbat Kiddush (4)
New Member
Previous Member
<b>Total: 52</b>

<b>Key Informants</b>	<b>Role</b>
Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner	Senior Rabbi to the Movement for Reform Judaism
Dr. Keith Kahn-Harris	Sociologist and Writer
David Jacobs	Dir for Syn Partnership, Movement for Reform Judaism
David Kaplan	Director of Community Services, United Synagogue
Rabbi Andrew Shaw	Executive Director of Tribe, United Synagogue
<b>Total: 5</b>	

**Total Interviewed: 257**

# THE JEWISH LEADERSHIP COUNCIL 2015 CONGREGANTS' SURVEY

**1. Thinking about your life as a whole, and comparing it with what is most important to you, how important would you say it is to you to belong to [NAME OF synagogue]?**

Very important	58%
Important	25%
Quite important	12%
Not very important	4%
Unimportant	0%

**2. About how often have you attended religious services in the past 12 months?**

Every Shabbat or more often	26%
A couple of times a month	25%
About once a month	18%
On High Holy days and other festivals	10%
On High Holy Days	7%
Just a few times a year or on special occasions	13%
Not at all	2%

[For NNLS only and only for those answering On High Holy Days or more]

**2a. Which of the following types of services do you attend more often?**

Services with separate seating, where men lead the services	48%
Services with mixed seating, where both men and women lead the services	37%
About both equally	10%
Other [please explain	4%

**3. For about how long have you been a member of the congregation?**

Under 5 years	20%
5-9 years	18%
10-19 years	23%
20 years or more, but not all my adult life	23%
All my adult life	6%
All my life, as my parent(s) were members too	9%

4. About how many people in the congregation are among your friends?

Many	33%
Some	35%
A few	23%
Hardly any or none	10%

5. In which, if any, of the following capacities are you now serving the congregation, or have served in the past?

	Now serving	Not now, but in the past	Never
Honorary officer of the congregation	2%	6%	92%
Member of the Council or Board	4%	12%	84%
Chair of a committee	4%	7%	89%
Active volunteer	30%	20%	50%

6. Over the last 12 months, about how often have you been involved in each of the following areas of activity in your congregation, if at all?

	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Adult text study (Torah, Talmud, etc.)	10%	16%	18%	57%
Lectures, educational programming	9%	31%	25%	35%
Engaging with issues around Israel	7%	22%	26%	45%
Social action	9%	28%	25%	38%
Social activities (e.g., Kiddush, celebrations, oneg Shabbat)	28%	33%	19%	20%
Service to people in need (e.g., mourners, visiting the sick)	6%	19%	20%	55%

**7. To what extent are you satisfied with the functioning of your congregation in each of the following areas or activities? (If the area isn't offered in your congregation, or if you're unfamiliar with it, please skip.)**

	<b>Very satisfied</b>	<b>Somewhat satisfied</b>	<b>Somewhat dissatisfied</b>	<b>Very dissatisfied</b>
Religious school / cheder	43%	44%	9%	4%
Youth (teen) activities	44%	44%	10%	3%
Adult text study (Torah, Talmud, etc.)	49%	44%	5%	2%
Lectures, educational programming	50%	44%	5%	2%
Engaging with issues around Israel	38%	50%	10%	2%
Social action	54%	39%	5%	2%
Social activities (e.g., Kiddush, celebrations, oneg Shabbat)	62%	33%	3%	1%
Service to people in need (e.g., mourners, visiting the sick)	58%	38%	2%	1%
[Alyth & NNLS] Cultural (e.g., Choirs, Drama, Arts, walking groups etc.)	56%	36%	6%	1%
The religious services on Shabbat	65%	29%	4%	2%
The High Holiday services	63%	30%	6%	1%
The extent of welcoming	54%	36%	8%	1%
Opportunities to make and meet friends	40%	45%	13%	3%
The lay leadership	53%	40%	6%	1%

**8. To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements about your congregation?**

The congregation ...	<b>To a great extent</b>	<b>To some extent</b>	<b>A little</b>	<b>Not at all</b>
Provides congregants with a strong sense of belonging	60%	31%	7%	2%
Is pretty boring a lot of the time	4%	15%	29%	52%
Is a place where something is always happening	64%	29%	6%	1%
Is unwilling to change to meet new challenges	4%	15%	21%	60%
Nurtures innovation and empowerment	40%	42%	15%	3%
Has leaders who respond to the concerns of typical members	48%	38%	11%	2%
Recognises and uses members talents and skills	44%	41%	12%	3%

## 9. To what extent do each of the following apply to your congregation?

	To a great extent	To some extent	A little	Not at all
Warm	58%	32%	7%	3%
Engaging	55%	34%	8%	2%
User friendly	53%	37%	8%	2%
Passionate	53%	34%	10%	3%
Non-judgemental	56%	31%	11%	2%
Intimate	24%	41%	23%	12%
Welcoming	50%	37%	10%	3%
Child friendly	70%	25%	5%	0%

## 10. How well do you know the rabbi or cantor (or, if more than one, the rabbi or cantor who knows you best)?

To a great extent	40%
To some extent	36%
A little	17%
Not at all	7%

## 11. To what extent has the rabbi or cantor (or, if more than one, the rabbi or cantor who knows you best) made an effort to get to know you?

To a great extent	48%
To some extent	30%
A little	13%
Not at all	9%

## 12. How satisfied are you with your synagogue community experience overall?

Very satisfied	56%
Somewhat satisfied	36%
Somewhat dissatisfied	7%
Very dissatisfied	2%

**13. In the coming year, do you expect to renew your membership in the congregation?**

Definitely yes	86%
Probably yes	10%
Maybe	2%
Probably not	1%
Definitely not	0%
Doesn't apply, as I/we don't expect to be living in the area	

**14. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?**

	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
Important decisions about the synagogue are often made without open discussion by synagogue leaders and members	8%	21%	53%	18%
Disagreements and conflicts are dealt with openly rather than hushed up or hidden behind closed doors	7%	30%	27%	36%
The current morale of our synagogue is high	36%	49%	5%	10%
Were it not for a need to have a burial plot, I would stop paying dues to the congregation	3%	5%	85%	7%

**15. Please say a few words about features of your congregation that you find especially appealing. Think of features that tend to engage your interest in the congregation.**

**16. Now, please say a few words about features of your congregation that you find especially unappealing. Think of features that prompt you to diminish your engagement or even give you reason to think of leaving.**

**17. Do you have anything to add specifically about the prayer services at your congregation?**

## BACKGROUND QUESTIONS

### 18. What is your age?

Under 18	1%
18-24	1%
25-34	5%
35-44	19%
45-54	22%
55-64	20%
65-74	21%
75+	11%

### 19. You are ...

Male	45%
Female	55%

### 20. In which country or region were you raised?

United Kingdom	85%
France	1%
Israel	1%
The United States	3%
Canada	1%
Other (Where? )	10%

**21. Your marital status**

Married	76%
Living with a partner	2%
Never married	7%
Divorced or separated	7%
Widowed	6%
Other (Enter)	1%

**22. [IF MARRIED or PARTNERED] Does your husband/wife/partner consider him/herself Jewish?**

Yes	92%
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**23. Do you have any children living at home?**

Yes	49%
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**24. [If yes] In which of the following age groups are the children in your household? (Check all that apply)**

0-4	8%
5-11	15%
12-14	10%
15-17	8%
18+	12%

**25. [If children 5-14] Do you have any children who attend cheder or religious school at the congregation?**

Yes	49%
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26. [If children 12-17] To what extent do any of your children 12-17 participate in any youth activities at the congregation?

To a great extent	25%
Somewhat	30%
A little	21%
Not at all	24%

27. Which of the following do you consider yourself to be (choose the single most appropriate designation)?

Haredi	0%
Orthodox	5%
United Synagogue	14%
Traditional	8%
Masorti	34%
Reform	30%
Liberal or Progressive	1%
Secular	3%
Just Jewish	4%
Other	1%

**28. Aside from synagogue services, about how many times have you set foot inside the synagogue building during the last month?**

Many times	30%
A few times	26%
Once or twice	23%
Never	21%

**29. About how often do you participate in a Friday night Shabbat meal, if at all?**

Regularly	55%
Sometimes	16%
Rarely	16%
Never	14%

**30. [If not Never] During the last 12 months, has anyone from the congregation invited you to a Friday night Shabbat meal?**

Yes	66%
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**31. [If not Never] During the last 12 months, have you invited anyone from the congregation to a Friday night Shabbat meal?**

Yes	57%
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**32. As you were growing up, did you attend any of the following? (Check all that apply)**

Jewish primary school	19%
Cheder or religious school	70%
Jewish youth movement or organisation	63%
Jewish summer programme, including overnight summer camp	42%
Israel Tour	35%
Gap-year or Year-off programme	15%
On-campus /University Jewish movements (e.g., JSoc, Hillel)	37%

Many thanks for all your help. Should you have any comments about your answers or this survey, please enter them here:

Should you wish to write to the researcher, Prof. Steven M. Cohen, please write him at [Steve34NYC@AOL.Com](mailto:Steve34NYC@AOL.Com)





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