



## Rabbi Experience Research



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# About This Research

## Goals

1

### Develop a comprehensive picture of what “rabbi” means to Jewish young adults

- ✓ Understand the image of a rabbi today – what they look like, what they do, and how they interact with their community.

2

### Explore the trajectory of young Jews’ relationship with rabbis

- ✓ Learn about past and present experiences with rabbis and the impact it has or has not had on their connection to community, Jewish identity and/or Jewish practice.

3

### Learn about what young Jews want from a rabbi going forward

- ✓ Understand the role that young Jews would want a rabbi to play in their lives and what impact that could have on young people’s beliefs, connection and/or actions as it relates to their Jewishness.
- ✓ Identify what an “ideal rabbi” would look like for young Jews today.

## Methodology: How we accomplish our goals



### Stage 1: Online Qualitative Journals (August 2022)

Benenson Strategy Group interviewed 41 young American Jews aged 18-44, representative of the Jewish young adult population nationwide for the journals. They were fielded from July 28<sup>th</sup>- August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022. The purpose of this methodology is to allow young people to talk about their experiences, impressions and views of rabbis in an unfiltered, personal environment by responding to a series of in-depth, open-ended questions. This allowed us to understand the perspective of young Jews before we wrote the quantitative survey, helping us to write more thoughtful, comprehensive questions.



### Stage 2: Quantitative Survey

Benenson Strategy Group conducted a survey with n=800 Jewish Americans aged 18-44 from October 10-21, 2022. The overall margin of sampling error is  $\pm 3.5$ . It is higher among subgroups. Due to rounding, displayed answer choices may not always add up to 100.

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This research, the first of its kind in a generation, explores the impact of rabbis on Jewish young adults (ages 18-44) in the United States. This study examines their experiences with rabbis and how those experiences have influenced their connections to Judaism and Jewish communities, shaped their perceptions of rabbis, and their ideas of what a rabbi should be.

*Perception of Rabbis Among American Jews 18-44* was commissioned by Atra: Center for Rabbinic Innovation in 2022 with support from the Jim Joseph Foundation. This study was conducted by Benenson Strategy Group (BSG) using qualitative journals and a quantitative survey.

**Atra: Center for Rabbinic Innovation** elevates the ability of rabbinic and spiritual leaders to lead with vision and effectively meet the ever-evolving needs of the Jewish people. Atra prioritizes a comprehensive research agenda to define rabbinic excellence and define the knowledge, skills, characteristics and behaviors critical for an effective rabbi and spiritual leader.

## Purpose

Atra conducts research regularly to better understand what the Jewish community needs from its rabbis and in turn, what leadership models and tools will help these leaders be most successful. This research informs the organization's approach to continuing education to support rabbis as well as advance the field of Jewish spiritual leadership. In an effort to build the field of applied rabbinic training, Atra set out to create a baseline understanding of how young American Jews experience rabbis and what they want in a rabbi. The goals of this inaugural study were to:

- 1) Develop a comprehensive picture of what “rabbi” means to American Jews aged 18-44
- 2) Explore young Jews’ experiences and interactions with rabbis (past and present)
- 3) Learn about what young Jews want from a rabbi going forward

Note that in this research, the researchers did not define the term “rabbi” for respondents but based on their responses, some associate the term with other educated clergy serving as spiritual leaders including cantors, maharats, rabbaniot, etc.

## Methodology

### Stage 1:

#### Online Qualitative Journals (August 2022)

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### Stage 2:

#### Quantitative Survey

Benenson Strategy Group conducted a survey with n=800 Jewish Americans ages 18-44 from October 10-21, 2022. The overall margin of sampling error is  $\pm 3.5$ . It is higher among subgroups. Due to rounding, displayed answer choices may not always add up to 100. The survey was conducted online utilizing BSG’s online panel vendors to reach a representative sample of our targeted audience of American Jews ages 18-44.

*Note:* To ensure a representative sample BSG used the 2020 Pew Jewish Americans research as the guide, in addition to other research that BSG has done among the young Jewish American population. See Appendix A for a snapshot of the sample we surveyed.

# Executive Summary

## Overview of Findings

1

**69% of survey respondents have had an experience with a rabbi at some point and their experiences have been largely positive** (47% positive, 23% mixed, 7% negative, 25% neutral). These interactions have occurred across a wide variety of occasions ranging from synagogue services and shabbat dinners to college campuses, camps, and classrooms.

- a) Among those who have interacted with a rabbi, 69% of Orthodox, 79% of Conservative, 73% of Reform and 63% of non-denominational Jews have had a positive experience with a rabbi.
- b) Positive experiences are largely characterized by the feeling of being accepted and heard by a rabbi who is welcoming, friendly and knowledgeable. The impact of these positive interactions cannot be overstated:
  - i) 91% said it made them feel more positively about being Jewish
  - ii) 90% said they felt more spiritually connected
  - iii) 88% said it made them more confident and comfortable being Jewish
- c) Negative interactions are largely characterized by feeling that the rabbi was judgmental, rude or unhelpful – leaving young Jews to feel disappointed, annoyed and uncomfortable.

2

**Most (64%) say that having a relationship with a rabbi is important to them currently.** Only 12% of all respondents say it is not currently important and that it will not be important to them in the future to have a relationship with a rabbi.

- a) Having a relationship with a rabbi today is more important for Orthodox (87%) and Conservative (74%) than Reform (56%) and non-denominational (66%). However, the majority of Reform (70%) and non-Denominational Jews (63%) who say it's currently not important are open to it becoming more important later in life.

3

**Young American Jews want their rabbis to be accepting and knowledgeable.** When describing their ideal rabbi, young Jews desire a combination of acceptance, kindness, knowledge and helpfulness. But only about half of young Jews say the rabbi they have interacted with most meets these ideals. Across denominations, the top priorities for a rabbi are acceptance of themselves or how they choose to be Jewish and "Is someone I trust."

4

**Over half of young Jews currently interact with a rabbi today (58%), but nearly half of them say it's on rare occasions – representing a large opportunity for increased engagement.**

- a) 40% of young Jews say it's hard to develop a relationship with a rabbi today. While they believe a synagogue might be the place to find a rabbi (the top two situations in which respondents currently interact with rabbis are in synagogue and in casual/social interactions at 29% each, and 53% say they expect to find their ideal rabbi in a synagogue), the synagogue is seen as a barrier (among those who say it's hard to establish a relationship with a rabbi today, 26% cite synagogue membership as being too expensive and 26% say they don't feel comfortable visiting or contacting a synagogue).

# Executive Summary

5

**The respondents of this study largely feel connected to a Jewish community and their Jewish identity, and nearly half of them desire a stronger connection.**

- a) 71% of respondents feel connected to some form of Jewish community today with 1 in 3 feeling very connected.
- b) 48% desire more connection. Of the 29% who do not currently feel connected, 1 in 3 desire more connection to Jewish community.
- c) Feelings of connection to any type of Jewish community are high across denominations. Orthodox feel more connected (91%) than those who identify as Conservative (77%) and Reform (63%) and non-denominational (75%).
- d) Notably, desire for more of a connection is very similar across denominations: 53% of Orthodox, 54% of Conservative, 52% of Reform and 46% of non-denominational Jews wish they had more of a connection to a Jewish community.

6

**Ultimately, if young Jews can make a connection with their ideal rabbi, they believe their connection to their Judaism and the Jewish community will be strengthened and their engagement will grow.** Respondents reported that if they had a relationship with their ideal rabbi they would:

- a) Feel more connected to their Jewish identity (67%)
- b) Feel welcome and a sense of belonging (67%)
- c) Feel more connected to a Jewish community (66%)
- d) Be more inclined to celebrate Jewish holidays/Shabbat (65%)

Like all research, there are limits to how much we can definitively extrapolate learnings from the population that was sampled to the general population. While every effort was made to ensure a representative sample, we recognize that additional research must be conducted so that we may better understand and refine the implications these findings might have on the field.

Atra engaged in a two-month-long field validation phase to preview the data with 150 scholars, practitioners, organizational leaders, and funders before publicizing the research. This broad validation effort allowed for input and reactions as they analyzed and processed the data. The main findings from those focus groups are as follows:

1. This data affirms what many in the field have observed anecdotally - that rabbis matter - and it is encouraging to see that reflected in the data.
2. Some were surprised at the low percentage of purely negative experiences (7%).
3. Most were not surprised that what 18-44 year old American Jews want from rabbis is for them to accept them. This raised questions for further study/research:
  - a) How do rabbis and Jewish spiritual leaders

demonstrate that they are accepting? How does the field identify the competencies? How do Jewish institutions adapt training to help rabbis do this? How do they recruit people with those skills?

- b) How might rabbis grapple with the tension between the many roles they are expected to play and the importance young people appear to place on acceptance?
4. Synagogue as barrier tracks with other research and is unsurprising. However, most of the positive experiences reported with rabbis occurred in a temple or synagogue or in an event that might occur within a temple/synagogue (b'nei mitzvah ceremony, wedding, funeral, etc.), so this suggests further study may be valuable.
5. How does this relate to the rabbinic pipeline problem? While this research is not about talent, this question has been raised among scholars, practitioners and funders.
6. Several focus groups expressed interest in learning more about how denominational affiliation affected experiences with rabbis.
7. Many people wanted to know more about the rabbis with whom the survey respondents had interacted.

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# Executive Summary

## Recommendations

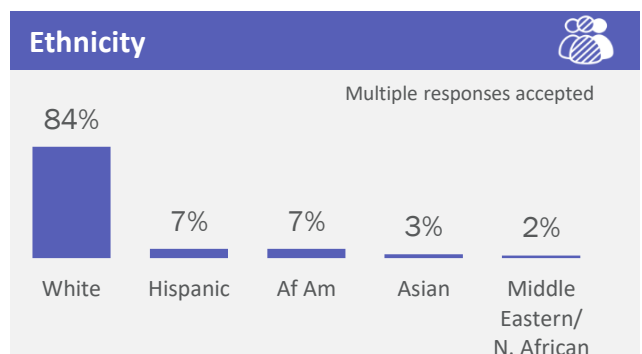
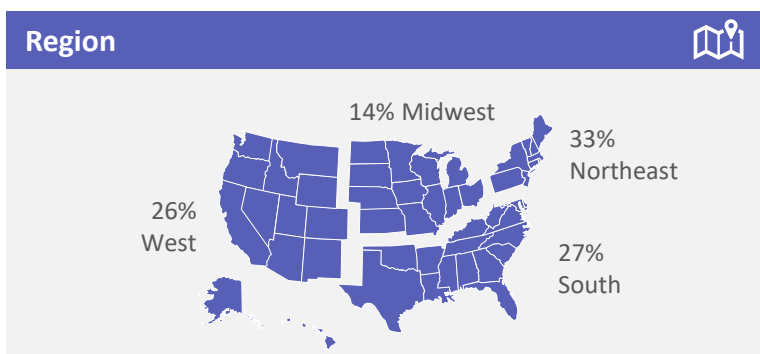
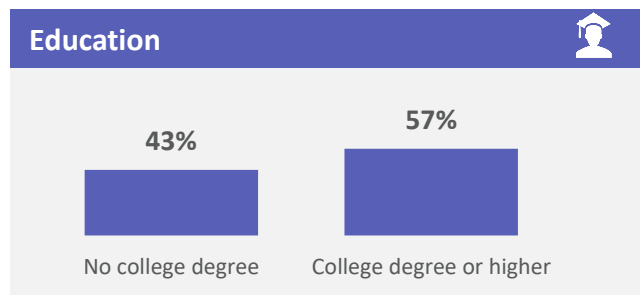
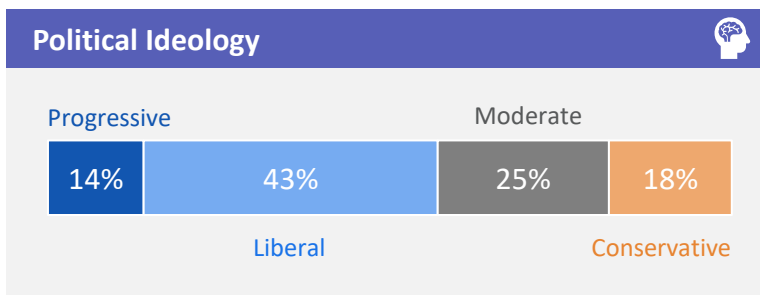
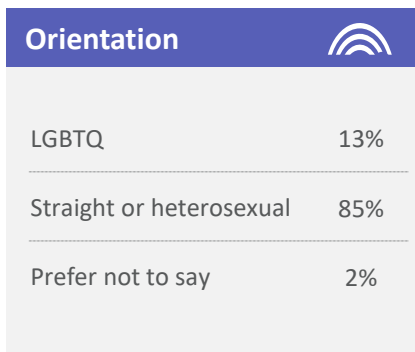
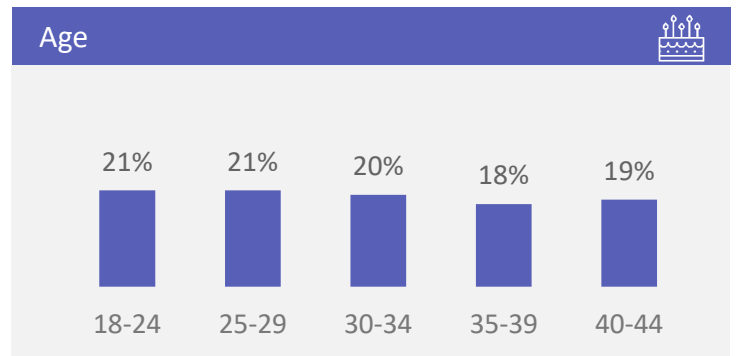
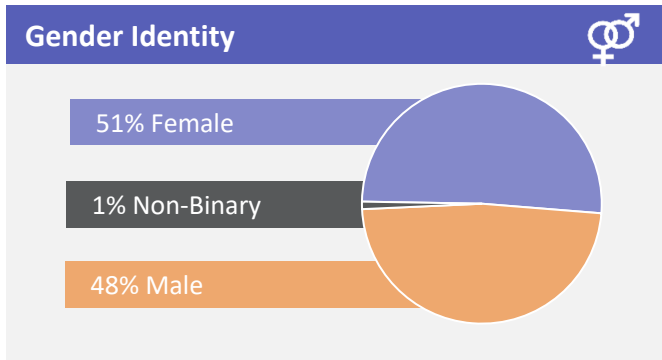
The data from the research study and learnings from focus groups will inform Atra's educational vision and strategy. This study seems to show that there is a cultural window right now where young people are interested in relationships with rabbis but do not know exactly how to access them. Given that, Atra proposes the following recommendations, which will be refined as we engage in further applied research:

- 1) Dramatically increase the number and variety of rabbis engaging young Jews by investing in training and resources.
  - a) Resources - Invest in start-up capital and technologies for rabbis to engage young people within institutions and beyond - microgrants, initial salaries, CRMs, and additional resources to support Jewish spiritual leaders to work inside, alongside and outside institutions.
  - b) Training - Provide new pre-service and in-service training for aspiring and current spiritual leaders to reach more people in the ways they want to be reached. All Jewish spiritual leaders must learn/re-learn to:
    - i) Articulate a wise Jewish vision that centers both the call of tradition, the wisdom of Torah, and the authentic experience of the people, and then practice Jewish spiritual leadership artfully.
    - ii) Go meet the people; do not wait for people to come to you (in synagogues or other places). Learn and apply relationship-based organizing techniques to find Jews and develop new markets, in and outside of synagogue, in and outside of lifecycle events.
    - iii) Demonstrate sensitivity and approach people with a curious and non-judgmental stance. This includes rabbis understanding the difference between acceptance, approval, and permission, as well as how these are expressed and may be perceived.
    - iv) Take risks, seek support for, and experiment with communal models that prioritize relationship-driven, rather than program/worship-driven, rabbinic work.
- 2) Map where rabbinic engagement with young people is currently occurring and identify key gaps in the market.
- 3) Share this learning broadly: In addition to being interested in DIY Judaism, young people believe that relationships with rabbis are critically important to their Jewish engagement.
- 4) Conduct future research.

## Conclusion

This study established a baseline and we believe it demonstrates opportunities for the Jewish communal sector to better leverage its most underutilized resource: rabbis. Contrary to the narrative that suggests that young Jews do not want to affiliate, are not interested in engaging with religious/spiritual leaders, and are only interested in peer-led Judaism, this study demonstrates that American Jews aged 18-44 enjoy interacting with and want guidance from rabbis. They hope to have access to more opportunities to build real relationships with rabbis. They want these rabbis to be both accepting and knowledgeable, so they can provide for them wisdom and guidance. They appreciate opportunities to engage with rabbis in a range of settings. Ultimately, if young Jews can make a connection with their ideal rabbi, they believe their connection to their Judaism and the Jewish community will be strengthened and their engagement will grow.

# Snapshot of the American Jews 18-44 We Surveyed



Note: To ensure a representative sample we used the 2020 Pew Jewish Americans research as our guide, in addition to other research that BSG has done among the young Jewish American population.



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## Key Findings

- **Young American Jews largely feel connected to a Jewish community and their Jewish identity**, and nearly half of them desire a stronger connection. Rabbis can play an important role in fostering these connections.
- **A relationship with a rabbi is important to young American Jews** – 64% say its important to them currently – and even a majority of those who say it’s not currently important are open to that relationship in the future.
- **Most young Jews have had an interaction or experience with a rabbi** (69% said yes) and these interactions have occurred across a wide variety of occasions ranging from the formal (i.e., synagogue) to the informal (i.e., Shabbat, social events). Importantly, the majority of those who have interacted with a rabbi report having positive experiences while only 7% of all young Jews report having had a purely negative experience.
- **Positive experiences are largely characterized by the feeling of being accepted and heard by a rabbi who is welcoming, friendly and knowledgeable.** The impact of these positive interactions cannot be overstated, 91% said it made them feel more positively about being Jewish, 90% said they felt more spiritually connected and 88% said it made them more confident and comfortable being Jewish.
- **On the other hand, negative interactions are largely characterized by feeling that the rabbi was judgmental, rude or unhelpful – leaving young Jews to feel disappointed, annoyed and uncomfortable.** While these negative experiences do affect young Jews, it’s important to note that positive experiences have a greater impact than negative ones, signaling the importance of positive experiences at young ages.
- **Over half of young Jews currently interact with a rabbi today (58%), but nearly half of them say it’s on rare occasions** – representing a large opportunity for increased engagement.
  - That being said, there is a general sense that it’s difficult to establish a relationship with a rabbi today, with the largest barriers including not having enough time, not feeling accepted, and the synagogue itself (comfort in approaching or dues).
- When describing their ideal rabbi, **it’s clear that young Jews desire a combination of acceptance, kindness, knowledge and helpfulness.** But only about half of young Jews say the rabbi they’ve interacted with most meets these ideals.
- Ultimately, **if young Jews can make a connection with their ideal rabbi, they believe their connection to their Judaism and the Jewish community will be strengthened and their engagement will grow.**

# Overview of Jewish and Rabbi Experiences

1

**The vast majority of young Jews feel connected to a Jewish community, and nearly half desire an even deeper connection.** Their connection to the Jewish community takes a variety of forms from observing holidays to doing Jewish things with Jewish friends.

2

**Additionally, a majority say having a relationship with a rabbi is important to them today.** Even those who don't see it as important today are not writing it off for the future.

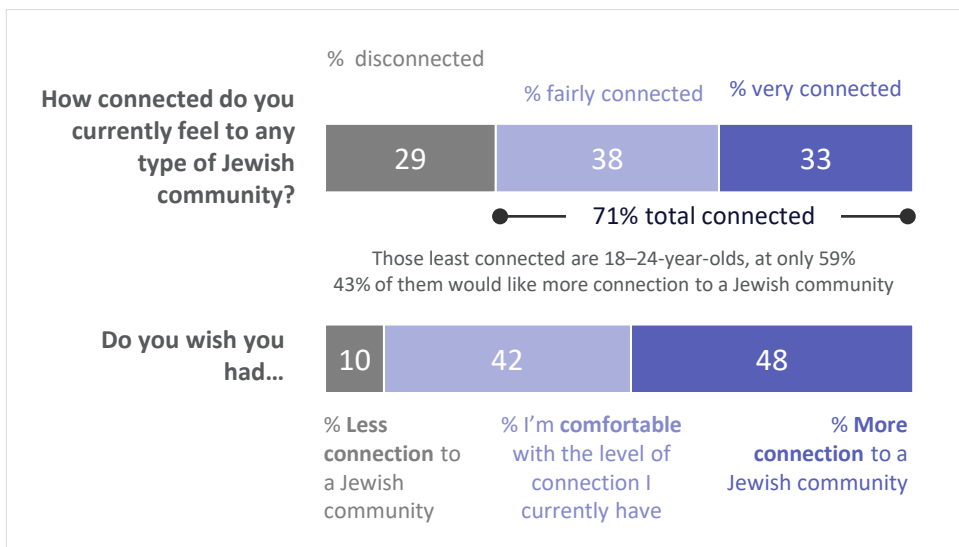
3

Those who've had experiences with a rabbi say **those experiences have largely been positive.**

## Young Jews largely feel connected to a Jewish community, and nearly half desire even more connection

7 in 10 young Jews feel connected to some form of a Jewish community today, with 1 in 3 feeling very connected. Encouragingly, almost half would like more connection to a Jewish community, including 1 in 3 (33%) who currently feel disconnected.

Feelings of connection to any type of Jewish community are high across denominations. Orthodox feel more connected (91%) than those who identify as Conservative (77%) and Reform (63%) and non-Denominational (75%). Notably, desire for more of a connection is very similar across denominations: 53% of Orthodox, 54% of Conservative, 52% of Reform and 46% of non-denominational Jews wish they had more of a connection to a Jewish community.



Young Jews are engaged Jewishly in a variety of different ways. Many say they actively observe Shabbat or other Jewish holidays, in addition to participating in cultural Jewish activities such as cooking or eating Jewish foods and having a group of Jewish friends with whom they do Jewish things. Notably, while 64% say they belonged to a synagogue or congregation when growing up, only 38% say they currently do. Younger Jews, aged 18-24 years old, report lower levels of involvement in a variety of Jewish activities.

### Below you will see a list of things that may apply to someone who is Jewish.

For each of the following, please indicate whether or not it applies to you.

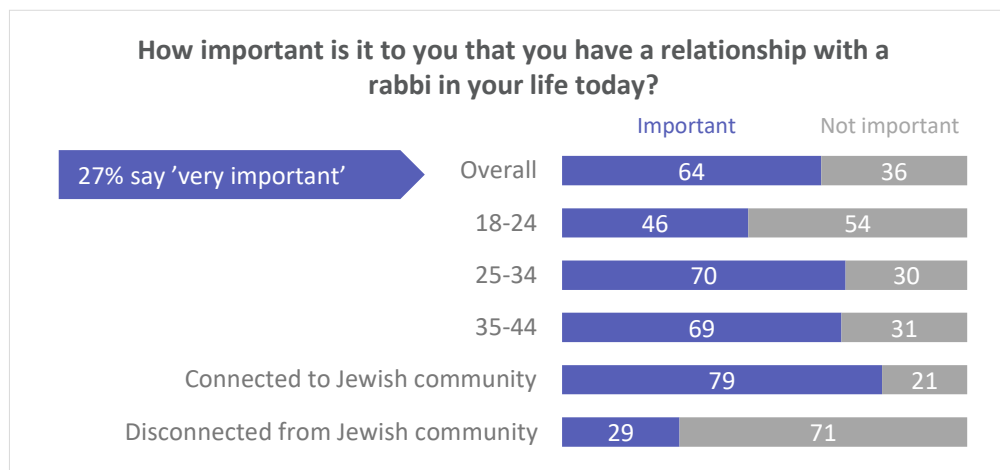


Note: We pay very close attention to make sure the data is representative. Our goal is for the numbers to be close to Pew, though they will not match Pew exactly. First, the wording of the questions is slightly different which affects how the questions are answered. Second, on any dataset, there is a margin of error which means the numbers will be close and within range but will not match exactly. Taken as a whole, the level of Jewish affiliation in this study is in line with Pew and in line with other research that has been done among young Jewish Americans.

## Nearly 2-in-3 young Jews say having a relationship with a rabbi is important to them, and few have written off the importance later in life

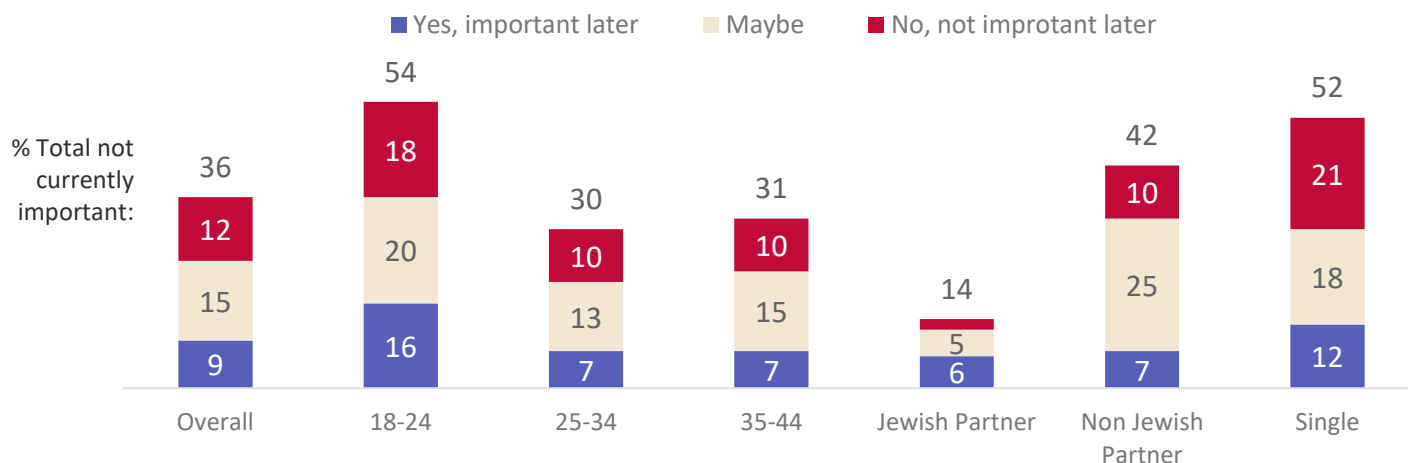
A majority of young Jews (64%) say having a relationship with a rabbi is important to them; however, younger Jews are less likely to say it is important. While most say it’s important overall, the intensity of that feeling, or the percentage who say it’s “very important,” is relatively low at only 27%, meaning that a relationship with a rabbi seems like a “nice-to-have” but not necessarily a “need-to-have” for some young Jews.

Having a relationship with a Rabbi today is more important for Orthodox (87%) and Conservative (74%) than Reform (56%) and non-denominational (66%). However, the vast majority of Reform (70%) and non-Denominational Jews (63%) who say it’s currently not important are open to it becoming more important later in life.



Among the 36% who say having a relationship with a rabbi is not important to them today, most are open to it being important to them later in life. Only a third of that group, or 12% of young Jews overall, say a relationship with a rabbi isn’t important to them now and won’t be important to them later in life. This sentiment is particularly prominent among the youngest group of Jews in our research, 18-24-year-olds, with 18% (or nearly 1 in 5) saying a relationship with a rabbi is not important to them now and likely won’t be important later. Notably, while nearly half of those in interfaith relationships (42%) say having a relationship with a rabbi isn’t important to them now, 32% of them (those who say ‘yes’ or ‘maybe’) are open to a rabbi becoming more important to them later in life.

### Do you think having a relationship with a rabbi could be more important to you later in your life?

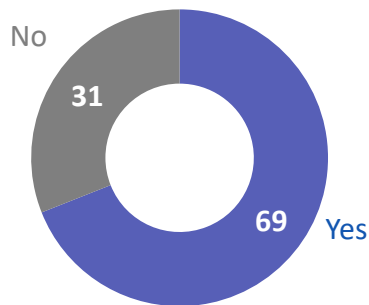


When asked at what point in their life they think they will want a relationship with a rabbi, most say when they get married or have kids. The second most frequently mentioned response is if they have a personal crisis and need help.

## A majority of young Jews have had an experience with a rabbi at some point in their life

Nearly 7 in 10 young Jews have had an experience or interaction with a rabbi at some point in their life. Overall, there are not major differences by subgroup, though older and LGBTQ+ Jews are more likely to have interacted with a rabbi at some point, while those less likely to have interacted with a rabbi are younger, in Southern states and currently part of an interfaith couple.

Have you ever had an experience or an interaction with a rabbi at some point in your life?



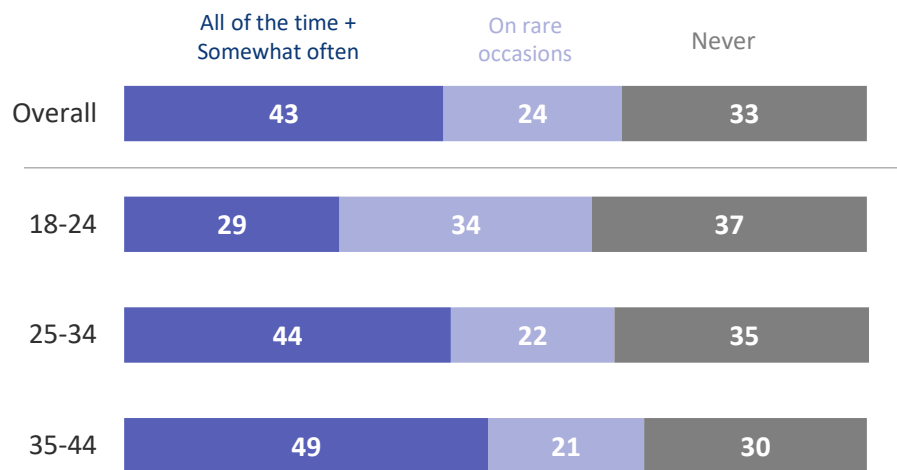
	Yes	No
Overall	69	31
18-24	65	35
25-34	67	33
35-44	73	27
LGBTQ+	78	22
City	67	33
Suburb/ Rural	71	29
Northeast	71	29
Midwest	68	32
South	66	34
West	70	30
Raised Jewish HH	75	25
Raised Interfaith HH	71	29
Jewish Partner	71	29
Non Jewish Partner	60	40
Single	71	29

**52%** of Jews 18-44 years old have had a rabbi in their life who knows them by name

## Most young Jews interact with rabbis when they're growing up and in college

2 in 3 young Jews interacted with a rabbi growing up (67%), with 43% doing so frequently and 24% doing so only on rare occasions. Similar to lower levels of engagement in Jewish activities, generally speaking, 18-24-year-olds say they were less likely to have interacted with a rabbi when they were growing up.

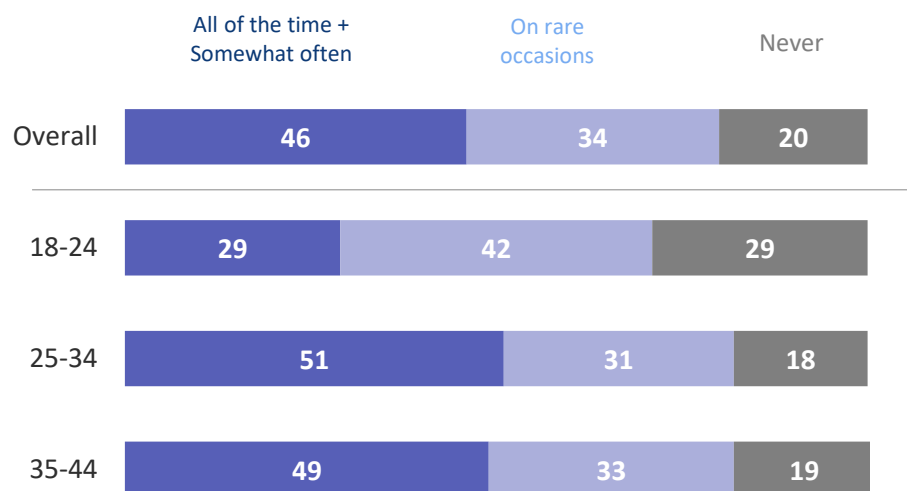
### When you were growing up, how often did you interact with a rabbi?



Additionally, many young Jews are having the chance to interact with a rabbi in college. 80% of those in college or graduated from college interacted with a rabbi during that time period (in other words, 50% of all young Jews interact with a rabbi while in college). Notably, 18–24-year-old's interactions with rabbis in college are much less frequent than their older counterparts, indicating that there may be less engagement than there was with older segments of this population.

### When you were in college, how often did you interact with a rabbi?

If currently in college, how much do you interact with a rabbi? (Among 63% currently enrolled or graduated from college)

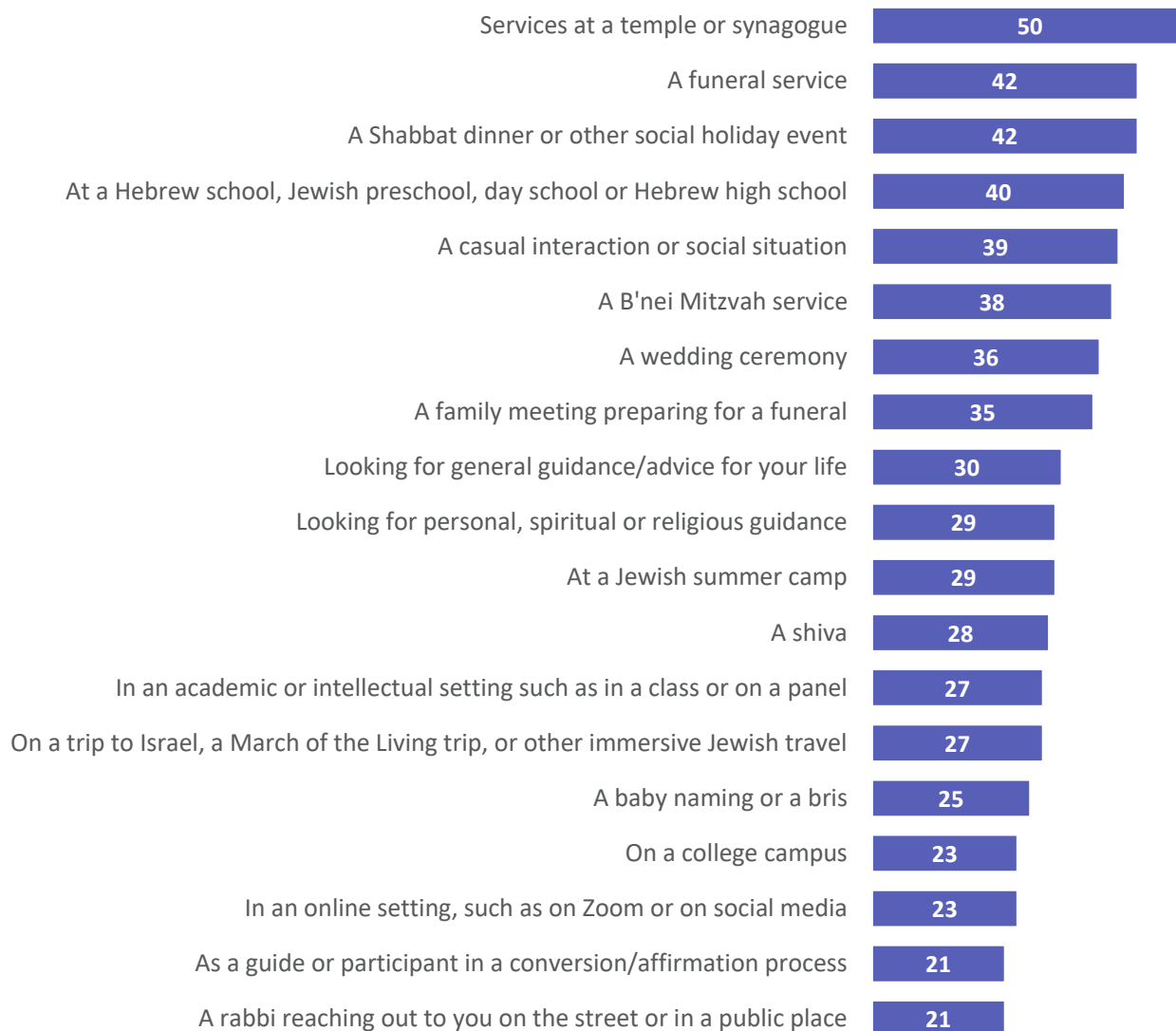


## Interactions with rabbis have taken place across a wide variety of occasions, ranging from formal to informal

Young Jews' experiences with rabbis are diverse. Interactions with a rabbi at services at a temple or synagogue are the most common, followed by a funeral service, Shabbat dinner or holiday event, and educational settings (Hebrew school, day school, etc.). Less formal, casual interactions are also prominent as well.

### Which of the following situations have you interacted with a rabbi?

*(Asked of the 69% who had an experience with a rabbi; Multiple responses accepted)*



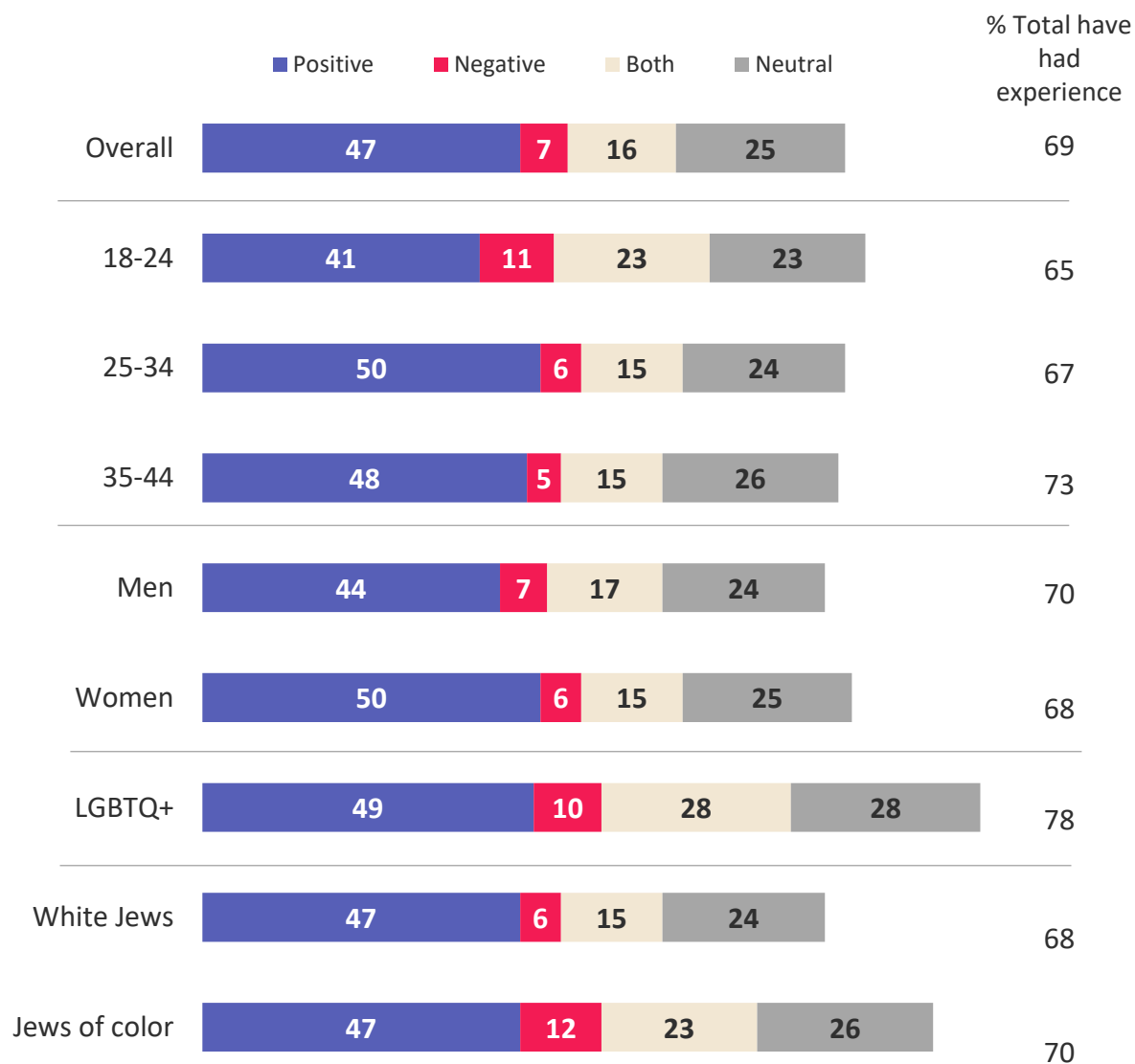
On average, respondents selected 6 different situations, indicating that 18-44-year-old Jews are having the opportunity to interact with rabbis in many different circumstances.

## Most rabbi experiences have been positive for young Jews, though nearly 1-in-4 had a negative or mixed experience

The dominant rabbi experience for young Jews is positive, at 47%. Only 7% say they’ve had a truly negative experience, while 23% have had a negative or mixed experience. 18–24-year-olds Jews, LGBTQ+ Jews and Jews of color are most likely to cite a negative experience.

### Thinking about your experiences with rabbis, have you ever had...

*(Multiple responses allowed for those who have had an experience)*



Rabbi experiences across denominations are overwhelmingly positive. Among those who have interacted with a Rabbi, 69% of Orthodox, 79% of Conservative, 73% of Reform and 63% of non-Denominational Jews have had a positive experience with a Rabbi.

Note: Because multiple responses could be selected, the numbers in the bars will not add up to the total percentage who have had a rabbi experience.





# Positive Rabbi Experiences

1

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Most positive experiences with rabbis occur in formal settings like synagogue or services, but informal interactions cannot be overlooked as they are equally meaningful.

2

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Rabbis have a critical role to play in helping young Jews feel more comfortable with their Jewishness: positive experiences make them feel more accepted and more comfortable being Jewish.

3

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A positive experience with a rabbi can have a lasting impact on young Jews' involvement in the community, connection to their religion and interest in learning more moving forward.

## Positive experiences with rabbis mainly occur during major life events, in school settings, in temple/synagogue or when receiving guidance

Most positive experiences occur in temples or synagogues, in academic settings, during major life events, particularly weddings or B’nei Mitzvahs, or when receiving guidance (either religious/spiritual or general guidance). Casual and social interactions have an impact as well. For most people, these experiences took place in the last 5 years, with 1-in-5 saying it happened during the past year. Notably, younger respondents were more likely to say they had a positive experience with a rabbi in the past year.

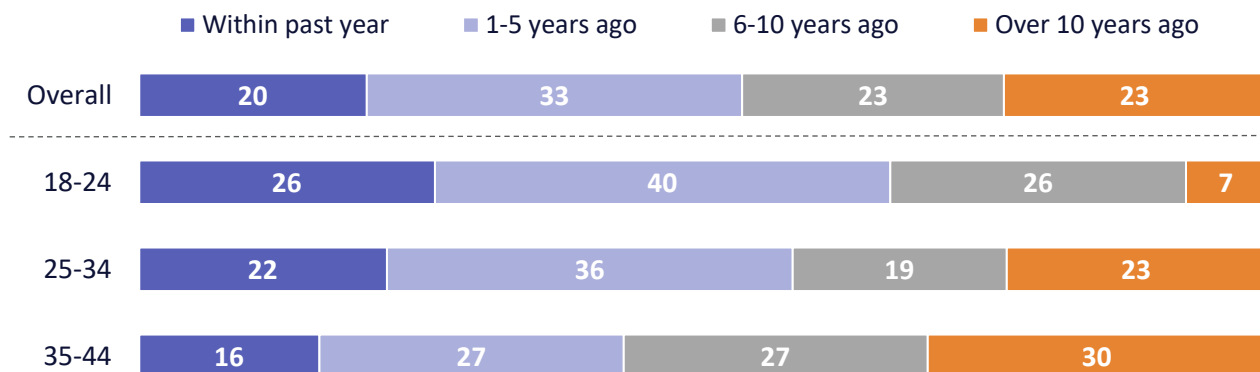
### Please select all of the situations where you have had a positive experience with a rabbi.

*Asked among those who had a positive or mixed experience (54%), Multiple responses accepted*

		% MOST POS EXPERIENCE
Services at a temple or synagogue	44	8
A casual interaction or social situation	41	7
At a Hebrew school, Jewish preschool, day school or Hebrew high school	39	9
A Shabbat dinner or other social holiday event	38	5
A B’nei Mitzvah service	32	9
A funeral service	32	5
Looking for personal, spiritual or religious guidance	32	8
A wedding ceremony	31	9
Looking for general guidance/advice for your life	30	8
A family meeting preparing for a funeral	26	2
A shiva	24	3
On a trip to Israel, March of the Living trip, other immersive Jewish travel	24	5
At a Jewish summer camp	24	5
In an academic or intellectual setting such as in a class or on a panel	23	3
In an online setting, such as on Zoom or on social media	22	4
A rabbi reaching out to you on the street or in a public place	21	4
As a guide or participant in a conversion/affirmation process	21	3
A baby naming or a bris	20	2
On a college campus	19	3

### Roughly how long ago did this positive experience or interaction with a rabbi occur?

*Asked among those who had a positive or mixed experience (54%)*

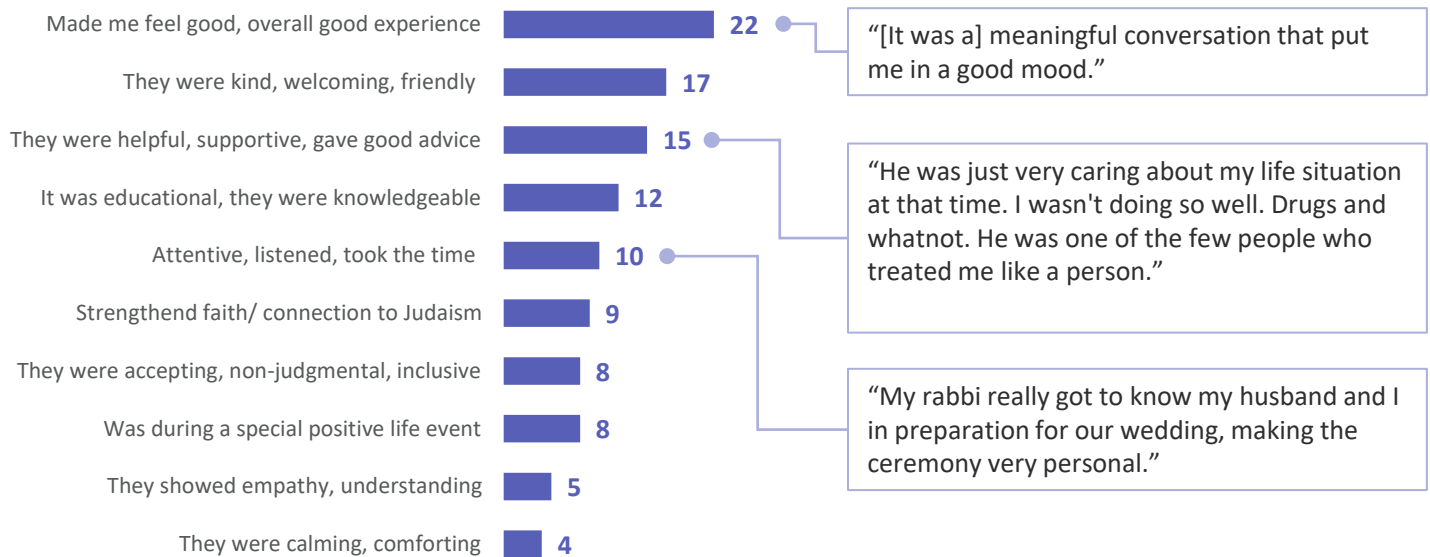


## A common thread across positive experiences are that they leave young Jews feeling more connected and accepted

Among those who've had a positive experience, on an open-ended basis, they were most likely to mention that it made them feel good, that the rabbi was kind, welcoming or friendly, and that they were helpful and supportive.

### What specifically made this a positive experience? Open End

Showing responses above 3%



For a majority of those who had a positive experience, it left them feeling accepted. Women were more likely than men to say these positive experiences made them feel at ease and connected. Notably, the type of positive experience does not affect how people feel – regardless of the experience, whether it was a life cycle event or something else, the top feelings of acceptance, gratitude, feeling at ease, connection and happiness remain.

### How did this positive experience make you feel? Please select all that apply.

Asked among those who had a positive or mixed experience (54%), Multiple responses accepted

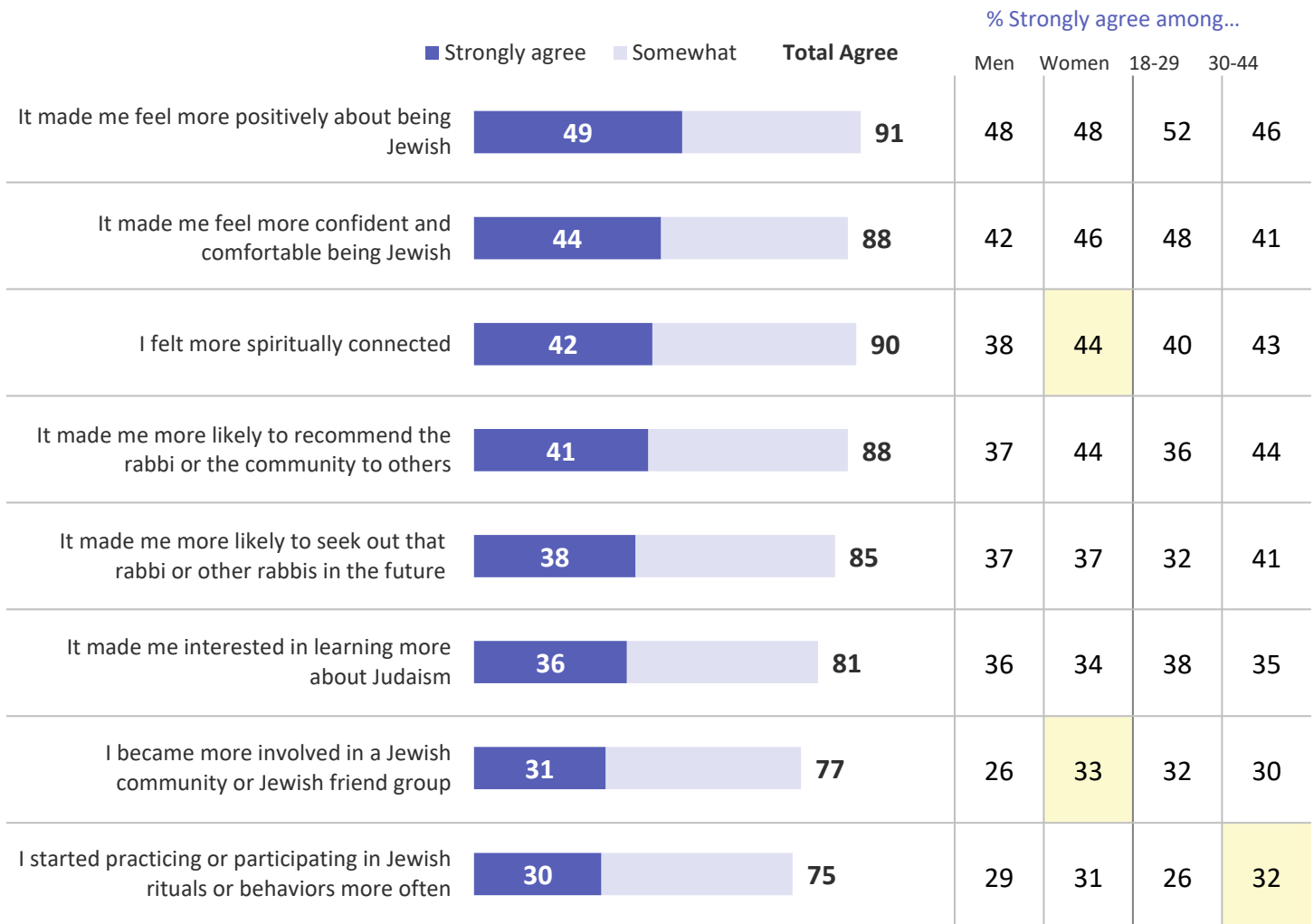
	Men	Women
Accepted	58	49
Grateful	44	46
At ease	36	50
Connected	33	51
Happy	44	42
Excited	37	35
Safe	35	35
Capable / competent to engage in Jewish things	27	37
Included	30	36
Proud	28	35
Fulfilled	25	37
Spiritually engaged	24	38
Satisfied	32	23
Informed	24	26
Understood	23	24
None of the above	1	1

## Positive experiences lead to stronger connections with Jewish identity and faith

Positive rabbi experiences have a profound impact. First, these experiences do the best job at strengthening internal feelings of Jewishness and connection, namely feeling more positive, confident and comfortable being Jewish, in addition to feeling more spiritually connected. Second, these experiences help with future engagement with and recommendation of that rabbi. While there isn't overwhelming indication of behavior change in terms of becoming more involved with a Jewish friend group or participating in more Jewish rituals or practices, there is still positive improvement, particularly among women and 30-44-year-olds.

### Impact of their positive rabbi experience

Asked among those who had a positive or mixed experience (54%)



For most types of positive rabbi interaction, the outcomes tend to be similar and ranked in a similar order, regardless of what the interaction is, whether it's a life cycle event, services, or an educational/ school experience. The one exception is instances where the positive experience was a rabbi providing spiritual, religious or general guidance to someone. In those cases, the outcomes are significantly more positive (higher numbers across the board on the chart above), particularly for practicing or participating in Jewish rituals or behaviors more often (13 points higher than total in strongly agree) and feeling more spiritually connected (11 points higher).

# Negative Rabbi Experiences

1

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While negative rabbi experiences are not frequent, when they occur, they leave young Jews feeling disappointed, uncomfortable and angry.

2

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These negative experiences can have a lasting impact on young Jews' relationship to Judaism and the Jewish community, making them less likely to engage.

3

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To keep young Jews engaged in some form of Jewish community, it's critical to avoid these negative experiences from occurring at younger ages.

## Negative rabbi experiences are varied, but services, youth experiences (educational settings or camp), life cycle events or spiritual guidance gone wrong can have a lasting impact

Negative experiences with a rabbi were most likely to have occurred at Hebrew school or day school, or at any type of service. As a result, many young Jews indicate their negative rabbi experience happened when they were young (likely before college) --- more than 10 years ago for 30-44-year-olds and 6-10 years ago for 18-29-year-olds. This means that it's crucial to ensure the youngest Jews are having positive experiences with rabbis so that they're not turned off from future interactions with other rabbis.

### Please select all of the situations where you have had a negative experience with a rabbi.

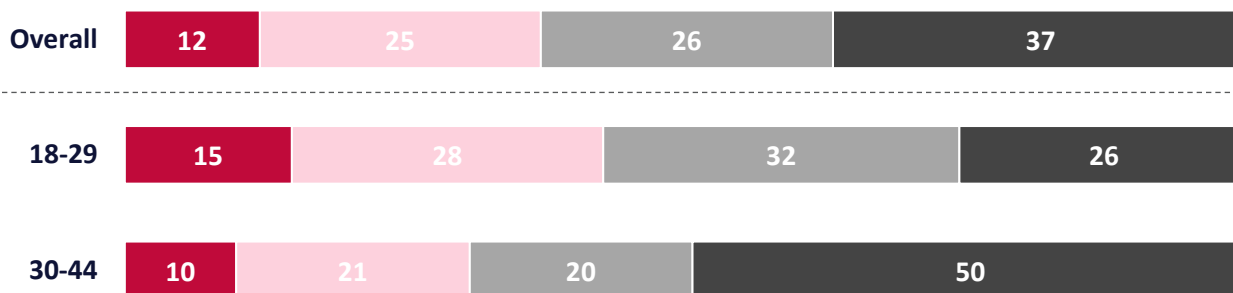
*Asked among those who had a negative or mixed experience (20%), Multiple responses accepted*

		% MOST NEG EXPERIENCE
At a Hebrew school, Jewish preschool, day school or Hebrew high school	20	8
Services at a temple or synagogue (high holidays, shabbat, etc.)	19	10
A funeral service	17	8
A B'nei Mitzvah service	16	6
Looking for personal, spiritual or religious guidance	16	8
A wedding ceremony	15	7
A Shabbat dinner or other social holiday event	15	0
A shiva	13	3
Looking for general guidance/advice for your life	13	5
A casual interaction or social situation	13	3
At a Jewish summer camp	13	8
A rabbi reaching out to you on the street or in a public place	13	4
On a college campus	12	6
In an online setting, such as on Zoom or on social media	12	2
On a trip to Israel, a March of the Living trip, or other immersive Jewish travel	11	5
A family meeting preparing for a funeral	10	4
In an academic or intellectual setting such as in a class or on a panel or group discussion	10	4
A baby naming or a bris	8	1
As a guide or participant in a conversion/affirmation process	8	3

### Roughly how long ago did this negative experience or interaction with a rabbi occur?

*Asked among those who had a negative or mixed experience (20%)*

■ Within past year   ■ 1-5 years ago   ■ 6-10 years ago   ■ Over 10 years ago



## Negative experiences lead to decreased connections with the Jewish community and faith

Negative experiences leave young Jews feeling disappointed, annoyed, and uncomfortable most of all. The most dominant takeaway when asked to describe their negative experience is a feeling of judgment, which is very much in line with what we heard from our qualitative journaling phase of research. Notably, those with a negative experience selected an average of 4 emotions while those who had positive experiences averaged over 5 positive feelings, indicating positive experiences carry more weight.

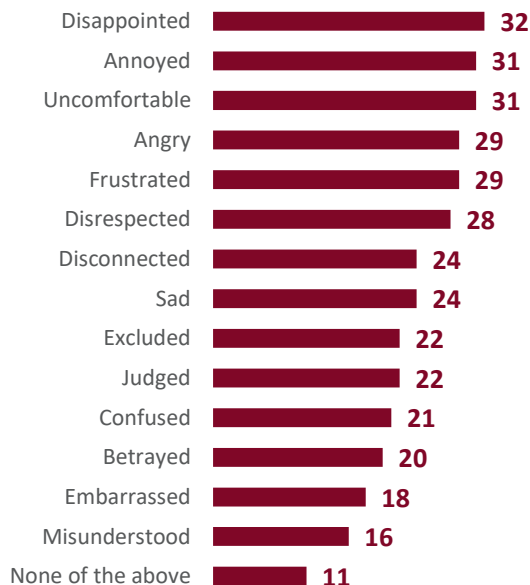
### What made this a negative experience for you? (Open End)

- 20% said the rabbi was judgmental or they felt judged
- 10% said the rabbi was rude, mean or unfriendly
- 6% said they were unhelpful or didn't have answers for their question
- 4% said they were hurt by the rabbi as a child
- 4% said they were misbehaving as a child
- 4% said they did not feel listened to or taken seriously

The remainder offered a wide variety of reasons ranging from long or confusing services (3%) to being asked for money (3%), while many said it just left them feeling unhappy or unsatisfied.

### How did this experience make you feel? Please select all that apply.

Asked among those who had a negative or mixed experience, Multiple responses accepted



These negative experiences make young Jews much less likely to seek out a rabbi in the future and contribute to disengagement from the Jewish community, particularly for 30-44-year-olds. However, it's notable that all of these scores are lower than the positive ones on page 17, indicating that positive experiences have a much bigger impact than negative ones.

### Impact of negative rabbi experiences

Asked among those who had a negative or mixed experience

% Strongly agree among

Statement	Response		Total Agree	% Strongly agree among	
	Strongly agree	Somewhat		18-29	30-44
It made me less likely to seek out that rabbi or other rabbis in the future	32	29	61	30	35
It made me less likely to recommend the rabbi or the community to others	31	35	66	32	30
It made me feel like I am 'not Jewish enough'	27	24	51	25	28
I became less involved in a Jewish community or Jewish friend group	26	24	50	22	30
It made me less likely to practice or participate in Jewish rituals or behaviors	25	26	51	21	30
It made me less interested in Judaism	23	26	49	17	29
It made me feel negatively about being Jewish	22	24	46	20	25
It made me feel less confident and comfortable being Jewish	18	31	49	20	17
I felt less spiritually connected	17	34	51	14	20



# Rabbi Experiences Today

1

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Those who currently interact with a rabbi are largely satisfied, but their interactions are not occurring very frequently.

2

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While many young Jews currently interact with a rabbi, 2-in-5 say it's difficult to establish a relationship with a rabbi today.

3

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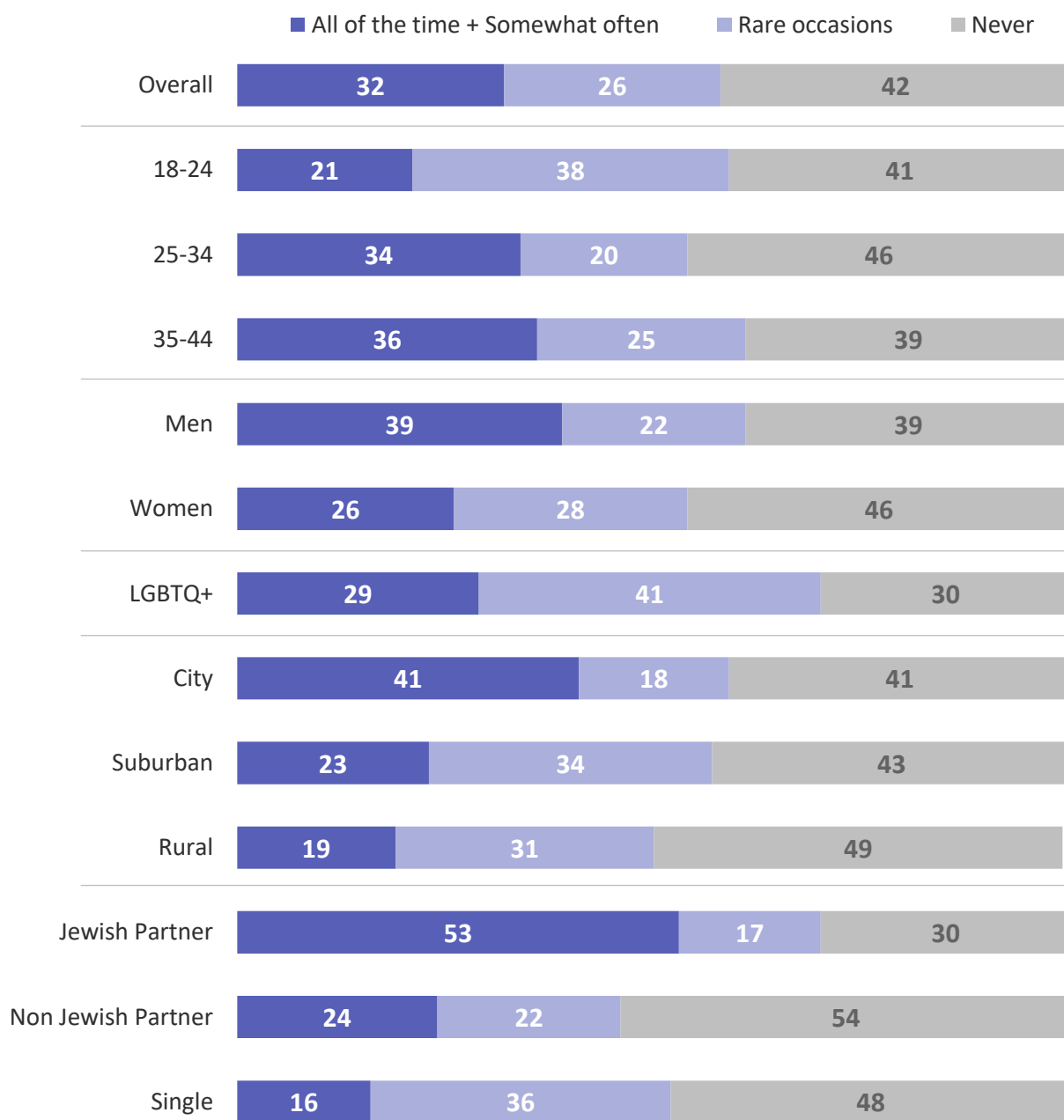
But people are largely optimistic: most of them say they've found the right rabbi for them while only a small portion say they're not interested or it's not possible.



## Over half of young Jews currently interact with a rabbi, but not very frequently, representing plenty of opportunity for increased engagement

58% of young Jews currently interact with a rabbi, with 32% interacting often or all the time. Younger Jews (18–24-year-olds) may have access to a rabbi in college while 35–44-year-olds often do as they begin to have families, but there is an opportunity with the middle age group of 25–34-year-olds, particularly 25–29-year-olds, who interact with rabbis less often. Further, young Jews in suburban and rural areas, those who are single and those who are in interfaith relationships interact with rabbis much less frequently today, representing an opportunity for engagement.

How often do you interact with a rabbi today?

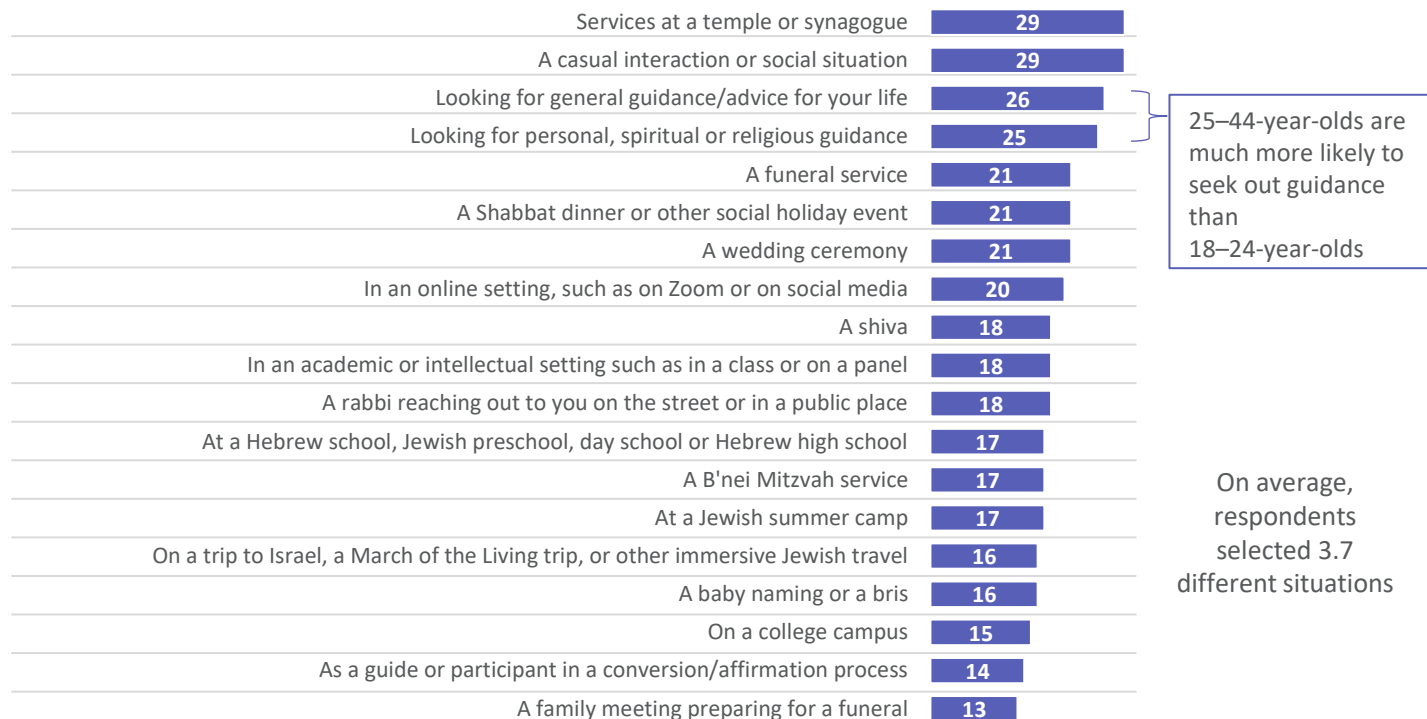


## Interactions with rabbis today take place in a variety of formal and more casual settings, and satisfaction with these rabbi relationships is high

Overall, the most common situations for young Jews to interact with a rabbi are tied between services and casual/social interactions. Young people interact with rabbis in a number of different settings, with respondents on average selecting nearly 4 different situations where they tend to interact with a rabbi.

### In which of the following situations do you tend to interact with that rabbi?

(Asked of the 58% who interact with a rabbi currently)

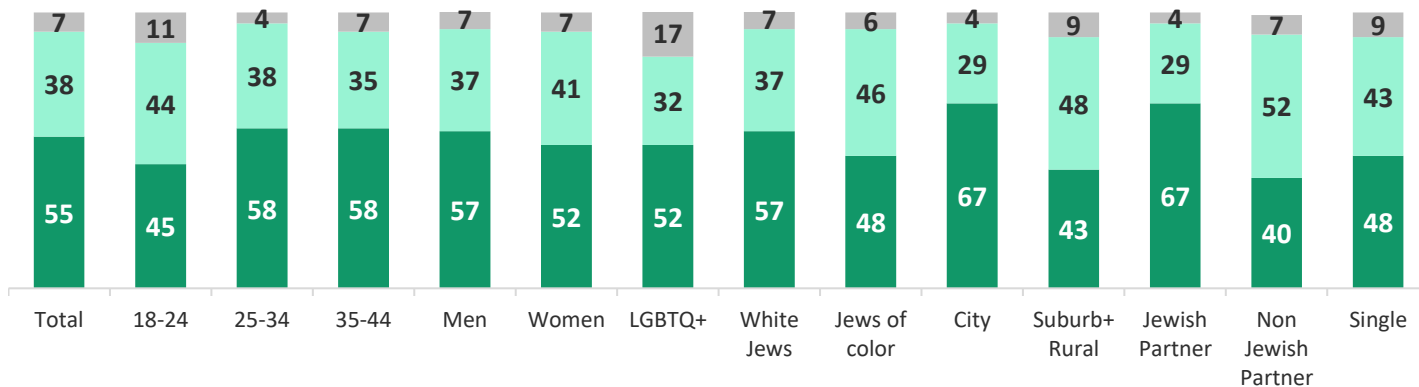


Those who do interact with a rabbi today are extremely satisfied. Nearly all are satisfied (93%) with a high number, 55%, saying they are “very satisfied.” However, 18-24-year-old Jews, LGBTQ+ Jews, Jews of color, suburban and rural Jews and those in interfaith relationships are less satisfied than others, indicating room for improvement.

### Thinking about the rabbi you interact with most often today, in general, how satisfied are you with this rabbi?

(Asked of those who interact with a rabbi currently)

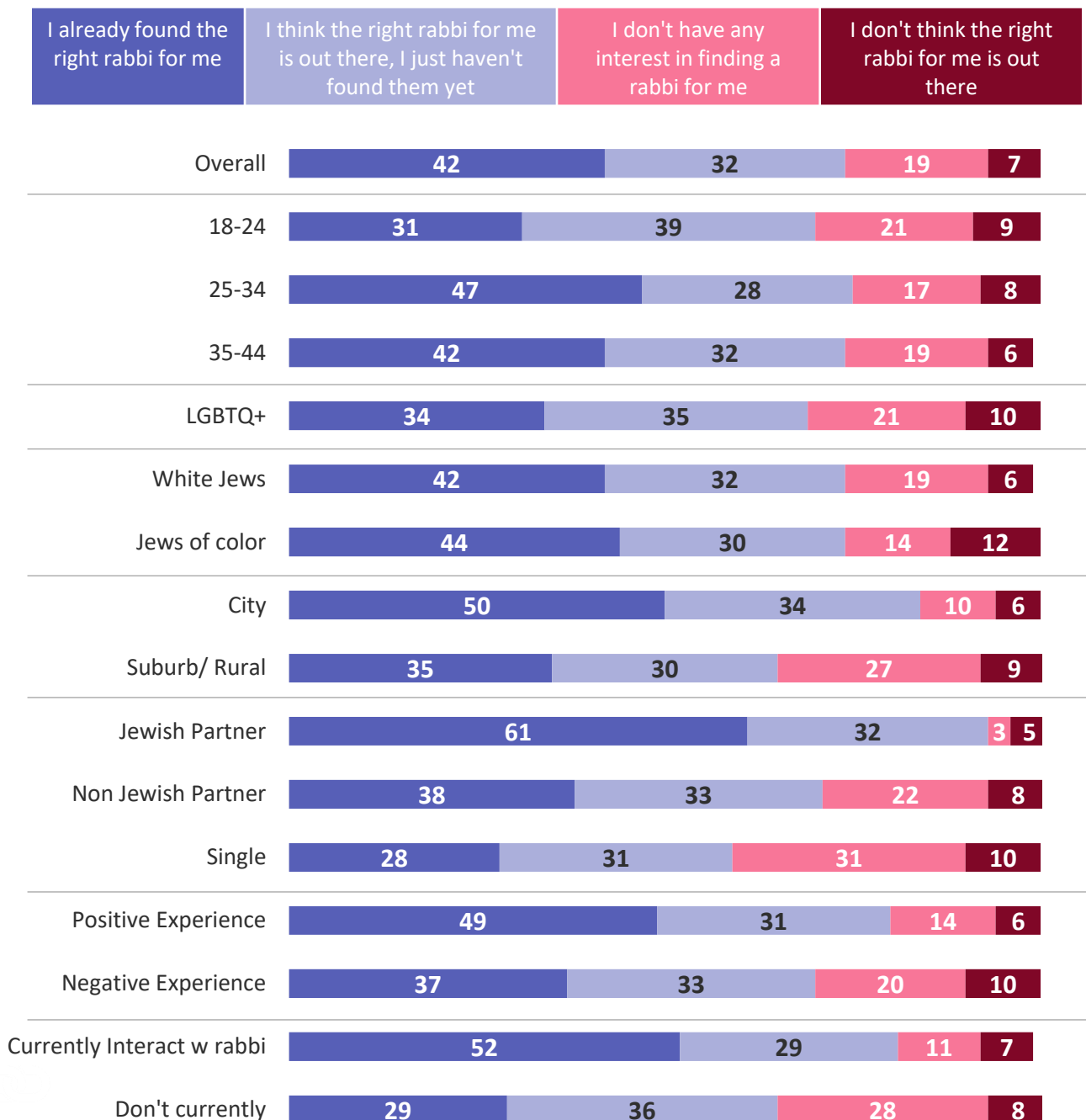
Very satisfied    Somewhat satisfied    Dissatisfied



## Overall, optimism is high among young Jews about finding the right rabbi for them – many have already found that person and only about 1 in 4 have no interest or believe the right rabbi doesn't exist.

Encouragingly, a plurality of young Jews have already found the right rabbi for them, including more than half of those who currently interact with a rabbi. While many have already found the right rabbi for them, others, including 32% of young Jews overall, are optimistic that the right rabbi for them is out there. Jews of color, LGBTQ+ Jews, suburban and rural Jews and those who have had a negative rabbi experience tend to be more pessimistic about whether the right rabbi for them is out there.

### Which statement do you agree with most?

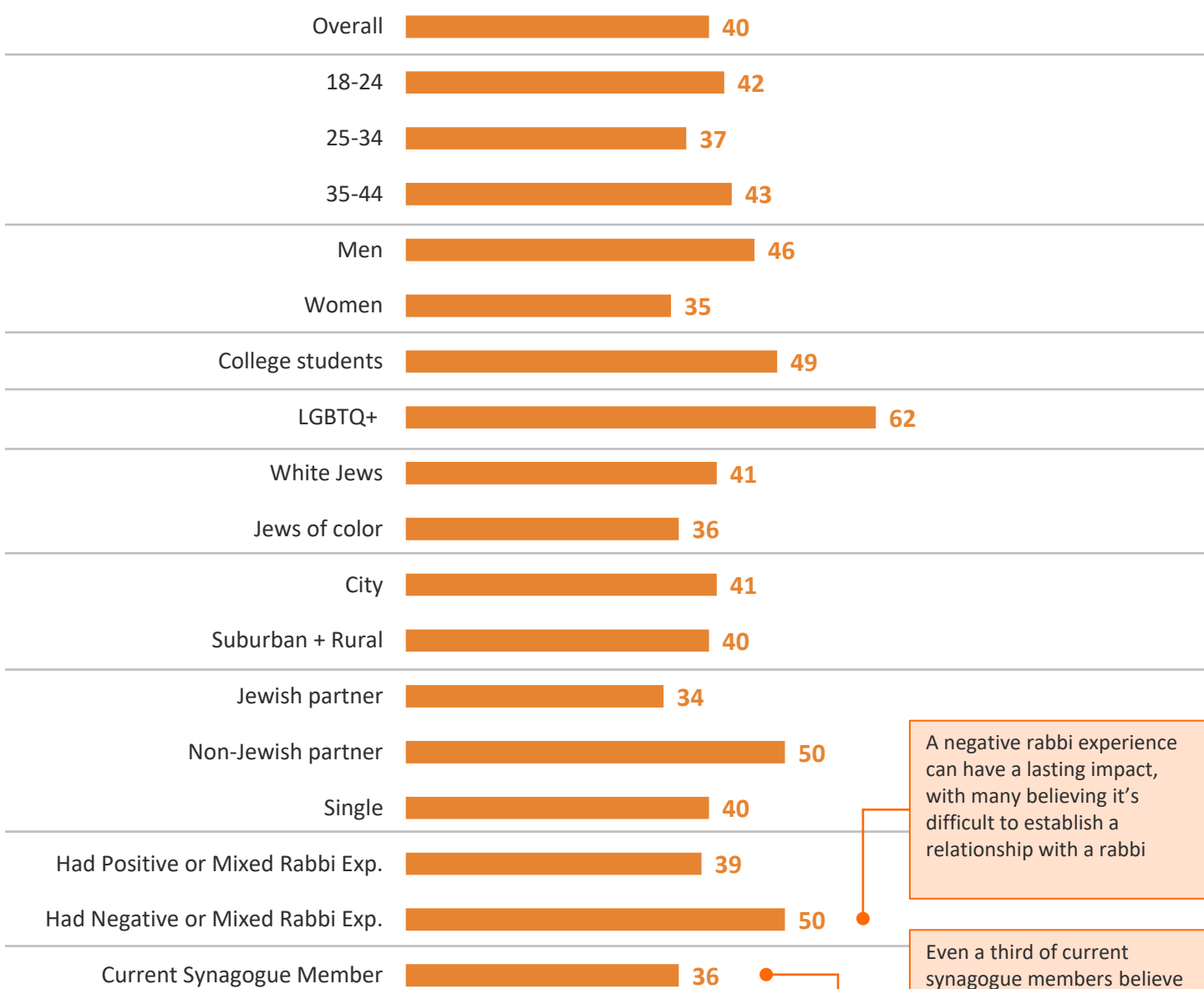


## While many young Jews have a relationship with a rabbi, 2 in 5 acknowledge that it's difficult to develop a relationship with one

4 in 10 young Jews feel it's difficult to develop a relationship with a rabbi today. Men, college students, LGBTQ+ Jews, interfaith couples and those who have had negative experiences with rabbis are more likely to believe it's difficult.

Notably, there isn't a significant difference by age, ethnicity and whether someone is currently a synagogue member in terms of their perception of how difficult it is to develop a relationship with a rabbi today. Interestingly, young Jews who live in cities, which presumably have more access to Jewish opportunities, are equally likely to say it's difficult to establish a relationship with a rabbi as those who live in more suburban and rural areas of the country.

**"It's hard to develop a relationship with a rabbi today"**  
*% who agree*



A negative rabbi experience can have a lasting impact, with many believing it's difficult to establish a relationship with a rabbi

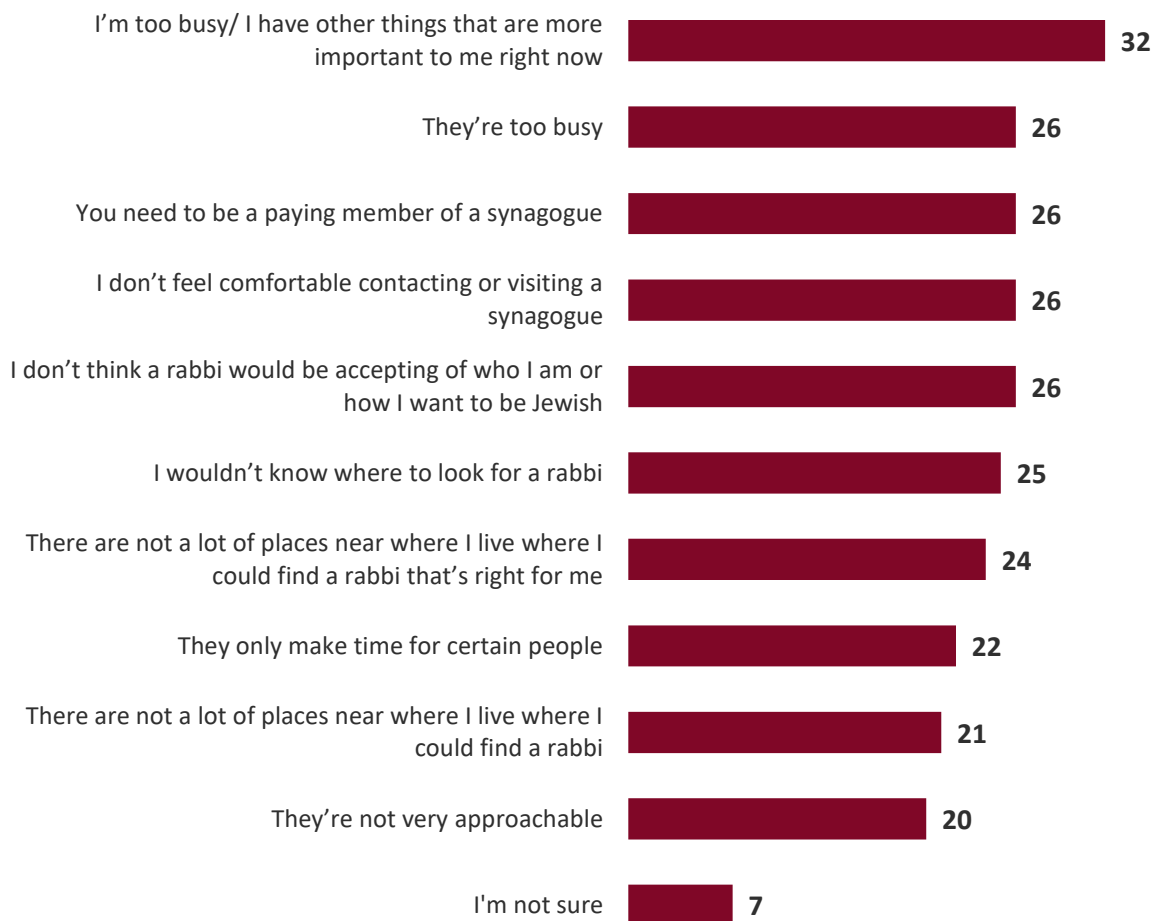
Even a third of current synagogue members believe it is difficult to establish a relationship with a rabbi

## There are a number of barriers to stronger relationships with rabbis, including their time, general acceptance, the synagogue itself (comfort in approaching + dues) and knowing where to find one

Among those who believe it’s difficult to develop a relationship with a rabbi today, there are a variety of reasons why. On average, young Jews select nearly 3 different reasons. Being too busy personally is the top reason why, but there are a number of other top reasons why as well. Because many of these answer choices are grouped close together, it’s best to look at this data by subgroup, because different groups identify different barriers (see next page).

### Which of the following reasons, if any, make it hard for you to develop a relationship with a rabbi today?

*Asked among those who agree that it’s hard to develop a relationship with a rabbi today (40%), Multiple responses allowed*



On average, respondents selected 2.6 different reasons

## Barriers to deeper relationships with rabbis vary notably by subgroup – concerns about being accepted and comfort in synagogue are often cited

There are lots of different reasons why young people perceive it to be difficult to develop a relationship with a rabbi today. While many cited that they personally were too busy and it wasn't a priority, there are other top reasons that were cited as well that indicate how young Jews feel about rabbis today. Notably, many are concerned about being accepted, they feel uncomfortable going to a synagogue and some worry that rabbis won't have time for them. Knowledge about where to find a rabbi is a barrier for younger Jews and Jews of color, in particular.

### Which of the following reasons, if any, make it hard for you to develop a relationship with a rabbi today?

*Asked among those who agree that it's hard to develop a relationship with a rabbi today, Multiple responses allowed*

Key:  Indicates a top reason among that group. We removed "I'm too busy" from the list because it's a top reason for most groups and that finding is not as actionable in terms of increasing engagement.

Barrier:	Knowledge	Knowledge/ Location	Location	Acceptance	Comfort	Money	Perception	Perception
	I wouldn't know where to look for a rabbi	There are not a lot of places near where I live where I could find a rabbi that's right for me	There are not a lot of places near where I live where I could find a rabbi	I don't think a rabbi would be accepting of <u>who I am or how I want to be Jewish</u>	I don't feel comfortable contacting or visiting a synagogue	You need to be a paying member of a synagogue	They're too busy	They're <u>not very approachable</u>
Total				▪	▪	▪	▪	
18-24	▪			▪				
25-34		▪			▪			
35-44						▪	▪	
Male							▪	▪
Female		▪		▪	▪			
College students				▪		▪		
White Jews					▪		▪	
Jews of color	▪			▪				
LGBTQ+				▪	▪			
Partner is Jewish			▪				▪	
Interfaith couple			▪	▪	▪			
City				▪	▪	▪		
Suburb + Rural		▪					▪	
Rabbi exp: pos or mixed				▪		▪		
Rabbi exp: neg or mixed				▪	▪			

# Moving Forward: The Ideal Rabbi

1

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It is critical for young Jews to find rabbis who accept them for who they are, both personally and spiritually/religiously.

2

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Most young Jews imagine the ideal rabbi as being older than them. In terms of gender, young Jews' ideal rabbi skews male, but that is largely driven by Jewish men.

3

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What young Jews want most of all is a rabbi who is trustworthy and accepts them for who they are – both in terms of their Jewishness and otherwise. But their experiences so far have been centered around spiritual and religious knowledge.





## What young Jews are looking for doesn't always match up with what their rabbi experiences have been so far

What young Jews want most of all is a rabbi who is trustworthy and accepts them for who they are – both in terms of their Jewishness and otherwise. However, the thing that most identifies rabbis that young Jews have interacted with so far in their life is their expertise in Jewish texts and the rabbi's spirituality, which is not a top tier priority when young Jews evaluate what they would like most in a rabbi. There is undoubtedly room for improvement when it comes to acceptance, as this trait is very important to young Jews but ranks only in the middle for what they've actually experienced from rabbis. There's also room for growth on "taking time to get to know me" and "being easily accessible."

### Rabbi Attributes: How young Jews' ideal rabbi matches up with their experiences

Colors indicate ranking within each category from highest to lowest	Ideal rabbi: % who say it's extremely or very important	Rabbi they've interacted with most: % who say it describes that rabbi well
Is accepting of how I choose to be Jewish	72	63
Accepts me for who I am	72	62
Is someone I trust	72	66
Takes the time to get to know me	67	60
Is easily accessible	67	60
Makes me feel connected to Judaism	65	61
Is someone whose teachings or sermons I can understand and relate to	64	59
Is able to effectively engage children and kids in Jewish activities and learning	64	62
Is someone I would seek out for advice on religious or spiritual issues	62	62
Strengthens my connection to a Jewish community or other Jewish people	62	62
Has expertise in Jewish texts	61	68
Is spiritual	60	68
Is someone I would seek out for advice on life issues	59	57
Spends time with members of the community outside of a synagogue	57	63
Shares the same views toward Israel as me	54	55
Shares the same politics as me	52	49

Importantly, what people want in a rabbi does not differ much by subgroup. This ranking and prioritization of ideal rabbi attributes is the same even when we look at groups that should be an area of focus like 18-24-year-olds, LGBTQ+ Jews, Jews of color, Jews in suburban and rural areas and interfaith couples and families – these are all groups who are either less likely to engage with rabbis today, have had negative experiences with rabbis, or are less satisfied with their current rabbi.



Across denominations, the top priorities for a rabbi are acceptance of themselves or how they choose to be Jewish and "Is someone I trust". Notably, Conservative Jews also rank being "able to effectively engage children and kids in Jewish activities and learning" as a top priority.

## Most young Jews expect to find their ideal rabbi in a synagogue or community organization but when they need to find a rabbi, the internet and word of mouth matters

While most expect to find their ideal rabbi in a synagogue or community organization, 1 in 10 (11%) are not sure where their ideal rabbi would work, reflecting an opportunity to provide more information to the Jewish community about how to find a rabbi. The youngest Jews in our research (18-24-year-olds), LGBTQ+ Jews, Jews of color, those in suburban and rural areas and those who grew up in interfaith families are all more likely to say they don't know where they would find their ideal rabbi.

**And thinking about this ideal rabbi for you, where would they work? Please select all that apply.**

*Multiple responses accepted*

		18-24	25-34	35-44
Synagogue	53	46	60	50
Community organization	37	34	39	36
Jewish camp	30	28	29	33
Hebrew school	27	27	30	24
Jewish day school	24	26	25	22
Campus organization (Hillel/Chabad)	23	28	24	19
I'm not sure	11	15	8	12

When asked where they would go to find a rabbi in general (before we asked about ideal rabbis specifically), synagogues are the most frequently named place, but the internet and social media, along with word of mouth, play an important role as well.

**If you wanted to talk to, or find a rabbi today, where would you go to find one?**

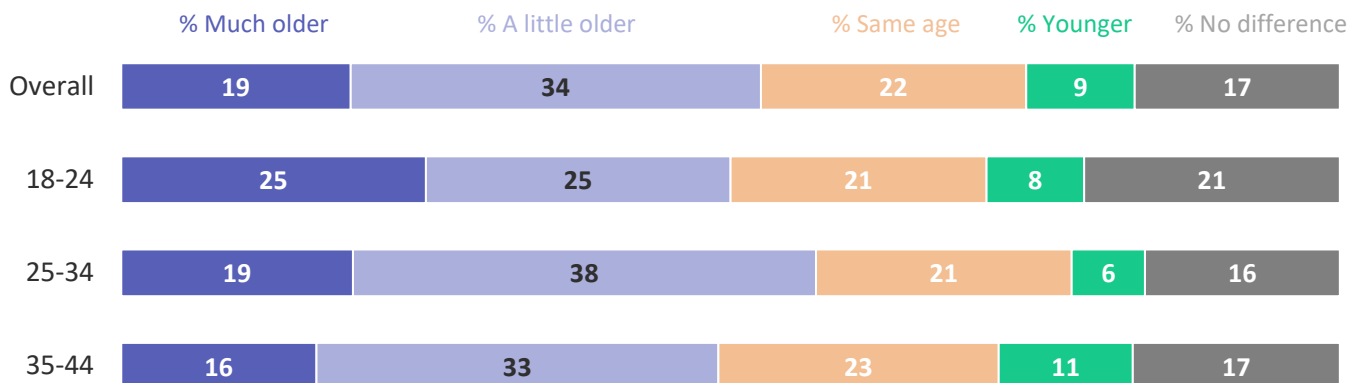
*Open end, top responses shown*

Temple/synagogue	36
Jewish community organizations	11
Online/search engine	9
Friend/family member	8
School/day school/college campus	5
Social media	4
Camp/Jewish summer camp	2

## Young Jews have a slight preference for a rabbi to be a little older than them, while gender preferences are more varied

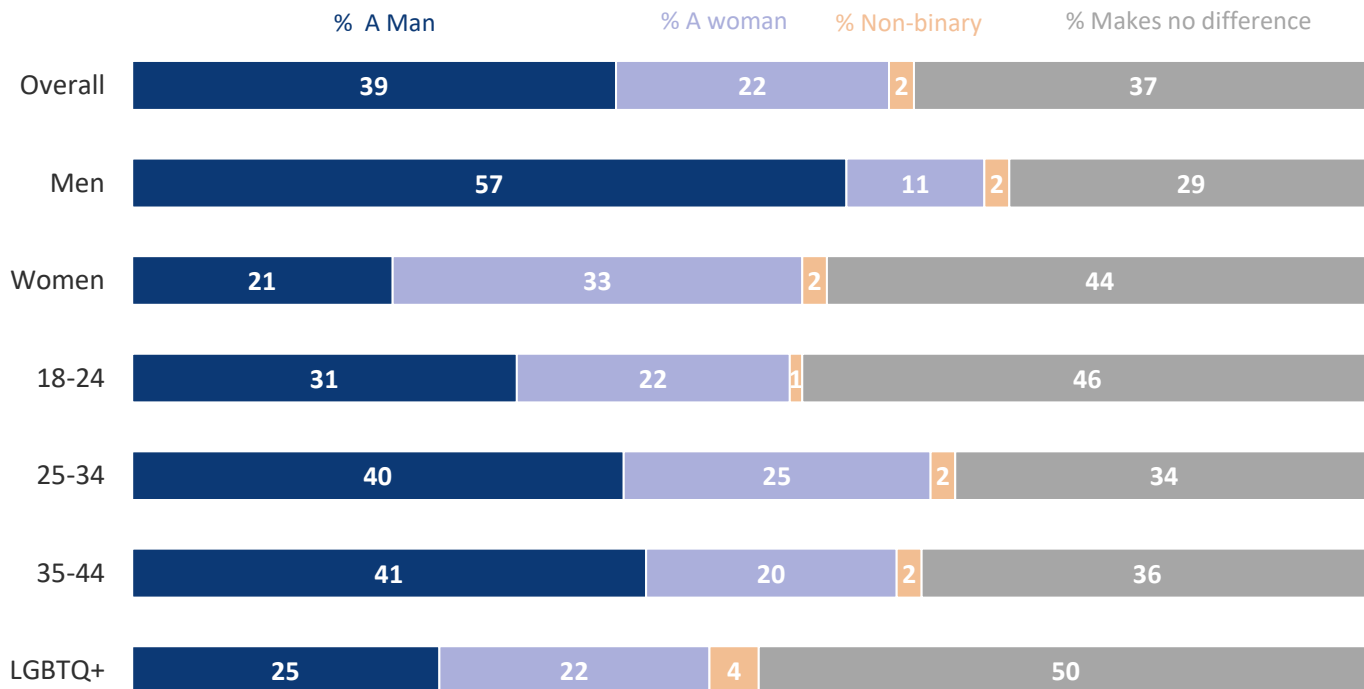
While about 20% would like a rabbi around their same age, most young Jews say their ideal rabbi is older than themselves.

Would you want your ideal rabbi to be...



In terms of gender preferences, young Jews lean toward a male preference (39%), but that is driven mostly by men (57% prefer a male rabbi). 37% overall say it makes no difference. Women lean toward preferring a female rabbi, but a plurality, 44%, say it makes no difference.

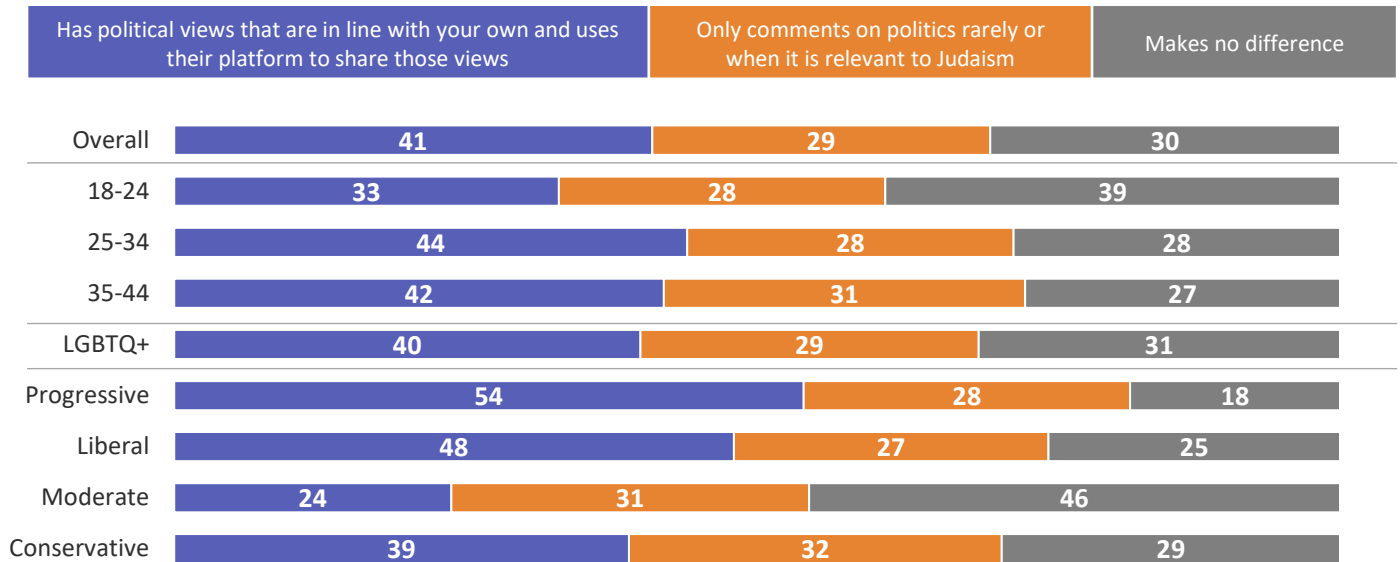
Would your ideal rabbi be...



## Politics are not a dominant factor when thinking about their ideal rabbi, but if given the choice, they would prefer their rabbi to align with their views

In our politically divided times, a plurality of young Jews (41%) would like their ideal rabbi to share their political views and use their platform to share those views. Progressive young Jews are most likely to want their ideal rabbi to express their political views (54%), while those who identify as moderates are mostly likely to say it doesn't make a difference for them (46% makes no difference).

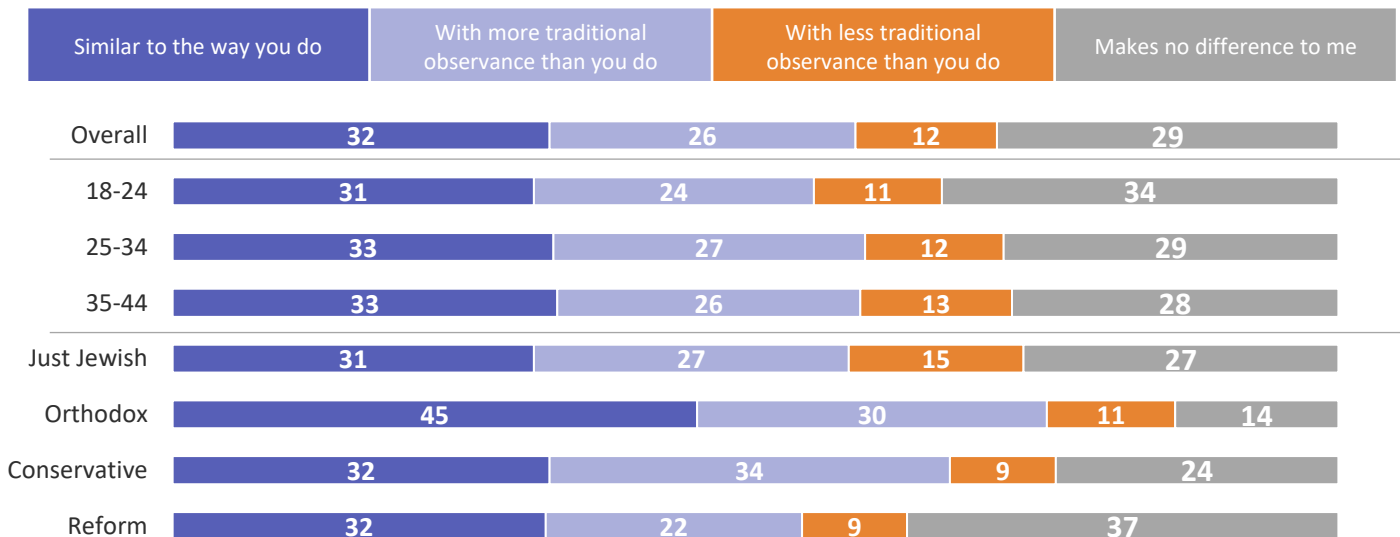
In an ideal world, would you want a rabbi who...



## In terms of religious observance, there is no one-size-fits all: a plurality lean toward a rabbi that practices similarly to them, but many say it makes no difference or want a more traditional rabbi

Observance preferences differ greatly by religious identification: Reform Jews are more likely to say it doesn't make much of a difference while Conservative and Orthodox Jews prefer a rabbi that is similar or more traditional than themselves.

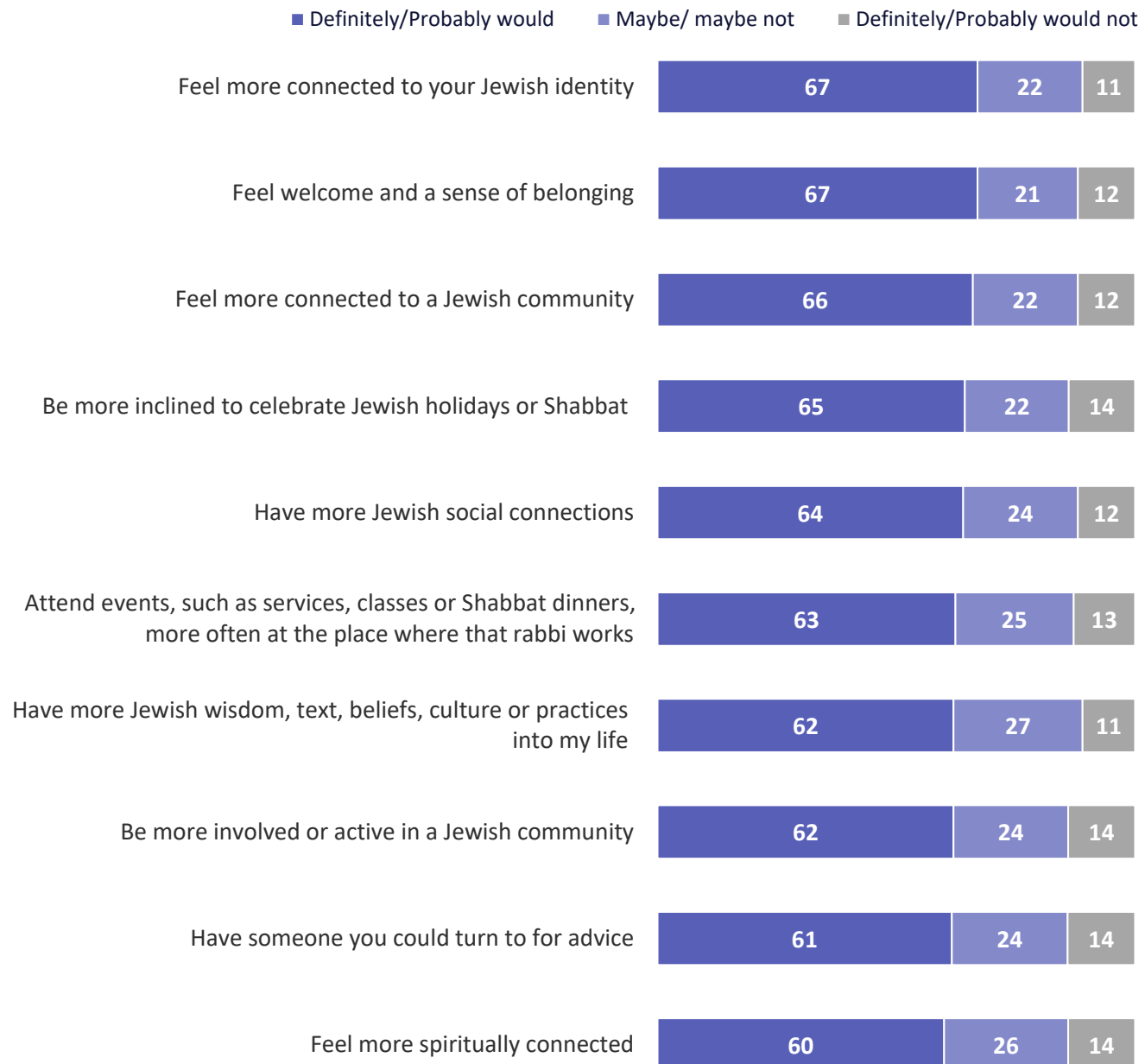
In an ideal world, would you want a rabbi who practices Judaism...



## Matching young Jews with their ideal rabbi could have a significant impact on their involvement and connection to their Jewish Identity and community

With high scores across nearly all the areas tested, it's clear the impact of finding the ideal rabbi would strengthen connection and belonging and likely boost engagement.

If you had a relationship with your ideal rabbi, do you think you would...

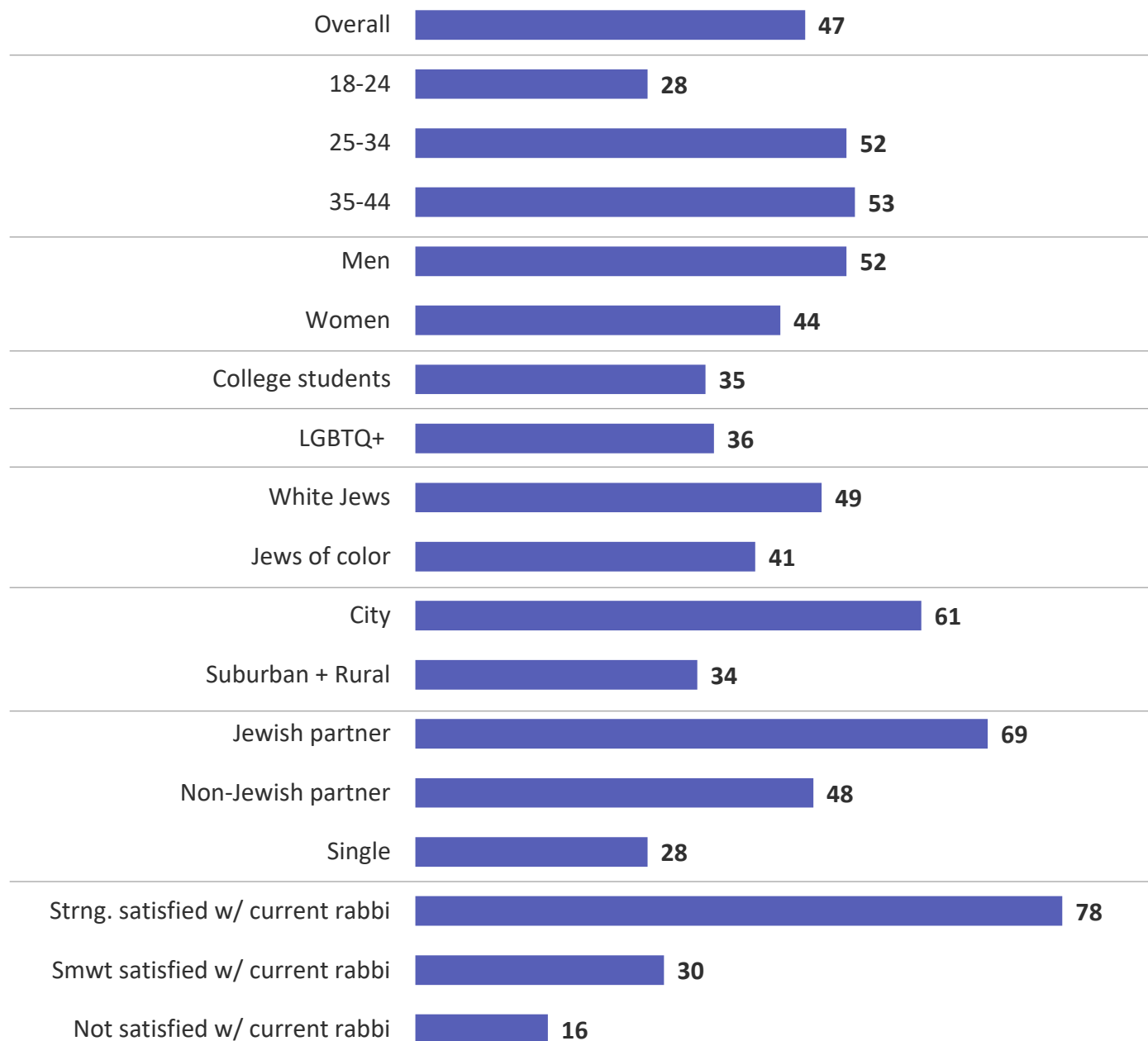


## Younger and less religious Jews are less likely to have found their ideal rabbi, leaving a large opportunity to connect them with the right rabbi

Just under half of young Jews say the rabbi they interact with most often resembles their ideal rabbi – that number is even lower with 18–24-year-olds, college students, LGBTQ+ and suburban/rural Jews. Additionally, only 30% of those who are “somewhat satisfied” with their current rabbi say that rabbi closely resembles their ideal rabbi, indicating that the key is to drive “strong satisfaction” rather than just overall satisfaction in order to ensure constituents are happy with their rabbi.

### Thinking about the rabbi you currently interact with most often, How closely do they resemble the ideal rabbi you’ve described?

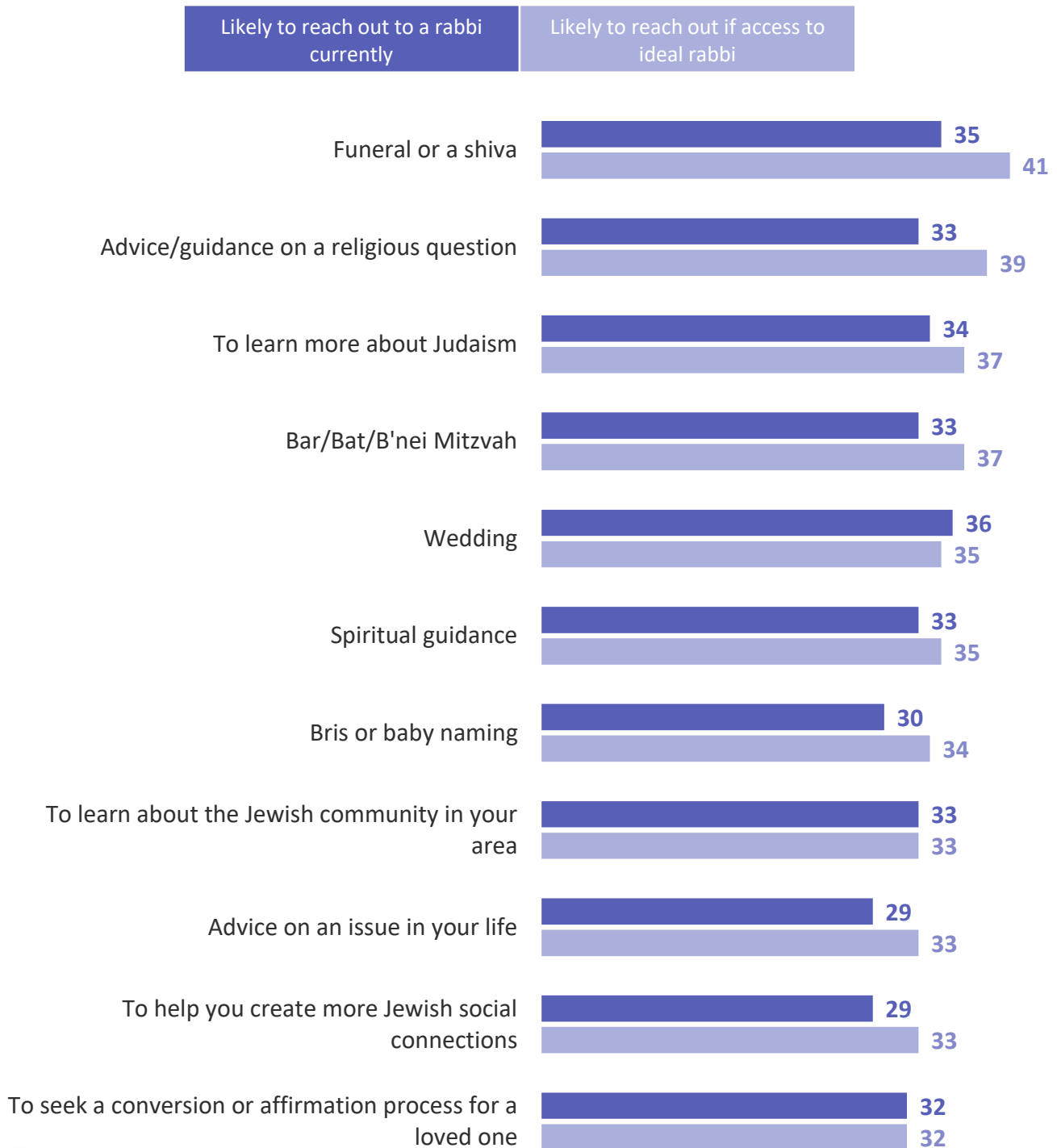
*% Net 8-10 on a 10-point scale that their “most often” rabbi closely resembles their ideal rabbi*



## Finding their ideal rabbi makes young Jews more likely to reach out during nearly all life events or situations

If they are able to connect with their ideal rabbi, young Jews are more likely to reach out to a rabbi for life events, advice and guidance and to learn more about Judaism.

How likely would you be to reach out to a rabbi for each of the following?





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## Wrap Up: Key Opportunities for Increasing Engagement with Rabbis

### 1) The most important trait to demonstrate is acceptance

- The top 3 traits people want in a rabbi are trustworthiness, acceptance of who they are and acceptance of how they want to be Jewish. Rabbis are already generally seen as trustworthy, but there is room for improvement on both elements of acceptance. This will go a long way in helping to engage Jews who don't currently interact with a rabbi today, including but not limited to 18-24-year-old Jews, LGBTQ+ Jews, interfaith Jews and Jews of color.

### 2) Leverage opportunities to interact with rabbis outside of a synagogue

- Rabbis are highly associated with synagogues – it's where people often interact with rabbis today and it's the first place they would look if they needed to find a rabbi. However, there are significant barriers to synagogues, namely financial barriers (people believe you need to be a paying member of a synagogue to have access to a rabbi there) and intimidation and lack of comfort that some feel with entering a synagogue. As a result, giving access to rabbis outside of a traditional synagogue setting could go a long way in helping to develop more rabbi relationships.

### 3) A knowledge gap exists that prevents many young people from engaging with a rabbi

- While many young people would turn to a synagogue to try to find a rabbi, we shouldn't discount that many don't even know where to go. 1 in 4 cite not knowing where to look for a rabbi as a reason why it's hard to develop a relationship with a rabbi (or 10% overall), which lines up with the 1 in 10 Jews who say they wouldn't know where to look to find their ideal rabbi. So, while getting out of the synagogue would help engagement among those who see barriers to walking through synagogue doors, that doesn't solve the problem of some not even knowing where to look to begin with. Consequently, more outreach and education needs to be done to demonstrate the varied places and opportunities where Jews can interact with rabbis.

### 4) Be relevant now, not later

- Because rabbis are highly associated with synagogues and life cycle events, many young Jews who do not yet have families don't see a need to have a rabbi in their lives right now. To keep these Jews engaged in young adulthood, it's crucial to demonstrate the role a rabbi can play in the lives of pre-couple or pre-family Jews.



[www.bsgco.com](http://www.bsgco.com)

## Full list of rabbi attributes tested: Rabbis today are associated with spirituality and Jewish text expertise, while negative experiences affect connection, relatability and engagement with rabbis

Rabbis are largely viewed as having expertise in Jewish texts and being spiritual. Those who've had positive experiences with a rabbi point to trustworthiness and ability to engage children in Jewish activities and learning. Those who've had negative experiences are much more likely to have said the rabbis they've interacted with are asking for money, are judgmental or intimidating.

### Rabbi attributes: How well does this describe the rabbi you've interacted with most in your life?

% Describes the rabbi you've interacted with most well (Net 4+5 on a 5-point scale)	Overall	Had Positive Experience	Had Negative Experience
Has expertise in Jewish texts	68	82	69
Is spiritual	68	78	64
Is someone I trust	66	80	57
Spends time with members of the community outside of a synagogue	63	73	45
Is accepting of how I choose to be Jewish	63	77	52
Is someone I would seek out for advice on religious or spiritual issues	62	76	46
Strengthens my connection to a Jewish community or other Jewish people	62	77	58
Accepts me for who I am	62	76	54
Is able to effectively engage children and kids in Jewish activities and learning	62	80	53
Makes me feel connected to Judaism	61	73	43
Is easily accessible	60	70	44
Takes the time to get to know me	60	70	52
Is someone whose teachings or sermons I can relate to	59	69	46
Is someone I would seek out for advice on life issues	57	67	41
Shares the same views towards Israel as me	55	62	48
Shares the same politics as me	49	53	45
Mainly cares about people who are more active in the community or those who give a lot of money	47	47	42
Is always asking for money or trying to fundraise	43	37	52
Is judgmental	39	34	44
Is intimidating	37	31	41

Additionally, 68% say the rabbis they interact with most frequently are older than them, while 27% say they're around the same age.