

**Coming-of-Age Post B'nai Mitzvah:
Community Seeking, Identity Development, and Diasporic Translocal Space among Jewish
Youth in Victoria, British Columbia**
by
Beatrice McIntosh

**An Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the
HONOURS PROGRAM
in the Department of Anthropology**

©

University of Victoria

**All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy or
other means, without the permission of the author.**

Abstract:

As an ethno-religious minority at the intersection of Euro-Canadian young adulthood and deep legacies of heritage and history, young Jewish adults in Victoria, BC are uniquely oriented within a complex set of transnational, transgenerational, and multiethnic dynamics. Particularly in a region which is highly secular, and in a broader cultural context with strong narratives related to multicultural nationalism, the experiences of young Jewish adults in this city are distinctive. In this study, I strive to address the questions of how, exactly, are young adults engaging with hybridized Jewish-Canadian identities, building communities which reflect this engagement, and envisioning themselves within the continuum of Jewish pasts, presents, and futures. Through qualitative methods including participant observation and semi-structured interview research within this community, I am proposing a triad model of youth Jewish engagement with heritage, culture, and identity. The model is premised on the following three pillars: Jewishness as fostered and expressed through seeking affirming Jewish community among peers, Jewish identity as consistently evolving during early adulthood, and Jewish identity and belonging as expressed through the creation of unique translocal community space. Through qualitative inquiry and interpretation, I present a viewpoint on this community which embraces internal diversity, complex and pluralized Jewish identities, and collective cultural experience.

Key Words:

Jewishness, diaspora, translocal, community, identity, representation, inclusion, isolation, culture, religion

Address and Dedication

This research was conducted in conjunction with Hillel's young adult/student Jewish community of Victoria, British Columbia, and on the traditional and unceded territories of the Lekwungen, Esquimalt, and WSANEC peoples whose traditional relationships with the land continues to this day. This study strives to promote acceptance and embrace of the great multiplicity of place based relationships and identities fostered by the contemporary cultural and geographic context of Vancouver Island. I raise my hands to say *Huy tseep q'u* to the Indigenous peoples of this land, who have shared their traditional territories with settlers for generations, and I hope to enter into good relationships with these peoples through my research in years to come.

To the young adult Jewish community of Victoria, I extend my deepest gratitude for welcoming me, as a researcher and knowledge holder, into your midst. Your imparting of cultural, religious, spiritual, and practical knowledge to me with grace and trust is greatly appreciated, and I work alongside you all to strive for greater representation of the beauty and strength of the Jewish people in the broader Island community and beyond. Thank you to all those who have contributed to the creation of such a welcoming Jewish home.

To my supervisor Dr. Rachel Brown, who has provided invaluable guidance, feedback, and support since the earliest inklings of this project, I extend my deepest gratitude. This research would not have been possible without you.

To all who shared their knowledge and perspectives with me, *todah rabah*.

תודה רבה

Prelude

It's Friday night in the neighborhood surrounding the University of Victoria. Students throughout the campus are setting down their study materials for a few hours of fun, hatching plans for house parties or nights out, and dressing up in their finest. The Jewish students in this mix have one stop to make before the Friday night fun begins - Shabbat dinner at Hillel house. A small team of student volunteers have been cooking all day, roasting vegetables, making matzo ball soup, and of course, preparing the ubiquitous loaves of challah. As the sun begins to drop in the sky, attendees begin to trickle in, leaving their shoes by the front and back doors, setting coats and purses on folding chairs, sitting around a snaking line of plastic folding tables. The tables, covered by white tablecloths, are set for north of 50 attendees.

By 6:45pm, the main floor of the residential home is packed, Jewish students everywhere, talking, laughing, and catching up. Finding one's seat is a delicate dance, students climb under tables and stand on chairs to find their places in the very crowded room. Students are still talking noisily while one student volunteer attempts to grab the attention of the room, often with a resounding *OY* or a *sheket bevakasha*¹! Once the room falls to a hush, but not quite a silence, the blessing begins. The room orients towards a tiny set of tealights, propped on a table in the corner of the room. One person lights the candles, reciting the *ner shel Shabbat*² blessing, while others listen or recite the blessing themselves. The sounds of the room are awash with different tunes, as well as some quiet chatter and the rumble of passing cars. The recitation of the *amen* acts as a permission for chatter to begin once again. Next, attendees raise short water glasses, most with only an ounce or two of Manischewitz concord wine, for the recitation of the *borei pri hagafen*

¹ Oy is a Yiddish language roughly translated to “oh!” or “hey!”, while sheket bevakasha is a Hebrew term (שקט בבקשה) meaning “quiet, please”, commonly used at North American Jewish summer camps.

² This is the blessing commonly recited during the lighting of the Shabbat candles, roughly translating to “...commanded us to kindle the lights of Shabbat.”

(wine) blessing. Finally, loaves of challah are raised throughout the room, the *hamotzi* (bread) blessing is recited, and tables of people get up, one by one, with plates in hand, lining up to serve themselves from the kitchen. The room is, once again, dynamic and crowded. People talk over one another, calling across spaces to catch up. Students hold plates and bowls of soup precariously, meals are in various states of completion. Dishes begin to stack up high next to the sink, while attendees cluster, settling into pockets of less lively conversation. The level of enthusiasm among attendees has gradually declined since their initial arrival, with people beginning to drift out, moving on to their other evening plans. In a matter of hours, Hillel house has breathed with life, buzzed with activity, and now simmers with quiet chat and low-burned candles, settling once again into the steady rhythm of another week.

Introduction

As a people with deep temporal and geographically broad heritages, diasporic Jewish communities are often hubs of internal diversity and identity plurality. Within Jewish communities, both individuals and collectivities consistently mediate the influences of the contexts of the broader cultural setting in which they find themselves *and* the enduring legacies of Jewish ethnoreligious heritages and their intergenerational transmission. Furthermore, with broader trends towards secularization in the west similarly impacting Jewish religious communities (Wilkins LaFlamme, 2015; Schwadel and Heft, 2020), Jewishness is increasingly recognized as a consciously chosen, rather than externally ascribed identity (Boxer and Saxe, 2015), positioned within a broader continuum of secularity and post-secular return to ethnic heritages. The young-adult Jewish community of Victoria, BC is no different. This community,

composed of individuals of diverse national, ethnic, and practical religious³ backgrounds under the umbrella of Jewishness are both uniquely impacted by the surrounding cultural matrix, and engaged with the construction of novel spaces and novel young adult Jewish identities. To explore this, I designed an 8-month investigative ethnographic study between September 2023 and April 2024, including participant-observation fieldwork and 8 semi-structured interviews. Following interpretation of the data collected during this study, I am proposing that the nature of engagement with Jewish heritages and identities among Jewish youth in this community can be broadly represented through the triad-engagement model I have developed. The triad Jewish cultural engagement model recognizes, without mutual exclusivity, the engagement with and development of Jewish identity and community across the following three categories: a) Jewish youth as seeking affirming Jewish communities and engaging with them in quintessentially Jewish ways, b) Jewish identities as particularly emergent during young adulthood, and c) Jewish youth as engaged in the co-construction of diasporic translocal space. The following paper will discuss the tangible evidence which supports this model, and how it may represent an effective framework for interpreting Jewish youth community engagement in the anthropology of religion moving forward.

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

Representations of Jewish life are fundamentally reductive, sorting contemporary Jewish communities and identities into two broad, internally homogeneous categories. If Jewish life is acknowledged at all outside of representations of the Holocaust, which is significantly reliant on the “Dead Jews” media paradigm set forth by Dara Horn (2021), they are broadly sorted into the

³ In this context, the term “practical religious(ity)” refers to the nature of religious practice observed by an individual, ranging from limited practice with loose attention to orthopraxy, to strong attention to religiously sanctioned practices and closer following of religious doctrines.

normative categories of either the North American Ashkenazi or the modern Israeli national, both of which rely on reductive stereotyping and the limited experiences of a select proportion of global diaspora Jewry (Barron, 2024). Furthermore, these normative categories collectively represent Jews as ethnically white, erasing internal ethnic diversity while dismissing the racialized experiences of Jews of all colours and origins (Brodkin, 2004; Weisskirch et al., 2016). This paper is critically interested in addressing these representational voids and deconstructing this dominant model of Jewish community identity⁴.

Within the academy, however, representations and discussions on contemporary Jewish communities embrace greater nuance and internal community diversity. As evidenced in this study, much of the literature on contemporary Jewish life embraces the idea that in our current cultural milieu, commitment to Jewish identity is elective and reinforced through conscious action (Boxer and Saxe, 2015; Schwadel and Heft, 2020). This is a particularly prevalent trend among the youngest generation of adult Jews in the diaspora, who in line with many of their non-Jewish peers, indulge in independence based and identity developing practices which mediate their Jewish and broader western identities (Weisskirch et al., 2016). This is particularly indicative in Minkin's (2019) proposal of *emergent* Jewish identities, in reference to the developmental period during which young Jewish adults come to construct and internalize their own unique relationship to Jewishness. Furthermore, this identity development is widely situated in the literature as discursively co-developing through peer relationships (Cohen et al., 2011), compounding the significance of Jewish youth communities of the same age cohort.

⁴ Collectively, the individuals who participated in this study defy this dominant model through their position within Cascadia, a region with limited Jewish presence when compared to the American north east (Brym et al. 2020), while also exhibiting immense internal diversity, with participants including Jews-by-choice (converted Jews with no discernable Jewish lineage), mixed-faith Jews, and Jews of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

One of the most important distinctions evidenced by the literature available on this topic, as well as my own research, is the distinction made between Jewish culture and Jewish religious beliefs and identification. A variety of studies reference widespread youth understandings of Jewish spaces as deeply culturally meaningful, providing a link to heritage and tradition that is unavailable in the community at large (Hersh, 2022; Schwadel and Heft, 2020; Shain et al. 2013). These same sources all reference a lack of overt focus, or implicit sense, of religious importance within community space.⁵ This is heavily reflected in the results of my study, with most of my interview participants referencing a stronger cultural, rather than religious, commitment to Jewish identities. In understanding how these trends are influenced by the community at large, I turned to Keyser's (2010) comparative study on secular Americans and secular Jewish Americans, which suggests a similar self-identification with religious labels even in the absence of truly *religious* practice⁶ across both groups. Secularity is a major theme in the anthropology of religion, which was also considered an essential perspective to review for this study. Particularly in the Cascadia region, widely considered one of the most quickly secularizing areas in the world (Brown, 2022; Wilkins Laflamme, 2015), Jewish communities are uniquely positioned as both a stark ethnoreligious minority⁷ and a cultural-religious enclave in the secular world.

One of the texts reviewed for this purpose references Jewish spaces designed for young adults as countercultural, representing a relationship to a traditional religious identity

⁵ This is not to suggest that these spaces are religiously unimportant, however it has been my perception that religious experiences in these spaces tend to be internally perceived and experienced, rather than shared among community members. Many participants referenced the primary importance of Hillel as a social and community space, rather than a space of religiosity.

⁶ In this context, a truly religious practice is defined as a practice undertaken with the intention of worship or connection with the divine.

⁷ Jewish religious affiliation is broadly recognized as part of a larger category of "religious minorities" of non-Christian practitioners in the Cascadia region by many scholars. In the year 2011, the proportion of Jews in the total British Columbia totaled less than 1% of the overall population (Brown, 2022)

uncharacteristic of mainstream secularization (Hersh, 2022). I would venture to push back against this idea, suggesting that, in fact, these Jewish spaces are falling in stride with a growing embrace of minority translocal cultural spaces, particularly in leftist North American urban settings. Youth-led spaces such as Hillel provide a space where young Jewish adults can participate in forming a personal and community version of “DIY” (do-it-yourself) Jewishness (Shain et al., 2013), which draw in diverse and distinct cultural traditions, placing them at the forefront, while religious identities often remain in the background.

These Jewish spaces are formed through unique cultural traditions, minority positionalities, and the diasporic imaginaries of Jewish communities which, even if geographically stable, often perceive the world around them through the lens of cognitive movement (Dawson and Johnson, 2001). The production of these spaces represents some of the same processes of creation of traditional translocal spaces, such as including culturally specific material cultures (Low, 2017), while still being uniquely diasporic in that, for instance, the material cultures included in these spaces often do not have a discrete geographic-cultural origin. This, the final element in the triad model, is informed by multiple scholarly perspectives while still being a novel concept.

The existing body of scholarly literature, which has formed the theoretical basis for the presentation of my study results, creates a cohesive image of young Jewish communities as engaged with broader trends in secularization and post-secularization, autonomously formed through conscious engagement, and generally interested in cultural continuity over religious adherence.

Methodology and Approach

As previously discussed, in my study of this community I was particularly interested in exploring the representational void populated by a small, diasporic, internally diverse Jewish community of young Jewish adults from across Canada, the United States, and Israel. I approached this community and the ethnographic study of it with an emic understanding of the unique experiences of Jewish-Canadian young adulthood, as a hybridized cultural minority with a legacy of intergenerational trauma, as well as an acknowledgement of the lack of representation, and even visibility, of this group in the community at large. Furthermore, while I was initially focused on approaching this community with care and sensitivity grounded in an awareness of the experiences of antisemitism, feelings of isolation, and generationally informed senses of Jewish liminality and displacement which may be present among members and participants, this attention to sensitivity compounded following the events of October 7th, 2023. The extremely graphic and intense violence represented in the media related to October 7th, as well as the subsequent conflict and the political strife that emerged internationally, further contributed to a sense of isolation, fragility, and persecution in the community, which both added a significant layer of complexity to my research and demanded even greater sensitivity and gentleness from the researcher. I believe my emic positionality, as a fellow community member and Jewish community insider may have contributed to a sense of comfortability among my participants, garnering trust that their sensitive cultural knowledge would be handled with care and dignity.

Ethnographic research within the community was based on two key methodologies: participant observation and semi-structured interviewing. Between September 2023 and May 2024, I conducted qualitative participant observation research at community events held at the

University of Victoria's Hillel House, following a low-visibility/complete-participation observation style (Macgarry and Mannick, 2017). The events attended ranged from holiday or culturally themed Shabbat dinners, such as Rosh Hashanah and Mizrahi heritage, Hebrew language learning cafe's, Jewish craft nights, and other culturally and religiously specific activities. During these events, it was always announced to attendees that I was present as a researcher, however beyond this, I engaged wholly in all of the activities being observed by other participants. Attending a variety of events which both focused on select Jewish cultural subgroups, such as Mizrahi heritage or Israeli culture and modern Hebrew language, as well as events which hybridize Jewish and mainstream cultural identities, such as exam-season Jewish themed craft sessions, was highly intentional. This allowed me to explore how young Jewish adults developed their pluralized and culturally hybridized identities discursively with the broader cultural environment co-created with their diverse peers.

I also conducted eight semi-structured interviews during this same time frame, each lasting roughly 45 minutes to 1 hour. Each interview was a single, self-contained session, and individuals were selected based on the first respondents to an open call for interview participants verbally announced during community events. Coincidentally, seven out of the eight interviews conducted were with woman-identifying volunteers, perhaps reflecting a greater willingness to participate among women, and possibly a greater ease with sharing sensitive information and discussing often emotionally loaded topics among and between a woman researcher and women interlocutors. However, gender did not factor significantly into any interview discussions, and is not considered a significant dimension in the interpretation of research results. Each participant was prompted using the same core set of questions related to their upbringing, observance of Jewish practice, and self-envisionment and identification with Jewishness as an identity and

cultural continuum. However, each conversation with participants developed its own participant-led direction grounded in the perspectives and backgrounds of the individual interlocutor (Campbell and Lassiter, 2015), yielding richly diverse data indicative of the diversity of the community itself. My scholarly orientation, evidenced by my socio-intellectual approach and qualitative methodology, is uniquely suited to the community of study as it allows for a high degree of sensitivity and care, yields significant control to the participant, and embraces the diversity of research results to create a portrait of complexity, rather than reductive generalization.

Results: The Triad Engagement Model

The findings of this study led me to develop a representational model of individual and community engagement with Jewish identity, culture, and heritage broadly divided into three core categories of: community connection, identity development, and the creation of diasporic translocal space. This model is uniquely applicable to this community, and derived from community specific research results, despite being supported by much of the other literature available on this topic. However, elements of this model, such as the concept of diasporic translocal space, which will be explored further in the text below, may be applicable beyond this community and contribute to broader disciplinary conversations on diasporic cultural minorities and the places they create.

The three core components which create the triad model introduced above are not mutually exclusive, but co-constitutive and mutually supportive, with even single cultural acts or observances contributing to the evidential basis for multiple or even all of the components of the triad model. Furthermore, each of these categorical themes, and their co-engagement, are

collectively governed by the relationship between deep Jewish heritages and contemporary Canadian young adulthood mediated by community members as cultural practitioners and representatives. This model relies on a foundationally Geertzian approach rooted in the interpretation of cultural meanings and the parsing out of their positions within a broader cultural network, while also honouring the contributions of contemporary scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. As a whole, this model provides an effective framework for interpreting the ethnographic results of this study, anthropologically configuring them to contribute to scholarly and theoretical development in the field.

The Pursuit of Affirming Jewish Community

Perhaps the most tangible and ubiquitous component of Jewish cultural engagement, particularly in this cultural context, was the evident and continuous pursuit of affirming Jewish peer communities⁸. This was both highly evident during interview research, where nearly all interview participants perceived having Jewish friends as critical stakeholders in supporting their wellbeing, and during community events, particularly Shabbat dinners, where attendance would regularly climb to an estimated 80 participants. This is particularly significant in Victoria, where the total size of the Jewish community is estimated at only 3000, (Brym et al. 2020) which is miniscule in comparison to, for instance, Greater Toronto's Jewish community of nearly 200,000 (Shahar, 2019). This regular gathering of a small and somewhat fragmented⁹ community is indicative of a collective sense of the critical importance of Jewish community ties.

⁸ In this context, an affirming peer community is defined by the co-recognition of mirrored identities and positionalities among peers (i.e. Jewish/youth/university student) and the sense of belonging and affirmation attributed to these communities and shared positionalities.

⁹ In this context, the term fragmented refers to the comparative proportion of Jewish individuals relative to urban space, as well as the prevalent lack of familial ties within Victoria's Jewish youth community, with many members having left their natal communities.

This perceived importance of relationships with Jewish peers and communities has been compounded by the events of October 7th, the subsequent conflict, and its promotion of local political polarization and demonstration. Many participants, such as *Tamar, referenced a sense of safety and belonging related to being in community at Hillel, sharing that for her, Hillel is “a place of belonging and a place of safety. ... I was personally very affected by October 7, and being in a place (with) people who understood that and could be there to support me, and who I can support as well (was important).” This sentiment was mirrored by most interview participants, and was often juxtaposed with a sense of isolation and a lack of belonging in the community at large. For instance, one American-Jewish woman, *Miriam, shared that “I’m always ... hiding that Jewish aspect of myself, because people just don’t understand it. Even if they’re outwardly accepting, they don’t see they don’t see (me), like they see themselves.” *Miriam, however, did not need to hide her Jewishness among her Jewish peers, indicative of the differential relationships between Jews, Jewish communities, and broader, mainstream Euro-Canadian secular settings.

Furthermore, this juxtaposition of safety and isolation is indicative of the discursive or relational construction of Jewish identity in conjunction with the broader non-Jewish world. The climate of the non-Jewish world is a significant stakeholder in dictating where and how Jewish identity can be enacted and performed, and at the time of this research, the climate of the community at large towards Jews was decidedly unfriendly¹⁰. This feeling was particularly tangible at an on-campus Hannukah menorah lighting ceremony, where the menorah, as a recognizably Jewish symbol, generated deep concern among attendees for fear it may place a target on the Jewish community. In this way, the practices and expressions of Jewishness within

¹⁰ This perceived unfriendliness towards Jews in the community at large is related to recent developments in the Israel-Palestine conflict, with Jews often sensing hostility from those around them due to a potential relationship to the State of Israel.

this community are dually governed by a commitment to heritage and cultural continuity as well as the perceived reception of Jewishness within the community at large.

This burgeoning discussion of the modes of Jewish practice warrants the assertion that Jewish individuals do not only engage with their communities through Jewish modes, but also envision engagement itself as a Jewish value and obligation. One participant, *Hannah, referenced that “the first time I went, I was a little bit nervous, but I did feel a sense of community, and I felt obligated to that community, so I kept coming back,” indicative of this idea that Jewish students are seeking community not only for themselves, but out of a perceived responsibility to others within their same demographic. This sense of obligation to the Jewish community of one's city is a socialized cultural value (Schwager, 2005), evidently inherited by this younger generation. This same individual stated a sense of “ingrained closeness and desire to be around other Jewish people” related to histories of persecution and contemporary minoritization, demonstrative of the idea that community engagement within this group is not only the Jewish expression of a desire for an affirming social group, but also a modality informed by cultural heritage and socialized values.

As discussed, engagement within and among this community occurs through quintessentially Jewish modalities, semiotically understood as Jewish (Cohen, 2008) and collectively developed among Jewish peer groups. This suite of engagement methods, aptly referred to by Minkin as the “Jewish cultural toolkit” (2019) is the hybridization of Jewish and mainstream Euro-Canadian young adult behaviors as enacted among and between Jewish peers. For instance, I often observed young Jewish women complementing one another’s Jewish jewelry, from Star-of-David necklaces to Hamsa bracelets and even miniature challah or sufganiyot earrings. This unique form of relationship making simultaneously recognizes and

validates the feminine self-expression of a peer *and* nods to their external expression of Jewishness. These conversations often reinforce relationships of mutual affection between peers, while also opening further discussions about Jewish travel experiences (“I bought this in Israel”), family history (“This was my Bubbie’s”), and upbringing (“I got it for my Bat Mitzvah”). When examined in depth, it is evident that these modes of engagement are not neutral, but enactments of pluralized cultural identities and attempts at creating both socially familiar and particularly Jewish relationships.

Participants often referenced that relationships with Jewish peers are governed by a shared sense of cognitive movement (Dawson and Johnson, 2001) and cultural liminality which construct the broader collective of diasporic consciousness. This collective consciousness, often conceived from a deep cultural memory of historic dispossession and persecution (Fludernik, 2003), structures interpersonal dynamics and modes of relationship making within this community. For instance, one participant, *Eden, referenced that her Jewish friends just “got her on another level” and she felt “already so much closer to them” by virtue of their shared Jewishness. She went on to say that, around these friends, she could make jokes about being Jewish and her experience as a Jewish person, and have them be seamlessly understood by her Jewish peers. This sense of belonging and mutual understanding is compounded by the shared life stages of Jewish peers. One participant, *Noah, referenced that he often struggled to make connections at local synagogues, stating that “there are no young people, yeah, and not that I'm against being friends with 70-year-old Jewish women ... but I prefer people my own age.”

Ironically, this stated preference for Jewish peer relationship was rolled into a Jewish-coded joke. Humour, as a mode of relationship building, is a prevalent Jewish value and mode of diffusing tension throughout the diaspora (Rosenberg, 2015), and in this context, is a

particularly apt representation of the Jewish cultural toolkit (Minkin, 2019) developing in relationship to this specific community. “Jewish humour”, as part of the toolkit, represents a socially learned and collectively negotiated form of conversation which draws upon shared experiences and mainstream youth cultural norms to subvert tension related to minority Jewishness and reinforce notions of shared experience. This is further indicative of contemporary understandings of Jewish identity as relationally constructed and upheld through social ties, rather than individually held meanings (Kelmen et al., 2016), with these participants performing Jewish identity most meaningfully in their interactions with others, such as forming relationships and making jokes. Returning to Geertz’s foundational understandings within the discipline of anthropology, culture is *made meaningful* through its collective engagement (2008).

Furthermore, it was evident that a significant part of the sense of community engagement and familiarity fostered at Hillel was related to an atmospheric connection, rather than a specific topic of conversation or shared experience point. Oftentimes, events like Shabbat dinners do not foster discussion of one-to-one connection development, due to the noise level and relative chaos of the environment, however were widely referenced as appreciated events by a variety of participants, in addition to being quite well attended. This is reflective of the idea that Jewish community connection is derived from not only interpersonal relationships, but collective contributions to Jewish spaces. In short, the seeking of affirming communities of Jewish peers of the same age cohort according to relational engagement codes governed and reinforced by shared experiences is a prevalent theme throughout this Jewish youth community.

Jewish Identity Emergence and Development in Young Adults

Throughout this research, it was evident that young-adult Jewish identities, as performed and self-ascribed visions of the Jewish self, are not the end-stage products of childhood identity development. Rather, young adult Jewishness is a developmental stage of continued identity negotiation occurring in stride with broader trends in post-adolescent development in the west. This is the reference made in the title of this paper, “Coming-of-Age Post B’nai Mitzvah”, suggesting that B’nai Mitzvah, widely recognized as the beginning of Jewish adulthood, is not necessarily the completion of Jewish identity development. This development of Jewish identity during young adulthood is uniquely informed by the secularized cultural context of the region at large and evolving understandings of Jewish identity in the western world characteristic of the broader cultural milieu. This community presents a unique understanding and enactment of individual Jewish identity as highly self-ascribed and consciously claimed, integrally connected to the independence of Canadian young adulthood, and connected to the broader trends of secularization and post-secularization in the world at large.

Young Jewish adults are a grossly underrepresented group within understandings of Jewish social agency, often situated as a liminal generation between the developing identities of Jewish children and the cultural and religious practitioners who are Jewish adults. With the home and family widely considered the center of Jewish life and practice (Bronner, 2010), young Jewish adults, often living away from their natal homes, are evidently beyond this dominant understanding of identity development (Boxer and Saxe, 2015). Multiple participants referenced their understanding of Hillel as an essential setting in this liminal stage in Jewish life, for instance, with *Rebecca referencing that “Hillel functions as an intermediate ... your parents teach you stories to pass it down to your kids, and you have all this time in (before) you have the

kids ... you gotta remember it (the stories), and you gotta keep it fresh.” This functional understanding of Hillel as a cultural fixture which facilitates the preservation of Jewish identities between stages of “active” use (the learning of stories and the teaching of stories) is a testament to this individual's understanding of Jewish young adulthood more broadly - as a period of development and transition from childhood to adulthood.

Many participants referenced the development and re-arrangement of practical and self-ascribed Jewish identities during this life stage in connection with the broader markers of growing independence characteristic of Euro-Canadian young-adulthood. For instance, *Noah referenced that, now living apart from his parents, most of his intentional food choices are oriented towards Jewish or kosher-style dishes. *Miriam referenced that Hillel is a particularly unique space because it is a club for university students, and unlike the Jewish summer camp and Hebrew school spaces of her childhood, she and other participants are always present on their own accord. *Lydia, similarly, stated that “now that I’m at university and not at home, I’m already making a lot of my own choices ... (going to Hillel) is one more thing I’m making a choice for.” Many participants referenced travel experiences which included elements of typical young adulthood, such as socializing, as forming Jewish relationships or enhancing personal Jewish identities. *Noah referenced his experience on Taglit-Birthright as important as it allowed him to interact with Jewish individuals from all over the world. These experiences, which are common among Canadian young adults and university students exploring independence from their natal homes, represent hybridized engagement with Jewishness and broader cultural trends among these aptly titled *emergent* Jewish adults (Minkin, 2019).

These experiences are particularly remarkable considering that many participants referenced limited connections to formal Jewish communities and structured practice during their

upbringing. For instance, *Tamar referenced that “(Hillel) made me kind of more connected (to my Jewishness), like at home, we did basic Jewish traditions, but not too much”, *Noah stated that “I grew up in a city where I had maybe one or two other Jewish friends ... I didn't have as much involvement growing up”, and *Rebecca shared that, now that she lived away from her family “I care about it (being Jewish) a bit more ... and I think my parents were a bit surprised”. This defies the traditional Jewish identity development model presented by Kelmen, which posits that Jewish identification transitions from an externally reinforced sense of Jewishness during childhood to an internalized sense of Jewishness during adulthood (Boxer and Saxe, 2015), precisely because, for many of these participants, Jewish identities were not strongly externally enforced during childhood. Younger Jewish generations, specifically, are generally most likely to develop personally meaningful relationships to Jewish identity and heritage, even in the absence of traditional religious structures (Shain et al., 2013).

This is perhaps indicative of broader cultural trends towards secularity, and now post secularity, in the western world (Casanova, 2017). Jewish identities, particularly among younger generations, are increasingly recognized as ethno-cultural and genetic, rather than religious identities¹¹ (Schwadel and Heft, 2020), a trend corroborated by most interview participants and evident in the lack of overt focus on religiosity in community events at Hillel. This is indicative of a growing secularity and diminishment of faith based beliefs in the western world (Wilkins LaFlamme, 2015), as well as a growing overt embrace of minority cultural identities.

Furthermore, with Jewishness increasingly recognized in the public sphere as a subset of hegemonic whiteness (Brodkin, 2004), Jewish communities and individuals are responding to

¹¹ The distinction between culture and religion is enormously complex and flush with internal contradiction and context dependent factors. However, in the scope of this paper, the distinction between culture and religion is that which is identified by participants themselves. Many participants self-identified as more cultural than religious, for instance, eating culturally Jewish foods as a preference, but not keeping kosher all the time, or celebrating holidays because of their familial or traditional importance, rather than their spiritual meaning.

this trend through consciously differentiating their own particular ethnocultural and religious identities (Weisskirch et al., 2016, Hersh, 2022). Overall, individuals within this community display evidence of continued identity development and negotiation related to Jewishness and Jewish-mainstream dynamics well into post-adolescence, with this identity emergence occurring in stride with the growing independence and experimentation characteristic of Canadian young adulthood as a whole.

Diasporic Translocal Space as Constructed by Young Jewish Adults

Young Jewish adults and the spaces with which they engage are extending our current disciplinary understanding of translocal space to include those produced not only by transnational migrants, but by those with collective understandings of cultural liminality and cognitive movement. This community, composed of both diaspora Jews and Jews in the diaspora¹², is governed by a collective sense of cultural distinction from mainstream cultural identities, despite being predominantly assimilated. Community members are capable of effectively transgressing the boundaries between multiple overlapping cultural worlds, the mainstream Euro-Canadian setting within which they live their everyday lives, and the hybridized western-Jewish diaspora community which they co-create through Jewish intercultural exchange.

Traditionally, the term “translocal space” refers to spaces produced by (usually) transnational migrants which reflect their cultural identities and heritages in an attempt to materially emulate the cultural home context while in the host context (Low, 2017). This

¹² While some participants and individuals may self-identify as diaspora Jews, meaning, Jews of diasporic Jewish heritages such as those whose ancestors lived for many generations in the Pale of Settlement before moving to North America, others may identify as Jews in the diaspora, due to their familial or personal residential ties to the modern State of Israel, and now living outside of this land.

community, however, is a collective of predominantly Canadian-born individuals, often descended from Canadian-born individuals, who's sense of cultural distinction emerges from Jewish diasporic imaginaries and senses of cognitive movement and liminality (Dawson and Johnson, 2001). While it is this collective sense of cultural distinction which draws Jews towards one another, the “ingrained closeness” so to speak, it is the cultural and ethnic diversity within these communities which creates their internal complexity and promotes the identity development of those who participate in it.

Jewish spaces throughout the diaspora are often collectively conceived of as extensions of the private home space (Hartman and Sheskin, 2012), and were often referenced by participants as being both intimately private and highly vulnerable. This private, translocal Jewish interiority is often juxtaposed with the non-Jewishness of the community at large, indicative of the ways in which the surrounding cultural matrix informs Jewish understandings of place and practice. Particularly in the wake of local and extended threats to ban Hillels from university campuses (Bialik, 2024; Schlott, 2014), participant *Hannah referenced fears that “the one place we (Jews) have, when we are feeling alone in our views and beliefs” might become inaccessible was a truly fearful thought. In this context, understandings of Jewish space are governed by ideas of both collective experiences and cultural memories of persecution (Wright et al., 2021) *as well* as internally diverse heritages and upbringings.

Young Jewish adults actively engage with and construct translocal spaces such as Hillel through the activities that they plan and participate in, as well as the material cultures that they curate and create. These material and practical items reflect specific Jewish cultural heritages while also promoting engagement between multiple Jewish subcultures, making these spaces

quintessentially diasporic¹³. For instance, participant *Tamar referenced feeling most “at home” in Hillel when among the enactments of Israeli culture and heritage, such as Hebrew language and Israeli music, while also expanding her own personal Jewish identity through engaging with other Jewish traditions, explaining that she had learned about Havdalah and tried rugelach while at Hillel¹⁴. This instance, specifically, is evidence of the three components of the triad engagement model intersecting co-constitutively. For *Tamar, her post-adolescent Jewishness is informed by the collective *and* specific Jewish cultural experiences of her fellow community members as enacted in diasporic translocal space. This was further evidenced by planned events such as the November 2023 Mizrahi Jewish Heritage themed Shabbat dinner. Dishes such as shakshuka and couscous were prepared and served to attendees to celebrate internal community diversity, enacting internal cultural interchange through material means, such as food. Diasporic translocal space is critically distinct from typical translocal space because it takes as its starting point not a geographic and cultural origin¹⁵, but a collective sense of Jewish cultural distinction. The members of this community are not interested in recreating a cultural origin point, but rather, co-contributing to a Jewish cultural enclave (Livezy, 2001) which draws together the material traces of diverse Jewish traditions, as understood by collective understandings of Jewish cultural liminality.

¹³ It should be noted that the terms transnational/translocal and diasporic are distinct, and used intentionally in this text. While translocality refers to experiences and memories of discrete instances of migration and movement, diaspora and its related terms refers to a cultural sense of historic placelessness and cultural liminality, often referred to as cognitive movement (Dawson and Johnson, 2001).

¹⁴ This is a testament to the diversity of Jewishness even within ethnic subgroups. Though rugelach is an Ashkenazi baked good, it is not necessarily part of every single Ashkenazi Jew’s dietary repertoire.

¹⁵ Take, for instance, the Chinatowns of North America as an example. These spaces are produced by predominantly Chinese migrants, using Chinese material cultures, to emulate a Chinese cultural space apart from Chinese territory proper (Anderson, 1987). Jewish diasporic translocal space is distinct, in that it reproduces not an original cultural-geographic space, but draws together varied experiences of movement and cultural liminality attributed to Jewish experience. This is also what created the distinction between Israeli translocal space and Jewish *diasporic* translocal space.

Furthermore, members of this community are interested in engaging with collective space and community activities in strongly youth-oriented ways, further developing this concept of diasporic translocal space through the integration of material markers of mainstream western young adulthood alongside more recognizably Jewish material cultures. The development of youth-specific modes of engagement with space and community are not missing from existing literature on this topic (Shain et al., 2013), however studies are often oriented towards recognizing how Jewish youth develop specific relationships to their traditions and heritage. Though placing it within the context of diasporic translocal space, however, these youth-specific modes of engagement become newly meaningful in their ability to contribute to an understanding of Jewish youth spaces as *generationally specific cultural enclaves*. For instance, the activities planned and attended by Jewish students are often socially, rather than learning or tradition, oriented. Participant *Eden mentioned that attendees might lose interest or seek alternative social spaces if they were to realize “there's a complexity to it (Jewishness), or there's rules they have to follow, or there's learning involved.” Similarly, participant Emily referenced her appreciation of the position of Hillel as “not an enforcement agency ... (because) everybody can get out of it what they want.” This is evident, once again, of the intersecting elements of the triad engagement model - with diasporic youth Jewish identities representing hybridized versions of young adulthood and Jewishness, the cultural enclaves with which they engage and create are reflective of these positionalities. In short, diasporic translocal space as produced and experienced by the young-adult Jewish community takes as its seminal point not a recent shared geographic origin or lineage, but a shared conception of Jewish cultural distinction and kinship governed by the shared experiences of hybridized Jewish youth identities. The externalization of

these identities (Cooper, 1974) through event planning, participation, and materialities represents the mode through which this diasporic translocal space is created.

Scholarly Applicability of the Triad Engagement Model

Though the triad Jewish cultural engagement was designed to represent the modes of cultural practice, identity development, and place creation of the young adult Jewish community of Victoria, BC, elements of this model may be applicable beyond this community alone. Even if not applicable in its entirety, isolated elements of this model may be able to effectively contribute to broader conversations occurring in a variety of disciplines focused on religion, culture, and society. This model may be of particular relevance within growing discussions of the nature of secularism and post-secularism in western urban spaces. The participants of this study often self-identified as predominantly secular, that is, placing greater emphasis on the ethnic and cultural dimensions of Jewishness, which, as corroborated by much of the literature on this topic (Horowitz, 2000; Ukuleles, 2022), is indicative of the broader cultures of secularity in the west. However, the reclamation of Jewish identities, even if these identities are minimally religious and predominantly cultural, are indicative of a burgeoning transition towards post-secularity (Casanova, 2017), with religious traditions increasingly recognized as important elements of cultural practice. Emergent Jewish identities and the nature of their development, as discussed in this study, provide compelling evidence of generationally specific post-secularity in the Jewish community.

In addition, the results of this study and my suggestion of a novel conception of translocal space rooted in collective senses cultural of liminality, rather than a shared cultural origin, might contribute meaningfully to broader conversations occurring on the topic of migrant and cultural

minorities in the west, expanding traditional understandings to include discussions of how internally diverse yet cohesive communities develop collective spaces. In short, this study and the proposed framework for results may have the capacity to contribute to more nuanced understandings of migrant and culturally minoritized identities.

Conclusion

Diasporic Jewish youth engage with their cultural identities and the multiple Jewish and non-Jewish communities within which they exist in highly unique and plurally informed ways. As evidenced by the results of this study and the existing body of scholarship on this topic, Jewish youth communities hold a specific position within the broader cultural world of the multicultural, multiethnic, secular, and now postsecular western world. The triad model of Jewish cultural engagement that I proposed through this research, premised upon the dominant themes of community seeking, identity development, and translocal diasporic space, presents a holistic representation of the nature of engagement with Jewish community and self among this particular group. Despite emerging from the specific ethno-cultural context of Victoria's young adult Jewish community, elements of this model may represent effective methods for understanding the nature of cultural engagement among other communities of diasporic peoples, ethnic minorities, and culturally pluralized youth. As a whole, the results of this study and their representation are a testament to the internal diversity yet overarching cohesion of diasporic Jewish communities, and the ways in which they mediate these complex and culturally layered dynamics.

Bibliography

- Anderson, K. J. (1987). The Idea of Chinatown: The Power of Place and Institutional Practice in the Making of a Racial Category. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 77(4), 580–598. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1987.tb00182>.
- Barron, K. (2024, July 28). *Beyond the punchline: Rethinking jewish representation - inherit magazine*. - Inherit Magazine. <https://inheritmag.com/articles/beyond-the-punchline-rethinking-jewish-representation>
- Boxer, M., and Saxe, L. (2015). The Birthright Israel Generation: Being a Jewish Young Adult in Contemporary America. In *Who Is A Jew?* (Eds. Greenspoon, L. J.) Purdue University Press.
- Brodkin, K. (2004). How Did Jews Become White Folks? In *Off white* (2nd ed., pp. 17–34). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203621479-3>
- Bronner, S. J. (Ed.). (2010). *Jews at home: the domestication of identity*. Liverpool University Press.
- Brown, R. (2022). 10 “To Be or Not to Be” Religious: Minority Religions in a Region of Nones. In *Religion at the Edge: Nature, Spirituality, and Secularity in the Pacific Northwest* (pp. 203-221). University of British Columbia Press. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.59962/9780774867641-012>
- Brym, R., Neuman, K., & Lenton, R. (2020). 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada: Executive Summary. *American Jewish Year Book 2019: The Annual Record of the North American Jewish Communities Since 1899*, 247-261.
- Campbell, E., & Lassiter, L. E. (2014). *Doing ethnography today: Theories, methods, exercises*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Casanova, J. (2017). Are we still secular?: Explorations on the secular and the post-secular. In *Post-secular society* (pp. 27-46). Routledge.
- Cohen, E. H. (2008). Symbols of Diaspora Jewish identity: An international survey and multi-dimensional analysis. *Religion (London. 1971)*, 38(4), 293–304. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2008.03.010>
- Cohen, S. M., Veinstein, J., Grant, L. D., Pomson, A., Miller, H., Miller, H., Grant, L., & Pomson, A. (2011). Jewish Identity: Who You Knew Affects How You Jew---The Impact of Jewish Networks in Childhood upon Adult Jewish Identity. In *International Handbook*

- of Jewish Education* (Vol. 5, pp. 203–218). Springer Netherlands.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0354-4_12
- Cooper, C. (1974). The House as Symbol of the Self. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 77(4), 168–172. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1987.tb00182.x>
- Dawson, A and Johnson, M. (2001). Migration, Exile, and Landscapes of the Imagination. Conference Proceeding: Contested Landscapes: *Movement, Exile, and Place*. *American Anthropologist*, 105(3), 639.
- Fludernik, M. (2003). The Diasporic Imaginary Postcolonial Reconfigurations in the Context of Multiculturalism. In *Diaspora and Multiculturalism* (pp. xi-xxxviii). Brill.
- Geertz, C. (2008). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In *The cultural geography reader* (pp. 41-51). Routledge.
- Guest, G., Namey, E. E., & Mitchell, M. L. (2013). *Collecting qualitative data : a field manual for applied research*. SAGE Publications.
- Hartman, H., & Sheskin, I. M. (2012). The Relationship of Jewish Community Contexts and Jewish Identity: A 22-Community Study. *Contemporary Jewry*, 32(3), 237–283.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-012-9090-2>
- Horn, D. (2021). *People love dead Jews: Reports from a haunted present*. WW Norton & Company.
- Horowitz, B. (2000). *Connections and journeys: Assessing critical opportunities for enhancing Jewish identity*. New York: UJA-Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York.
- Kelman, A. Y., Belzer, T., Hassenfeld, Z., Horwitz, I., & Williams, M. C. (2017). The Social Self: Toward the Study of Jewish Lives in the Twenty-first Century. *Contemporary Jewry*, 37(1), 53–79. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-016-9182-5>
- Keysar, A. (2010). Secular Americans and secular Jewish Americans: similarities and differences. *Contemporary Jewry*, 30(1), 29-44.
- Low, S. (2017). Genealogies: The concepts of space and place. Pp 11-33 in *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place*. London: Routledge.
- Livezy, L. W. (2001). Communities and Enclaves: Where Jews, Christians, Hindus, and Muslims Share the Neighborhoods. *Cross Currents (New Rochelle, N.Y.)*, 51(1), 45–70.

- Minkin, R. (2019). *Constructing Jewish Lives: Emerging Adults and the Jewish Cultural Toolkit* (dissertation).
- Rosenberg, R. (2015). Jewish “Diasporic Humor” and Contemporary Jewish-American Identity. *Shofar (West Lafayette, Ind.)*, 33(3), 110–138. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.2015.0027>
- Schlott, R. (2024, October 10). *Jewish life on campus “attacked” as anti-israel activists call for Hillels to be defunded, shut down*. New York Post. <https://nypost.com/2024/10/10/us-news/jewish-life-on-campus-attacked-with-calls-to-defund-hillels/>
- Schwadel, P., & Heft, J. L. (2020). Current Expressions of American Jewish Identity: An Analysis of 114 Teenagers. In *Passing on the Faith* (pp. 135–144). Fordham University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823238064-009>
- Schwager, S. (2005). Assuring Jewish responsibility in a changing world. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*. 29-36.
- Shain, M., Fishman, S., Wright, G., Hecht, S., & Saxe, L. (2013). "DIY" Judaism: How contemporary Jewish young adults express their Jewish identity. *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, 55, 3-25.
- Weisskirch, R. S., Kim, S. Y., Schwartz, S. J., & Whitbourne, S. K. (2016). The Complexity of Ethnic Identity Among Jewish American Emerging Adults. *Identity (Mahwah, N.J.)*, 16(3), 127–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2016.1190724>
- Wilkins Laflamme, S. (2015). How Unreligious are the Religious “Nones”? Religious Dynamics of the Unaffiliated in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 40(4), 477–500. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjs21830>
- Wright, G., Volodarsky, S., Hecht, S., & Saxe, L. (2021). Trends in Jewish Young Adult Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism in America from 2017 to 2019. *Contemporary Jewry*, 41(2), 461–481. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-021-09354-6>
- Ukeles, J. B. (2022). How Jewish Are Jewish Young Adults? In *Illuminating the Path to Vibrant American Jewish Communities* (pp. 171–188). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-07642-8_9