

# MIXED-HERITAGE COUPLES: BECOMING ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN JEWISH LIFE

Embark – 2024 Evaluation

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THE CENTER FOR JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD EDUCATION  
*Building collective Jewish life through education*

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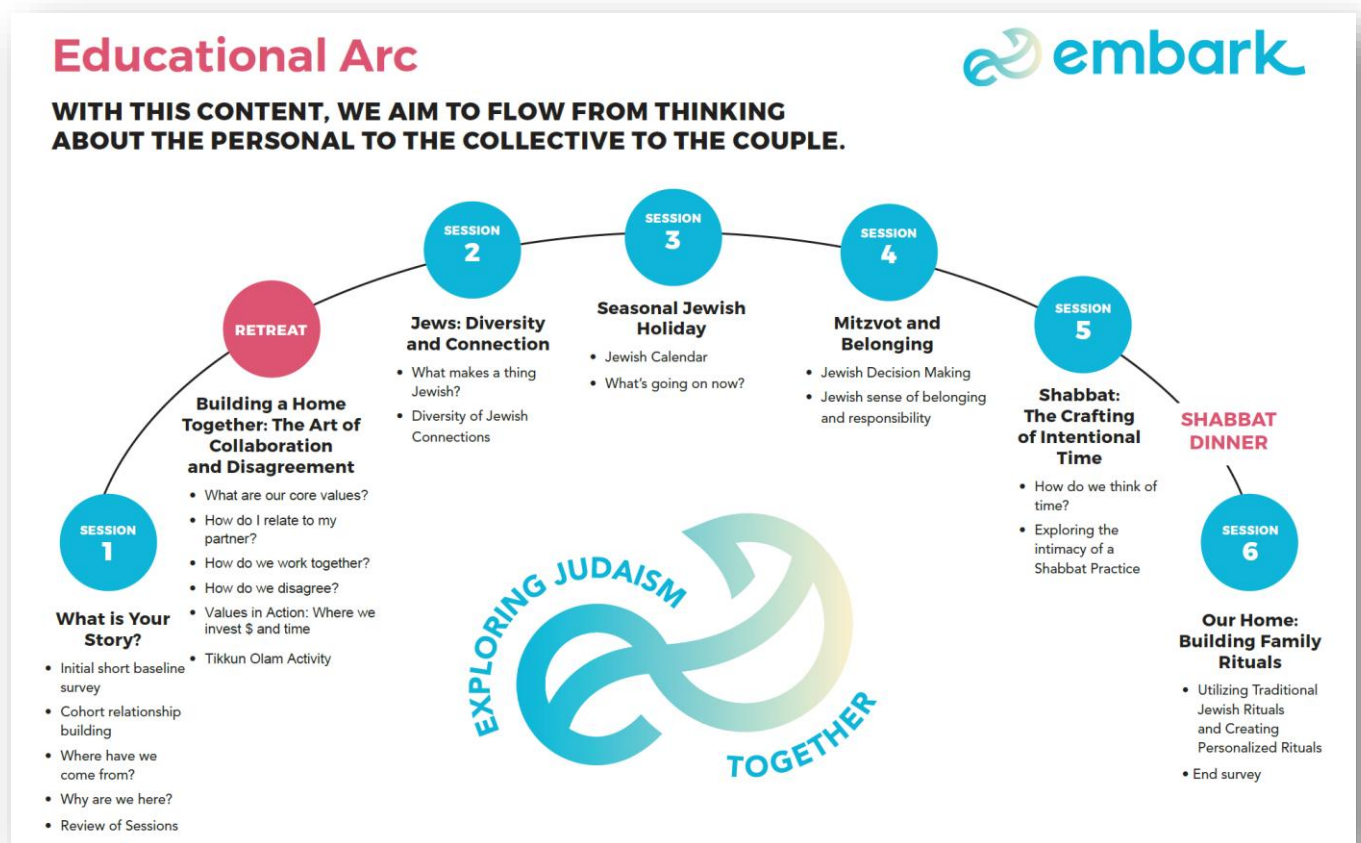
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Embark is a cohort-based initiative that empowers mixed-heritage and interfaith couples to explore and integrate Jewish life in ways that feel authentic and meaningful. Rather than prescribing a fixed model of Jewish engagement, Embark fosters agency by equipping participants with the confidence, knowledge, and relationships necessary to navigate their evolving Jewish journeys together. The 2024 evaluation assesses Embark's impact, demonstrating its success in supporting participants' transition from passive observers to active participants in Jewish life.

### Program Model and Approach

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Embark is structured around three key pillars:

- **Rabbinic Mentorship** – Participants develop relationships with approachable rabbis who serve as educators and guides, fostering trust and confidence in Jewish learning.
- **Accessible Jewish Learning** – The curriculum prioritizes practical, discussion-based learning that is relevant to participants' lives.
- **Cohort Community** – Small groups of couples form peer networks, providing a supportive space for exploring Jewish traditions.

### Key Outcomes

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- **Overcoming the Feeling of Being an Outsider** – Many participants—especially non-Jewish partners—struggle with feeling like outsiders in Jewish spaces. While Embark builds confidence in Jewish life, integrating into broader Jewish communities remains challenging.
- **Jewish Knowledge and Peer Support Increase Confidence** – Learning Jewish traditions and rituals gives participants the tools to engage more fully in Jewish life. Increased knowledge, combined with peer support, leads to greater confidence in leading Jewish practices such as Shabbat.
- **Viewing Jewish Practice as Positive and Desirable** – Embark helps participants see Jewish engagement as a meaningful choice. Jewish partners report increased fulfillment, while non-Jewish partners significantly expand their participation in Jewish rituals.
- **Strengthened Relationships** – Nearly all participants (97%) report that the program made it easier to discuss Jewish topics with their partners, and 76% say Embark significantly contributed to developing a shared vision for Jewish life as a couple.
- **Community Engagement and Jewish Friendships** – Embark fosters lasting friendships, with 76% of participants maintaining relationships beyond the program and 60%-75% reporting increased Jewish friendships and participation.
- **Deepening Connection to the Jewish People** – While participants engage in discussions about their local Jewish communities, there is an opportunity to strengthen their connection to the broader Jewish collective.

### Recommendations

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To further enhance Embark's impact:

- **Strengthen Post-Program Engagement** – Expand partnerships with Jewish organizations for facilitating entry into Jewish life.
- **Increase Access to Jewish Mentorship** – Develop additional mentorship pathways beyond Embark rabbis.
- **The Broader Collective Jewish Experience:** Incorporate discussions on contemporary Jewish challenges faced by Jews worldwide and of relevance to the participants.



## INTRODUCTION

Embark is an effort to launch and scale welcoming, high-quality Jewish learning and engagement experiences for young mixed-heritage and interfaith couples, inspired by the success of Central Synagogue’s Center for Exploring Judaism in New York and other existing cohort-based models. The goal is to provide meaningful opportunities for this target population to explore and connect with Judaism, Jewish life, and Jewish community. Emphasis is placed on reaching couples who don’t feel comfortable participating in organized Jewish life and wouldn’t naturally gravitate to synagogues and other Jewish institutions.

Driven by the support of the Laura and Gary Lauder Family Venture Philanthropy Fund, in 2023 a pilot of three groups was run, expanded to an additional four groups who completed their program in the 2024 calendar year.

Embark cohorts have three core pillars: cohorts, rabbis/mentors, and content. A cohort consists of 6–12 couples in their 20s or 30s, who are led by a local rabbi from a local partner organization and follow a nondenominational core curriculum geared toward exploring Jewish life. Participants learn about Judaism and Jewish life while developing a mentoring relationship with the rabbi mentor and formative Jewish social relationships with the other participants.

## THE EVALUATION

The goal of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of Embark in empowering mixed-heritage couples to actively participate in Jewish life. Specifically, the evaluation explores the following research questions: (1) How does Embark influence participants’ motivation and ability to shape their Jewish engagement? (2) In what ways does the program strengthen couples’ relationships and their connection to Jewish community? (3) To what extent do participants develop confidence in navigating Jewish spaces, rituals, and communal life?

The evaluation includes:

1. **Start and end program surveys** for participants in five Embark groups that completed their cohort program in 2024.
2. **An alumni survey** that went to all 2023 and 2024 cohorts in December and January 2025. The cohorts include Atlanta (2023), Miami (2023), Philadelphia (2023, 2024), the Bay Area (2024), Denver (2024), and New York City (2024). A total of 100 participants were invited to take part in the survey, with 35 completing it, resulting in an overall response rate of 35%.
3. **Interviews:** In addition to the surveys, the findings were triangulated with interviews with the Rabbi and participants from three of the group. throughout the program and her ongoing contact and conversations with the rabbis who led the three pilot groups.

## PATHWAYS INTO JEWISH LIFE: FROM PASSIVE TO ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Embark is an initiative designed to equip mixed-heritage and interfaith couples with the confidence, knowledge, and relationships to engage with Jewish life in ways that feel authentic and meaningful to them. Rather than prescribing a fixed model of Jewish practice, Embark fosters agency, empowering participants to actively shape their Jewish engagement and navigate their evolving Jewish journeys together.

This evaluation builds on insights from Embark’s 2023 pilot study, which tested different cohort-based models to understand how to best facilitate Jewish engagement among mixed-heritage couples. The pilot demonstrated that a relationship-driven, experiential educational approach fosters meaningful Jewish engagement and led to the development of a core program model. This model—applied across the 2024 cohorts—ensures a structured yet flexible framework that integrates cohort-based learning, rabbinic mentorship, and accessible Jewish education while remaining adaptable to local contexts.

The 2024 evaluation expands on these learnings, assessing Embark’s impact on participants’ sense of agency in Jewish life, the strength of their relationships, and their confidence in Jewish communal spaces. The findings highlight how Jewish learning, mentorship, and peer support create pathways for couples to move from passive to active participation, reshaping their relationship with Jewish tradition and community.

# Embark 2024 Evaluation: Key Findings

Mixed-Heritage Couples: Becoming Active Participants in Jewish Life

## The Three Core Pillars of Embark

**Cohort  
Community**

6-12 Couples

**Rabbinic  
Mentorship**

Guidance &  
Support

**Accessible  
Jewish  
Learning**

## Enabling Jewish Engagement

### Ability

Participants find it easier to integrate Jewish practices into daily life

### Ownership

Couples feel more in control of how they engage with Judaism

### Confidence

Non-Jewish partners transition from observers to active participants

## Building a Jewish Life Together

**100%**

Embark helps develop a shared Jewish vision

**89%**

More likely to speak about Jewish life as a couple

**76%**

Maintain connections with their cohort

## Growth in Connection to Jewish Life

### Jewish Partners

42% → 80%

Feeling connected "to a great extent" or higher increased from start to end of program

### Non-Jewish Partners

36% → 48%

Feeling connected "to a great extent" or higher increased from start to end of program

21% felt no connection at start dropping to 4%

Embark 2024 Evaluation | Mem Global: Jewish community wherever you are

# PROGRAM MODEL AND APPROACH

Embark is structured around **three core pillars**, which work together to activate participants' **personal agency in Jewish life**:

1. **Rabbinic Mentorship** – Each cohort is guided by an approachable rabbi, who serves as a mentor, educator, and facilitator, rather than an authority figure. This personalized mentorship fosters trust and provides participants with ongoing support in navigating Jewish learning and engagement.
2. **Accessible Jewish Learning** – Embark offers practical, discussion-based Jewish education, grounded in real-life applications. The curriculum prioritizes open exploration over rigid doctrine, ensuring that participants—regardless of background—can find their own meaningful entry points into Jewish tradition.
3. **Cohort Community** – Groups of 6–12 couples create a supportive peer environment where participants learn together, build friendships, and explore Jewish life through shared experiences.

## THE ROLE OF THE EMBARK RABBI: BUILDING TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT

For many participants, the Embark rabbi is their first meaningful relationship with a rabbinic mentor. More than a teacher, the rabbi serves as a guide and trusted confidant, creating a nonjudgmental space for exploration. Participants consistently emphasize the rabbi's warmth, accessibility, and ability to model a values-based Jewish life in ways that feel practical and relevant.

Survey data underscores the significance of this relationship: the stronger the rabbinic connection, the greater the participant's confidence in Jewish spaces and engagement with Jewish learning. While Jewish and non-Jewish partners experience this differently **both Jewish and non-Jewish partners find value in their rabbi's mentorship**. Post-program, all alumni maintain at least occasional contact with their rabbi, with many seeking continued mentorship.

The program also influences long-term interest in rabbinic mentorship. A majority (75% of Jewish and 76% of non-Jewish participants) express a heightened desire to connect with a rabbi or Jewish mentor in the future. However, while 58% of Jewish participants report having another Jewish mentor beyond Embark, only 29% of non-Jewish participants do—highlighting an area for potential growth in expanding access to Jewish mentorship beyond the program.

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Cultivating Belonging

• "Rabbi Dave and Daniel have a really unique ability to be able to cultivate belonging in a space, to be able to make spaces feel safe to share. I just felt like they did a really good job of bringing us all together."
  
- {
Modeling Caring

• "I think they did a phenomenal job at creating and modeling the culture that they wanted to see in terms of valuing pluralism, in terms of caring about people individually, and making space for people to show up authentically and connecting with people. I think they have tremendous strength there."
  
- {
Just Like Us

• "One of the main things I think I took away, in retrospect, was just seeing how normal of a life a Rabbi has. I feel like Rabbi Danny and his wife are our peers, but also that he has this great body of knowledge that he studied, and it's kind of integrated into his life in a very natural way."
  
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Always Accessible

• "I think that Rabbi Megan did a really good job of explaining everything. She was always accessible. We met with her after [the program], and she was helpful. She's having a dinner at her house tonight that we were considering going to."

I connected with a Rabbi	Jewish	Non-Jewish
To a very great extent	55%	35%
To a great extent	36%	41%
An extent	5%	18%
A small extent	5%	6%
Not at all	0%	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*End of cohort survey



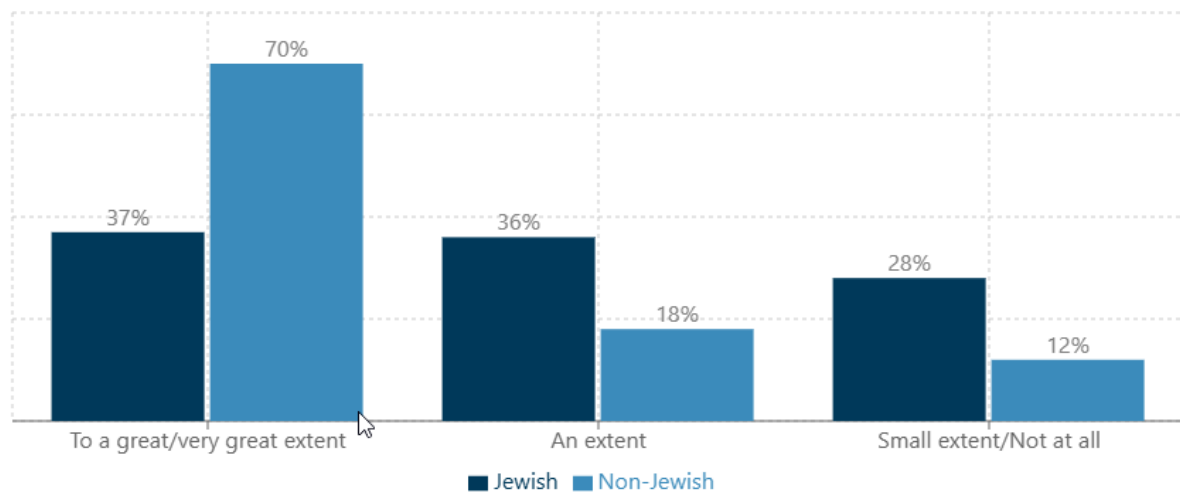
## ACCESSIBLE JEWISH LEARNING: KNOWLEDGE THAT FEELS RELEVANT

Participants reported that the weekly topics were highly accessible, even for those with little or no background in Jewish learning. Many described their learning as eye-opening, particularly in its exposure to varied Jewish perspectives and practices. For some, this was their first formal encounter with Jewish texts and traditions.

1. **A key element of accessibility is the balance between structured learning and open discussion.** Participants report strengthening their foundation of Jewish knowledge while also engaging in discussions that allowed for personal exploration. Their ability to connect abstract concepts to real-life applications is a crucial factor in making the material relevant.
2. **Participants report an experience of actively articulating Judaism's personal significance in their lives.** Participants engage in structured text study and join dynamic group discussions about holidays and identity formation, forging deeper connections with both Jewish traditions and their fellow couples. They particularly value exploring domestic Jewish practice, envisioning how traditions live within their homes beyond synagogue settings.
3. **Knowledge acquisition drives Jewish relationships.** In discussing what they are learning, couples report communicating with one another about Judaism in their relationship, while also building meaningful community with others navigating similar mixed heritage relationships.

Jewish and non-Jewish partners experience different learning trajectories. Non-Jewish participants report the greatest increases in knowledge, with 70% stating they learned "to a great extent" or higher, compared to 37% of Jewish participants. This highlights the program's effectiveness in providing accessible entry points for those with less prior exposure to Jewish learning.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?  
'I gained more knowledge about Judaism and Jewish life.'



\*End of cohort survey

Relevant, Meaningful and Applicable Discussion

• "We talked about holidays. We talked about conversion versus the concept of 'ger toshav', or the non-Jewish resident in a Jewish community. We talked a lot about identity formation. And one of the really nice things that really got us comfortable with the other couples was doing kinds of pairings, and we would get texts, and then we would kind of all move around. And I feel like that really got me to know the other couples. But also, people look at texts differently and have different concerns about them. They like different things about them. So that was really great for learning and then we would all come together as a big group and talk about them, and that really, really helped to get a deeper understanding of different things."

Judaism in the Home

• "For me, it was honestly about getting a better picture of what Judaism is, and can be, especially within the home, because I feel like we've been to synagogue like twice or so, but I feel like being there doesn't give you a full picture of 'what does that look like in the home?'"

## THE POWER OF THE COHORT COMMUNITY: RELATIONSHIPS THAT ENDURE

A defining feature of Embark is its cohort structure, where 6–12 couples form a tight-knit community. Participants emphasize that the peer environment fosters a sense of belonging, allowing them to explore Jewish life without fear of judgment. For mixed-heritage couples, the shared experience of navigating Jewish spaces provides both affirmation and practical support. Many describe the cohort as a "safe space" where they can ask questions, express uncertainties, and learn from others facing similar challenges. This sense of community continues beyond the program, with 76% of alumni maintaining connections with their cohort.

### Retreats: Immersive Experiences That Deepen Engagement

Embark's retreats are a cornerstone of the experience, offering immersive Jewish engagement in a communal setting. Taking place early in the program, the retreats build intimacy and trust, setting a foundation for deeper learning and connection. Over Shabbat, couples share meals, engage in facilitated discussions, and participate in Jewish rituals, including Havdalah, which is frequently cited as a program highlight. The immersive setting helps participants see Jewish practice in action, making traditions feel more approachable and relevant. Those unable to attend often express regret, recognizing the retreat's role in deepening relationships.

Beyond structured learning, the retreats provide unstructured time for bonding, allowing couples to form organic connections. Many describe this experience as transformative, noting that it fosters meaningful conversations and enhances their sense of belonging within the cohort.

A Full Shabbat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>"The retreat experience was really meaningful to me. It was the first time that I had ever really experienced a true Shabbat with all of the prayers and putting our phones away. That was new knowledge to me that I found really meaningful, and I'm really glad we got to have that experience."</li></ul>
Unstructured Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>"Moments between programming when we got to discuss what was feeling quite challenging about the weekend was the first time I felt like I was actually getting to know people and connect."</li></ul>
Community Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>"The most positive aspects were community building activities, sharing ancestral objects, and getting in deeper conversations with other couples than we had before."</li></ul>
Deeper Conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>"Getting to spend Shabbat with a new group of people, the deeper conversations we had as compared to other sessions of the cohort, and a time to connect and build community with new people were the most positive aspects."</li></ul>





# OUTCOMES: PARTICIPATION IN JEWISH LIFE AND COMMUNITY

Embark fosters meaningful engagement in Jewish life by strengthening participants' confidence, relationships, and sense of belonging. While outcomes vary between Jewish and non-Jewish partners, all report increased Jewish participation in some form.

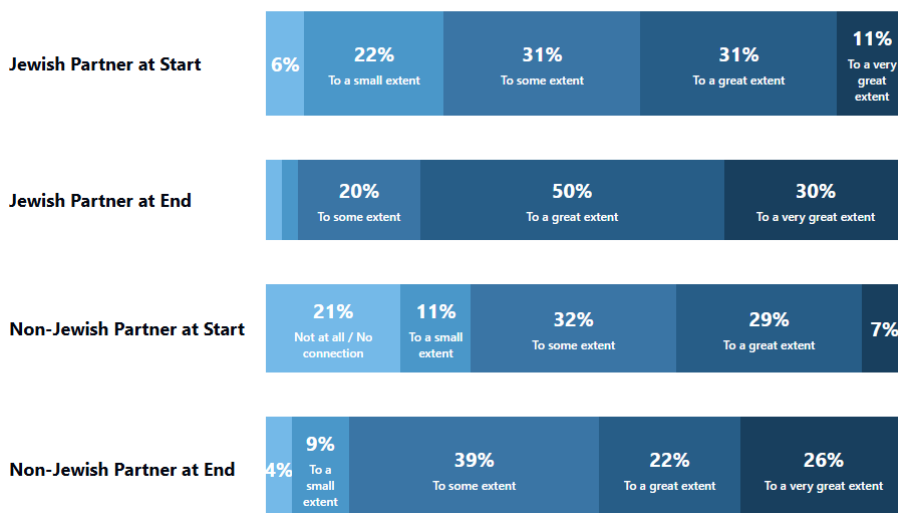
## OVERCOMING THE FEELING OF BEING AN OUTSIDER

Many participants—especially non-Jewish partners—struggle with feeling like outsiders in Jewish spaces. While Embark builds confidence in Jewish life, integrating into broader Jewish communities remains challenging. Survey data shows significant improvement:

- Jewish partners feeling "very connected" rose from 42% to 80%, with none reporting low connection by the program's end.
- Non-Jewish partners saw an increase from 36% to 48%, while those feeling little or no connection dropped from 32% to 13%.

Still, 52% of non-Jewish partners report less than strong connection, often due to lingering feelings of being on the periphery. While Embark fosters belonging within the cohort, many non-Jewish partners continue to struggle with authenticity and comfort in wider Jewish settings.

### To what extent do you feel good about your connection to Jewish life?



*Feels Welcome But Different*

• "To some extent, no matter how inviting the Jewish community might be, or however hard I try to educate my partner on certain things, or bring him into certain spaces, he might feel welcomed, but he'll always feel like a bit of an outsider, and that's something that I heard from a lot of the non-Jewish partners in our group. And so it just made me more aware, and perhaps more empathetic to that."

*Authenticity*

• "I have like an authenticity complex where I grew up my whole life being told I was Jewish by my Black mother because she was like, 'your dad is Jewish.' So like my whole life I was told that I was Jewish but did not grow up in a Jewish community. So I think it's been a lifelong question for me about my Jewishness or Jewish peoplehood."

## JEWISH KNOWLEDGE + SUPPORTIVE GROUP = GREATER CONFIDENCE

Confidence in Jewish spaces stems from two key factors: knowledge acquisition and peer support. Learning about Jewish traditions, rituals, and values gives participants the language and tools to engage more fully in Jewish life. Meanwhile, the supportive cohort environment normalizes Jewish engagement, reducing fear of "doing it wrong." Participants report increased comfort participating in Jewish rituals, from leading Shabbat meals to attending synagogue services. Jewish partners deepen their existing knowledge, while non-Jewish partners often experience transformative learning, gaining entry points into Jewish practice for the first time. Key areas of Jewish knowledge gained include:

- **Spiritual and Theological Knowledge:** Understanding Jewish ethics, values, and perspectives on spirituality.
- **Textual and Intellectual Knowledge:** Exposure to Jewish texts and traditions, fostering critical engagement with Jewish learning.
- **Historical and Cultural Knowledge:** Learning about Jewish diversity, movements, and historical context.

*Jewish Partner*

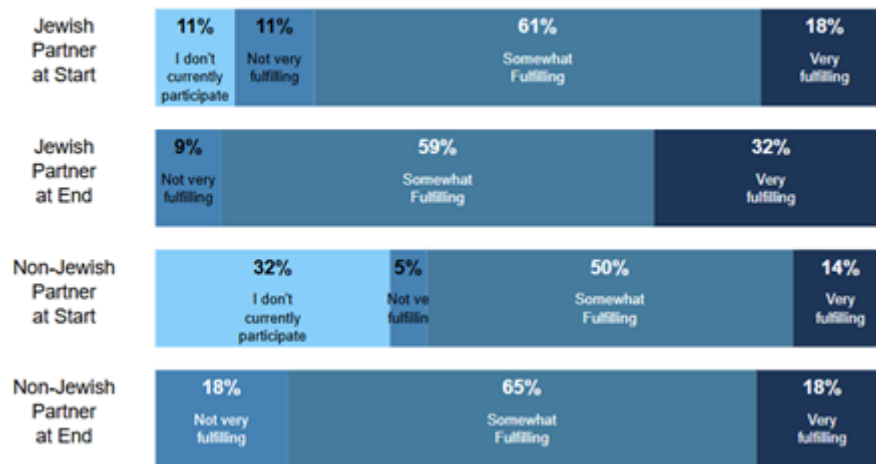
"Embark gave me a language or vocabulary around how to describe the parts of Judaism that are important to me. Before Embark, I would say that Judaism is important. My partner would ask me why it's important and I would say that I don't know - it just is. I didn't have a good way to talk about it. And so I feel like I've gained a vocabulary to be able to identify those important pieces."

## VIEWING JEWISH PRACTICE AS POSITIVE AND DESIRABLE

Embark helps couples see Jewish practice not as an obligation but as a meaningful choice. By the program's end, all participants engage in some form of Jewish practice, though levels of fulfillment vary.

For Jewish partners, the biggest shift is in finding Jewish practice personally meaningful, with those describing it as "very fulfilling" rising from 18% to 32%. For non-Jewish partners, participation in Jewish practice increases significantly, with those previously not engaged at all dropping from 32% to zero. However, while all now participate, fulfillment remains lower among non-Jewish participants, highlighting an area for further exploration.

### How Fulfilling is Your Current Jewish Practice?



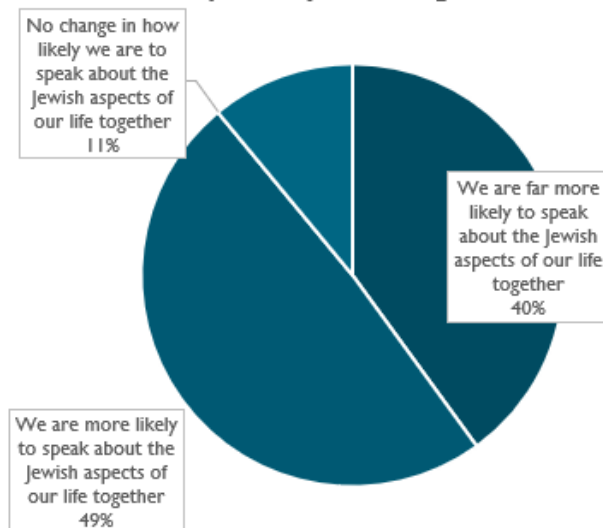
*"I think Embark has sort of reframed the way that I think about things. Made me a little bit more open to the idea of actively participating in the Jewish community from the perspective of hosting Shabbat or something."*

## COUPLE-FOCUSED OUTCOMES: STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS

Embark facilitates deeper conversations about Jewish life within couples. Participants describe Embark deepening their understanding of Jewish values they share, strengthening their relationships in the process. They describe opportunities for reflection, considering the Jewish traditions they wish to embrace and how to integrate them into their lives, including shared household practices and long-term vision for their Jewish life.

- 97% of participants found it easier to discuss Jewish topics with their partner as a result of the program.
- 89% of the alumni survey respondents report being more likely to speak about the Jewish aspects of their life together.
- All report Embark helping them and their partner to form a shared vision of how they want to integrate Jewish living into their lives, with 76% attributing the contribution "to a great extent or higher."

### As a result of participating in Embark, to what extent are you and your partner more likely to speak about the Jewish aspects of your life together?



\*Alumni survey

#### Couples Bond Strengthened

*"I feel that for me husband and me, our bond has only strengthened. There is a feeling of trust knowing, okay, we've had some of these conversations now, and we know the intentions and the morals behind each other's thoughts. So, going forward, I have a lot of confidence that we can talk, negotiate, and try to come up with our own traditions and form our own household traditions."*

#### Open Communication

*"Embark made us talk about certain things that maybe we wouldn't have. She [Rabbi Megan] made us face some uncomfortable questions. It's good in that sense. There was one session about holiday traditions. Her family does different things from my family, because her family is not Jewish and how we split all that up. That was a big conversation, although that's something that we now have figured out."*

## COMMUNITY-FOCUSED OUTCOMES: BUILDING JEWISH FRIENDSHIPS AND ENGAGEMENT

Embark fosters a strong sense of peer community, with many participants maintaining friendships beyond the program. In the alumni survey, 87% agree that connecting with other mixed-heritage couples was an important aspect of their experience, and 76% report ongoing relationships with their cohort.

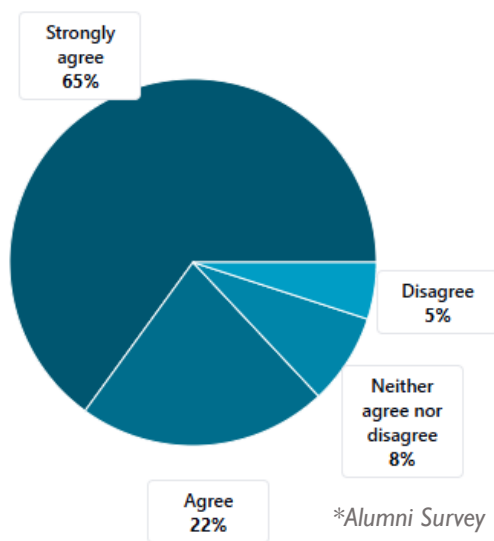
Beyond personal relationships, Embark participants increase their involvement in Jewish communal life:

- 60%-75% report strengthening Jewish friendships.
- Around 60% participate more frequently in Jewish activities.
- 50%-63% increase their engagement with local Jewish organizations.

While engagement levels differ, the program successfully introduces participants to Jewish communal spaces and encourages long-term participation.

### Connecting with a peer-group of mixed heritage couples

is an important contribution of Embark for me



*"I never had access to a community like that before. And that is really the highlight of why I really liked it because I have a chance now to go to events when I'm able to, whereas I didn't have that before. I'm sure that I'm going to be getting more messages about upcoming events. It's not just for Shabbat, but they [the Rabbi] even wanted to just get together to go out somewhere and do mini golf, just to hang out and stay connected. So they are working to not just bring us together for holiday events, but to also have us hang out in social settings, and just to continue the relationships."*

## DEEPENING CONNECTION TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE

**Jewish life is fundamentally both a local and global collective experience**, rooted in meaningful friendships and community relationships built upon shared memory, knowledge, and a sense of mutual responsibility. As such, an introduction to Jewish life is also an introduction to the collective dimension of Judaism - Peoplehood. For Embark couples, their cohort represents more than just a venue for acquiring knowledge—it serves as a gateway into the rich tapestry of collective Jewish life, encompassing religious, cultural, historical, political, and other dimensions.

Currently, participants report that their cohort discussions focus on their lives as couples within their local communities, with limited engagement in the broader collective aspects of Jewish Peoplehood. This finding highlights a curricular area where Embark can further enhance participants' experience of Jewish belonging. A notable example emerged during the post-October 7th period, which presented an opportunity to explore how Jews both locally and worldwide collectively experience and react to moments of crisis and resilience. As one interviewee noted, the intensity of news coverage around Israel made the war and its impact on American Jewish life a topic of relevance they were eager to discuss.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2024 evaluation confirms that Embark creates meaningful pathways into Jewish life for mixed-heritage and interfaith couples. The program’s relationship-driven, experiential model fosters Jewish engagement through mentorship, learning, and peer support. Participants move from passive observers to active participants, integrating Jewish traditions into their lives with greater confidence and agency.

Key strengths of the program include:

- Cohorts that provide a supportive peer environment.
- Rabbis who serve as trusted mentors, enhancing confidence in Jewish learning and practice.
- A curriculum that is accessible, discussion-based, and applicable to real life.
- Retreats that create immersive experiences, deepening relationships and engagement.

### From Passive to Active Jewish Engagement

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A central theme of the evaluation is the development of **agency**. Embark empowers participants to take ownership of their Jewish engagement, moving beyond inherited traditions or external expectations.

- Jewish partners shift from defaulting to family traditions to actively shaping their Jewish lives.
- Non-Jewish partners transition from passive observers to engaged participants in Jewish rituals and discussions.

This sense of ownership is critical in fostering long-term Jewish involvement.

### Challenges and Areas for Growth

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Two areas emerge as priorities for strengthening Embark’s impact:

#### 1. Facilitating Deeper Integration into Jewish Communal Life

While Embark fosters strong internal belonging, some participants—especially non-Jewish partners—struggle with transitioning into broader Jewish spaces.

- Strengthening partnerships with local Jewish organizations could create structured post-program engagement.
- Expanding mentorship pathways beyond the Embark rabbi could sustain participants' Jewish learning.

#### 2. Deepening Connection to the Global Jewish People

Participants focus primarily on their personal and local Jewish experience, with limited engagement in the broader Jewish collective.

- Incorporating discussions on contemporary global Jewish challenges could expand participants' sense of Jewish belonging.
- Structured conversations on Jewish Peoplehood, Israel, and historical narratives could strengthen connections to the collective Jewish experience.

