

# BBYO IMPACT STUDY: A Summary

## Introduction

In 2010, the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation (CLSFF) commissioned new research to understand the impact of participation in BBYO (an independent youth organization that was part of B'nai B'rith International until 2000) on Jewish youth in their teenage years. The key findings, presented in summary here, reveal the effects of teen engagement with BBYO on connection to Jewish life in the short and long term.

BBYO is the leading pluralistic organization offering fun, meaningful and affordable experiences to Jewish teenagers in North America and throughout the world. For nearly 90 years, BBYO's AZA and BBG chapters have been providing leadership programs and identity-enriching experiences, shaping the lives of 250,000 alumni who are among the most prominent figures in business, politics, academia, the arts and Jewish communal life. BBYO's broad program menu enables teens to explore areas of leadership, service and civic engagement, Israel education, and Jewish values with the expectation that they will exhibit

positive attitudes and behaviors about being Jewish while maintaining the values and relationships that strengthen the Jewish people.

This impact research comes at a critical time. Researchers and sociologists who study American Jews have been documenting a decline in interest and participation in Jewish youth organizations and activities by young Jews born in the waning years of the 20th century. It is estimated that around 75 percent of teenage Jews celebrate their bar or bat mitzvah; yet, by the time these individuals reach their last two years of high school, at best about half continue to be involved in Jewish life. Among the reasons suggested for this decline are negative experiences with formal Jewish education, poor quality programs or leadership, social and academic pressures, and the increasing influence of secular society. As a study of Jewish teenagers noted several years ago, the bar/bat mitzvah is viewed as an end, rather than as a beginning, to engagement in Jewish life.



# Methodology in Brief

This study, conducted by Groeneman Research & Consulting and Gerstein | Agne Strategic Communications, set out to ascertain the impact of participation in BBYO in the short, medium and long term. As such, the research design included surveying four distinct populations: (1) high school juniors and seniors who currently participate in BBYO activities, (2) BBYO alumni ages 18–23 (college-age alumni), (3) BBYO alumni ages 24–35 (young adult alumni), and (4) a national comparison group of American Jews ages 18–35 who have never participated in BBYO activities. Nearly 3,000 BBYO alumni responded to the survey and the

comparison group consisted of 500 individuals. Importantly, the responses for the comparison group were “weighted” to mirror the BBYO alumni on a wide range of demographic and family traits, thus enabling the researchers to isolate the unique impact of BBYO participation as much as possible.

Survey questions covered an array of topics that are central to BBYO’s mission, ranging from Jewish identity and raising Jewish families to leadership skills, commitment to service and Jewish friendships.

# The Power of BBYO

Overall, BBYO is having a remarkably positive impact and achieving success across many of its priorities. BBYO participants are overwhelmingly pleased with their BBYO experience and young BBYO alumni believe the organization has played a significant role in their lives. BBYO members and non-members across all ages surveyed have strong and positive recognition of and association with BBYO. This evidence alone provides the confirmation that BBYO is largely succeeding in achieving a key aspect of its mission.

The power of BBYO is even more evident when comparing BBYO alumni with Jews who are the same age but did not participate in BBYO as youth. This comparison demonstrates that the BBYO experience results in young adults who are more inclined to have Jewish friends, believe that being Jewish plays an important role in their lives, hold leadership roles in their communities and

are committed to having Jewish families. Results from the study also indicate, however, that BBYO does not have a significant impact on participants’ religiosity (e.g. synagogue attendance), nor engagement in Jewish cultural activities (e.g. reading about Jewish topics, attending a Jewish concert).

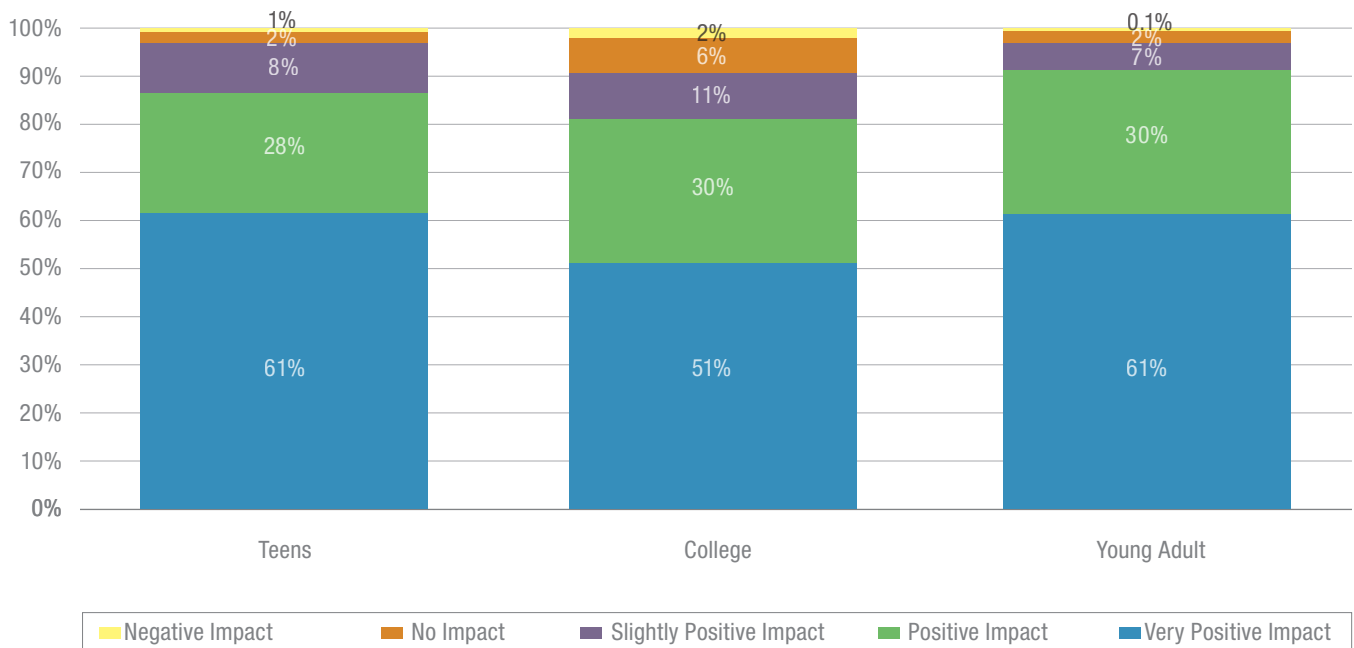
When those surveyed were asked to use their own words to describe the impact that BBYO has played in their lives, the responses tended to be very positive and reveal a deep appreciation for BBYO. Current participants and alumni consistently mention the self-confidence and leadership skills the experience instilled in them, the friendships that were created during BBYO and how their participation strengthened their Jewish identities. The personal reflections inserted throughout this document represent the variety of respondent comments.

# FINDING #1: BBYO POSITIVELY IMPACTS YOUNG JEWS

*“BBYO has changed my life. I’ve gained confidence, learned about myself and learned about my Jewish identity. Not to mention I’ve made all of my best friends in BBYO.”*

BBYO participants and alumni express highly favorable opinions about their BBYO experience. Whether it is current BBYO high school students or alumni who participated in BBYO activities nearly two decades ago, large majorities of BBYO members say that BBYO has had a very positive impact on their lives. Notably, hardly any respondents felt that BBYO had no impact or a negative impact.

Impact of BBYO on My Life



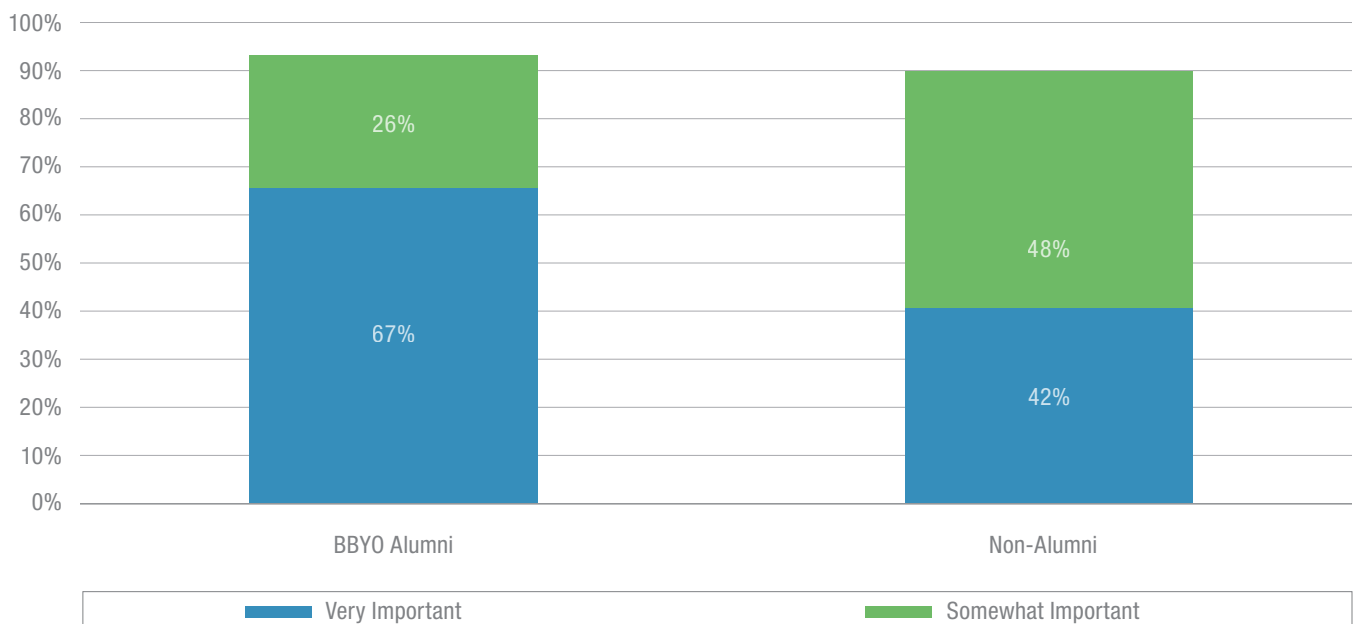
# FINDING #2: BBYO CULTIVATES JEWISH PRIDE

*"[BBYO] taught me to be proud of my heritage and to celebrate it. Sometimes it is hard to be proud of your Judaism when most of the kids around you are Christian."*

Among the most critical and telling findings from this study is the clear impact that BBYO has had on how young Jewish adults feel about being Jewish. On the most basic Jewish identity question of “how important is being Jewish in your life,” the BBYO effect cannot be clearer—67% of BBYO alumni say it is very important while 42% of non-alumni Jews say it is very important. This trend carries over to connectedness to the Jewish community and also indicates “stickiness” as people get older. That is, large majorities of BBYO alumni say that being a part of the Jewish people plays a very important role in their lives, and this holds from their college years to post-college years at a much higher rate than among non-alumni.

This is where BBYO is leaving its mark: creating young Jews who overwhelmingly declare that Judaism is very important to them.

How important is being Jewish in your life? (college and young adults)

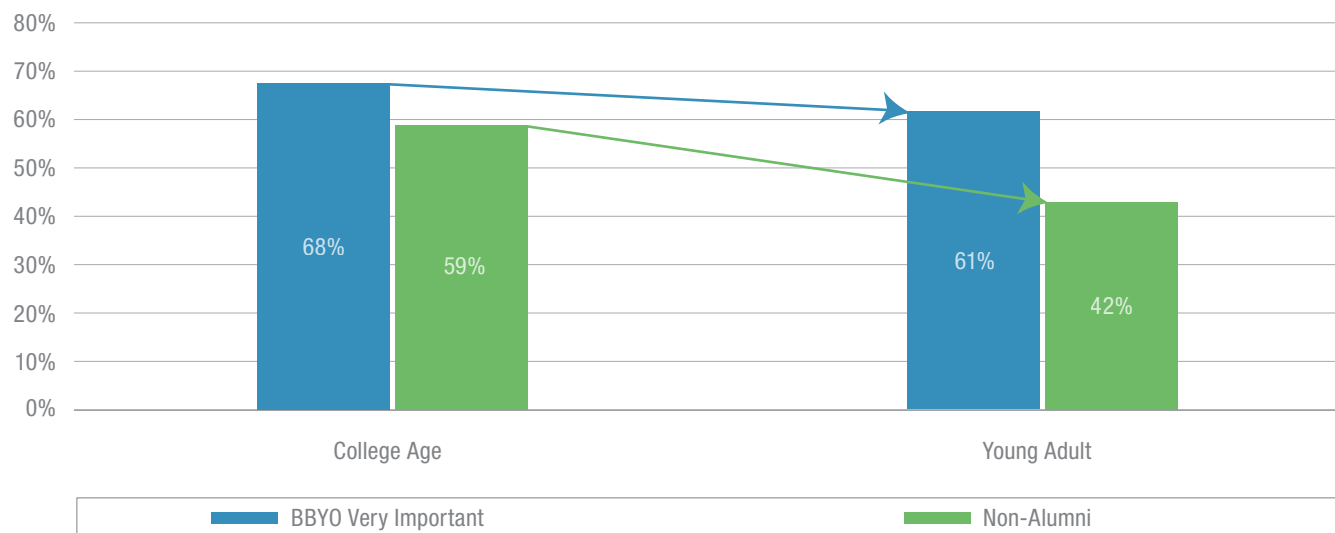


# FINDING #3: BBYO CREATES ENDURING JEWISH CONNECTIONS

*“Before joining BBYO I stereotyped Jews and didn’t really want any social involvement in Judaism. After my mom FORCED me to try it I loved it. Ever since, Judaism has played a major role in my life.”*

The BBYO experience results in people having a stronger connection with the broader Jewish community than among those who do not participate in BBYO. This is particularly noticeable when examining the responses of Jewish young adults in college and afterward as compared to their non-alumni counterparts. While each group shows a decline in connectedness to the Jewish community from the college years to post-college years, the drop among BBYO alumni was significantly less steep than the drop among non-alumni, suggesting that BBYO provides “stickiness” on this measure (as shown by the arrows in the chart below).

How important of a role does being a part of the Jewish people play in your life?



While the measure of connectedness to Israel is lower than the measure of connectedness to the broader Jewish community for both BBYO alumni and non-alumni, BBYO alumni are 30–31% more likely to indicate a strong connection to Israel than the general population.

Finally, as a proxy for Jewish affiliation in college, college-age BBYO alumni participate in Hillel at a much higher rate (63%) than non-alumni (42%).

# FINDING #4:

## BBYO FOSTERS LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

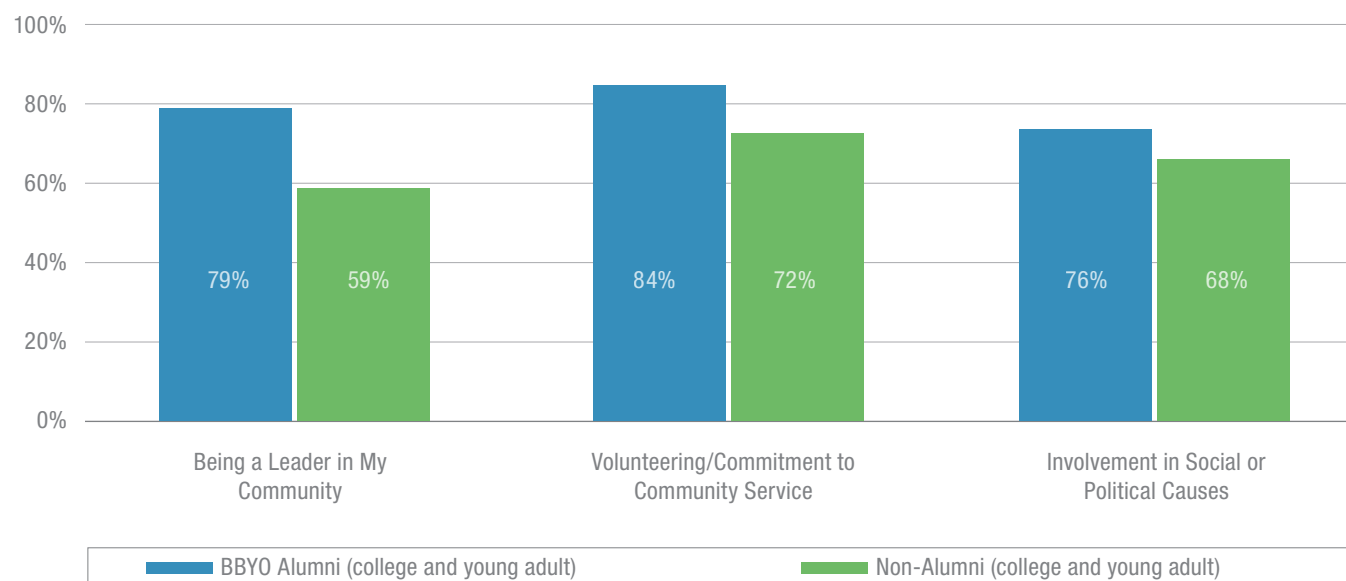
■ *“BBYO prepared me for holding leadership roles in college, grad school and in my Jewish Federation.”*

Nearly all BBYO alumni underscore the value of their BBYO participation in high school as meaningfully increasing their self-confidence and leadership skills, with more than two-thirds reporting that BBYO helped them “very much” to improve these aspects of their lives. We see the empirical evidence of this impact as BBYO young alumni place greater importance than their peers in the national comparison group on leadership and service.

When asked how important a role “being a leader in my community” plays in their lives, 79% of young adult BBYO alumni say it is important. This is 20 points higher than the 59% of non-alumni who believe being a leader is important for them. These trends carry over to volunteering and a commitment to community service, as well as to involvement in social and/or political causes.

Moreover, as noted in other studies, BBYO young adult alumni are more likely to donate money to Jewish organizations (57% versus approximately 46%) than similar-age Jewish young adults.

Importance of Leadership and Service (very/somewhat important)



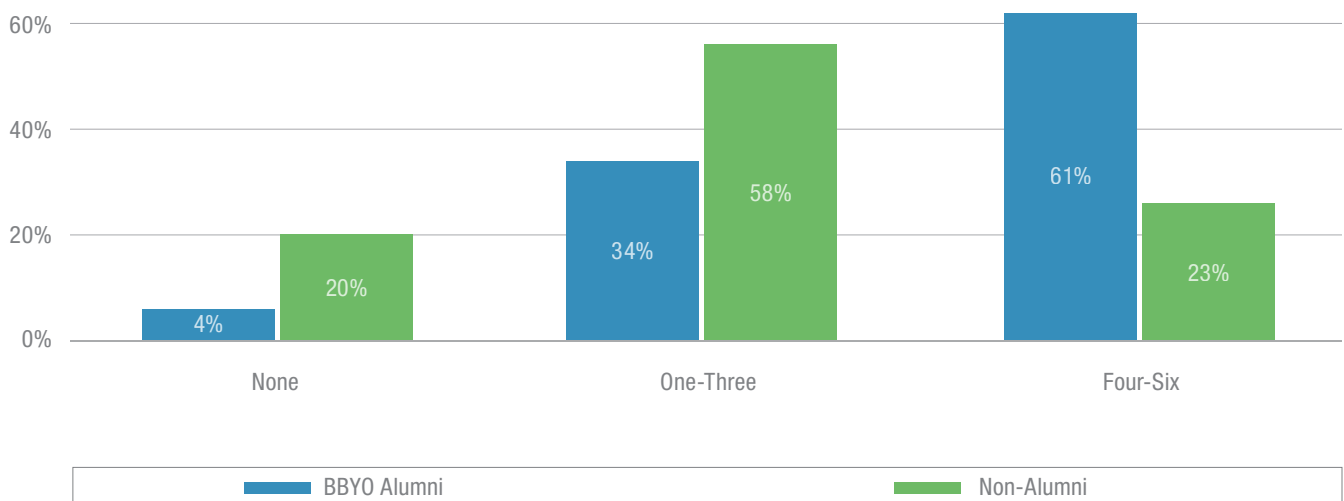
# FINDING #5: BBYO LAUNCHES LIFELONG JEWISH FRIENDSHIPS

*“I made tons of wonderful friends there, many of whom I am still in touch [with]. They were kinder, more supportive friends than what I found in my high school—more like family.”*

One of the most striking ways in which BBYO makes an impact on its participants is in establishing and maintaining friendships with other Jews. In both the survey responses and open-ended comments, the value of friendships made through BBYO was reiterated and celebrated. Nearly all young BBYO alumni (91%) agreed that the organization strengthened their interest in having Jewish friends. Survey responses reveal the magnitude of this dynamic, demonstrating that for the majority of BBYO alumni (61%), at least four of their closest six friends are Jewish, compared to just 23% of non-alumni. Only 4% of BBYO alumni say that none of their six closest friends are Jewish, whereas 20% of non-BBYO alumni say that none of their six closest friends are Jewish.

Jewish and secular research has shown that one’s social network plays an integral role in life decisions, activities and connections to community. This study establishes the impact BBYO has had on the social choices of its alumni.

Of your six closest friends, how many of them are Jewish? (college and young adult)\*



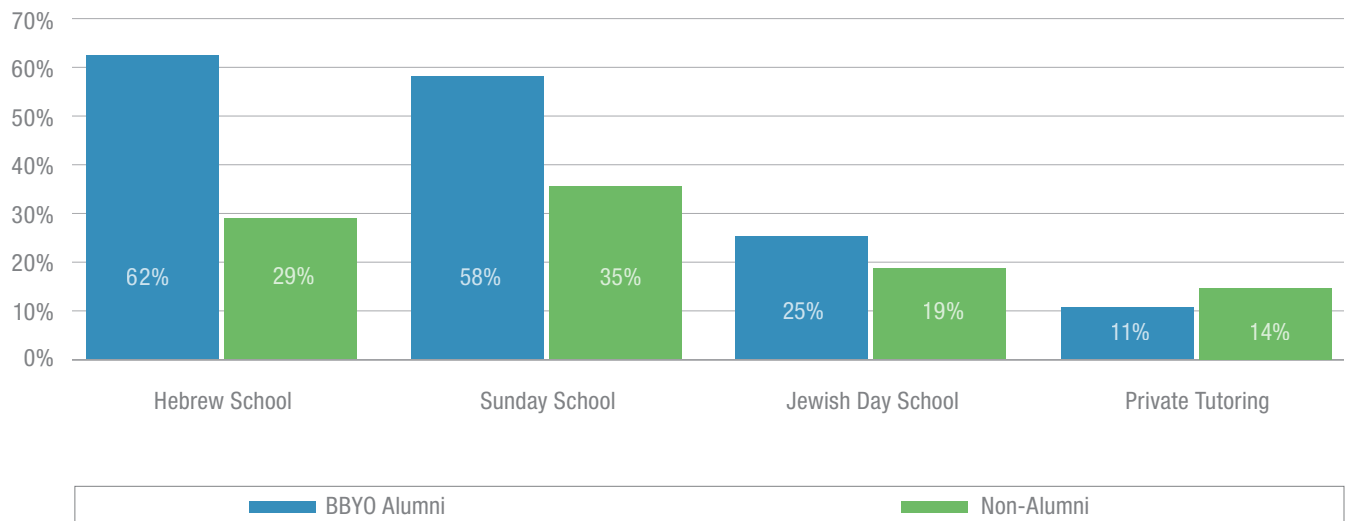
\*Due to rounding, totals may not add up to 100%.

# FINDING #6: BBYO BUILDS COMMITMENT THAT REACHES THE NEXT GENERATION

*“My experience in the BBYO summer programs, specifically CLTC and ESPECIALLY Kallah, truly were catalysts to my increasing Jewish learning and observance, something that I am passing on to my son and daughter.”*

Raising Jewish families is a priority for BBYO young adult alumni, as shown by their thoughts and actions: 74% of BBYO young adult alumni strongly believe it is important to raise their future children to be Jewish, compared to 40% of the comparison group. They also are committed in much higher numbers to providing their children with some form of Jewish education.

Current or Expected Participation in Different Forms of Jewish Education (asked only among parents)



# FINDING #7:

## BBYO PROVIDES A SAFE AND PLURALISTIC ENVIRONMENT FOR GROWTH

BBYO participants and alumni used the open-response section to highlight characteristics of the BBYO experience that were not included in the structured questions but were obviously central to their personal involvement. In response to the invitation to share the elements of BBYO that most influenced or moved them, many cited BBYO's open and safe environment in addition to its pluralistic culture.

*"In an area that had few Jews, some anti-Semitism and a great deal of homophobia, BBYO gave me a safe haven in which I could explore my Jewish identity and come to terms with being gay."*

Comments underscored the sentiment that BBYO provides a protective, non-threatening environment to "be yourself" around other Jewish teens who are unlikely to be critical or religiously judgmental. Alumni noted that BBYO provided a "safe haven" for exploring being Jewish and developing one's personal identity in a familiar and comfortable environment. This was especially relevant for BBYOers living in areas of low Jewish density or who otherwise feel socially isolated.

*"I attend a Modern Orthodox Jewish school with others who are similar in belief and tradition to me. In BBYO, everyone I know is either Reform or Conservative and this has provided me with the realization that it is important to connect with everyone within the Jewish community."*

Respondents also referred to the organization's openness to and tolerance of all strands of Judaism, including beliefs and behaviors that are far from traditional. It was not uncommon to read how exposure to Jewish youth religiously different from themselves served to expand respondents' understanding and appreciation of the variety of customs and levels of observance in Jewish life.

BBYO's pluralistic environment—representing an array of denominations, Jewish educational backgrounds and Jewish family lifestyles—offers a place for a wide range of Jewish teens to explore their Jewish identities and, importantly, to learn about and from others who are different from themselves. The insight that the content and philosophy of BBYO works for a mix of Jewish youth is critical within the context of a discussion of the successes and challenges of BBYO.

# The Value of Teen Engagement

This research demonstrates the efficacy of the BBYO model for engaging teens in Jewish life. It articulates that with the ingredients of close friendships, Jewish experiences and leadership opportunities, BBYO leads to significantly greater commitment to Jewish life, both on a communal and a personal level. Across several measures, BBYO alumni demonstrate a strong sense of Jewish pride and peoplehood, a willingness to play leadership roles and a connection to the State of Israel. They support Jewish organizations with their checkbooks and volunteer time. Alumni also participate actively in Jewish social networks and exhibit a desire and commitment to raising Jewish families.

Our communal researchers caution that young Jews in their teenage years are susceptible to alienation from the Jewish community once they pass the age of b'nai mitzvah. They also indicate, however, that the teenage years offer great potential for creating strong, affiliated and dedicated Jews. This new research affirms that engagement with BBYO during the critical teen years lays the foundation for enduring Jewish friendships, values, commitments and engagement in Jewish communal life and leadership.

## About the Research

The Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation commissioned Groeneman Research & Consulting and Gerstein | Agne Strategic Communications to conduct a comprehensive research study. The research was developed and carried out collaboratively by Sid Groeneman of Groeneman Research & Consulting (Bethesda, Maryland) and Jim Gerstein of Gerstein | Agne Strategic Communications (Washington, DC). Both have extensive experience designing, conducting and interpreting research for Jewish organizations on issues of interest to the Jewish community. The two principals did their work under the guidance of Wendy Rosov of Rosov Consulting (Berkeley, California), who managed the project on behalf of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation. Foundation staff and BBYO professional leadership were deeply involved in the framing and implementation of the research. To access the full research report, please visit [www.schusterman.org/resources/studies-evaluations/bbyo-impact-study](http://www.schusterman.org/resources/studies-evaluations/bbyo-impact-study).