

Helena Miller
Alex Pomson

Jewish Lives and Jewish Education in the UK

School, Family and Society

 Springer

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Foreword

Every blade of grass has an angel that bends over it and whispers, 'Grow! Grow!'—Midrash Bereshit Rabbah

A traditional Jewish midrash teaches that every blade of grass is nurtured over time to grow to its potential. If this is true of a blade of grass, how much more so for our young people? We cherish their growth and their learning over time.

At Pears Foundation, we are inspired by this kind of long-term learning as well. One of the advantages of philanthropy is that we are able to take the long view and look at growth and development over time.

The Jewish Lives project began in 2011. It started from a place of curiosity: we wanted to know more about the role that Jewish schools played in the lives of the young people who attended them, and their families. We soon realised that we had an opportunity to go even further and create the first ever longitudinal cohort study of young British Jews.

The data was gathered on five separate occasions over a 10-year period, through surveys and interviews with a cohort of young people and their families. The young people all started secondary school in September 2011. Most of them attended Jewish secondary schools and a minority attended non-denominational independent or state schools. Today, most are in university and this book is the first exploration of their educational and social experiences over this period.

And what a period it has been. Their education has occurred against a backdrop of Brexit and austerity in the UK, a global pandemic and rising levels of antisemitism and conflict in the Middle East. They have grown up on social media with more access to technology and opportunities for travel than any previous generation has enjoyed, but also amidst a developing mental health crisis among young people and increased awareness of climate change and global poverty.

Amidst this, our young people have thoughtfully and quietly constructed and reconstructed their identity as young British Jews. As they have grown up, the data has provided a unique insight into their relationships with their families and friends, their Jewish identities and their life as British citizens.

This book also provides an opportunity to update understandings of faith-based schooling in the UK, giving readers a glimpse inside seven of Britain's mainstream Jewish secondary schools that educate around 7,500 students. The data can tell us how schools function as both public and community-based institutions, what they contribute to the lives of young people and where they fall short of their promise.

By taking the long view, we now have a unique portrait of what it means to grow up within the British Jewish community. The project will continue to follow these young people as their stories unfold into early adulthood and beyond.

I am grateful to the research team (Helena and Alex in particular), the advisory board, our Foundation Director Amy Braier and most of all to the young people and parents who generously opened up this window into their lives and allowed us in.

Executive Chair, Pears Foundation
London, UK

Sir Trevor Pears CMG

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The *Jewish Lives* study could not have taken place without the involvement of many people.

We would like to thank our truly international research team, who have worked with us since 2011 to ensure that data collection, transcription and analysis could actually happen, and happen to a very high standard:

Dr Hagit HaCohen Wolf, Dr Randal Schnoor, Michelle Terret, Dr Belinda Copitch, Charlotte Gillis, Jeffrey Leader, Marion Cohen, Hilary Hosier, Dr Thomas Spielhofer.

And several people who worked on one or more phases since 2011:

Karen Scott, Tanya Miller, Deborah Shapson, Lisa Zeital.

You have all been amazing and we are proud to work with each and every one of you. In Pirke Avot chapter 4 verse 1 (Sayings of the Fathers), we read: *Who is wise? One who learns from all people.* Well, we have learnt enormous amounts from all of you. Thank you.

Additional thanks for reading and commenting on the draft of this book to Michelle Terret, Belinda Copitch and Karen Scott.

Our Advisory team gave rigorous and helpful advice and support every time we met with them. We thank:

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We thank our supporters—The London School of Jewish Studies (LSJS), Rosov Consulting, UJIA, PaJeS—for their willingness to enable this project to happen.

Without the financial support of the Pears Foundation, this study could not have started, nor sustained itself over a 10-year period. We thank you for your enormous support, partnership, and the faith you put in us to deliver.

Without the willingness of the Head teachers and their staff teams at our Jewish secondary schools in the UK, we would not have been able to collect any data, let alone have the high completion rates that we managed for our surveys, over the

seven years that our cohort was in secondary school. A huge thank you to Hasmonean High School for Girls, Hasmonean High School for Boys, Immanuel College, JCoSS, JFS, King David High School, Manchester, King Solomon High School and Yavneh College. We are the biggest advocates of Jewish schooling, and each of you are such great examples of Jewish education in practice.

Our biggest thank you is reserved for our participating families—the parents and young people who completed our surveys time and time again and have been willing and engaged in our interviews every two years. Without you, there would be no *Jewish Lives* project. You have made, and are continuing to make, history with this unique and important study.

And finally, neither of us would have had the possibility of undertaking this work without the unfailing support of our families. This work is dedicated especially to Steve Miller and Tanya Pomson, without whom we would be lesser people.

September 2024

Helena Miller
Alex Pomson

Authors' Note

This book is about one study that has been taking place since 2011. It has been and continues to be a unique opportunity to study young people and their families from the time they entered Jewish Secondary schools, as well as a group of Jewish adolescents who entered non-Jewish schools.

We have chosen to use this 10-year marker to gather our thoughts and data together in this one book. You might ask, why now? Why not wait until the study is complete? The challenge is that we don't know when that will be, and we have gathered such a richness of data so far that we think that now is a good opportunity to tell you what we've found so far. Ten years is also a turning point for the project. Until now, our cohort has been in a range of formal Jewish frameworks—school, home, synagogues, youth movements, university—and these frameworks have scaffolded their Jewish Lives to a large extent. From now onwards though, as they become independent adults, the scaffolding will no longer surround them, or it will certainly surround them to a lesser extent. We plan, in the long-term, to write the sequel to this book, and maybe its title will need to be *When the Scaffolding Comes Down*—or something similar!

A note on *how* to read this book. The book is a narrative of our study and has been divided into chapters, each of which focuses on one or other theme from our data collection and analysis. We have taken a broadly academic tone, but we also hope that our style is accessible if you are a general reader intrigued by the topic, or a post-graduate student of Jewish Education. For those of you who are either teachers recommending reading to your students, or students looking for references for your essays, the chapters are intended to be read independently of one another. Each chapter has its own list of references to enable this to be helpful to you. The challenge of making each chapter “stand-alone” is to ensure that each chapter is whole, with no loose ends. This has inevitably led to occasional repetition in other chapters, and we hope that's not off-putting. We (naturally) think that the book is a good read from start to finish, and we hope you will too. For us, *Jewish Lives* has been, and continues to be, an extraordinary project. We hope you will think so too.

Contents

1	<i>Jewish Lives—A Long Look at Unfolding Stories</i>	1
	Religion and Schools in the UK	2
	The Expansion of Jewish Schools	4
	Beginnings and Inspirations for Our Work	5
	Building the Research Team	6
	Theoretical Foundations	7
	Studying the Same People Over Time	8
	The Research Sample	10
	Collecting Our Data	12
	The Book’s Structure: A Glimpse of What Is to Come	15
	References	17
2	Choosing a Jewish School	19
	Introducing the Families	20
	A Snapshot in Time	23
	Deconstructing School Choice—Theoretical Constructs	24
	Parental Considerations	26
	Parental Aspirations	27
	Parents’ Expectations of Schools	31
	A Good Choice Looking Back?	35
	Conclusion	38
	References	38
3	Jewish School Experiences	41
	The Nuts and Bolts of Jewish Secondary Schooling in the UK	42
	The Formal Curriculum	42
	The Informal Curriculum and the Intangibles	44
	Informal Education Through School	46
	Perceptions of Jewish Education	49
	How Doctrinaire It Is	49
	How Substantive It Is	51

Highlights—What Interviewees Valued Most About Jewish Education	54
Informal Education	54
Social and Communal Dimensions	55
Non-Jewish Schools—A Counter-Factual Case for Community	57
What Has Been the Jewish Impact of Schools?	59
Quantitative Data	59
Qualitative Data	61
Conclusion	62
References	63
4 Focusing on Families	65
Methodology and Sample	68
Six Families	69
Seth Arons, and Parents Sharon and Mike	69
Sarah Brownstein, Mother Ann and Step-Father Justin	69
Dan Charles, and Parents Sylvia and Jack	70
Gideon Cook, and Parents Cheryl and Ari	70
Joanna Eber, and Parents Leah and Nat	70
Stacey Fine, and Parents Katie and Ron	70
In their Parents’ Shadow	70
Emerging from the Shadows	72
Finding Equilibrium	73
Reconstructing Home, Away from Home	74
Unpacking the Contribution of Family	77
Family Culture	77
Family Systems	79
Family Rituals—The Stories Families Enact	80
Family Rituals—The Stories Families Tell About Themselves	81
Family Structure: Birth Order	82
Beyond Family	83
References	83
5 It Takes a Village: What It Means to Be a Jewish Young Person Today in the UK	85
Jewish Identity	86
Family Patterns	87
Feeling Jewish More than Doing Jewish	89
The Specialness of Friday Night	91
The Unfulfilled Promise of Bar and Bat Mitzvah	92
The Significance and Insignificance of the Synagogue	96
The Pull of the Youth Movements and More	97
Widening the Circle at University	99
The Power of Jewish Social Capital (and Shared Cultural Capital)	100
Summary	101
References	102

6	Friends Are Everything	105
	Parents—Important Shapers of Friendship	106
	The Role that Schools Play—“ <i>He’s Got a Lovely Circle of Friends</i> ”	109
	Separate Social Circles	111
	A Period of Adjustment—Transition to University	113
	Jewish Friendships on Campus	115
	Dating and Life Partners—A Young Person’s Perspective	117
	The Parental Perspective	122
	Conclusion	124
	References	124
7	Growing Up in Britain	127
	Connecting to Other Jews	129
	Expressions of Identity as a British Jew	130
	A Reassessment?	133
	Antisemitism	135
	Engaging with Society	137
	Beyond the Jewish Community	139
	Being Jewish and Being British	141
	References	142
8	Israel in the Life of Young Jews—Proximate and Personal, but Not Political	145
	What Israel Means	147
	Connected to Israel <i>and</i> Critical of It	149
	Sources of Commitment and Connection	151
	Home Help	151
	Experiencing Israel	153
	Hits and Misses	156
	Leaving the Bubble	159
	Maintaining Equilibrium	161
	Ending Where They Started	164
	References	164
9	The Covid Years: Resilience, Despair and Ongoing Ripple Effects	167
	The Practical Challenges of Covid-19	170
	Back Home. “It’s Nice, but It’s Rubbish”	172
	How Did Our Cohort Cope During Covid-19?	173
	Mindset and More	174
	Health Concerns—Filled to the Brim with Anxiety	176
	Trying to Figure Out Their Working Futures	178
	After Effects Are Far from Over	180
	Summary	181
	References	182

10 Looking Back, Looking Forward 183

 Choosing a Jewish School 185

 Highly Satisfied with General Education in Jewish Schools 186

 A Mixed Assessment of Jewish Education in Jewish Schools 186

 Taking a Chance on a Non-Jewish School 187

 It Takes a Community to Raise a Child 188

 Key Questions on Which to Reflect 190

 Key Contributions of Jewish Schools 190

 A Strong Personal Connection to Israel 190

 Friendships 191

 Community Connection and Comfort 192

 The Long View 193

 Family Relationships 194

 Finding a Place in the UK 195

 Change Happens Slowly 196

 Schools and the Community Using Our Data 197

 Looking Ahead 199

 References 199

Glossary of Hebrew and Jewish Terms 201

Author Index 205

Subject Index 209

List of Figures

Fig. 2.1	Parental aspirations in relation to denomination (2011)	29
Fig. 2.2	Parental aspirations in relation to their own education (2011)	29
Fig. 2.3	Parental aspirations in relation to income (2011)	30
Fig. 2.4	Parental Jewish expectations for children in relation to Jewish engagement (2011)	32
Fig. 2.5	Parental Jewish expectations for themselves in relation to Jewish engagement (2011)	32
Fig. 2.6	Students' assessment of worth of seven years of Jewish Secondary School (2018/2021)	36
Fig. 2.7	Parents' assessment of the worth of seven years of Jewish Secondary School (2018/2021)	36
Fig. 3.1	Changes associated with child's attendance at secondary school (2012/2018)	60
Fig. 6.1	Parent involvement in children's friendships (2016)	108
Fig. 6.2	Dating and marriage plans (2020)	118
Fig. 7.1	Student self-perception among British people (2014/2018)	131
Fig. 7.2	Measures of British identity (2014/2018/2020)	134
Fig. 8.1	Images of Israel (2018)	148
Fig. 8.2	Circles of belonging answer options	150
Fig. 8.3	Circles of belonging responses (2012/2018)	150
Fig. 8.4	Freedom to criticise Israel (2014/2018)	151
Fig. 8.5	Changing images of Israel (2014/2016)	157
Fig. 8.6	Images of Israel, in relation to participating in a Year 9 Israel Trip (2016)	157
Fig. 8.7	General knowledge about Israel and Britain (2016)	158
Fig. 8.8	Engagement after Israel Tour (2018)	159
Fig. 8.9	Interest in and attitudes to Israel (2014/2018/2020)	162
Fig. 8.10	Probable and improbable futures (2020)	163

List of Table

Table 2.1	Factor analysis of parent priorities when choosing schools	26
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Chapter 1

Jewish Lives—A Long Look at Unfolding Stories



Abstract This first chapter introduces life course study, the theoretical framework for our work, alongside the various inspirations that led to the launch of this project. We make explicit what life course studies bring into view and what kinds of planned and unplanned questions this framework has allowed us to explore. We introduce our sample; a cohort that includes more than 1000 students and their parents from Jewish secondary schools in London and Manchester, alongside a comparison group of 50 families whose children did not attend a Jewish secondary school. We describe our data-gathering methodologies, including surveys of the entire sample and biennial interviews with 120 families whose members we have interviewed five times over ten years. We frame the study within the period in the UK during which the student sample was growing up, as well as giving some historical context about faith schooling, and specifically Jewish schooling in the UK. Finally, we provide an orientation to the chapters that follow.

Keywords Jewish secondary schools · Life course study · Students · Parents · Longitudinal study · Methodology · UK

One hundred and fifty-seven blue and white balloons floated up towards the clouds above East Barnet, in North London, at 3.30 p.m. on 6th September 2010, the first day of the new school year. The balloons represented just one year group at one school, The Jewish Cross Community Secondary School (JCoSS), of the approximately 34,000 Jewish children populating all the Jewish schools in the UK. On that date, for the first time in 350 years of Jewish education in Britain, one of those Jewish secondary schools was a cross-communal school, as 157 Year Seven children walked through the gates in their brand new, black and purple JCoSS school uniforms. For those of us involved since the earliest planning stages for the school, this was an exciting and emotional day. A dream was fulfilled. How many people have had the opportunity to take part in such a life-changing project? As we watched those balloons drift skywards, we knew we were privileged.

Of course, that was not the end of the story. In the long history of a school, the story of its foundation and formation is of decreasing significance, even with a unique project such as JCoSS. The real story of any school is connected to the lives

of its students and their families. Before that first week of the school term was finished, we had persuaded the leadership of the school that a research project to follow the members of that first cohort through their seven years as students at the school would be profoundly instructive. We wanted to know who the parents were who had chosen to send their children to the school rather than to one of the UK's other Jewish schools. Were they religiously observant? Were they connected to a synagogue? Why had parents chosen this particular school when it had no track record whatsoever? We wanted to know what parents expected of the school, and, most fascinating for us, we wanted to find out how the school would have an impact on the students who were due to attend it for seven years. How would the school leave its mark on the students and how would the students change as they grew through their adolescence? We knew that not every change in a teenager's life could be attributed to school—far from it—and that during the secondary school years, peers and family have at least as much influence on a person as school does. A faith perspective was also relevant: JCoSS is a Jewish school, with Jewish students. How would the Jewish dimensions of these young lives develop over time, and what could our research say about religious commitment and Jewish learning during the secondary school years?

As JCoSS opened, we set about designing a study that would focus on the 157 JCoSS Year 7 students and their families. But by early 2011, we had already been approached by the Chair of Governors at another Jewish secondary school: *“we're really interested to talk to you about expanding the research you're planning to do at JCoSS.”* We were then contacted by the Head Teacher at a third Jewish secondary school: *“we understand that you are going to research the changing Jewish lives of students as they go through secondary school. Could you do that at our school too?”* Within a very short space of time, our proposed JCoSS research had expanded to not merely two further schools, but to a total of seven of the UK's largest Jewish secondary schools.

Those seven schools are part of a much larger educational landscape made up of 100 Jewish schools that currently educate more than 34,000 Jewish children from the ages of 4 to 18. To put our study of the families at these seven schools in perspective, it is important first to understand a little about the context of faith schooling in the UK.

Religion and Schools in the UK

Britain is not a nation of worshippers. Only 5–7 percent of adults in England and Wales go to church on an average Sunday (Brierley, 2018). Yet, more than 35 percent of the population send their children to faith schools (Barnes, 2018). Our study explores some of the reasons for this phenomenon, from the perspective of the parents and students who choose to send their children to Jewish secondary schools rather than schools of no religious affiliation. The data we have gathered adds to our

growing understanding of the place that faith schools occupy within the British school system.

Unlike in America, and indeed unlike most other parts of the world, Jewish schooling in Britain has a long history of financial support from the State. In 1851, 12 years after the government accepted that schools of a Christian religious nature were eligible for State funding, the government agreed that Jewish schools were permitted to receive grants in the same way that other denominational schools were, provided they agreed to read the scriptures of the Old Testament every day and provided they were also prepared to submit to government inspection (Miller, 2001). Conversely, 60 years earlier, in America, in 1791, the First Amendment mandated a legal separation of Church and State and the law established religious pluralism as public policy. As a consequence, religiously-affiliated schools were effectively barred from receiving State funding, a situation that has remained broadly in force until the present day in the USA (Jorgenson, 1987).

Around one third of the total number of State maintained schools in Britain today are schools with a religious character (approximately 6850 schools) out of a total of around 21,000 maintained schools (Barnes, 2018). This dual system of maintained schools supported by faith organisations that exist alongside schools without a religious character is therefore at the heart of the school system in Britain. This has come about because, historically, whilst the Church of England was active in maintaining schools, the Anglican orientation of these schools effectively excluded Non-Conformists, Catholics and Jews or demanded that they fully assimilate into one particular strand of Christianity. These minority groups chose instead to provide schools for their own young people (Miller, 2001). In the Jewish community there was great concern that children would be at risk of losing their Jewish heritage and identity through compulsory study of Christianity and the New Testament. Added to this fear was the concern raised about the great number of Christian schools opening throughout England, perceived by the Jewish community as having a missionary influence. In 1732, the Jews Free School (JFS), one of the schools in our study, was established, with a curriculum that emphasized secular subjects as well as traditional Jewish texts and traditions (Black, 1998).

By 1850, Jewish schools had opened in all areas of the country where Jews lived. Their continuation was assured when in March 1853, the Manchester Jews' School received State funding, putting Jewish schools on an equal basis for the first time with other denominational schools (Miller, 2001; Miller et al., 2016).

Today, the government continues to support the benefits this system brings both for parental choice and for social diversity. Whilst a small proportion of Jewish schools are private institutions, funded by trusts and fee paying parents, most Jewish primary and secondary schools exist within the UK State supported sector. The rights of religious communities to establish their own schools have been enshrined in law in the UK since the mid nineteenth century (Wolffe, 1994).

The Expansion of Jewish Schools

As noted above, within this system, approximately 34,000 Jewish children in the UK (more than 60 percent of all Jewish children in the UK) are currently educated in Jewish faith schools (Boyd, 2019). Numbers have been climbing consistently over several decades, since the mid-1990s. In 1994, Jonathan Sacks, then Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue, wrote a powerful study of Jewish continuity (Sacks, 1994). Seriously concerned for the fate of Anglo-Jewry, Sacks issued a summons for collective action to counteract the prevailing trend of assimilation and to build on the pleas of his predecessor, Immanuel Jakobovits, for the Jewish community to invest more deeply in Jewish schooling (Jakobovits, 1971). Inter-marriage rates, which had been rising dramatically in the United States, were now reaching similar proportions in the UK. Sacks identified the “fourth generation”, that generation of Jews who had lived in the UK for many years and were so far removed from the traditions which their forefathers had brought with them, that they were unable to live by, and saw little relevance in, an integrated Jewish life. Jewish education became secondary to high achievement in secular education at every level. Cultural pluralism (the acceptance of religious minorities in secular societies) had a double effect on Jewish life. It enabled Jewish people to live freely as committed Jews and it also allowed them to lose easily all or most aspects of Jewishness and to become ‘deculturated’ (Schiff, 1988).

Sacks berated the Jewish community for lacking an overall strategy for education, for donating funds to Welfare but not to Education, for not noticing or acting upon the gradual erosion in Jewish literacy and community that had taken place over the four generations since the mass immigration of the Eastern European Jews into the UK at the end of the nineteenth century (Sacks, 1994). The response to his words triggered various fund-raising efforts and philanthropic donations to Jewish education. Accelerating a trend that had started in the 1980s, Individuals and foundations began to divert their funds towards provision for Jewish education, specifically towards the full time, day school sector (Miller, 2001).

It is insufficient to argue for investment in the Jewish school system purely because of a perception that Jewish schooling prevents assimilation. It is also true, however, that a major stimulus for the remarkable growth of the full-time school system in the UK has been the conviction among Jewish communal and education leaders that the continuity of Jewish life is dependent on the perpetuation of intensive and rich patterns of Jewish education. This is seen as a direct contrast to what is perceived as the failure of the part time system of supplementary Jewish education to provide meaningful and enculturating curricula and experiences. As Scheindlin has observed, whilst much of Jewish education in supplementary schools is designed to “market religion” rather than to promote a religious understanding of life, the Jewish day school is uniquely placed to “work on the child’s growing capacity to comprehend the world”, effectively ensuring that Judaism will be truly alive within each child (Scheindlin, 1999).

The growth in the number of Jewish children attending Jewish schools has taken place against the decline in the size of the Jewish population of the UK, which dropped from approximately 420,000 in the 1950s (Black, 1998) to the current estimate of 290,000, where it has been relatively stable since 2001 (Boyd, 2019).

There are 100 Jewish schools in the UK. Of those, 42 mainstream Jewish schools serve approximately 15,000 pupils, covering modern orthodox, masorti, progressive and secular Jewish populations (Boyd, 2019). All except seven of those schools align with the mainstream Orthodox community. Six of the others are cross-communal and one aligns with the UK Movement for Reform Judaism. An additional 19,000 children in Jewish schools are educated in 58 strictly Orthodox Independent schools that operate within the *Charedi* (ultra-orthodox) community in Britain, the majority of which are in and around Greater London and Manchester.

The denominational pattern of Jewish schooling reflects the denominational pattern of Jewish life in the UK. Historically, the established community in the UK aligned with orthodox Judaism through synagogue membership, even if most synagogue members did not practice an orthodox Jewish way of life. Even today, fewer than 20 percent of synagogue members are attached to synagogue movements religiously to the left of the United Synagogue, the mainstream orthodox movement (Mashiah & Boyd, 2017).

It is against this backdrop, that in 2010, when our story begins, approximately 1000 11-year-olds took up places in year seven at one of the mainstream Jewish secondary schools. This 1000-member cohort represents a very small percentage of the more than 600,000 babies born in the UK between September 2000 and August 2001, (Office for National Statistics, 2015). Of those, around 2800 were born to Jewish parents (Graham et al., 2012). These babies—a millennium cohort—have grown up in complex times and we wanted to record and analyse their journeys through life. They are the participants in *Jewish Lives*, the longitudinal research study we launched in September 2011.

Beginnings and Inspirations for Our Work

No research project can exist without financial sponsorship. Our study owes its longevity to the Pears Foundation. This independent British family foundation focuses on building long term relationships with its partners, offering organisational and leadership programmes, as well as research funding. In doing so, the foundation has implemented a vision of engaged philanthropy and the value of leading by example. We were lucky; the Pears Foundation was already invested in our JCoSS research as a consequence of its commitment to the school itself. As the concept of an expanded study gathered momentum, the foundation became an enthusiastic supporter, providing welcome advice and financial support through the years.

Whilst the opening of a brand-new school was certainly a stimulus and inspiration for the study, it was not the only trigger for our work. In 1964, a television series called “*Up*” (Apted et al., 1964-present) launched as a television series which traced

the changing lives of a group of British children from a variety of backgrounds and different areas of the UK, returning at seven-year intervals to document their lives. As trainee teachers, we had to watch “*Seven Up*”, “*Fourteen Up*” and “*Twenty-One Up*”. The programme has continued to be made every seven years, the most recent episodes being “*Sixty-Three Up*”.

Directed by Michael Apted (1941–2021), the project has worked with a small cohort of 14 participants. It makes for compelling viewing and has both confirmed and challenged preconceived notions of how lives change and develop over time. How exciting to watch people mature before your eyes. How fascinating to see what incidents and interactions influence people to make decisions about their lives. How insightful to listen to people reflecting on why and how their lives have taken a particular path. What could be predicted from what was known about a child at age seven? What was surprising?

This original and ground-breaking “*Up*” series was an important inspiration for this study, *Jewish Lives*. We wanted to retain the intensity of close interaction with individuals alongside a broader look at a large cohort of children. This dual approach would provide both quantitative survey-based data to suggest general trends and in-depth interview data to track individuals over time.

Building the Research Team

This type of research has not previously been undertaken in the UK Jewish community. Whilst we two were experienced qualitative researchers, we were not experienced collectors or analysts of large data samples, and we certainly were not experienced in longitudinal work. We therefore gathered around us a team of 12—interviewers, analysts, a highly experienced quantitative data expert, someone who had conducted longitudinal work, and one transcriber who has listened to, and typed out every word of every interview over a 10-year period; by our reckoning, that has been about 24,000 pages. Finding the right people to work on this project has meant that our eventual team is international, spanning Toronto and Jerusalem, as well as London and Manchester. In later years, that geographical reach has also included Brisbane, when one of our London based team relocated for work. She has remained a key member of the team, often joining meetings at 3.00 a.m. local time.

We have trained our team while training ourselves in the art and science of designing, administering and analysing survey and interview data from a longitudinal panel study. This is a project which ebbs and flows; the team gets together once a year in the periods in-between data collection and analysis, and more often in the years where there is more research activity. For all of our team, this is piecemeal; there are periods of inactivity and periods which are very busy. Each member of the team juggles *Jewish Lives* responsibilities with busy working and personal lives. Each and every team member is invested in the study. They must be, to remain committed to ensuring its continuity after so many years! And none are more invested than the authors of this book.

So, we have been following the members of a cohort (in technical terms, a panel) who in September 2011 entered Year 7 at one of seven British Jewish secondary schools. In the UK, there is a two-stage schooling system. Students attend primary (elementary) school age 4 to 11, and then secondary (middle/junior high/senior high) age 11 to 18. The mainstream Jewish secondary schools in the UK are large schools with between 150 and 300 students in each year group. There are eight of these secondary schools in the UK, seven in greater London and one in Manchester, in the North of England. The UK's two other mainstream Jewish secondary schools have not participated in our study, one because it was not yet established in 2011 and the other because it has a predominantly non-Jewish intake, due to demographic shifts in the Jewish community. For practical reasons, we collected our data from families at these seven schools only, giving us a pool of more than a thousand families in our data set. Numbers are crucial elements of data collection and an astute reader will notice as you read this book, that we started with seven schools and now work with eight schools. This is because Hasmonian high school, which had been one school with single gender teaching on two sites, was re-established as two separate schools by phase five of this study.

Theoretical Foundations

Researchers of Jewish education have increasingly acknowledged that “Family Matters”, as the title of Jack’s Wertheimer’s, 2007 volume put it. Of course, the family has long been seen by sociologists as a major—perhaps *the* major—arena for the socialisation of children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, what is distinctive about Jewish educational research over the last 15 years is that families have been seen not only as significant shapers of the emerging identities of children, they have also been conceived as participants in the Jewish educational journeys taken by their children (Pomson & Schnoor, 2008; Kress, 2011). In Pomson and Schnoor’s (2018) book, *Jewish Family*, family is seen as providing both the content and context for Jewish life.

When family shapes the lives of young people it is through the roles played by family members who share the same roof as well as by those who may not even live close by. As previous research has shown, family cultures are shaped by the rituals that give meaning to families’ lives—repeated activities that have both a formative and a performative dimension (Wolin & Bennett, 1984; Fiese et al., 2002). These rituals both shape the family culture and broadcast its distinctiveness to others (Pomson & Schnoor, 2018). In respect to the families that participated in this study, we found that family cultures are also shaped by the stories that family members, especially parents, tell about themselves; these stories indicate how a family presents itself to the world and in turn those stories shape a family’s life. In the course of interviewing parents and children, five times over the course of 10 years, we became aware of some of those stories, how deeply ingrained they