

# Specialty Camps Incubator: An Enduring Legacy for Campers & the Field of Jewish Camp

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Prepared for  
Foundation for  
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## THE SPECIALTY CAMPS INCUBATOR GENESIS & ARC

In 2008, the Foundation for Jewish Camp (FJC) set out to answer a question: How could the field of Jewish camp attract and retain more teen campers?

At the time, a short supply of spaces in overnight camps was challenging the field of Jewish camp. Incentive programs to bring more campers to traditional Jewish camps had somewhat increased demand; at the same time, traditional Jewish camps did not have enough beds available to satisfy what camper families wanted. Further complicating the picture, teens were increasingly filling up their summer weeks with interests cultivated during the school year, including sports, technology, and drama.<sup>i</sup>

What if, posited FJC, new Jewish camps offering teen programs that dove deep into a specialty area could attract new campers and simultaneously increase the capacity of the Jewish camp field? After researching this concept, FJC believed a new specialty camp model had potential to connect with a new market of Jewish campers if given financial and capacity-building support. With support from funders, the FJC Specialty Camps Incubator (the Incubator) was born.

Over the course of 11 summers, 13,000 campers—many of whom had never been to camp—attended 15 new specialty summer camps incubated by FJC.

The thousands of new campers are a crowning achievement of the Incubator’s success. Between 2008 and 2021, Jim Joseph Foundation and AVI CHAI Foundation dedicated \$30 million to underwrite the start-up of these new camps and provide mentoring and consultative support as the camp directors developed the foundations for their new camps. The new camps were designed with intentionality, from their mission and vision to their values and intended outcomes. The Incubator staff and consultants worked with the camp directors to build their organizations’ capacity in areas of leadership, personnel, marketing, board development, finance, and programming.

**EXHIBIT 1. Incubator Camps by the Numbers**

	# OF CAMPS	# OF SUMMERS OPEN	YEAR OPENED	UNIQUE CAMPERS SERVED
Incubator I	5	Range: 5 to 11	2010	6,872
Incubator II	4	Range: 3 to 7	2014	3,303
Incubator III	6	Range: 2 to 3	2018	1,792

Throughout the Incubator’s three cohorts, FJC partnered with Informing Change to independently evaluate the Incubator as a model and then evaluate and support ongoing learning for camps. This brief describes the primary takeaways from the wealth of data Informing Change gathered while monitoring and studying the Incubator—including camper surveys, camper and parent interviews, and camp observations—during this 13-year investment. As the Incubator progressed, so too did the scope and volume of data collection and analysis. Thus, many data points in this brief are described in ranges to represent the entire investment. In

some instances, Informing Change provides data from one Incubator cohort which exemplifies trends observed in other cohorts.<sup>ii</sup>

### SPECIALTY CAMPS' IMPACT ON THE FIELD OF JEWISH CAMP

FJC Incubator camps tapped a new market of campers: Jewish teens who were interested in specialty programming and had never been to Jewish overnight camp before.

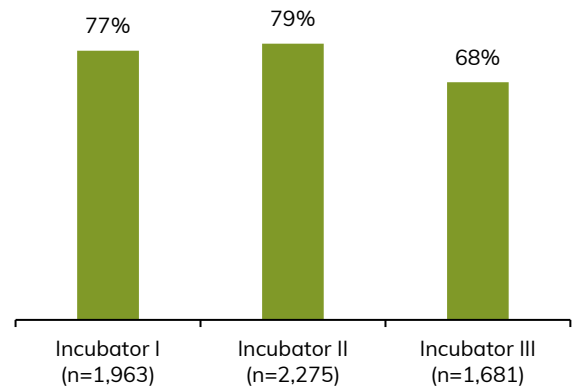
The Incubator camps were unique to the Jewish camp field in that they specifically designed and marketed their programs to middle and high school-aged kids. Camps from across the cohorts succeeded in reaching this group, with young people ages 11 to 18 making up 68%-77% of campers (Exhibit 2)<sup>iii</sup>.

Early in the Incubator, leaders in the Jewish camp field expressed concern that the new Incubator camps could compromise existing camps' ability to retain their existing camper base. However, Incubator camps consistently recruited large proportions of campers who had never been to Jewish overnight camp before, as exemplified by the Incubator III cohort, where approximately half of campers had never previously attended a Jewish overnight camp.

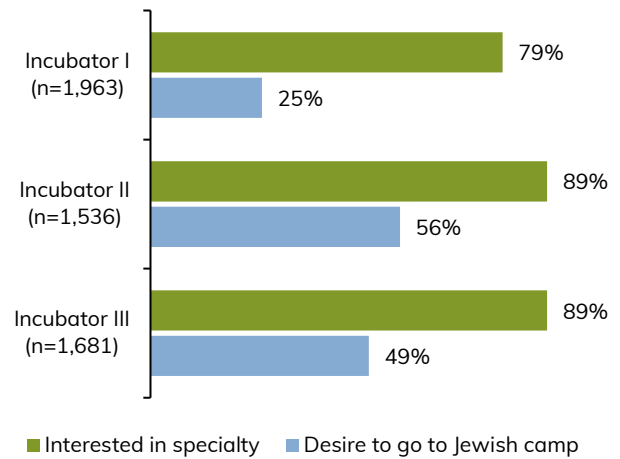
Camps' specialty programming was key to creating this new market of campers. When asked what motivated them to come to camp, campers cited the camp's specialty more often than a desire to attend Jewish camp, indicating that many campers would not have come to Jewish camp had it not been for its specialty (Exhibit 3).

One of the most compelling indicators of the Incubator camps' success is that campers returned year after year. After two years of operation, Incubator camps were retaining 47%-62% of campers from the previous summer (Exhibit 4). These retention rates were particularly impressive for specialty camps, per leaders in the Jewish camp field who monitored secular specialty programs (where retention rates hovered around 20%).

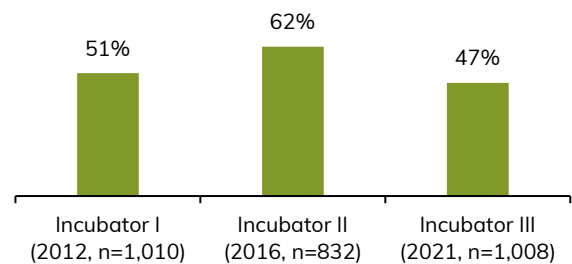
**EXHIBIT 2.**  
Percentage of Campers Ages 11–18



**EXHIBIT 3.**  
Reasons Campers Attend Jewish Camp



**EXHIBIT 4.**  
Percentage of Returning Campers in Final Year of Each Incubator



## The field of Jewish camp has taken note of the Incubator’s successes.

According to leaders in the Jewish camp field, more Jewish camps are considering shorter camp sessions and developing their own streams of specialty programming to expand to new markets of Jewish campers. The Incubator camps inspired new philanthropic support in the field: multiple funders dedicated new funding streams to establish specialty camp programming for traditional Jewish overnight camps, day camps, and multi-specialty camps.

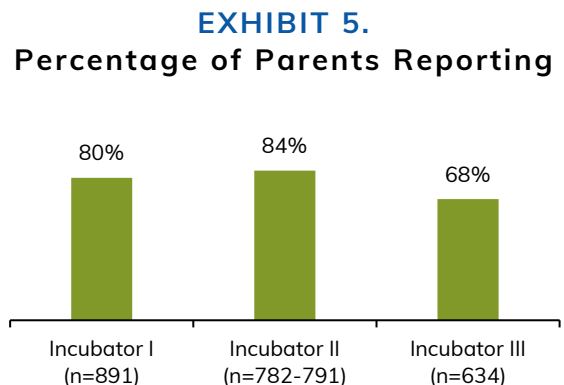
The Incubator also dispelled a long-held belief that Jewish camp required a large capital investment in remote, rural properties to create a camp community that would sustain multi-year participation from campers and families. On the contrary, in holding camp at college campuses and more urban settings, Incubator camps showed skilled, intentional effort on the part of camp leaders can create meaningful Jewish camp environments. This proved especially true when unexpected COVID-19 pandemic rulings forced two Incubator camps in 2021 to completely relocate to new college campuses at the last minute. Camp leaders quickly and successfully pivoted and adapted their programming and recreated the sense of camp community that campers remember and cherish. In a similar nod to Incubator camps’ knowledge and insight about creating camps on leased sites, some traditional summer camps consulted with the Incubator when natural disasters forced them to relocate their camps to university or school campuses.

## SPECIALTY CAMPS’ IMPACT ON CAMPERS

Incubator camp experiences spurred lasting changes in campers, bolstering their personal growth and deepening their Jewish identities.

### Big Changes

Informing Change surveyed parents of campers 9-12 months after campers returned home to see if they noticed any changes in their child because of camp. Across Incubator cohorts, 68%-84% of parents (depending on the year data was gathered) reported noticeable, lasting changes (Exhibit 5). Big changes included increases in their child’s relationship with Judaism, improvement in their child’s confidence and maturity, and strengthened skills related to the camp’s specialty.



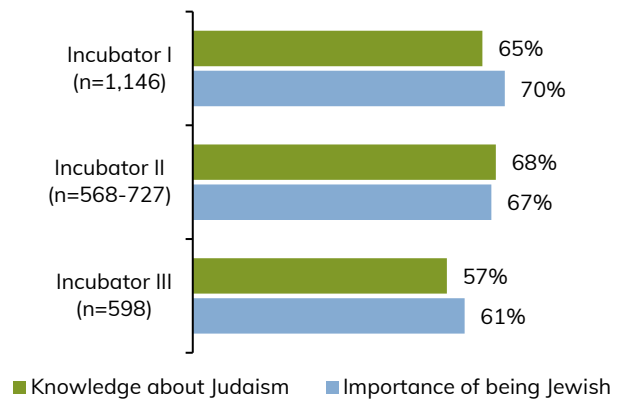
**“What an amazing summer. [Camper] grew so much, became more independent, had a blast, and made a lot of new Jewish friends. He still keeps in touch with his [camp] family.”**

**– PARENT**

## Jewish Development

Each Incubator camp took its own unique approach in intentionally integrating Jewish values, knowledge, and rituals into camp culture and programming. As a result, campers came away with a greater knowledge of, and deepened connection to, Judaism; for many campers, the specialty provided a relevant and grounding entry point into developing their own sense of self alongside their Jewish identities. In surveys from each cohort of camps, campers consistently indicated camp influenced how important being Jewish was to them (Exhibit 6).<sup>iv</sup>

**EXHIBIT 6.**  
Camp Influence on Campers



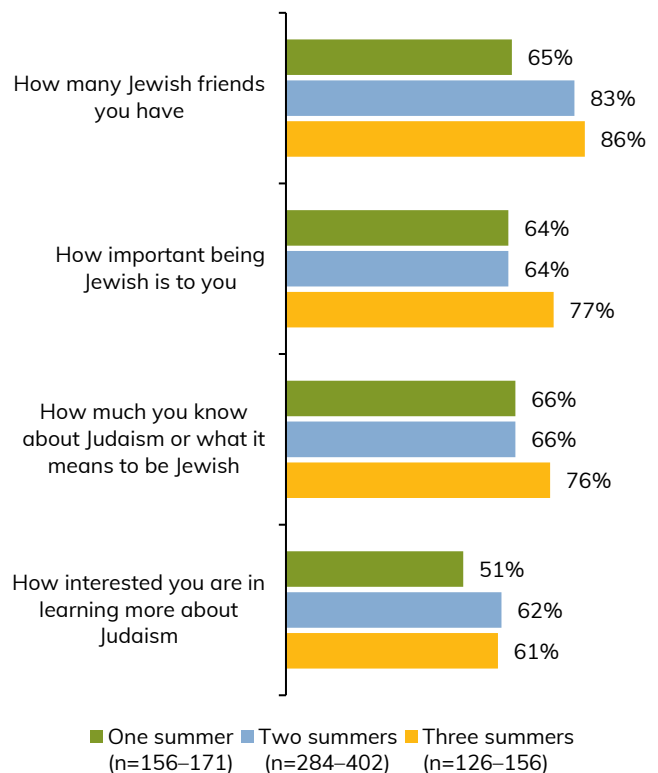
“Before camp, I didn’t really care at all about Judaism. After camp all I ever wanted to be is Jewish. I’ve met friends that are like sisters to me... [Camp is] the place where I want to be most of the time. It not only changed me physically, but also spiritually.”

– CAMPER

## Lasting Impact

The changes campers experienced were long-lasting. Returning campers surveyed on their first day of the new camp season (9 -12 months after their first summer at camp) reported similar, and for some items, even higher levels of influence from camp’s prior summer, as exemplified by data from Incubator II camps (Exhibit 7).

**EXHIBIT 7.**  
Incubator II Camps’ Influence on Returning Campers by Number of Summers



“I can honestly say that I feel more connected with Judaism since I was able to have a Jewish experience with like-minded people. Experiences at camp changed my perception of myself in relation to my interests and Judaism. Some of the other campers have become my best friends and meeting a variety of Jewish leaders and young Jewish adults and hearing their thoughts and about their lives has heavily influenced how I view modern Judaism and its role in society.”

– CAMPER

## ELEMENTS OF INCUBATOR CAMPS' SUCCESS

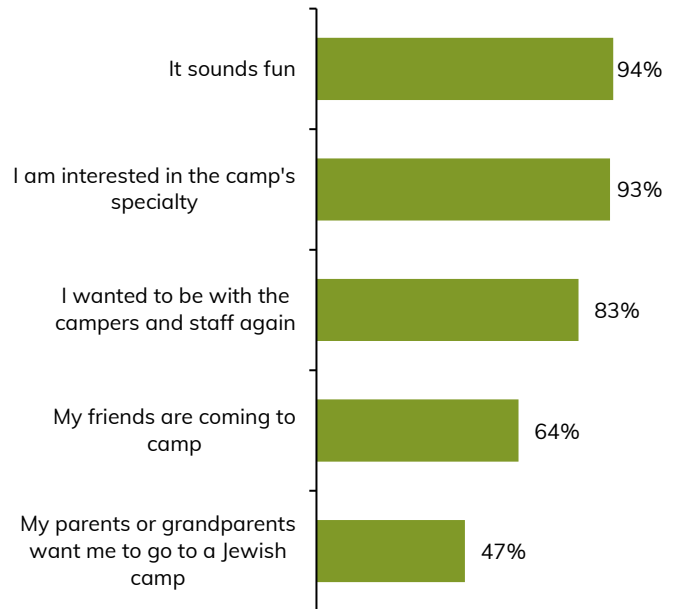
Incubator camps had a profound impact on campers because they created inclusive spaces where campers could explore Judaism, friendships, and their own personal growth.

### The Role of the Specialty

Incubator camps created deeply relevant specialty experiences for campers, which served as strong bases for individual camper outcomes and the sense of a camp community. Campers reported growing skills and deepening interests in the specialty areas. The specialty was a key element in building camp community; campers could bond over their shared passions and interests alongside their common experiences of being Jewish. As a result, campers reported having “found their people”; they had more Jewish friends after camp, and many of these new relationships persisted into the school year.

The impact of the specialty extended further beyond campers' first summers: returning campers consistently cited the camp's specialty as a primary reason they came back to camp, as exemplified by data from Incubator III camps (Exhibit 8). Camp directors designed their programs with an intentional developmental model—an aspirational arc—to provide campers with opportunities for higher skill development, greater responsibility within the camp community, and leadership roles.

**EXHIBIT 8.**  
Incubator III Campers' Reasons for Returning to Camp (n=375)



**“I found a Jewish community where we were bound by more than our religion and culture. It's a lot easier to feel connected to people who enjoy the arts and are Jewish than just other Jewish teens. [Camp] helped me find my people and take that feeling into my everyday life.”**

**– CAMPER**

## Teen-Centered Design

Incubator camps built their programs specifically for middle and high school-aged youth. The programming challenged teens in developmentally appropriate ways, with opportunities for campers to question, learn, and grow with one another. Furthermore, camps created camp traditions and communities into which new teens could easily step and find a comfortable role. As a result, nearly every camper across all Incubator camps reported feeling a sense of belonging (Exhibit 9).

## Inclusive Jewish Values

Camp leaders worked diligently to ensure their camps were grounded in Jewish values that would appeal to families and teens across the Jewish spectrum. As a result, Incubator campers came from a range of Jewish backgrounds.

“It was the perfect fit for our summer schedule and a way for [my child] to go to their first Jewish sleepaway camp even at the age of 14 and not feel like an outsider.”

– PARENT

“[My child] established very strong relationships and bonds with her other bunkmates. They shared in their Jewish experiences at home and in their community and related on a very personal level that she has not been able to access with her school friends.”

– PARENT

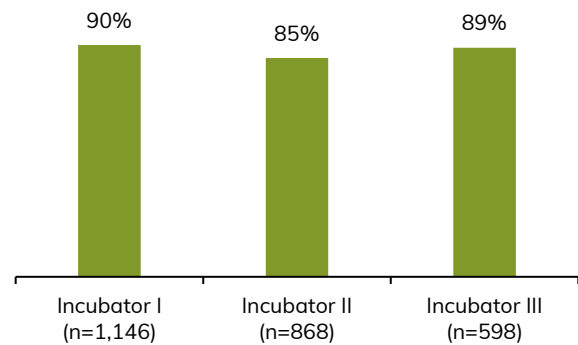
Because of deep and sustained support from FJC’s Specialty Camps Incubator, camp leaders had the freedom, resources, and training to design and implement their camps very intentionally.

Camps had the impact on both campers and the field of Jewish camp more broadly because of deep and sustained Incubator support. From the outset, FJC leaders and staff knew the opportunity to build camps from the ground up came with the risks of launching something new and untested by the marketplace.

To support camp directors’ journeys to their first summers of camp, the Incubator guided and coached them across dimensions that included mission and vision, leadership, board development, marketing, staffing and personnel, finance, and program development. For all Incubator cohorts, this support proved critical, and especially for Incubator III camps that weathered the immense challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Incubator III camp directors valued the Incubator trainings and support for recruitment, which likely contributed to their ability to sustain their camps’ enrollment numbers through the pandemic.

EXHIBIT 9.

### Percentage of Campers Reporting Feeling a Sense of Belonging



More broadly, the Incubator support included:

- Regular and dependable guidance and support from a community of experts, including experienced camp directors
- One-on-one technical assistance and coaching by mentors, staff, and select consultants, which helped camp directors anticipate the road ahead and align with best practices and standards of success
- A cohort approach that cultivated peer support and a professional network
- Ongoing evaluation that created a process for camps to use camper and parent feedback to improve, and for the Incubator to refine its model of support

“Having peers in the industry come in to teach us was valuable. For a new professional, it’s very hard to develop a network of experienced people ... Feeling like I know camp directors who I can call and ask a question or observe what they’re doing or get on their mailing lists was a real gift from the Incubator.”

– CAMP DIRECTOR

## THE UPSHOT: ENDURING CHANGE

The Incubator left a profound mark on the field of Jewish camp, providing a clear answer that specialty and teen-specific programming can build new markets of teens who had never attended Jewish overnight camp.

The 15 new camps established through the Incubator reached campers who otherwise may never have gone to Jewish camp. Quality programming created lasting change in forming teens’ Jewish identities and built a strong sense of community, which brought campers back year after year. Evidence over 11 summers, \$30 million of funding, and lasting outcomes for 13,000 new campers proves that the Incubator concept has been an effective model for shifting and growing the field of Jewish camp.

As an experiment in how to serve increased numbers of youth, the Incubator and the camps it supported demonstrated successful innovation and created enduring change. Not only did they foster meaningful experiences and communities for teens, but the successes of these camps also challenged the broader camp field to continue to innovate and grow. With 11 of the 15 Incubator camps still open and bringing campers together every summer, Incubator specialty camps continue to fulfill their promise to inform and expand the field of Jewish camp and to serve generations of campers in the years to come.



# Acknowledgements

## ABOUT FOUNDATION FOR JEWISH CAMP



The Foundation for Jewish Camp is dedicated to leading the field of Jewish camp to adapt its successful, immersive learning experience to a rapidly changing world—impacting campers and counselors, during the summer and year-round; and attracting new families seeking new connections, today and tomorrow.

## ABOUT INFORMING CHANGE



Informing Change, a strategic learning firm based in Berkeley, CA, combines the power of data with inclusive and participatory sense-making processes to complete evaluation, research, and strategy projects. Learn more at [informingchange.com](http://informingchange.com).

## THE INCUBATOR CAMPS

Informing Change, the authors of this brief, would like to acknowledge the important contributions of each cohort of Incubator camps to this evaluation:

### INCUBATOR I



### INCUBATOR II



### INCUBATOR III



## THE FUNDERS

The Specialty Camps Incubators I, II, and III were made possible with generous funding from Jim Joseph Foundation and AVI CHAI Foundation.



# Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> Foundation for Jewish Camp. (December 2007). — FJC Proposal to the Foundation New Specialty Camps Incubator Grant Proposal to the Jim Joseph Foundation. Unpublished, New York.
- <sup>ii</sup> Graphs in this brief represent data collected over different time periods. Some data points represent data from one summer of an Incubator cohort of camps, while other data points represent the multiple years of a whole Incubator period. Data points where only one summer of an Incubator is represented is indicated by an asterisk (\*).
- <sup>iii</sup> Incubator I and III data on age are sourced from camper surveys. Incubator II data on age are sourced from camps' records
- <sup>iii</sup> The phrasing for "Importance of being Jewish" differed in Incubator I surveys. The specific wording for the percentage reported for Incubator I for "Importance of being Jewish" was "Camp's influence on campers feeling more positive and enthusiastic about being Jewish."