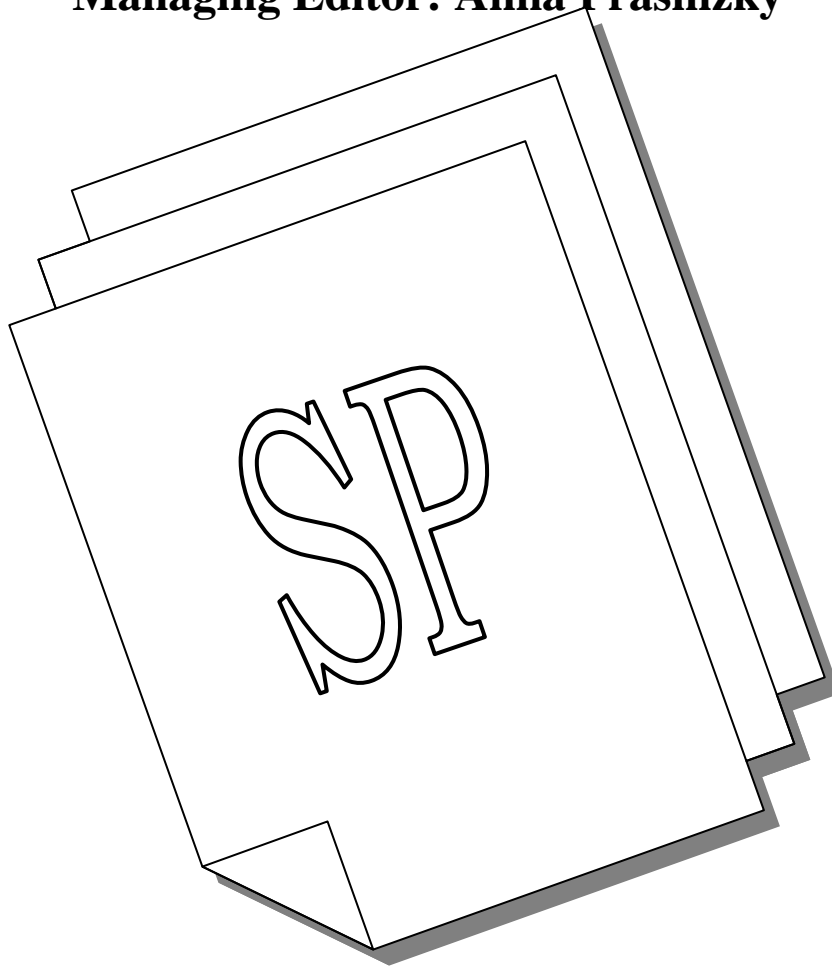


# *Sociological Papers*

## **Formal and Informal Jewish Education: Lessons and Challenges in Israel and in the Diaspora**

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# **Bar/Bat Mitzvah Programs and Jewish Identities: An Australian Case Study**

**Danny Ben-Moshe,**

**Centre for Citizenship and Globalization, Deakin University, Australia**

## **Abstract**

This article considers and compares the aims, content and methods of five diverse Bar and Bat-Mitzvah programs in Melbourne, Australia. The research is contextualized with data about the Australian Jewish community. The article considers the extent to which Israel and Peoplehood is included and advanced as part of these programs, and how these programs fortify Jewish identity. The overall finding is that ideology and philosophy remains a primary driver in shaping Bar and Bat-Mitzvah programs, which have either universal or parochial tendencies, with little in the middle. The research illustrates the plurality of Jewish identities, but finds an absence of Israel and Peoplehood education within these programs. The article calls for a greater emphasis on Peoplehood education in Australia via organizational synergy between Bar/Bat-Mitzvah education and other Jewish formal and informal educational experiences, including Jewish day schools and youth movements.

## **Introduction**

In focusing on Jewish education in the Diaspora, the special edition of this journal aims to explore how different formal and informal programs fortify contemporary plural Jewish identities, the nature of these programs and how these programs embrace the notion of Jewish Peoplehood. This article explores these issues based on a study of informal Bar and Bat Mitzvah programs delivered by diverse providers in Melbourne, Australia.

Bar and Bat Mitzvah programs (BBMP) were chosen for this Jewish education research for four main reasons. First, and foremost, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah (hereafter *Bnei-Mitzvah*) are the most widely accessed lifecycle event that Jewish youth participate in from across the communal spectrum (Markus et al., 2011). Secondly, and concomitantly, the diverse range of BBMPs offered allows for a comparative approach across diverse religious and cultural groups. Thirdly, the Bnei Mitzvah remains a formative Jewish experience in general, providing indicators of the information and values with which future generations of Jews are being imbued. Fourthly, despite the extensive research on Jewish education in Australia and its impact and relationship to Jewish identity, continuity and Peoplehood, there has been little research on BBMPs in Australia. Accordingly, this paper fills a gap in the literature by considering the place of the BBMP in the paradigm of Jewish education and its role and impact on identity formation, Jewish continuity and instilling a sense of Peoplehood.

In considering Jewish Peoplehood, this article recognizes it is a “multi-dimensional complex construct” *with* four distinct dimensions as described by David Mittelberg (2013):

*collective belonging or identification with the Jewish people; Jewish cultural capital or familiarity with the cultural knowledge, language, customs, and rituals that makes a Jew feel comfortable anywhere in the Jewish world; Jewish responsibility or commitment to the welfare of other Jews; and interpersonal attachment or personal connection with other Jews.*

### **Australian Jewry: Community, Education and *Bnei-mitzvahs***

The Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI) offer four categories to describe the state of Jewish communities: thriving, drifting, defensive and nightmare (Markus et al., 2011: 11). Australian Jewry was described in *Jewish Continuity: Report Series on the Gen08 Survey* (hereafter Gen08), the most recent and comprehensive study of the community, to be “*a thriving and vibrant community uniquely poised in the Diaspora. Its rich religious, educational and cultural life serves as a model for other Jewish communities around the world and for other ethnic and minority communities in Australia*” (Markus et al., 2011:28).

Indeed, Australian Jewry outscore their peers in other parts of the Jewish Diaspora on multiple measures of Jewish identity (Markus et al., 2011:86). Besides their generally strong Jewish identity, the community is also notable for its Zionist orientation and identification with Israel. It has higher *aliya* rates than any other community in the Western world, higher philanthropic giving to Israel (Ben-Moshe, 2006:108), and over 80% visitation rate (Markus et al., 2011:86), and all this, despite being geographically at “the edge of the Diaspora” (Rutland, 1997).

Several factors describe and explain the characteristics and orientation of Australian Jewry. Firstly it is a relatively young community. While Jewish settlement in Australia can be traced to the earliest arrival of White settlers in the eighteenth century, the majority of the community is linked to migrant arrival on either side of the Second World War. Secondly, and concomitantly, the community was thus shaped with living memory not only of the “*haym*” but also the bitter memory of the Holocaust. Indeed, Australia has the highest number of Holocaust survivors per capita than any diaspora community, with 50% of the current Australian Jewry being Holocaust survivors or their descendants (www.join.org.au: 2003). The Holocaust has shaped the worldview of generations of Australian Jews and was a formative experience that underlined a commitment to preserving Jewish identity, including support of Israel.

Additional factors that allowed for and explain a flourishing communal life include: the community being geographically concentrated (Markus et al., 2011:29); having strong visionary leadership who built strong community structures (Markus et al., 2011:30); active youth movements (Markus et al., 2011:85); and being economically successful, in a politically-stable democracy in a land without serious mainstream antisemitism (Markus et al., 2011:86).

The final factor in relation to maintaining Jewish identity in Australia is a strong Jewish day school system: 60% of the children attend full-time Jewish school through to high school graduation, and approximately 70% of the total Jewish pre-school age

population is enrolled in Jewish pre-schools (Munz and Forsgaz, 2011:1130). Indeed, education is regarded as the flagship of the community, the base on which all other outcomes rest. Indeed, as Gen08 put it, “*Education is a key issue for Jewish continuity, the most important issue in the view of many*”. This landmark report found “*there is a marked differentiation in the learning and outlook of those who attended a Jewish as distinct from a non-Jewish secondary school*” (Markus et al., 2011:57).

Melbourne, where the research for this article took place, has five Jewish high schools. The first Jewish day school was Mount Scopus Memorial College established in 1949. It used to be the only Jewish school offering tuition from primary through high school, yet over recent years “*a succession of ideologically diverse day schools began to spring up*” reflecting diverse orientations within the community (Munz and Forsgaz, 2011:1128). The schools include:

- Mount Scopus - teaches Judaism and Israel within a Modern Orthodox and Zionist framework that can be regarded as centrist, with the school having a traditional rather than observant parent body
- King David – the Reform Movement’s school
- Leibler *Yavneh* College – the *Mizrachi* affiliated Modern Zionist School which is also aligned with the *Bnei Akiva* youth movement
- Bialik College – a cross-communal Jewish school with Israel and Zionism being central to school’s mission
- The *Chabad*-affiliated Yeshiva College and *Beth Rivkah* Girls School which are Ultra-Orthodox and non-Zionist but attract many students from outside the *Chabad* community.

These are the schools that many of the participants of the BBMP program in this study attend and, as is discussed below, the BBMP providers take what these schools teach into account. The number of day schools and rate of enrollment is one of several measures by which Australian Jewry are performing strongly compared to other diaspora communities.

However, it is important to note that the community is also experiencing the attrition experienced in other parts of the Diaspora. Inter-marriage is on the rise. The number of marriages in the State of Victoria, which in Jewish terms means in its capital city Melbourne, where both partners were Jewish decreased from 88% in 1961 to 70% in 2006 (Markus et al., 2011:43). Additionally, there are signs in the weakening of the traditionally strong ties with Israel (Markus et al., 2011:3). In terms of the future of Australian Jewry, according to Gen08, that “*in the mid-term the community could find itself, again in the JPPI conceptualization, moving from the Thriving category to both Drift and Defensiveness*” (Markus et al., 2011:87). This paper considers the role of BBMPs as part of broader identity, continuity and Peoplehood education designed to address and prevent such outcomes.

Gen08 explains that Australian Jewry is experiencing “*social change...where identity is primarily or largely based on ethnicity and culture, not religion*” (Markus et al., 2011:45). Furthermore, Gen 08 quotes the 2010 JPPI report *2030: Alternative Futures for the Jewish People*, stating that “*The overall trend in Jewish identification is towards more diverse and pluralistic forms of Jewish identification less focused on a common set of basic values. There is a shift in identification from religious to secular,*

*from ethnic to cultural, from community- oriented to individualistic and universal"* (Markus et al., 2011:87).

Australian Jewry is clearly experiencing cultural change. For instance, as Gen08 notes, while the community has traditionally belonged to Orthodox synagogues, recent years have seen development of “*smaller and more spiritually directed congregations*” such as *Shira Hadasha* whose BBMP is included in this paper. According to Gen08, these synagogues “*push the boundaries of halacha by providing more egalitarian services that revolve around song and social action*” (Markus et al., 2011:30).

Interestingly, *Bnei-Mitzvah* ceremonies hardly rated a mention in the Gen08 report, with the main references being the cost of Jewish living (Markus et al., 2011:35). However, Gen08 also broke the Australian Jewish community down into three categories: core (25–30%) with a strong Jewish identity; middle (around 40%) with a challenged transmission of Jewish identity; and periphery (over 30%) with minimal transmission of Jewish identity (Markus et al., 2011:69). Of the periphery, over 80% had Bnei-Mitzvahs (Markus et al., 2011:72), which evidently remain a central feature of communal life across the religious and identity spectrum.

JJPI include BBMPs as part of a series of life cycle interventions that create social capital networking, noting that “*connections between educational program and family life reinforce one another. Networking among families. Multiple serendipities of programs and social connections.*” Indeed, the forming of social relationships is seen as a key outcome of and driver of Jewish communal participation (Fishman and Fischer, 2012:2).

Overall, Bnei-Mitzvah programs are arguably understudied as a vehicle addressing the Jewish identity, continuity and peoplehood challenges confronting the Australian Jewish community. How these programs do this, is the focus of this paper.

## **Methodology**

The research was undertaken in 2013 in Melbourne, the city with the largest concentration of Jews in Australia. It included the following organizations, which allowed for consideration of diverse BBMPs and comparative perspectives:

- Blake Street Hebrew Congregation, a centrist modern Orthodox community with about 500 members
- *Chabad* House of Malvern, including about 500 members drawn from the non-*Chabad* community
- Temple *Beth-Israel*, the main reform congregation in Melbourne with about 2500 members
- Jewish Aid Australia, a nonprofit organization dedicated to pursuing social justice for disadvantaged communities in Australia and overseas
- *Shira Hadasha*, an egalitarian Orthodox congregation with about 350 members.

The data was collected through interviews with the BBMP coordinators at the five participating programs and textual analysis of Bnei-Mitzvah handbooks, curricular and related materials from the participating programs.

Interviews were semi-structured with questions designed to elicit insightful information on the following issues and themes:

- The aims and distinguishing characteristics of the BBMP
- What they want participants to know about their Jewish identity and how they fortify it
- Whether a singular or multiple philosophies are taught as part of the program, and if so, which
- The balance of key components in the programs, e.g. ritual, religious, cultural, political, Zionist
- The extent to which Israel features in the program, why and how
- To what extent is Jewish Peoplehood emphasized, what is taught about the Jewish world and why
- What is taught about Australian Jewry
- What methodologies does the program use.

The subsequent sections present the core findings, followed by analysis and discussion.

## Findings

To establish the different or similar approaches of the BBMPs, the research findings on the themes listed above is presented comparatively between the different BBMP providers.

### The aims and distinguishing characteristics of the BBMPs

	Blake Street	Chabad House	TBI	Shira	JAA
Tikkun Olam & social Justice			X	X	X
Preparation for BBM day in synagogue		X	X		
Non BBM ritual and religious practice		X			
BBM prayers and parsha			X		
Jewish social network	X				
Parents participation	X	X			
Synagogue life	X	X			
Core Jewish knowledge	X	X			
Critical Jewish thinking				X	
Clear religious doctrine	X	X			
Social network	X				

From the information gathered in the interviews with BBMP coordinators, and an assessment of BBMP literature, we can make the following observations.

Blake Street’s aim is focused on being part of the synagogue and the community and identification with Israel and core Jewish knowledge, such as kashrut and Jewish holidays (*chaggim*), and creating a Jewish social network. As a synagogue community, Blake Street brings the parents into key presentations that are part of the BBMP, so the program engages with the family.

*Chabad* House of Malvern aims to teach what they regard as “authentic” Judaism, as opposed to the Judaism the children are exposed to at school and elsewhere, and is based on the Jewish calendar and synagogue life. *Chabad* House also involves parents in key parts of the program as a way of involving them in the community.

Temple *Beth-Israel’s* (TBI) BBMP aims to convey a sense of Jewish identity, tradition, and notions of social action. However, the primary aim of the BBMP is ritual preparation for the Bnei-Mitzvah day in the Temple and teaching synagogue literacy in general.

Jewish Aid Australia’s (JAA) aim is to empower their students to be agents of change in the broader community inspired by the Jewish tradition of *Tikkun Olam*, *Tzedakah* and *Chessed*. The program “*engages participants to explore and address 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges: social cohesion, poverty alleviation, equitable distribution of wealth and human rights*” (Jewish Aid Australia, Stand Up program outline).

*Shira Hadasha’s* aim is to instill the values of egalitarianism and diversity and to get the BBMP participants to think critically about Judaism. They also provide skills on how to access information on Judaism, usually online.

### **Imparting Knowledge About and Fortifying Jewish Identity**

	Blake Street	Chabad House	TBI	Shira	JAA
Clear religious doctrine/ ideology/ values	X	X	X	X	X
Create emotional connection to Judaism through cultural connection	X				
Create Jewish social environment as a vehicle to fortify Jewish id-ty	X				
Israel is part of their identity	X				
Know chaggim (Jewish calendar) and culture	X	X			

What the BBMP providers want their students to know about their Jewish identity also varies considerably according to ideology and philosophy.

Blake Street wants their students to know that one can be modern and Orthodox. They recognize the limitations of what can be taught in after school sessions once a week, over three terms in one year. So the fortification comes from the emotional and cultural domains rather than factual and intellectual dimensions: creating positive

associations, comfort and familiarity, positive tastes and memories that will trigger ongoing ties. An example given by Blake Street Rabbi and BBMP coordinator Ian Goodhart was, “on Lag Ba-omer they eat hot potatoes and marshmallows and sing songs, so when they hear those songs again it will spark that memory”. This process will fortify their identity by instilling positive feelings about being Jewish and a desire to express Jewishness in their life.

Chabad House of Malvern is based on an encounter with “authentic” Judaism as these youths' heritage and birthright, and ritual practice. Chabad House of Malvern teaches what they regard as Torah *Min Ha-Shamayim*, unadulterated “true” Judaism. As BBMP coordinator Rabbi Cooper explained, this is because “*Even if the girl’s parents don’t use a mikvah, we teach them what the mikvah is about, so if they want to use one they know, and even if they don’t want to, it will give them the truth - so they will know about it if it comes up in a discussion or they see it in a movie.*”

It is this learning about, seeing and experiencing “authentic” Judaism that the BBMP hopes to instill to fortify the participants’ Jewish identity.

TBI wants their students to know Progressive Jewish values and that Jewish identity is something they have to take charge of. They do this by “getting the students to choose and empower themselves through their own questioning and exploring”. TBI fortifies the students’ Jewish identity “*making them proud young Jews, giving them a sense of identity, ownership, peoplehood.*”

JAA want their students to know that social justice and *tikkun olam* are central to being Jewish and their Judaism can be expressed in this way. This identity is fortified by empowering participants to be the agents of change in the long tradition of Jewish social justice. As JAA’s BBMP handbook put it:

*Our educational programs provide contemporary relevance to an ancient tradition. This allows us to translate the ‘widow’, ‘orphan’ and ‘stranger’ of the ancient world into the disenfranchised and unrepresented of the modern world. By placing Jewish core values in a contemporary, relevant context, and appealing to a growing discourse on social justice in a globalized world, we offer a meaningful way of expressing Jewish identity (Jewish Aid Australia: School Program booklet).*

Shira Hadasha wants their students to know that Jewish identity and synagogue life is egalitarian and can be diverse and critical. Their BBMP is not prescriptive about what Judaism is or how it should be lived.

### **Singular or multiple philosophies taught as part of the program**

There are different approaches to the range of philosophies taught.

	Blake Street	Chabad House	TBI	Shira	JAA
Singular Philosophy		X			
Multiple Philosophies in general	X		X	X	X
Multiple Philosophies within religious stream	X				



Blake Street provides a broad range of philosophies, from *Chassidut* to the teachings of Rav Soloveichik, but it is important to note that this range is limited to the Orthodox spectrum, with an emphasis on Modern Orthodoxy.

Chabad House of Malvern teaches Chabad philosophy only.

TBI's BBMP pupils learn a Reform Bnei-Mitzvah, but in order to place the rite of passage in context, TBI also draws on non-Jewish philosophies and customs. Thus the program includes a session where they "*explore the history of rites of passage and compare the cultural differences, as well as try to understand how indigenous rites of passage became the ceremonies we know today*" (Temple Beth Israel).

JAA teaches Jewish and general philosophies, but they try to have the main source of inspiration coming from Judaism. Thus, they teach social justice through a Jewish lens, for example citing Hillel's quote "If not me, then who?" However, it is not just Jewish role models JAA use to convey their message, with other individuals ranging from social change-makers such as Mandela.

*Shira Hadasha*, consistent with their overall philosophy, adhere to a quote from the Rambam "*Shema t'emet me mi sh'amara*"— listen to truth from wherever it comes. However, in selecting the sources they expose their BBMP students to, they primarily share sources that support their egalitarian ethos.

### Relative weights of the religious and cultural components of the programs

	Blake Street	Chabad House	TBI	Shira	JAA
Synagogue customs*	5%	50%	85%		
Israel education	15%				
Working for social justice			10%	20%	100%
Discussion and critical thinking				50%	
Chaggim Jewish calendar, culture and ritual	80%	50%		30%	
Peoplehood, Australian Jewish experience			5%		

Notes: 1. These categories may intersect, i.e. ritual may relate to *Chaggim*, discussion and critical thinking may relate to social justice. 2. The BBMPs have varying degrees of focus on the Bnei-Mitzvah ritual in the synagogue *per se*.

Reflecting their different ideologies, BBMP providers assign different weights to various elements of their programs.

Blake Street is a synagogue congregation and the BBMP is about connecting the students into that synagogue. The biggest focus is on the *chaggim*, but religion and ritual is taught through the *shul* service; Shabbat and kashrut also feature prominently. Given its Zionist orientation, Israel is also part of this 'package'.

*Chabad* House of Malvern is an Ultra-Orthodox synagogue, with ritual and religion forming the bulk of the BBMP. For example, the curriculum includes the students

going into the synagogue and practicing religious ritual, such as taking the *Sefer Torah* from the *Aron Kodesh*.

TBI's aim is about preparation for the Bnei-Mitzvah in the synagogue and this leads to acquiring the ritual skills for that day. The BBMP is the only one of those included in this study to have a formal synagogue attendance. There is also a *tikkun olam* or action-oriented project, but this seems to be a minor and a voluntary part encouraging the students to do something outside the supervised framework of the BBMP.

JAA's social justice focus leads to an action-oriented program, with an exclusive emphasis on *tikkun olam* - social justice philosophy and its application.

*Shira Hadasha's* focus on critical thinking and diversity determines the choice of content around the study of the Jewish texts and related activities, with an emphasis on cultural and political philosophy, and critical thinking. *Shira Hadasha* does not engage in ritual around the *Chaggim* but rather has programs around the theme of the *chaggim*. For example, on Pesach they do not have a mock Seder, but use the Pesach story as a springboard to talk about slavery then and now.

### Israeli features and content

	Blake Street	Chabad House	TBI	Shira	JAA
Teach about Israel in BBMP	X		X	X	
Synagogue/ parent body celebrates Yom Ha'atzmaut and commemorate Yom Ha'zikaron	X				

At Blake Street, Israel is a distinct feature of the curriculum: its main civil holidays *Yom Ha'atzmaut* and *Yom Ha'zikaron* are specifically taught, celebrated and commemorated. Establishing a connection to Israel is a clear objective of the BBMP. As the Synagogue Rabbi and BBMP coordinator Rabbi Goodhart put it:

*We are conveying that, as a Jewish person, connection to Israel is very important, that Israel belongs to them as Jewish people, and they owe some loyalty to Israel and need to have some connection to Israel. Every year we have some students who have never been to Israel and we always encourage them to go.*

Indeed, as a Modern Orthodox congregation, Israel is rather central to Blake Street's religious outlook. Israel is always part of teaching religion, such as the promise of the Land of Israel made in the Torah to Abraham, Isaac and Yaakov. Yet, the course does not go into the actual Zionist history due to time limitations. Similarly, they do not deal with political issues, such as settlements and religion and state in Israel.

For *Chabad* House of Malvern, Israel as the modern Jewish State is not formally included in their BBMP. Rabbi Cooper explains that this is not because it is not important, but because "*the children learn it in school, and we look at what they have and what they are lacking, and that is religion*". Israel features in their program only through the religious dimension, e.g. as the place Jews face when in prayer.

At TBI there is no specific inclusion of Israel, except for references to Israel articulated in the siddur read by the students. It is expected that Israel education is part of the day school program for students from the Reform King David school or TBI's Tamid program which students from non-Jewish schools must attend for two years before participating in the BBMP.

JAA's BBMP does not feature Israel in any formal way. This is based on the universalist philosophy and mission of JAA to look outside the Jewish community. Practically it is based on recognition that there are many Jewish organizations with an Israel (aid) focus. JAA representatives say that it is up to the students to choose Jewish, Israeli, or other social justice causes in the part of the program where the participants nominate a cause they take action for.

*Shira Hadasha* does not include Israel in their BBMP. Time is one consideration, but every program makes choices about time based on priorities; it was flatly stated by the program coordinators that there are higher priorities than Israel. *Shira Hadasha* is recognized as politically left-leaning, and the program's coordinators asserted that this influences the decision not to include Israel in the curricular. As BBMP coordinator Yael Praver stated, "Politics is not relevant to our BBMP, and Zionism is a form of politics". However, it seems that it is actually politics itself that is leading to Israel being specifically excluded. As Yael Praver put it, "*How can we teach Israel when the issues are so nuanced and we have such a short time, and if we don't give it the time it deserves we will give the students a one-sided approach and not dual narratives.*"

This was supported by comments that the BBMP was trying to get people to identify with the synagogue while Israel could be an alienating factor. Yael stressed the "*need to be careful because if we attach the two together (Israel and Judaism) if a child is not Zionist they will leave Judaism*". Despite this, the organizers stress that the students see a lot of Israel in the synagogue that often hosts speakers from Israel, and the Shabbat at the time of *Yom Ha'tzmaut* is celebrated with an Israel theme, and prayers for the State of Israel and IDF are said every Shabbat.

**Jewish Peoplehood and Study of Australian Jewry**

	Blake Street	Chabad House	TBI	Shira	JAA
Explicitly teach Jewish Peoplehood/ World Jewry or dimension thereof		X			
Teach about other sections of Australian Jewry			X	X	
World Jewry inferred, subset of other parts of the program	X			X	
Australian Jewry inferred, incidental	X				

Blake Street's BBMP does not include anything specific on world Jewry, but the subject comes up in incidental ways through other aspects of the program. For example, this will be through learning how all of Israel is responsible for one another,

and the bond Jewish people have for each other across the world or the different traditions of different Jewish communities on Pesach. Blake Street does not teach about Australian Jewry in a dedicated way, but it also comes up incidentally, for example, when students bring up issues they have been exposed to in the community.

*Chabad* House of Malvern do provide a sense of world Jewry but it is very much *Chabad*-specific, for example, how anywhere they go in the world *Chabad* will be there for them, how *Chabad* is a global movement, and that Jews have the same soul everywhere, even if they speak different languages. So it is more a *Chabad* Jewry dimension of the program rather than being about world Jewry in general.

TBI BBMP coordinator Chazan Laloum was the only interviewee who made unsolicited comments about giving the students a sense of “peoplehood.” Indeed, TBI is the only program that specifically exposes their students to other streams of Judaism in the BBMP, specifically through Shabbat morning session visits to Orthodox and Conservative synagogues and other streams, e.g. a Sephardi synagogue.

JAA do not emphasize *peoplehood* in any way. As JAA BBMP coordinator Elise Teperman explained, “*we don’t talk about specific communities anywhere, we look at big global issues and understanding them, such as what does extreme poverty mean.*” However, JAA explores this, as they do everything in their program, through the Jewish prism. Thus, in the section of the program when they consider who they should help, they ask about local Jewry, the wider Australian non-Jewish community, and world Jewry and the broader global community.

*Shira Hadasha’s* focus on diversity in the Jewish world leads it to have a more global Jewish outlook, as they consider diverse expressions of Judaism, from a Progressive synagogue in Melbourne to an alternative Orthodox *minyan* overseas. As they advance an agenda of inclusivity, they focus on including Jews everywhere. Part of the curriculum on *tikkun olam* has a simulation where the students as a collective learn about Ramban’s circles of responsibility – inner, medium and outer – and have to decide who they are responsible for, e.g. a Jew in Australia, Israel, or America, and how close they are to the central circle themselves.

### **What methodologies the programs use**

Diverse creative experiential methodologies are widely used.

	Blake Street	Chabad House	TBI	Shira	JAA
Classroom style			X		
Shabbaton’s and family involvement		X			
Practice ritual	X	X	X		
Outreach social justice program			X	X	X
Use art &/or music &/or multimedia				X	
Making e.g. Shofar, Matzah	X	X			
Mandatory synagogue attendance			X		
Teach Parshat Hashavoua			X		

Blake Street has a hands-on interactive program so that, for example, on Purim they bake *hamentashen* as a way of learning about the festival and kashrut. The participants then sell these to raise *Tzedaka*. The interactive nature of the program is manifest in many ways, so that, for example, when they learn about the Torah they write a section with a feather.

*Chabad* is very interactive and religiously experiential; e.g. they have a regular Shabbaton, a Friday night dinner with parents.

TBI program is a mix of religious learning to *layn* their *parsha*, give a *Dvar Torah* and ritual about what to do in the synagogue.

JAA's is also interactive, and takes a lead from the youth movements from which many of its facilitators are drawn. For example, in their global poverty program they are given \$2 to go to a supermarket to see if they can live for a day on that.

*Shira Hadasha* certainly takes a creative approach to their BBMP, looking at themes and issues through music, arts and multimedia.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

What does this research convey about contemporary plural Jewish identities, the nature of the BBMPs programs, and the place of Israel in Bar/Bat Mitzvah education? How do these programs embrace the notion of Jewish Peoplehood and what is their role for shaping Jewish identity and continuity in Australia?

In terms of the aims and distinguishing characteristics of the BBMPs, there is clearly a diversity of philosophies, content and approaches. Several factors appear to determine aims, with the ideology of the BBMP provider being the primary one. This obviously determines what they want to impart, being it an attempt to get the BBMP participants to live on \$2 a day in the case of JAA or the obligation undertake religious obligations for *Chabad*.

Time is another determinant of the programs' goals. All of them recognize the limitations of what can be accomplished in after-school programs; it is thus about making priorities. These priorities are in turn shaped by several factors: what their ideology and mission wants them to convey, and what they feel the children are getting elsewhere. This is either to ensure that they are offering something different, which explains why many omit Israel from their programs, or attempts to "fix" or counter-balance what they regard as wrong or inadequate in Jewish education from the home and school environments. This is most clearly the case with *Chabad*.

Another factor which determines the BBMP's aims are their respective cohorts. Whether or not the children come from a Jewish day school, and which school, effects what is taught. Thus, *Chabad* chose not to include Israel, as most their participants are from Bialik, a very Zionist school.

Finally, and obviously, the aims are determined by the nature of the organization providing the BBMP. Blake Street and *Chabad* are synagogues, so the engagement in synagogue community is a focus of their programs, while JAA's focus is clearly quite different as an NGO.

Ideology and philosophy similarly determines what they want the participants to learn about their Jewish identity. The different aims of the BBMPs documented in this research reveal the plurality of Jewish identities that exist in the community. There is also a nexus between the kind of identity being aimed at and how it is conveyed.

Hence, *Shira Hadasha* wants their participants to know Judaism is diverse and critical, so their programs encourage critical textual analysis.

The aims of the respective BBMPs relate to the identity the providers wish to project and these, in turn, determine whether singular or multiple philosophies are taught. *Chabad's* aim of teaching hassidic Judaism allows no time for other philosophies. Blake Street's teaching of Modern Orthodoxy allows for a range of ideas from across that spectrum, and JAA's social justice agenda calls for Jewish and general agents of change. Of the religious providers, only TBI and *Shira Hadasha* exposed their students to a plurality of Jewish viewpoints and experiences. The other providers use those that fit and reinforce their worldview, ranging from the parochial to the universal. The different ideologies and aims of the BBMP providers explain the different weights of the different elements in their programs.

What is clear from the findings is that Israel is not placed high in any of the providers' agendas, except for the explicitly Zionist Blake Street, and even there it is not a major part of the program. It is true that Israel is taught at the Jewish day schools where many of the BBMP participants come from. One could, of course, argue that the pupils are also getting religious and *tikkun olam* education at school, so the choices the BBMPs make are reflective of their priorities, and once again ideology comes into play. No one expects these providers to include courses on the history of Zionism, but given the absence of celebrating *Yom Ha'atzmaut* as part of the BBMP programs for all providers except Blake Street, it suggests that Israel is not central to their BBMP aims.

*Shira Hadasha's* comments about avoiding Israel because it is politically contentious reveals how Israel is actually regarded as a problematic dimension that is potentially in conflict with the Jewish identity they seek to instill, or at least is so nuanced and complex that it is easier to exclude it from a Bnei Mitzvah program. To cite Yael Prawer, "*politics is not relevant to our BBMP and Zionism is a form of politics.*" However, with gender issues arguably being political (yet present on their agenda), it seems that it is actually politics itself that causes Israel's omission from *Shira Hadasha's* BBMP. This suggests that, at least in term of *Shira's* BBMP, Israel and Zionism is an optional element of Jewish identity, rather than being integral to the belief the synagogue aims to instill.

Just because these organizations propose a non-Israel programming does not mean they are rejecting Israel. JAA made a fair point that there are lots of organizations educating about Israel. However, it would also be possible for Israel to be included in their programs – for example by relating to social justice and welfare in Israel. It is telling that it is not. JAA says that it is up to the students if they want to take up Jewish or Israeli social justice causes. However, in practice that is not happening, which is understandable given that Israel is omitted from the program.

Jewish Peoplehood is the buzzword of educators and policy makers in the field of Jewish education and continuity. However, the BBMPs are clearly *not* advancing the dimensions of Peoplehood: collective belonging or identification with the Jewish people; Jewish cultural capital or familiarity with the cultural knowledge, language, customs, and rituals that makes a Jew feel comfortable anywhere in the Jewish world; Jewish responsibility or commitment to the welfare of other Jews; and interpersonal attachment or personal connection with other Jews (Mittelberg, 2013).

Indeed, none of the organizers (apart from the BBMP coordinator at TBI) were familiar with the Peoplehood concept, as it is used as a paradigm for the global Jewish relationship. This suggests that Peoplehood theories and strategies have yet to make inroads in significant sectors of Australian Jewry.

Where Peoplehood does creep into the BBMPs is when it relates closely to the provider, such as *Chabad* around the world or *Shira Hadasha's* referencing like-minded synagogues. This is Peoplehood in the narrow sense of the word. Australian Jewry features incidentally and is usually limited to their community and family.

In terms of advancing Peoplehood, there is a clear need to include the range of peoplehood issues in a BBMP, such as Bnei-Mitzvahs around the world or different Bnei-Mitzvah customs. However, the parochial nature of the BBMPs thwarts this, as do their often narrow ideological frames and related aims. In discussion about Peoplehood, JAA stressed that they are the only Jewish organization in Australia offering support to non-Jewish communities, and that it is important to give a Jewish response to issues outside their community. Seeing this mission as their unique contribution and their area of specialization, they are not negating or rejecting the importance of peoplehood. While theoretically the students could opt for a local or global *Jewish* cause, in practice end up volunteering for Indigenous and local refugee programs that are in the center of their attention. However, it is important to note that from JAA's perspective the outside focus is a way of keeping the participants inside. As Elise Teperman explained:

*For students not connected to Judaism or alienated from Judaism it is a way of connecting them and expressing their Judaism; practicing and doing these things with other Jews is a way of keeping them in the community. A lot of money that the students raise goes to Jewish Aid, and we are a Jewish organization, and that's who they are giving to.*

Whatever the content, all the programs are interactive and experiential. It is clear that great energy, conviction, creativity and resources are being invested in the BBMPs. There appears to a consensus (with few exceptions) that classroom-style teaching is outdated and ineffective. For the most part, we can confidently say the BBMPs are informal, creative and innovative.

## **Conclusion**

The BBMPs included in this study are just a sample of those offered to Melbourne Jewry, but they represent major trends and experiences across the community. Blake Street is indicative of major mainstream modern-Orthodox traditional synagogues, Chabad Malvern's program is similar to those of other *Chabad* Houses and synagogues with Chabad Rabbis, TBI is the main Reform congregation, JAA the only Jewish NGO with an exclusively non-Jewish focus, while Shira Hadassha is reflective of new and emerging synagogues with pluralistic outlook. Collectively, they demonstrate the vitality of the Jewish experience and the multiple Jewish identity options available to Australian Jewish youth.

One significant factor none of the BBMPs seemed to be taking into account was that at least 40% of Jewish children do *not* attend a Jewish day school. While the BBMP providers take into account what the Jewish day schools teach when deciding on content, this other sizeable cohort must also be taken into account. Indeed, all the

providers included in this research had children in non-Jewish schools, but TBI was the only organization to consciously address this, having an additional program for children from non-Jewish schools to attend before participating in their BBMPs. Other providers would do well to do likewise.

A few general observations can be made in the light of our findings:

- BBMPs are as much about Jewish identity as they are about Jewish education and need to be understood as such by respective BBMP providers
- Traditional BBMP activity of learning the *parasha* and *dvar torah* is, with the exception of the Reform TBI, taught privately giving the BBMPs a potentially more impactful identity forming role
- Most programs draw on a combination of learning and activism
- *Tikkum Olam* appears to be a significant driver and dimension of the Jewish experience and identity
- Interactive experiential informal education suggests a vibrant and creative Bnei-Mitzvah educational environment
- The unique circumstance of each BBMP cohort must be taken into account.

It is clear that ideology and theology remain the primary drivers of key issues explored in this research. However, it is also clear that there is little common ground that transcends these ideological divides; neither Israel nor a sense of Jewish Peoplehood currently play this unifying role. The parochial nature of ideologically-driven programs suggests a further fracturing of the Jewish community along religious, cultural and political lines. Overall, two trends are emerging: the parochial and the universal, with little appearing in the middle. As noted in the Introduction, the “*trend is towards more diverse and pluralistic forms of Jewish identification less focused on a common set of basic values*” and “*a shift in identification from religious to secular, from ethnic to cultural, from community oriented to individualistic and universal*” (Markus et al., 2011:87). The evidence from the BBMPs supports this proposition. There is clearly pluralistic and diverse Judaism on offer, allowing for different forms of belonging and expression.

In terms of Israel, the research flags a warning sign. Rather than BBMPs being a vehicle for greater Israel engagement, Israel is basically absent from the BBMPs. Given the prominence of Chabad synagogues and rabbis across the Jewish world, the absence of even a *Yom Ha'atzmaut* celebration at the *Chabad House* signifies a problem for those concerned about Zionism and identification with Israel as a central value of Jewish life in the Diaspora. In addition, the attitudes expressed at *Shira Hadasha* suggest a political unease with the very notion of Israel that is a harbinger of a potential drift away from Israel in distinct Jewish circles.<sup>1</sup>

All participating organizations highlighted their frustration at the limit of what they could include in their BBMPs given the limited time they had, but the choices they

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<sup>1</sup> There is a paradox in that *Shira Hadasha* is modeled on and has ties to the *Shira Hadasha* congregation in Jerusalem, and this is proudly asserted by the synagogue community (shul). Furthermore, the shul's critical approach to Israel means its speakers are often engaged in discussion about the Jewish State and often come from various organizations in Israel. However, the shul, as described on its website [www.shira.org.au](http://www.shira.org.au), has no formal Zionist identity, although in practice the fact prayers for the State of Israel and the IDF are said every Shabbat suggest a Zionist identification.



make reflect their priorities. One way this could be addressed is a greater coordination between the Jewish day schools and the BBMP providers. While this may not be possible in cases of ideological differences, for some this partnership will be seamless (e.g., Modern Orthodox Blake Street synagogue with the Modern Orthodox Libeler Yavneh College and the Reform TBI and Reform King David school).

Overall, it is essential that the data presented in this paper is treated in context. Given that the majority of students at *Chabad* House attend Bialik College, they are at a very Zionist school and their parents are presumably looking for religious content. Similarly, if the majority of participants in the JAA program are from Jewish schools, their parents are not abandoning Jewish and Israel education, but rather wish to add a broader or more holistic dimension to their children's overall education. It would therefore be wrong to conclude from this research that Australian Jewish youth's identity is being developed without a sense of Peoplehood in which Israel is a part.

Yet, the nature and impact of BBMPs cannot be considered in isolation but in the full context of the participant's Jewish experiences, including Jewish day school and youth movement participation both before and after their Bnei-Mitzvahs. JPPI talk of "*cumulative serendipities: including Jewish family, formal and informal education, social networks and travel.*" "*All of these work together and reinforce one another to produce identified and attached Jews*". JPPI call for enhanced serendipities (Fishman and Fischer, 2012:3). There is a clear need for developing this idea in BBMPs in Australia.

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