



The Mothers Circle: Impact on Interfaith Families



What is The Mothers Circle?

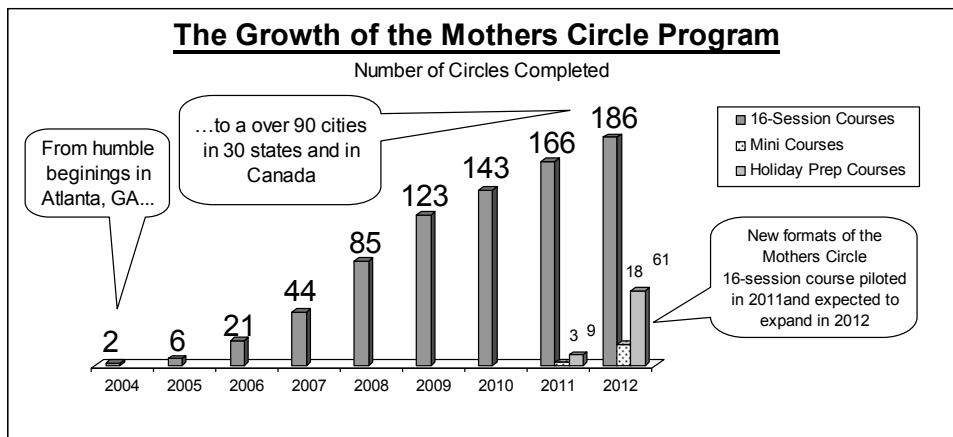
The Mothers Circle is an umbrella of free educational programs and resources for women of other religious backgrounds raising Jewish children within the context of an intermarriage or inter-partnership. JOI developed The Mothers Circle programs in order to provide these women, who previously went unnoticed by the organized Jewish community, with Jewish parenting skills, education, resources, and support to create a Jewish home.

Methodology

This report describes findings from pre- and post-course questionnaires. Participants completed one questionnaire at the beginning of the first meeting of the course; they then completed the questionnaire again after the conclusion of the 16-session course. This allows us to say with some confidence that any differences found between the pre- and the post-course questionnaire can be attributed to participation in The Mothers Circle course. This report is based on the analysis of 108 pre-course questionnaires and 35 post-course questionnaires collected from participants in 17 Circles, which took place between the fall of 2010 and the spring of 2012 in 14 states and provinces across North America.

The Span and Reach of the Program

As of November 2012, The Mothers Circle program is in its ninth year, and has reached close to 1,500 women through its extensive 16-session year-long course alone. With 186 Circles completed to date in over 90 locations across North America, the program continues to grow. To broadcast its content even wider, JOI launched an umbrella of additional programmatic offerings in 2011. Our three-session mini course and single session holiday prep classes (currently offered for the High Holidays, Hanukkah, and Passover) are gaining in popularity among women who are unable to commit to the full-length course. In the pilot year of these programs they reached over 60 additional women, and are expected to expand greatly in 2012, reaching over 250 women.¹ In addition, we also offer interactive webinars and a downloadable self-guide for women who wish to receive the content of The Mothers Circle outside of a moderated group. Just like the original The Mothers Circle course, all this content is offered free of charge.



¹ These numbers count only women in our target of "women of other religious backgrounds raising Jewish children in the context of an interfaith relationship." Since our holiday prep classes are open to women outside this population, the actual reach of the mini-course and the prep classes may exceed 600 women.

Program Impact (The 16-Session Course)

The Mothers Circle has had a marked impact on its participants. Alumnae are more comfortable aligning with their spouse's Jewish identity; they are more confident and competent practicing Jewish rituals and leading a Jewish home; they consistently choose formal Jewish education for their children; and many go on to formally affiliate with Jewish institutions. Moreover, the impact of the program reaches beyond the realm of its participants. The course's impact extends to partners and families, whose Jewish identities and practices are often also enhanced.

A. Confidence and comfort participating in Jewish activities

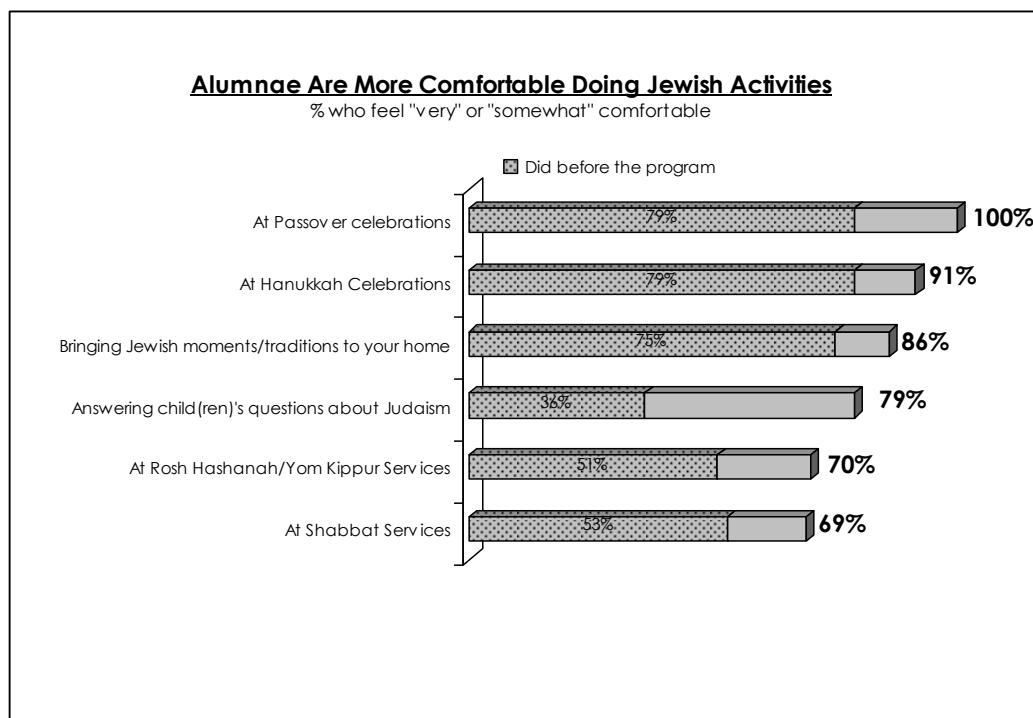
Following the course, participants feel more comfortable and competent engaging in Jewish rituals and traditions. For example, the number of participants who say their home "feels Jewish" jumps from 39% prior to the course to 71% after the course; the number of women who are comfortable answering their children's questions about Judaism jumps from 36% prior to the course to 79% following the 16-session course.

"I was not at all ok with Passover before the course. [The facilitator] helped me through that, and now I'm comfortable bringing Passover into our home."

[Participant, Lafayette, CA]

"Attending these sessions, I have been able to feel more confident in my role as 'Jewish Mother.' Having the chance to reflect and think about holiday celebrations, attending services and answering my children's questions has been very helpful."

[Participant, Houston, TX]

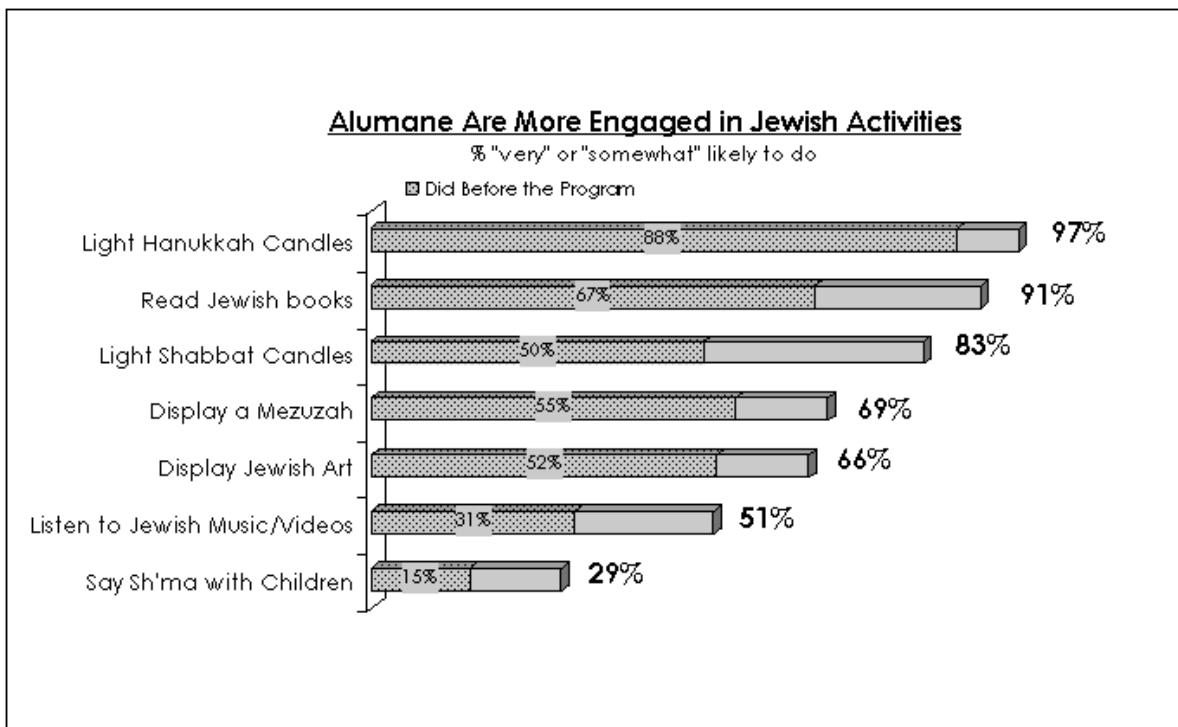


B. Expanded Jewish practice

Beyond greater comfort participating in Jewish rituals and holidays, alumnae of the course indicate engaging in more Jewish activities. For example, 83% of alumnae light Shabbat candles (up from 50%), 91% read books with Jewish themes (up from 67%), and 29% report saying the Sh'ma with their children at bedtime (up from 15%).

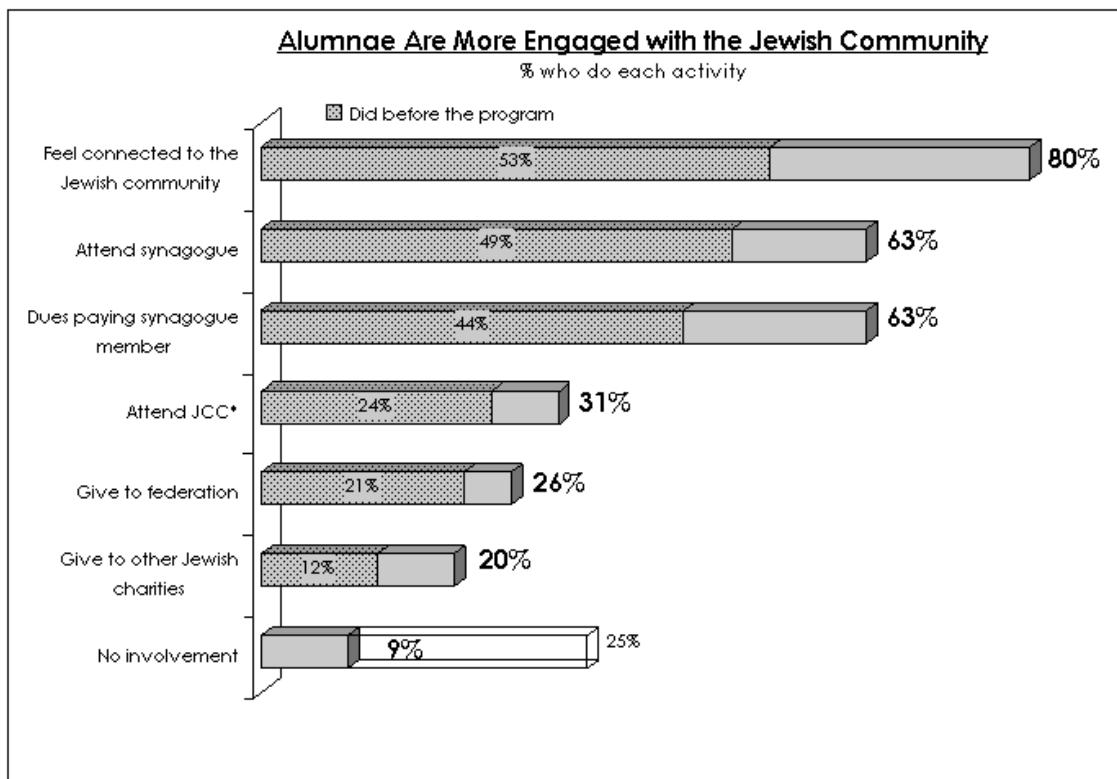
"Shabbat has become a wonderful ritual in our house. We hung mezuzahs on our front door and our kids' bedroom doors. We do not turn on the computers on Shabbat. We have included other families in our Jewish celebrations. Until this class, I would have felt intimidated to do that!"

[Participant, Hartford, CT]



C. Formal affiliation with the Jewish community

For many alumnae, the course has served as the gateway to formal affiliation with the organized Jewish community. The rate of participants who indicate they feel connected to the Jewish community jumps from 53% before the course to 80% following the course. 63% of alumnae are due-paying members of synagogues (up from 44% prior to the course). Only 9% of alumnae indicate having no involvement with the organized Jewish community (down from 25%).

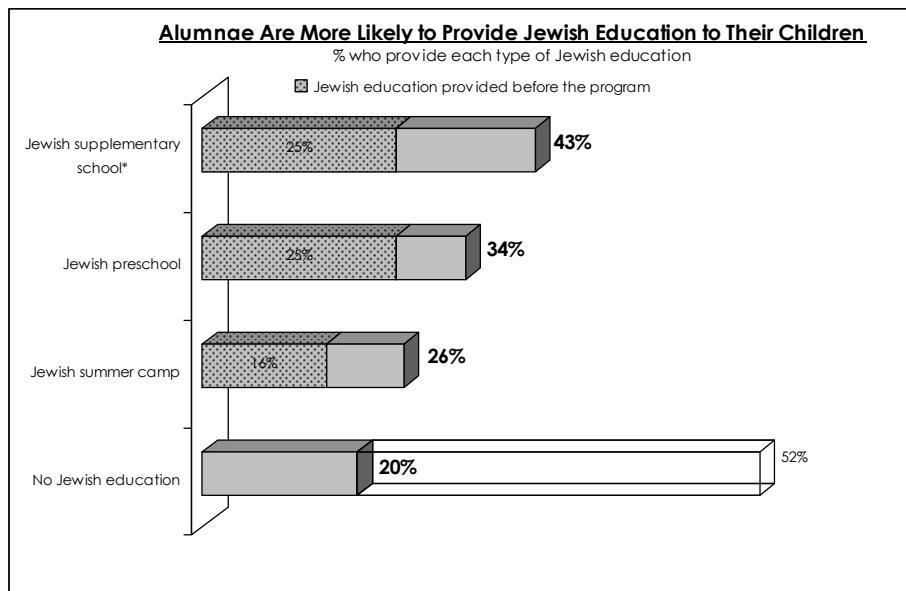


* No change was recorded in JCC membership.

D. Choice of Jewish education

While prior to the course half (52%) of the participants did not provide Jewish education to their children, 80% of alumnae have already chosen some kind of formal Jewish education for their children.

The most frequently mentioned form of Jewish education is Jewish supplementary school (43% plan to provide this following the course), followed by Jewish preschool (34%) and Jewish summer camp (26%). It is important to recognize that most of these women are mothers of very young children (see appendix).



* No change was recorded in day school enrolment.



E. Impact on the family

The impact of The Mothers Circle does not stop at the participating mothers. Anecdotally, mothers report that participation in the course reflects positively on their relationships with their spouses and their spouse's Jewish family.

"[The Mothers Circle] has brought us closer because we are spending more time together as we practice Jewish customs."

[Participant, Hartford, CT]

"[As a result of my participation in The Mothers Circle, my husband] feels more committed, more connected to the meaningful aspects of life, like getting together and making Shabbat on Friday, or going to early Kaballat Shabbat at the temple, creating these experiences."

[Participant, Providence, RI]

"[My husband] and I have had more extensive conversations about our beliefs than ever before."

[Participant, Providence, RI]

F. Impact beyond the program

After eight years of implementing The Mothers Circle across North America, we begin to see the program taking on a life of its own, with some communities adopting and adapting The Mothers Circle to meet their community's needs. One such example is Portland, Oregon, where the community now offers Dads Night—a program for "all Jewish dads and dads raising Jewish kids."¹ This program adds another layer of service to The Mothers Circle by supporting the spouses of Mothers Circle participants.

With eight years of service and counting, and over 1,500 women touched, The Mothers Circle continues to open the tent of the Jewish community to women of other religious backgrounds raising Jewish children. The program's considerable impact goes beyond helping these mothers to create vibrant Jewish homes. As a result of participation in the program, both they, their children, and their families take the first steps toward greater, more meaningful engagement with the Jewish community. As their children enjoy Jewish education, and their spouses and families become increasingly involved in Jewish institutions, The Mothers Circle positively impacts the community as a whole as well. As the program grows to over 100 communities across the United States and Canada, The Mothers Circle continues to open the tent of the entire North American Jewish community.

¹ As reported in the October issue of Oregon Jewish Life.

Appendix

Appendix A: Who are the Mothers?

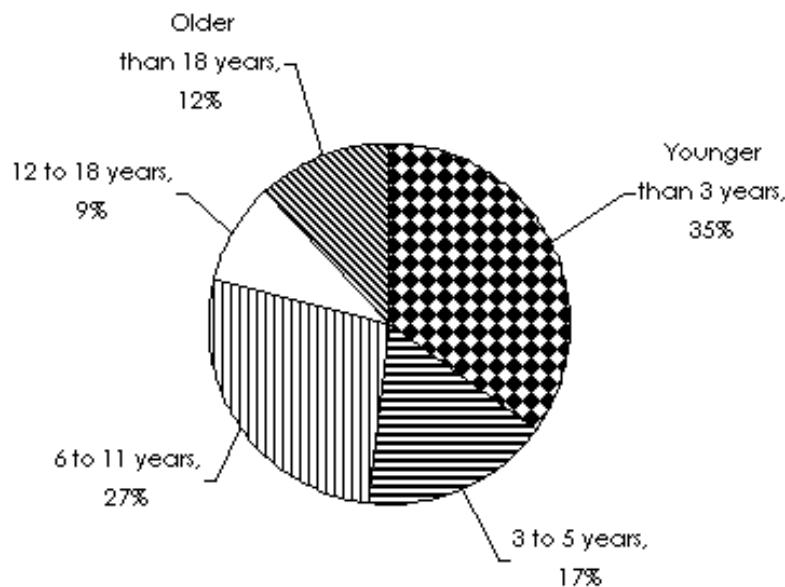
The majority of Mothers Circle participants come from a Christian background (77%), with the rest indicating "other" (16%) or "none" (7%) as their religion.

The most frequent reason (57%) that brings women to join The Mothers Circle is seeking knowledge about Jewish traditions. Some specifically indicate seeking guidance in educating Jewish children (27%) and creating a Jewish home (23%). Others (27%) seek the support of a group of mothers in similar circumstances.

Most mothers have one (53%) or two (30%) children when they attend the course; few (17%) have three or more children.

Half the mothers (51%) have either preschool age children (3-6 years old; 17%) or younger (35%); a third (27%) have children in elementary school, and the rest have children in high school or adult children.¹

Age of Oldest Child



¹ These percentages describe the oldest child.

Appendix B: Selected impact numbers**Greater Competence in Leading a Jewish Home**

How 'Jewish' would you say your home feels right now?	Answering "Very" or "Somewhat"		Change in Percentage Points
	Before	After	
	39%	71%	
How comfortable do you feel...		Very or Somewhat Comfortable	Change in Percentage Points
Before	After		
Answering your child(ren)'s questions about Judaism	36%	79%	+43 ¹
At Passover Celebrations	79%	100%	+21*
At Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur Services	51%	70%	+19*
At Shabbat Services	53%	69%	+16
At Hanukkah Celebrations	79%	91%	+12
Bringing Jewish moments/traditions to your home	75%	86%	+11

More Jewish Practice

Which Jewish Activities do you do at home?	Before	After	Change in Percentage Points
			Before
Lighting Shabbat candles	50%	83%	+33*
Reading books with Jewish themes	67%	91%	+24*
Playing Jewish music and/or videos with Jewish themes	31%	51%	+20*
Displaying a mezuzah	55%	69%	+14
Displaying Jewish art/ritual objects	52%	66%	+14
Saying the Sh'ma before bedtime with your child(ren)	15%	29%	+14
Lighting a Hanukkah menorah	88%	97%	+9*

Greater Affiliation with the Organized Jewish Community

How connected do you feel to the Jewish community?	Answering "Very" or "Somewhat"		Change in Percentage Points
	Before	After	
	53%	80%	
How, if at all, are you and your family involved with the following Jewish organizations?		Before	Change in Percentage Points
		After	
Member of synagogue/temple (pay dues)	44%	63%	+19*
Attend synagogue/temple	49%	63%	+14
Give to other Jewish charities	12%	20%	+8
Attend Jewish Community Center	24%	31%	+7
Give to Jewish federation	21%	26%	+5
None	25%	9%	-16*

¹ Change is statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

Formal and Informal Jewish Education

Which Jewish events do you attend with your child(ren)?	Before	After	Change in Percentage Points
Purim carnival	30%	57%	+27*
Hanukkah festival	36%	60%	+24*
Tot Shabbat	29%	51%	+22*

What kind of Jewish education do you <u>provide now</u> for your child(ren)?	Before	After	Change in Percentage Points
None	52%	20%	-32 ¹
Jewish supplementary school	25%	43%	+18
Jewish summer camp	16%	26%	+10
Jewish preschool	25%	34%	+9
Jewish day schools	5%	3%	-2

What kind of Jewish education do you <u>plan to provide in the future</u> for your child(ren)?	Before	After	Change in Percentage Points
None	39%	14%	-25*
Jewish summer camp	28%	37%	+9
Jewish day schools	12%	17%	+5
Jewish preschool	15%	17%	+2
Jewish supplementary school	48%	49%	+1

¹ Change is statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.