



Jewish Federation<sup>®</sup>  
of Greater Rochester

## IMPACT REPORT

# Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program

2025

A joint project of the  
Jewish Federation of  
Greater Rochester and  
Clal—The National Jewish  
Center for Learning  
and Leadership

Clal



THE NATIONAL JEWISH CENTER  
FOR LEARNING AND LEADERSHIP

# Introduction

The Jewish Federation of Greater Rochester launched the second cohort of the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program during the 2024–2025 program year, building on the momentum of its inaugural class. Rooted in Jay Birnbaum z”l’s deep commitment to the Rochester Jewish community, the program was designed to cultivate the next generation of local Jewish leadership. By fostering relationships, engaging participants in leadership learning through a Jewish lens, and offering meaningful opportunities to explore Jewish identity in creative ways, the program functions as a powerful onramp into communal involvement. Its vision remains ambitious: alumni stepping into committee and board leadership across Jewish agencies, synagogues, and organizations throughout Rochester, equipped with the insight and skills developed during the program year. As this report illustrates, that vision is already taking shape.

When we welcomed the second cohort into the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program, we knew we were building on the strong foundation laid in our first year. What we did not anticipate was how this group would show up for one another, especially in the shadow of October 7, and how powerfully they would lean into the work of strengthening Jewish life in Rochester. In their group learning and shared experiences across Jewish Rochester, they found a rare and much-needed peer community into which to ask the big questions of Jewish leadership.

It has been a privilege to learn with and grow alongside these leaders. Their energy, honesty, and dedication strengthen our belief that the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program is becoming an essential pipeline for Jewish leadership in Rochester, and that the seeds planted here will continue to bear fruit for years to come.



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# Executive Summary

The Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program continues to bring young Jewish adults in Rochester into meaningful leadership roles across the Jewish community. The program offers far more than a typical young adult division focused on philanthropy or social events. It provides an on-ramp into volunteer leadership; creates space for substantive conversations about Jewish communal life; builds strong peer relationships; and strengthens participants' connection with Federation and its agencies. Over just two years, the program has become the primary leadership pipeline for the newest leaders of Jewish Rochester.

This year's application process again drew a selective, high-quality group—now strengthened by referrals from the first cohort, which has begun to function as an engaged alumni network. Participants represent a wide swath of the Rochester Jewish community, with those already active in communal life as well as those newer to its institutions.

In response to learning from Cohort 1, several intentional changes shaped the Cohort 2 experience. The cohort launched with a Welcome Retreat at the Federation office, as many alumni shared that they had never been and were curious about Federation's role with the leadership development program and position in the landscape of Jewish Rochester. The four-hour Welcome Retreat included a catered brunch, guest speakers included lay leaders and Federation professionals to share about their dedication and commitment to this program and their experiences with Young Leadership. A professional team-building expert helped ground participants in their core values and provided in-depth rapport-building opportunities among the participants as they started this new journey.

Additionally, a pilot mentorship program was launched to connect cohort 2 participants with board members in the community from the Federation, JCC, Jewish Family Services and the Jewish Home. Time and substantial intention went into the match process and a preliminary loose structure was set once the dyads were introduced so the experience could be crafted based on their needs and interests.

Sessions featured light nosh and beverages rather than full dinners, while retaining the informal and relational atmosphere central to the program's design. Clal faculty again facilitated monthly learning sessions, but this year's program also included expanded programming outside the Clal-led classes. Alumni expressed that while they were very busy in this season of life, they craved service opportunities to give back to the community. Participants were divided into four teams and planned their own food drives leading up to a tour and hands-on session at the Brighton Food Cupboard, a program of Jewish Family Services and the only kosher food bank in Monroe County, New York. The food drives were seed funded by a microgrant made possible by the Jewish Federations of North America and Repair the World via the Catalyst Fellowship.

These additions helped make the program a more comprehensive leadership experience and further clarified the next steps available to participants as they consider their roles in the community. In the program feedback, there were major increases compared to Cohort 1 in the number of participants who:

**+18%**

**Report the program successfully developed relationships between members of the community**

**+17%**

**Report the program successfully built a cadre of new leaders for the Jewish community**

**+17%**

**Feel like they are now part of a community of young adult Jewish leaders**

**+11%**

**Report the program successfully taught about the Rochester Jewish community**

At the same time, the events of October 7, 2023 and their aftermath meant that this year's cohort may have entered with higher emotional needs and more demanding expectations around the Jewish curriculum. They reported lower scores than Cohort 1 in having thought more deeply about their Jewish identity (although still at 80%), being likely to reflect on something they learned in the program in their everyday life (although still at 74%), being likely to donate to Jewish causes or organizations (although still at 74%), and fewer felt the program was successful at deepening the understanding of Israel when compared to Cohort 1 (although still at 60%). It should be noted that this feedback survey was given before the Cohort 2 trip to Israel. This variation may also be connected to a variation in the types of participants, their preferred learning styles, the specific interests, and the philanthropic background of Cohort 2 as compared to Cohort 1.

Based on the Cohort 2 feedback, the program's next stage might include clearer structure and expectations from the outset (both in terms of the Jewish curriculum and additional activities), more small group interaction and bonding, more practical skills training, and expanded hands-on service.

Overall, the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program's second year achieved its stated goals and has continued to grow into a strategic path for cultivating the next generation of Jewish leadership in Rochester.

# About the Program

**What** A yearlong leadership development program for young Jewish adults in Rochester, combining Jewish learning, personal leadership exploration, exposure to local Jewish agencies and leaders, and community-building.

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**Who** Led by the Jewish Federation of Greater Rochester and Clal – The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, the 2024-2025 cohort included 19 young adults across Jewish backgrounds, professions, and levels of Jewish education.

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**When** Monthly gatherings from September 2024 to 2025, hosted in community homes or agencies, including:

- Exposure to a local lay or professional leaders
- A Clal-led learning session (6 meetings), sessions facilitated by local leaders (2 meetings), and a culminating Closing Celebration including Clal faculty and plus-ones of participants
- Time for peer conversation and reflection

**86%**

Rated their experience a 4 or a 5 out of 5

**100%**

Would or might recommend the program to others

# What Attracted Participants

Cohort 2 participants were drawn to the program through a combination of personal referral, a desire to enhance their Jewish connection, and a need for meaningful community following an intense year for Jews locally and globally. Their primary reasons for applying were:

1. **Personal referrals and trusted relationships:** Most participants joined because someone they trusted encouraged them—Cohort 1 alumni, clergy, supervisors, Federation staff, or Leora directly. Referrals played an even stronger role in Cohort 2 than in Cohort 1.
2. **Seeking connection with other young Jewish adults:** Many entered the program wanting to meet peers across political, religious, and institutional differences.
3. **Responding to October 7:** Several were actively looking for a place to process, reconnect, and understand their role in the Jewish community in the aftermath of October 7. Some participants described feeling emotionally vulnerable from the events of the year, joining to “find my people” and to feel held by a trustworthy Jewish community.
4. **Desire to re-engage with Jewish identity and roots:** Some sought to reconnect with their Jewish upbringing or explore their identity more intentionally as adults.
5. **Interest in developing leadership skills:** Participants wanted to build leadership skills and prepare for expanded roles in community organizations like board positions or new Jewish professional roles. The program felt like the signature way to enter Jewish leadership in Rochester.

These are the themes we suggest Federation continue to emphasize when recruiting new participants for Cohort 3.

# Achieving Goals of Program

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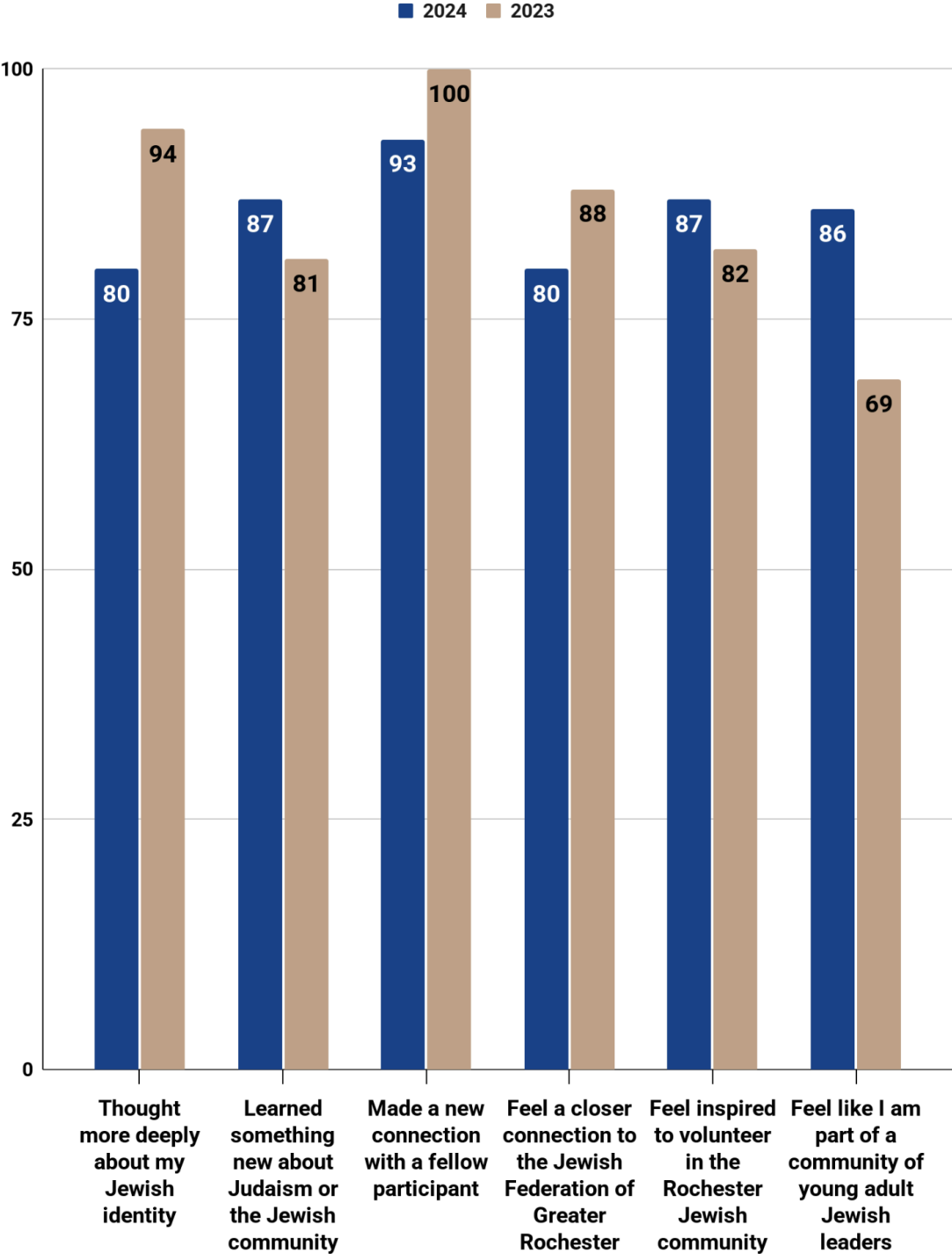
***“I am very appreciative of the Jay Birnbaum Leadership program as it has been essential to my connection to the Jewish community of Rochester.”***

***“Highlights were meeting a great group of people and feeling closer to the Federation for future leadership involvement.”***

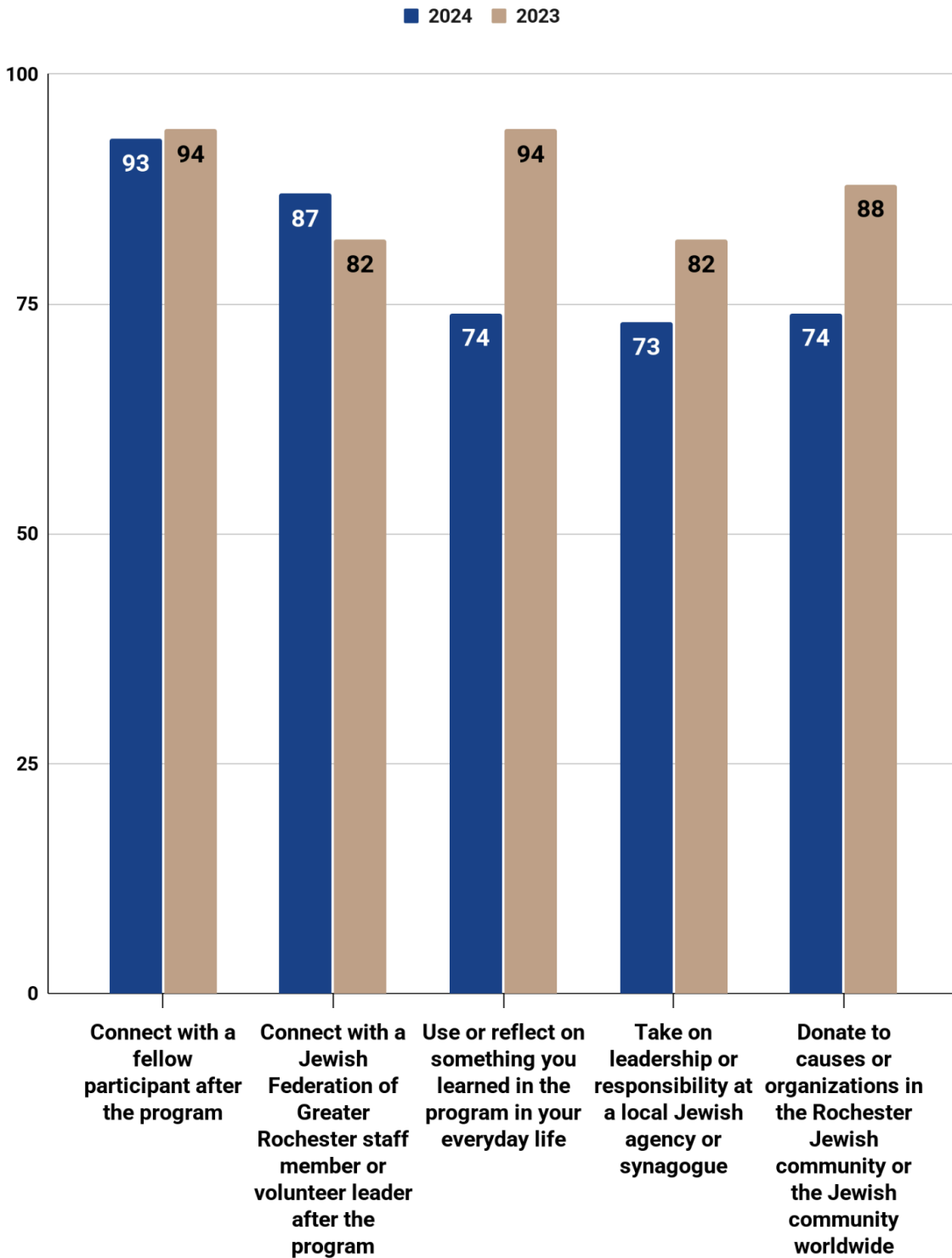
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The Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program continued to make strong progress toward its core goals in Cohort 2, with participants reporting meaningful growth in their confidence, Jewish engagement, and leadership readiness. The data reflects especially strong outcomes in building relationships within the cohort, strengthening connections to Federation, and inspiring participants to volunteer in the Rochester Jewish community. Several indicators—such as developing peer relationships and preparing emerging leaders for agency boards—showed notable increases from last year. Taken together, these findings demonstrate the program’s effectiveness while also highlighting ways to expand learning and engagement in future cohorts.

**Participants agree or strongly agree that because of the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program, they...**

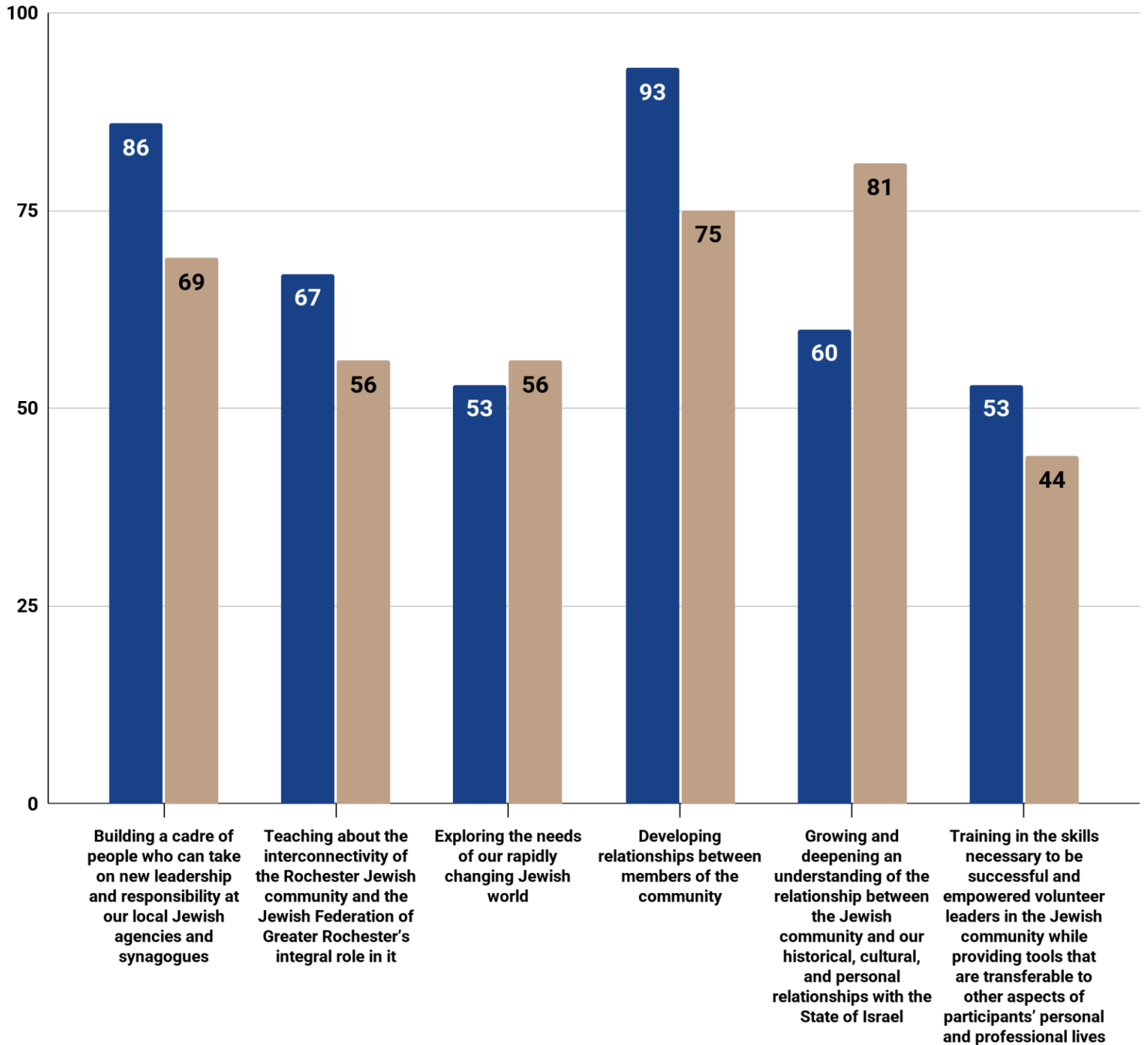


## Participants are likely or very likely to...

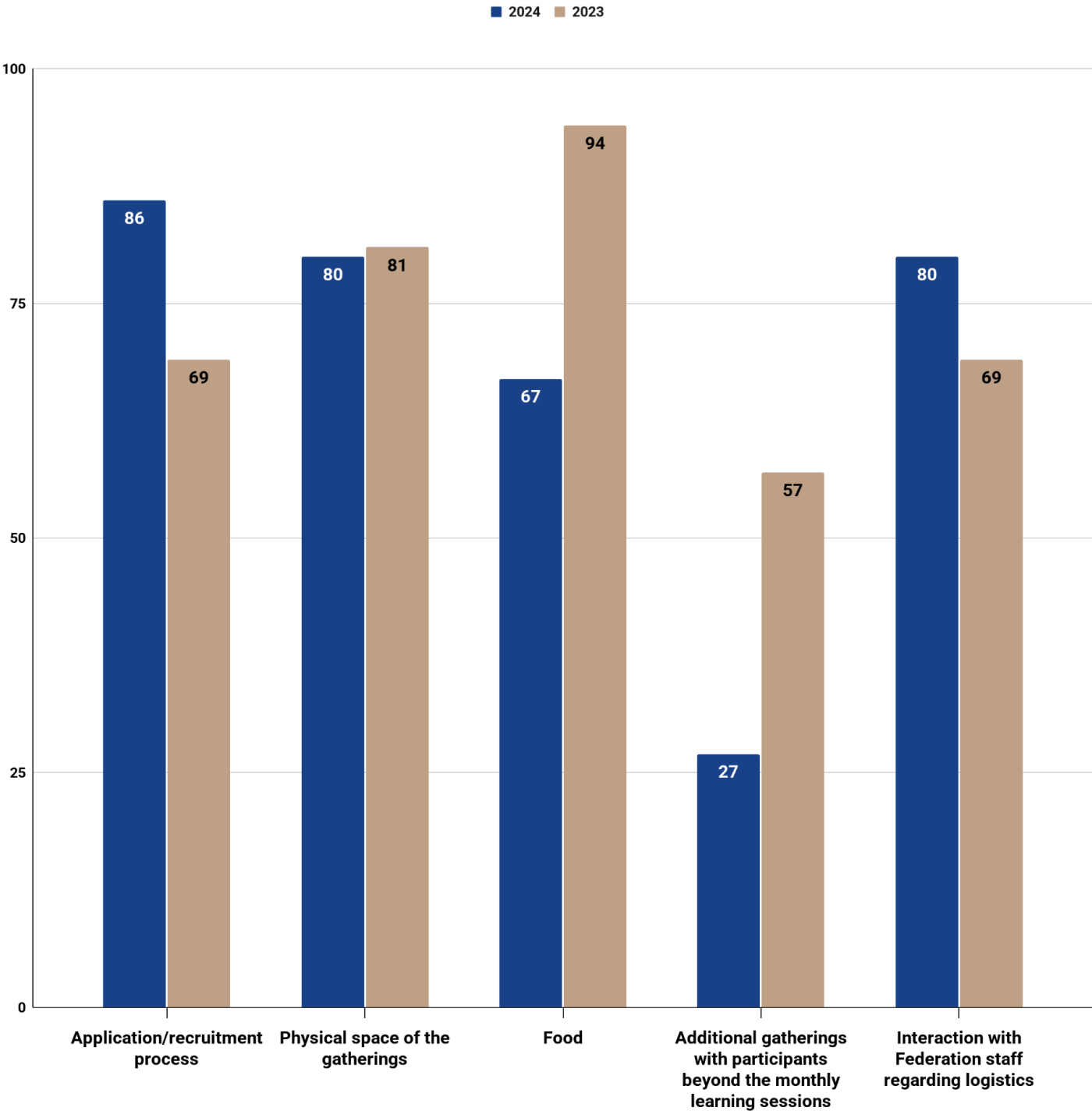


## Participants reported that the program was successful or very successful at...

■ 2024 ■ 2023



### How successful did you find the following elements of the program?



# Jewish Identity and Learning

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*"[The program] has sparked an interest and ignited passion to continue on my 'Jewish journey' and to lead with my Jewish values in mind."*

*"I have reconnected to the Jewish community almost exclusively because of this program."*

*"Thank you for facilitating an opportunity for me to expand my mind and also for me to reconnect with the Jewish faith."*

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Participants described the program as a powerful catalyst for exploring their Jewish identity and reconnecting with Jewish life. Many shared that the learning sessions opened new pathways for reflection, helped them articulate their values, and encouraged them to lead with a stronger sense of Jewish purpose. Several participants noted that the program reignited a personal connection to Judaism or provided practical tools for navigating pressing issues like antisemitism in a way that is helpful, instead of combative. The feedback also points to a desire for expanded learning time, shared baseline materials like pre-readings, and session agendas.

## KEY DATA:

**87%**

Learned something new about Judaism or their Jewish community

**80%**

Thought more deeply about their Jewish identity

**74%**

Expected to use or reflect on program learning in their everyday lives

# Building Community

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*“I believe there was a connection made by everyone involved. I hope to have made lifelong connections with my fellow cohort members.”*

*“A highlight was being part of a large Jewish group, which I didn't experience as a child.”*

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Participants consistently described community-building as one of the most meaningful parts of their experience in Cohort 2, especially given the post-October 7 context, in which Jews have felt more alone. Many spoke about forming genuine friendships, feeling a sense of belonging they hadn't experienced since childhood, and discovering a supportive peer group that expanded their Jewish connections in Rochester. The cohort's diversity of backgrounds and opinions enriched conversations and helped participants feel seen and welcomed. Hands-on service learning at the Brighton Food Cupboard, were a highlight of time spent together with the group.

Feedback also shows that the relationships formed during the program are continuing informally, which is an early sign of a growing, self-sustaining young adult Jewish network in the community.

**KEY DATA:**

**93%**

Made a new connection  
with a fellow participant

**93%**

Rated the program successful or very  
successful at developing relationships  
among participants

**93%**

Were likely or very likely to connect with  
participants after the program

**86%**

Felt they were a part of a community  
of young adult Jewish leaders

# Understanding the Rochester Jewish Community

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*“The program created a deeper sense of community for me as a Jew and a deeper understanding of all the ways Jewish institutions function across Rochester.”*

*“A highlight was understanding the history of contributions of prior generations.”*

*“I enjoyed learning about programs offered in the community and in the space they operated in.”*

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Participants shared that the program helped them develop a better understanding of how Jewish institutions function across Rochester, and how those pieces fit together. Many described gaining new insight into the roles of local agencies, the history and contributions of prior generations, and the work of Federation as the community’s central coordinating body. Exposure to board members, professional staff, and agency leaders helped participants see real pathways into communal involvement and leadership. Several participants began taking on leadership roles soon after or during the program, in part due to their participation.

## KEY DATA:

**87%**

Were likely or very likely to connect with a Federation staff member or volunteer leader after the program

**80%**

Felt a closer connection to the Jewish Federation of Greater Rochester

**67%**

Said the program was successful at teaching about the interconnectedness of Jewish Rochester

# Personal Leadership Growth

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*“I see myself as more woven into the Jewish community fabric than before—with a greater sense of agency and urgency to influence and secure its future.”*

*“It allowed me to reflect on how I wish to be a citizen and leader within the Rochester Jewish community and more broadly as well.”*

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Participants consistently described the program as a catalyst for their own leadership development, helping them see themselves as more integral to the fabric and future of Jewish life in Rochester. Many shared that the experience increased their confidence, clarified their personal leadership values, and expanded their sense of responsibility for strengthening the community. Exposure to local leaders and their stories offered concrete models of what Jewish leadership can look like in practice.

## KEY DATA:

**87%**

**Are inspired to volunteer  
in the Rochester Jewish community**

**74%**

**Were likely or very likely to donate  
to causes or organizations in the Rochester  
Jewish community or the Jewish community  
worldwide**

**86%**

**Felt the program was successful or very successful at building a cadre of people who can take on new leadership and responsibility at our local Jewish agencies and synagogues**

**73%**

**Were likely or very likely to take on leadership or responsibility at a Jewish agency or synagogue**

A theme in the feedback was the desire to pair the Jewish learning and exploration of Rochester's leaders and agencies with practical leadership skills.

# Interest in Future Involvement

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*“I feel more confident in my ability to connect and lead in conversation.”*

*“I look forward to staying connected to the Jewish Community at large.”*

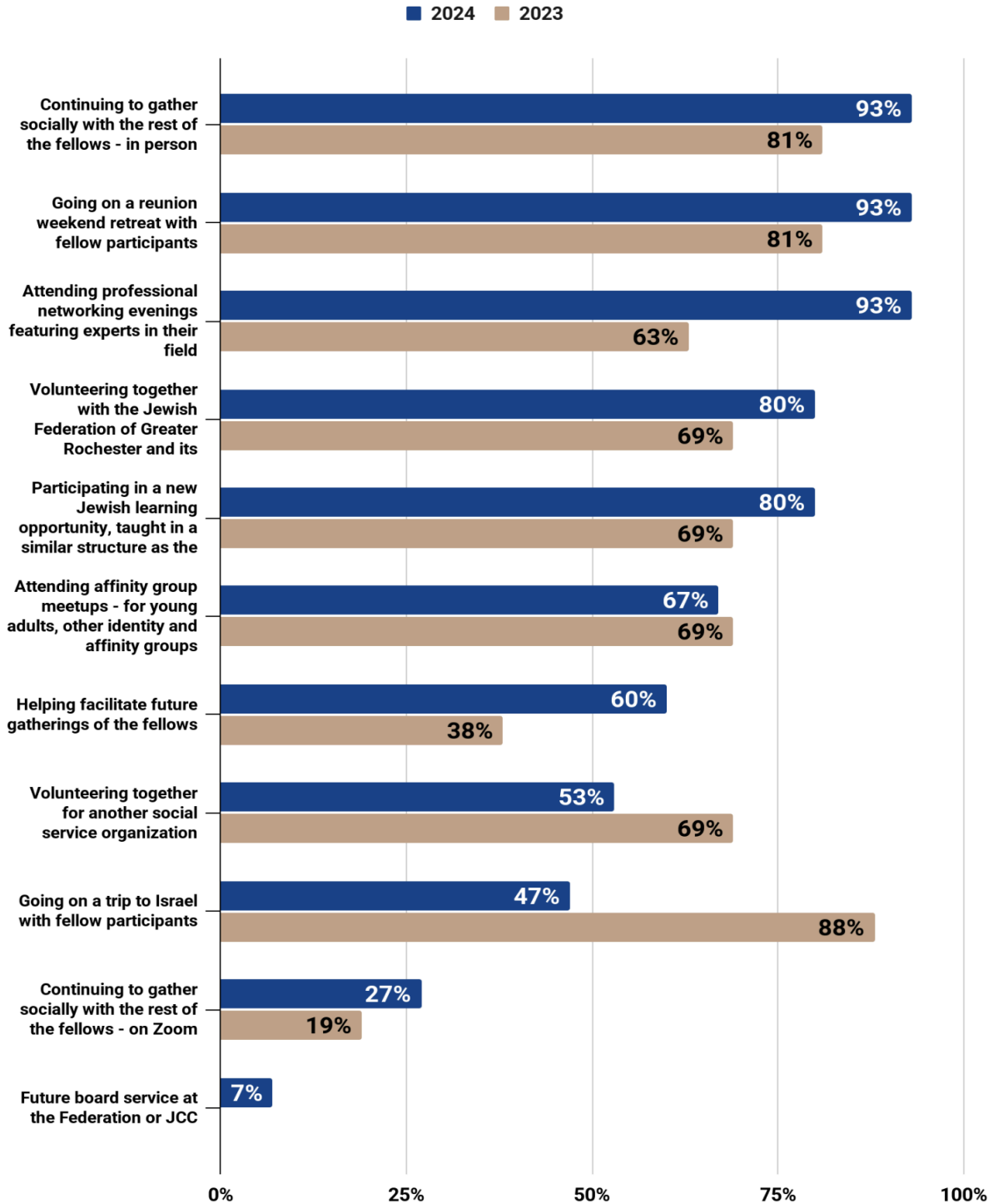
*“I am more inspired to get involved.”*

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Participants in the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program expressed strong enthusiasm for staying connected and continuing to build on the relationships formed during the cohort. Many shared that the friendships and sense of community they developed feel worth sustaining, and they are eager to continue them. The program also successfully sparked a desire for greater volunteer involvement, with participants ready for meaningful ways to contribute and to remain engaged.

There were significant gains over Cohort 1 in almost all categories, the largest of them in participants' interest in remaining connected as a group, participating in Jewish learning, and volunteering. The only significant reductions were in interest in an alumni Israel trip or volunteering in non-Jewish organizations together. This shows that with the investment of Federation and Clal staff and the incorporation of feedback, the program continues to improve over its already excellent impacts.

## Which of the following would you be interested in participating in?



# Recommendations for Future Cohorts

## 1. Clearer Structure and Expectations at the Outset

Staff observed a shift in tone from Cohort 1 to Cohort 2: Participants this year were more skeptical, more varied in their baseline knowledge, and more eager for guidance around how group conversations should unfold. Some participants expressed a desire for greater clarity at the beginning of the program around agendas, learning objectives, and a sense of whether the session would be free-flowing or structured, so they could calibrate expectations and feel confident they were using their time well. A few participants shared that they felt that others shared Jewish knowledge they lacked, and that they couldn't participate fully in some of the discussions. A few others noted that they wanted to understand more about Clal's role and how the outside rabbinic scholars complement Rochester's local leadership.

Some participants also wanted to know what was optional versus required components, as well as early information about mentorship and service expectations so they could plan accordingly. Finally, some participants wanted more explicit connections made between the learning content of the sessions and the leadership goals of the program.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Provide a Participant Packet upon acceptance that includes:
  - Goals of the program and how each program component supports those goals
  - Group norms about how to interact with each other and key shared values, especially around engaging well with controversy or high-emotion topics
  - Key dates and topics for learning sessions, including pre-reading and whether a session is designed to raise questions versus answer them
  - List of time commitments and participation expectations, including mentorship, volunteering, additional social gatherings
- Ensure everyone enters the conversation on equal footing, for example using pre-readings, grounding materials, and introductory explanations.

- Create more follow-up options, like optional secondary sessions, panels, or cross-cohort gatherings, especially when a Clal session opens up big questions that warrant more community-specific conversation.
- Potentially create commitments or action items between sessions to challenge participants to grow, as requested by some participants.

## 2. More Opportunities to Develop Practical Leadership Skills

Participant feedback highlighted wanting more robust ways to build practical leadership skills they could immediately apply in their personal, professional, and Jewish communal lives. With just over half of participants rating the leadership-skills component as successful, there is strong appetite for a more intentional and structured approach to applied skill-building. The tools mentioned by participants include how to fundraise, how to serve effectively on a board, how to build consensus in diverse groups, and how to facilitate conversations—especially in moments of disagreement or tension. Several participants expressed a desire for greater balance between values-based Jewish learning and hands-on leadership practice, suggesting that both are essential but should be more linked.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- A dual arc—one focused on Jewish ideas and frameworks and one focused on applied leadership skills—would allow participants to understand not just why leadership matters, but *how* to lead in concrete ways.
- Potentially have the calendar be Clal sessions paired with practical skills sessions taught by local clergy and leaders. For example, a session with Clal on pluralism followed several weeks later by a session with a local leader on holding difficult conversations or a Clal session on Jewish values around money paired with a fundraising session. Each Clal session on big ideas could be paired with a practical skill session utilizing those ideas.
- Another option is to explore the possibility of a second-year track for alumni who wish to improve their skills through placements in leadership roles, aligned with fiscal-year cycles to support board nomination processes. This would help address the timing challenges experienced by Cohort 2 (due to the board nominations timing happening before Cohort 2 were ready to step into leadership positions) and

provide a bridge from learning to action. This approach would also reinforce the program's growing role as a leadership pipeline by giving emerging leaders the chance to practice, reflect, and receive coaching as they step into real responsibilities.

### 3. More Relationship-Building and Small-Group Discussion

Participants would like their discussions with one another in ways that feel more challenging and dialogic. While the cohort formed strong bonds (and showed significant improvement over last year), many hoped for even more small-group learning, breakout conversations, and unstructured dialogue that would allow them to explore differences in identity, belief, and background. Several participants were eager for braver conversations—spaces where disagreement, debate, and complexity could be held constructively with good facilitation and shared norms. They also asked for frameworks to help navigate sensitive topics such as antisemitism, Israel, and communal conflict.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- As detailed above in recommendation #1, consider including expectations in how the group has discussions at the beginning of the program.
- Consider incorporating more relationship-building around the learning topics.  
Some ideas:
  - A small “home base” group participants would come back to throughout the year, in which participants debrief the learning topics and practice holding different opinions
  - Ensuring facilitated smaller discussion groups within each learning session
  - Optional mid-month meetups for continued conversation, potentially led by local leaders
- Create a schedule of community-building gatherings, like service projects or holiday gatherings. Participants have already begun organically hosting their own gatherings; are there ways to encourage and support this?
- Have a skill-building session explicitly focused on holding difficult conversations.

## 4. More Hands-On Service Opportunities

Participants repeatedly shared that while they appreciated learning about community institutions and Jewish leadership concepts, they wanted more chances to *experience* leadership together through meaningful, hands-on service. The Brighton Food Cupboard project was widely named as a highlight, because it both helped participants' understanding of local needs and also created a strong sense of shared purpose. As one participant said, "Stocking the shelves together was a perfect way to bond over shared impact."

Several people wished the mentorship and service components had been introduced earlier and with clearer structure, noting that doing so would have reinforced the leadership lessons of the program and strengthened connections to partner institutions. Participants also voiced interest in ongoing volunteer teams, leadership apprenticeships, or board-shadowing experiences that could help translate learning into concrete action.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Team-based service projects that would extend across multiple sessions and build accountability within the cohort. Such projects could give participants the opportunity to practice planning, decision-making, and execution within real community settings.
- Alternatively, hold planned service events at regular intervals rather than as isolated events.
- Share a framework for mentorship, service, and project-based learning from the outset, which would help participants see how these pieces connect to the broader leadership arc of the program.

# Conclusion

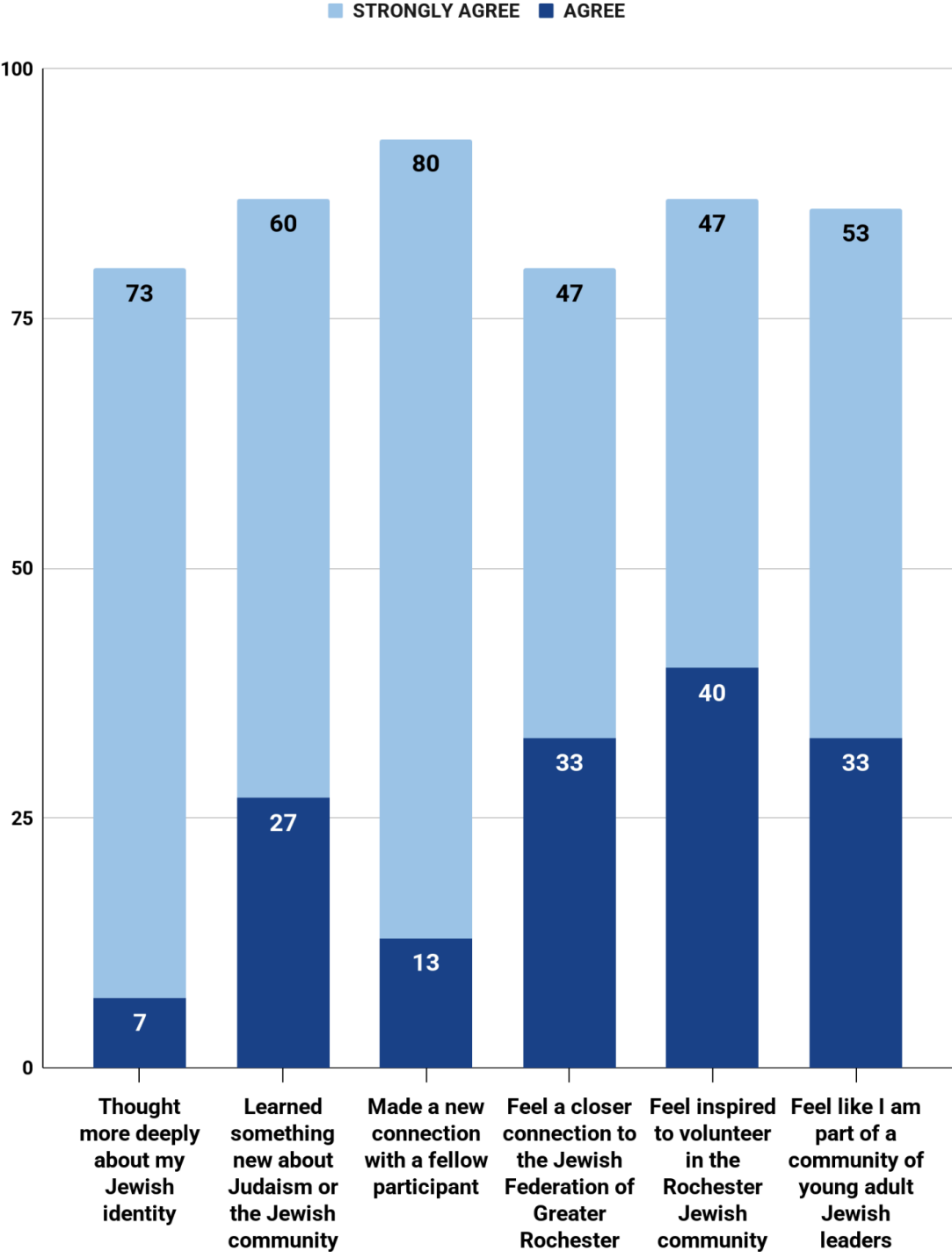
Cohort 2 of the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program demonstrated that young adults are seeking connection with each other and purpose in Jewish communal life, especially during a year of heightened global and local challenges. Participants strengthened their Jewish identities, formed lasting relationships, and stepped more confidently into leadership pathways across Rochester's network of institutions. Their reflections show a program that is succeeding in its core aims while also maturing into a true leadership pipeline for the community. The next iteration of the program could include clearer structure, richer small-group engagement, practical leadership skills, and more hands-on service for an even greater impact.

With Cohort 2, the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program moved from an experiment to a proven method for developing emerging leaders. Participants gained a better understanding of the landscape of Jewish Rochester, exposure to partner agencies and lay leaders, and experience exploring difficult topics and identifying their own next steps in leadership. They felt supported in discerning where they are called to contribute, through being introduced to a wide array of leaders, perspectives, and volunteer pathways. As future cohorts are developed, the growing alumni community will play an even greater role in the strength of this demographic of Rochester Jewish leaders. With continued partnership between Clal, Federation, and Rochester's Jewish institutions and leaders, the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program can build the field of new Jewish leadership for Rochester's future.

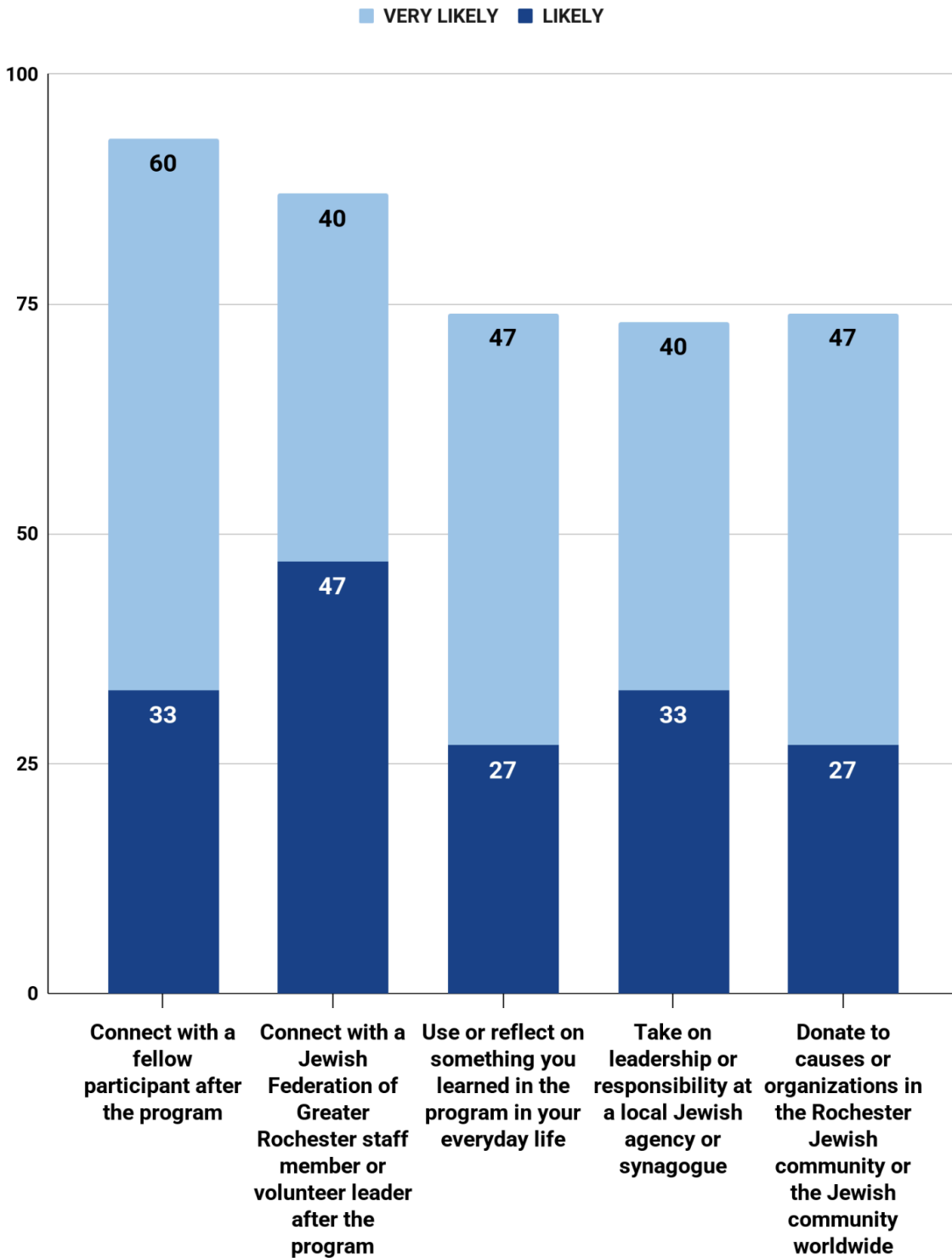
# Appendix

Below are the graphs of the data for the 2024 cohort, broken out more specifically by “agree” and “strongly agree,” “likely” and “very likely,” and “successful” and “very successful.” For the main report, we merged these answers together in order to compare them to the 2023 cohort more clearly. In case it is useful, we have included the breakdown of these answers here for the 2024 cohort, which can indicate within each question how strongly participants appreciated the different aspects of the program.

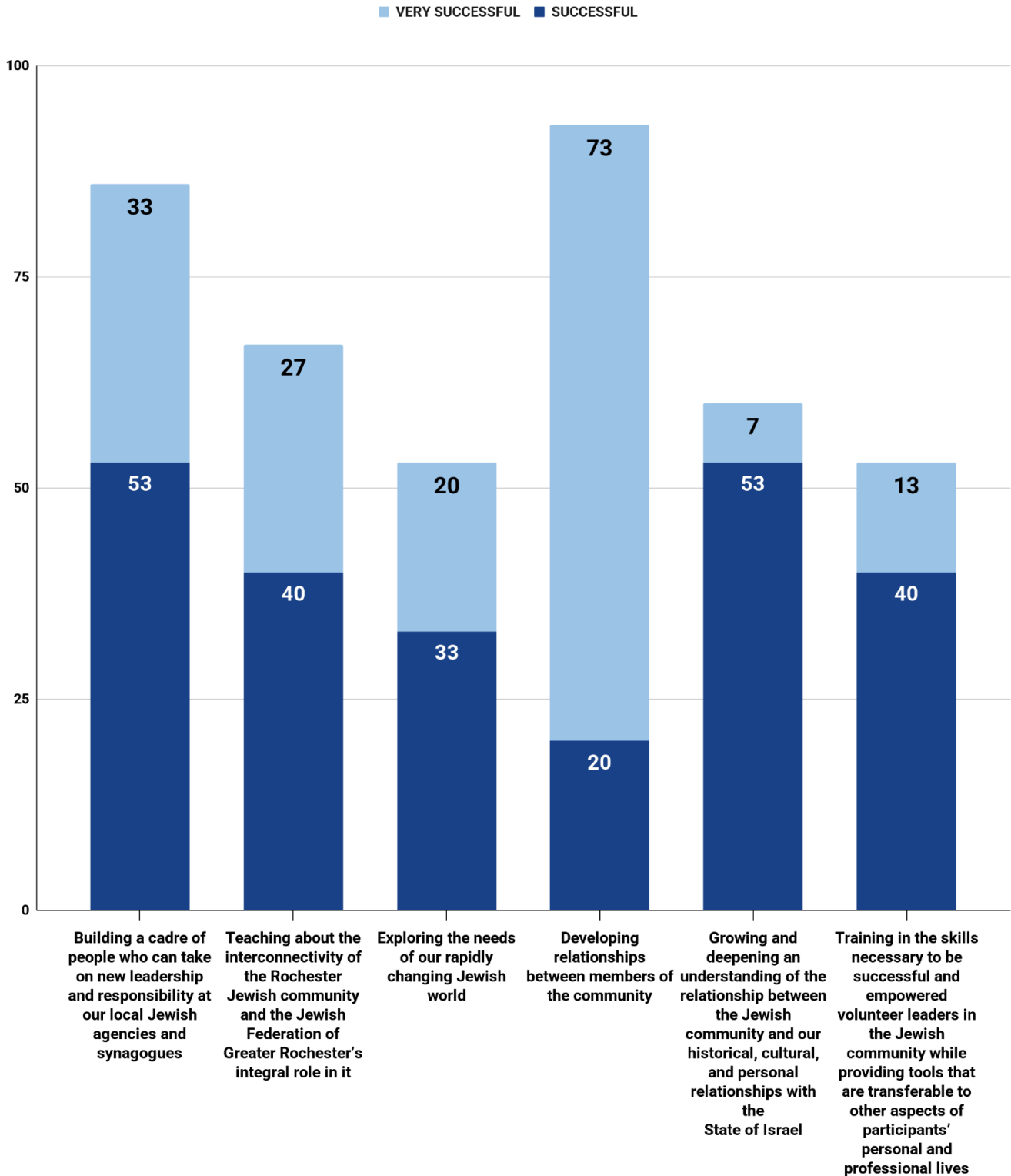
**Participants agree or strongly agree that because of the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program, they...**



## Participants are likely or very likely to...



## Participants reported that the program was successful or very successful at...



### How successful did you find the following elements of the program?

