Master’s Thesis (Academic Year 2025)

The Jewish Community of Japan: Processes of Identity Negotiation

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Abstract of Master's Thesis of Academic Year 2025

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Summary

Far from traditional centers of Jewish life, Tokyo's small but active Jewish community offers a unique case for understanding how identity is negotiated across difference, distance, and cultural boundaries. This study explores how Jewish identity is constructed, expressed, and negotiated by members of this community. The study focuses on a diverse group of individuals who participate in the Jewish Community Center (JCC), most of whom are not native to Japan and come from varied cultural, linguistic, national and denominational backgrounds. Using qualitative methods approach, including 25 semi-structured, in-depth interviews and 18 months of participant observation, the research examines two identity processes: 1. the internal formation of shared belonging within the community, and 2, the external navigation of Jewishness in relation to Japan as a host country. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Homi Bhabha, the study shows that Jewish identity in Tokyo is not fixed, but produced through social interaction, negotiation, and adaptation. The findings highlight the JCC as a diasporic space where multiple histories and practices are held together and demonstrate how Japan's specific cultural and legal landscape shapes both the expression and invisibility of Jewishness. This case contributes to wider understandings of diaspora, minority identity, and the relational nature of cultural belonging.

Keywords

1. Jewish Identity, 2. Diaspora, 3. Japan, 4. Community, 5. Identity Negotiation

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Table of Contents

Introduction………………………………………………………………….. 1

Chapter 1: An Introduction to the study…………………………………………3

1.1 Writing From Within…………………………………………………………3
1.2 Thinking Identity as a Process: Conceptual Starting Point ………………………5
1.3 Overview of the Jewish Community in Japan………………………………..9
1.4 Research Aim and Questions…………………………………………………..12
1.5 Methodological Orientation………………………………………………15

Chapter 2: Jewish Presence and Context in Japan……………………………..18

2.1 A Historical View of Jewish Life in Japan ……………………………………18
2.2 Japan as Host Country: Layers of Foreignness and Recognition..………………..21
2.3 The Evolution of Tokyo's Jewish Community Center (JCC)……………………..25
2.4 Placing Tokyo: Jewish Life in the Diasporic Landscape………………...………..32

Chapter 3: Community Characteristics……………………………………………39

3.1 Diversity Within Shared Space……………….……………..…………………39
3.2 Organization Structure…………………………………………………………42
3.3 The physical Space…………………………………………………………...45
3.4 Community Events and Participation at the JCC……………………………….48
3.5 Atmosphere, Emotion, and the Role of the Rabbi………………………………52
3.6 Jewish Identity Beyond the JCC……………………………………………...55
3.7 Conclusion…………………………………………………………………57

Chapter 4: Identity Negotiation & Analysis……………………………………..60

4.1 Framing Identity: A Theoretical Entry Point…………………………………...60
4.2 Internal Process: Constructing Shared Jewish Identity……………………………62
  4.2.1 The JCC as a Space of Belonging……………………………………...62
  4.2.2 Parenting and Transmission…………………………………………………64
  4.2.3 Negotiating Internal Diversity………………………………………………68
  4.2.4 Conclusion…………………………………………………………….70

4.3 External Process: Negotiating Jewish Identity within the Japanese Context…….71
4.3.1 Structural Absence and the Problem of Recognition………………………72
4.3.2 All in One……………………………………………………………..75
4.3.3 From Constraint to Engagement: Identity as Practice……………………..77
4.3.4 Strategic Invisibility………………………………………………………79
4.3.5 Conclusion…………………………………………………………………81

Chapter 5: Conclusion……………………………………………………………85

Limitation and Further Research………………………………………………89

Bibliography……………………………………………………………………..90

Appendix A……………………………………………………………………..92
Appendix B……………………………………………………………………..99

Introduction

This thesis examines how Jewish identity is constructed, expressed, and negotiated within the Jewish community of Tokyo, Japan (JCJ). In a context with no longstanding Jewish presence and limited public understanding of Judaism, individuals from diverse cultural, national, and religious backgrounds find themselves part of a community in which a shared sense of Jewish belonging takes shape. Guided by theories of cultural identity and diaspora and based on in-depth participant observation fieldwork conducted between September 2023 and April 2025, including 25 interviews with a diverse group of community members, this study explores how identity negotiation takes shape both within the community and in relation to Japanese society.

The research focuses on two interconnected processes: the internal formation of collective identity among community members within the Jewish Community Center (JCC), and the external negotiation of Jewish identity in broader Japanese social settings and Japan as a hot society to this community. These processes are analyzed through a thematic analysis of interviews and the conducted fieldwork. The study also reflects on the influence of Japan's cultural, legal, and demographic context on how Jewishness is perceived, expressed, maintained and therefore, constantly negotiated.

The thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the theoretical and methodological frameworks that guide the study. Chapter 2 provides historical and contextual background on Jewish presence in Japan and introduces comparative insights from other Jewish communities. Chapter 3 presents a detailed account of the community's structure and internal dynamics. Chapter 4 analyzes how identity is formed and negotiated

through internal and external processes. Chapter 5 offers concluding reflections, drawing together the main arguments and answering the research questions.

Through this study, I aim to contribute to broader discussions on diaspora, minority identity, and community-building in transnational contexts. The Tokyo Jewish community provides a compelling case for understanding how identity is not simply inherited or declared, but actively produced through interaction, adaptation, and shared space.

Chapter 1: An Introduction to the Study

1.1 Writing from Within

There is something unusual about writing a thesis on a community you already belong to. As a Jewish woman living in Japan, I come to this topic not as a distant observer, but from within the everyday life I am trying to study. My perspective is shaped not only by my connection to the community, but also by my own lived experiences. I have spent quite a long time thinking about how to approach this work, knowing that I am not observing the community from the outside, but writing from within it.

Jewish people around the world have been shaped by different cultural, political, religious, and personal contexts. Understandings of what it means to be Jewish vary across time and place - and within every community, including this one. I am part of that global picture, but I bring with me a specific background: I live in Japan, and I am Jewish, a daughter of Soviet-born Jewish parents, born and raised in Israel. That history, with its layers of diaspora, migration, and re-rooting - informs how I hear stories, what questions I ask, and how I interpret what is shared with me, whether I am fully aware of it or not.

Stuart Hall (1990) reminds us that "*who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical*."[1] That line has stayed with me. It describes what I sense when I write about something that feels familiar, but from a place that is still particular, a place shaped by personal history and positionality. Hall's concept of "positions of enunciation" helps me reflect on the fact that no writing is neutral. All knowledge is situated. I do not attempt to set aside my standpoint; I try to be honest about it. Rather than striving for objectivity, I approach this project from where I stand, and acknowledge that this position is not a limitation, but part of how the research takes shape.

This thesis is grounded in the understanding that identity is not something fixed or inherited, but something produced through ongoing processes of negotiation. I approach the study of Jewish identity in the JCC through two interrelated processes: internally, through participation and community life within the JCC; and externally, through individuals' navigation of Jewishness in the wider Japanese context. These processes are not separated, but deeply intertwined, the internal dynamics of the community are continually shaped by the external conditions of the host country and vice versa.

In this sense, the study becomes an example of how identity formation in an ethnic community (in this case, a Jewish community) is always in movement and constantly negotiated. The study shows that it is never developed in isolation. Rather, it takes shape within and through the space in which the community is embedded. In Japan, the host society influences identity in multiple ways: through who it attracts and who chooses to stay, how Jewishness is perceived or misunderstood in public discourse, how members adjust their practices, and how geopolitical events affect community life. At the same time, identity is also shaped by internal negotiation; between the diverse perspectives of Jewishness that individuals bring with them. People arrive with different understandings of what it means to be Jewish, shaped by language, culture, denomination, or personal history. As these meanings come into contact, they are negotiated within the shared space of the JCC. This way of seeing identity: as something constantly produced through the meeting of internal diversity and external pressure - is the perspective that guides this thesis and my views as its author.

1.2 Thinking Identity as a Process: Conceptual Starting Point

Identity has been defined and redefined many times across various academic fields, and it continues to change depending on context, the discipline, and moment in time. In the 1950s, Erik Erikson described identity from a psychological point of view, as a structured self that unfolds through psychosocial stages across one's life timeline.[2] Later In the early 1960s, Erving Goffman had a more flexible view by showing how identity can shift depending on interaction and social context and perception.[3] in the late 70s, Henri Tajfel (1978) (social identity theory) emphasized that identity is shaped by group belonging (the categories we are part of) and the boundaries that separate us from others.[4]

Therefore, just as the definition of identity keeps evolving, the experience of identity itself is never fixed. It changes over time, across spaces we visit, and through our relationships. As Stuart Hall (1990) reminds us, identity is not something that just we have once and for all - it is something we become. It is formed with a relation to history, and to the stories we tell about ourselves.[5] In contrast to earlier theories that treated identity as either psychological development, social role, or group attachment, this research is grounded in the understanding that identity is not fixed, but in constant motion. In this paper, I follow this approach and refer to identity as something that is negotiated over time and in different spaces. This way of thinking follows Stuart Halls theory, that does not see identity as something stable or given, but as something shaped by where, when, and who we speak to - as well as how we make sense of ourselves.

Hall's way of thinking feels especially relevant in diasporic settings, where people often carry more than one history, different affiliations, or various sense of homes. Identity in these contexts is not something people simply have – it is something they work through,

often in different ways depending on where they are and who they are with. Someone might feel one version of themselves in a religious setting or their diasporic community space, and another in a workplace, or at home with family. This kind of shifting is easy to see in the Jewish community in Tokyo, where many people live between cultures, languages, and national identities. As members hold multiple layers of identity, this complexity becomes even more visible - especially within Japanese society, where there is often little familiarity with the idea of Jewishness. As many community members shared in interviews, this unfamiliarity effected how they chose to present their identity in different settings – a theme I will return to later in the analysis. Therefore, Jewishness here is not fixed. It takes shape through stories, choices, and everyday life – and often changes through spaces and the surrounding. This understanding of identity also allows contradiction, fluidity, and hybridity to take place. Within a diasporic community, specifically within the context of one diverse Jewish community, people may draw on different sources of meaning: religious, cultural, linguistic, familial – to define their Jewishness. These meanings may overlap, but they may also conflict. Sometimes, identity is strongly expressed through practices, other times, it is carried more quietly or even hidden. My focus, then, is not on finding a single definition or description, but on understanding how individuals make sense of their Jewishness and navigate it in particular moments and spaces where identity becomes relevant. Through my analysis, I could see this take many forms within the community – shaped by the settings of: a diverse group of people navigating their Jewish identity within the specific context of Japan as a host country.

Questions of identity come up again and again in diaspora studies. People who live away from what is considered their homeland often have to think about who they are in new

ways. For many scholars, diaspora has become a space for thinking about how identity is shaped not just by where we come from, but by how we live in between places. The word diaspora itself was first used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible to describe the dispersal of the Jewish people after the Babylonian exile, and the Jewish case has often served as the earliest and most well-known example of diaspora.[6] Since then, scholars have looked at how Jewish identity is shaped not only by memory and tradition, but also by the spaces and societies in which people live.

Two scholars whose work is widely used in diaspora and identity studies are Avtar Brah and Homi Bhabha. Brah introduced the concept of diasporic space to describe not just the physical locations where diasporic communities settle, but the complex social fields where different histories of displacement, migration, and belonging intersect.[7] For her, diaspora is not only about routes or places of origin, but also about how power, race, and identity shape who feels at home, and under what conditions.[8] This idea is useful for thinking about the Jewish community in Tokyo, where people from a wide range of backgrounds come together in a place with no long-established Jewish history. The JCC, in particular, becomes a kind of diasporic space - a shared setting where belonging is created, questioned, and negotiated across difference. Homi Bhabha, writing from postcolonial theory, is also widely cited in diaspora studies, especially for his concepts of hybridity and the third space.[9] Bhabha argues that identity and culture are not fixed, but continually negotiated in the spaces between dominant and marginal systems. Bhabha introduces the idea of the third space to describe what happens when people live among and between different cultures. more than just being a place where cultures meet, he describes is as a space where people constantly have to work out meaning; by mixing ideas, repeating things in new ways, or reinterpreting what something means depending

on context. In this space, identity is not simply transferred from one setting to another; it shifts, adapts, and is sometimes challenged.[10] These ideas help to understand and make sense of how Jewish identity is expressed among the community members Tokyo; it is not fixed in specific terms, but through daily practices, adaptive expressions of Jewishness, or adjustments. Many people in the community live between languages, between cultural expectations, or between religious and secular modes of identification. Bhabha's work offers a way to think about this in-betweenness not as a lack, but as something generative.

This thesis mainly follows Stuart Hall's way of thinking about identity. His work offers the main lens for thinking about how Jewish identity is formed within the community in Tokyo. At the same time, I have found that ideas from Avtar Brah and Homi Bhabha have helped me make sense of the setting in which this identity work is happening. Brah's concept of diasporic space helped me to see the JCC as a space where people with different histories and relationships to Jewishness come together, rather than a building and a location for communal activities. These overlapping backgrounds - national, heritage, linguistic - create a shared but non-identical space of belonging, which forms the ground where identity is negotiated. Bhabha's work on hybridity and third space gives a name and meaning to the in-between-ness that many people in the community live with between languages, between cultures, between ways of being Jewish. These perspectives do not replace each other, but together they help build a fuller picture of the kinds of identity work that happen in this setting.

1.3 Overview of the Jewish Community in Japan (JCJ)

The Jewish community in Tokyo is small, diverse, and mostly formed by people who were non-native born in Japan. Unlike Jewish communities in countries with a long-established Jewish presence, the Tokyo community does not trace its roots back through generations. Most members are expats, international professionals, students who stayed after their studies, or individuals who married and settled in Japan. Over the past two decades, however, there has been a shift, with more long-term residents and families choosing to remain and raise children within the community.

Japan does not have a long-standing or continuous history of Jewish presence. There have been small Jewish populations in cities like Kobe, Yokohama, and Nagasaki at different moments in the 19th and 20th centuries, but a structured community in Tokyo only emerged after World War II.[11] The Jewish Community Center of Japan (JCC, also called JCJ) was founded in 1953 and was, until recently, the only organized Jewish community in the capital. While this research focuses on the JCJ, I am aware that other Jewish communities and initiatives have developed in Japan in more recent years. Smaller facilities such as Chabad houses began to appear in the early 2000s. These institutions primarily cater to tourists and short-term visitors, and although they provide ritual services and outreach, they operate on a much smaller scale in terms of local engagement and community-building. The present research focuses on the JCC due to its centrality in sustaining long-term identity formation among Japan-based Jews.

It is difficult to know exactly how many Jews live in Japan. The population is made up of people from a range of nationalities and migration statuses, many of whom are not permanent residents. Japan does not register its population by religion, only by nationality,

and many Jewish residents are not officially connected to any community. Some attend events or services occasionally, while others remain entirely unaffiliated. According to the World Jewish Congress, there are an estimated 1,000 to 1,400 people in Japan with Jewish heritage, although the actual number is likely higher.[12] This reflects a wider trend in Asia, where rapid economic growth in countries such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and China has attracted small but growing numbers of Jewish professionals and families.[13]

The JCC occupies a central role in the Jewish life in Tokyo and regarded as one of the most active Jewish institutions in Japan. It operates as a nonprofit organization and is structured around a board of members, who elect a president and appoint a rabbi. The JCJ building offers a synagogue, a Hebrew school, classrooms, a library, and spaces for community events. This 'All in one' concept is quite unique to Japan, and results from the small size of the community. Community members are often the ones who organize and initiate activities, from holiday celebrations to educational programs. A strong sense of collective responsibility and collaboration runs through many aspects of community life. Security is also a major concern. Although Japan is considered a relatively safe country, awareness around safety increased significantly after October 2023, following the outbreak of war in Israel and the news of rising antisemitic threats in other parts of the world. Since then, the community has been more mindful about safety, taking quiet steps to make sure people feel secure during events and gatherings. JCC membership is counted by family units rather than individual count. This family unit may include one person or five, depending on the household. At the point this research took place, there were approximately 140 families registered at the JCJ. The community is made up of members with very different backgrounds in more than one sense. They differ not only

by nationality - including Israel, the U.S., France, Australia, Russia, Syria, and beyond - but also by cultural background and level of religious observance. People in the community identify as Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and others. Some families are strictly observant, while others are secular, and many fall somewhere in between. Intermarriage is also common, and some members are part of mixed Jewish-Japanese households.

This creates a kind of shared but non-identical space of belonging. Despite the diversity of practices, beliefs, and languages, members come together under the shared framework of "the Jewish community." The JCC acts as a central point of connection, a place where people can celebrate holidays, send their children to Hebrew school, join Shabbat dinners, and participate in rituals that link them to Jewish tradition. The Hebrew school, held every Sunday, plays an especially important role for younger members, offering a space where children can build Jewish knowledge and identity in a country where Jewishness is almost entirely absent from public life.

As mentioned, in addition to the JCC, there are a few other Jewish spaces in Tokyo that serve different populations and needs. Based on field visits and conversations with local religious leaders, I found that there are two independent Chabad houses currently operating in the city. Chabad is a global Hasidic movement known for its outreach to Jews of all backgrounds, often emphasizing ritual practice, and hospitality. The two Chabad centers in Tokyo were both established in the early 2000s and are led by different rabbis from distinct Chabad streams: Rabbi Binyomin Edery and Rabbi Mendi Sudakevich. While their presence is valued, especially among observant Jews, mainly

short-term visitors, their structure, built around rabbinic leadership and religious outreach, differs from the member-driven, participatory model of the JCC.

Another additional space that has emerged more recently is Beit HaSamurai (Samurai House), a home-based initiative created by a Jewish-Japanese couple. It functions primarily as a warm, informal gathering place for Israeli travelers, students, and young professionals. While the hosts observe Jewish traditions and identify with Messianic beliefs, blending elements of Jewish tradition with faith in Yeshua (Jesus), the space itself is not a traditional religious institution. Most visitors are secular or culturally Jewish Israelis seeking connection and a sense of home while abroad. Since October 7th, 2023, the house has become an emotional and communal refuge for many young Israelis navigating trauma, distance from family, and the challenges of temporary life in Japan.

While these other spaces serve important functions, this research focuses on the Jewish Community Center (JCC) of Tokyo because it remains the most inclusive, stable, and multi-generational institution for Jewish life in Japan. It is also the only space built and sustained by its members, not through religious authority or hospitality alone, but through shared responsibility, negotiation, and everyday participation. This makes it uniquely suited for exploring how Jewish identity is constructed, lived, and redefined in a diasporic setting like Japan

1.4 Research Aims and Questions

This research sets out to explore how Jewish identity is constructed and negotiated in a community that exists outside the more commonly studied centers of Jewish life. The main aim of this research is to explore how identity is produced through ongoing

processes of negotiation, within the community and in response to the host society. While Jewish identity has been examined in depth in places like Israel, North America, and Europe, much less has been written about small, diverse communities in non-Western contexts. The Jewish community in Tokyo offers a chance to think about how identity takes shape in a setting with no long-established Jewish history, and where members come from many different backgrounds.

Rather than treating identity as something fixed or inherited, this study follows an understanding of identity as something that is in process; formed through lived experience, cultural practice, and interaction. Following Stuart Hall's work, identity is approached here not as a stable essence but as something shaped by positioning, memory, and meaning making within particular historical and social contexts. This means paying attention to how people come to articulate their Jewishness in daily life, and how they shift or hold onto that identity in different spaces within the community and beyond it.

The This research is guided by one central question and three supporting questions:

Main Research Question:

How is Jewish identity in the Jewish Community of Japan (JCJ) produced through processes of ongoing negotiation: both within internal community dynamics and in relation to Japan as the external host society?

Supporting Research Questions:

1. How do members of the Jewish community in Tokyo negotiate and express their Jewish identity?

2. What role does the Jewish Community Center (JCJ/JCC) play in shaping collective identity among members from diverse backgrounds?
3. In what ways do the specific circumstances of Japan as a host country shape how Jewish identity is negotiated?

This thesis approaches identity formation as unfolding through two overlapping processes. The first concerns how a shared Jewish identity is constructed within the JCC, among people who come from different national, cultural, and religious backgrounds. In this space, which I understand through Avtar Brah's concept of diasporic space, collective belonging is built not through sameness, but through negotiation, participation, and shared practice. The second process looks at how individuals' position and adjusts their Jewish identity in relation to the wider Japanese context, a society often unfamiliar with Jewish history or culture. Here, Homi Bhabha's ideas of hybridity and third space help make sense of how identity is rearticulated across boundaries, sometimes quietly, sometimes creatively, and often in between fixed categories.

These two layers, internal community dynamics and external cultural positioning provide the structure for the chapters that follow.

This research is shaped by both academic interest and personal experience. As someone who is part of the community I am studying, I am aware that my questions come from within, not from a neutral distance. I hope this work contributes to broader conversations about diaspora, identity, and belonging - and that it also offers something to those living in small, shifting Jewish communities in places far from where Jewish life is usually imagined.

1.5 Methodological Orientation

This research is based on qualitative methods that allowed me to listen closely and understand how members of the Jewish Community in Tokyo talk about Jewishness, in their own words, and in the spaces where they live that identity. As someone who is part of the community, I was already present in many of the everyday settings that became central to this study. The methods I used helped me slow down, pay attention, and reflect on what might otherwise feel familiar or be taken for granted.

The research draws on 25 semi-structured interviews with members of the Jewish Community Center in Tokyo (JCJ). The participants were selected to reflect a range of roles and experiences within the community, including board members, Sunday school educators, long-term residents, and regular members. All interviewees had lived in Japan for at least five years (some for as long as forty) and were actively involved in the community in different ways. They came from diverse national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, including Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, Ethiopian, American, Israeli, Japanese, French, Russian, and mixed-heritage identities. Levels of religious observance also varied, from secular to more traditional practices.

Interviews were guided by a flexible set of open-ended questions that focused on participants' personal backgrounds, family life, experiences within the community, and their own understandings of Jewish identity. While the interviews followed a general structure, many opened into broader conversations and memories that were not anticipated in advance. A summary of participants by role, heritage, nationality, and age group is included as an appendix. A simplified table may also be added to visually reflect the sample's diversity.

Participant observation was another central part of this research. Between September 2023 and May 2025, I spent over 200 hours attending community events, religious services, holiday celebrations, memorial days, and informal gatherings. My presence was consistent but not directive. I took on a role close to what Raymond Gold (1958) refers to as *Observer-as-Participant*: present and known, occasionally participating, but primarily observing. [14] About 60 of those hours were documented in fieldnotes, usually written shortly after events. In those notes, I tried to record what was said, what happened, and what stood out - from tone and body language to silences and side comments. Because I was not a neutral observer, I regularly reflected on how my presence might have shaped what I noticed or how I interpreted it.

To make sense of the material, I used Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, a flexible interpretive method that helped me identify patterns in interviews and field work observations without reducing them to fixed categories.[15] The analysis were done in two main steps. First, I identified themes in the interviews and fieldnotes using Braun and Clarke's method, in a process of making myself familiar with the materials and then coding the themes, the result is presented in Chapter 3. Second, I interpreted those themes through the lens of the theoretical framework outlined earlier, using Hall, Brah, and Bhabha to explore how identity is negotiated internally and externally, presented in Chapter 4.

This study focuses on adult members currently active in the JCC. It does not include unaffiliated Jews in Tokyo, individuals who have left the community, or younger generations of mixed-heritage children, all of which would be important to explore in future research.

Footnotes

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Chapter 2: Jewish Presence and Context in Japan

2.1 A Historical View of Jewish Life in Japan

Writing about Jewish identity in Japan necessarily begins with acknowledging how unusual setting of the community is. Japan is not a traditional site of Jewish diaspora. It has no indigenous Jewish population, no legacy of entrenched antisemitism or Holocaust memory, and no direct historical ties to Jewish massive migration routes from Europe or the Middle East. The presence of Jews in Japan is a relatively recent development, shaped less by generational continuity and more by mobility and reinvention.

The first Jewish settlers in Japan, at least the confirmed ones, arrived in the late 19th century. They were primarily as merchants, diplomats, and entrepreneurs in newly opened treaty port large cities; Nagasaki, Yokohama, and Kobe.[16] Nagasaki was most likely the first to host Jewish comers, they were Ashkenazi Jews from the Russian Empire, who established businesses of naval and trade activity. Later, Yokohama became a center of Jewish life in the Kanto region, with a recorded Jewish cemetery in use by the 1860s and around fifty Jewish families by 1869. Kobe followed as a major hub for Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jews (Mizrahi), including traders from Syria and Egypt. These early communities were very small, commercially oriented, and rarely permanent. Their presence was shaped by the opportunities Japan offered at the time, and by the instability in their countries of origin and the broader geopolitical dynamics of the time, especially for Jewish people. Key historical shifts in the world such as the Russo-Japanese War, which brought over 1,700 Jewish prisoners of war to Japan, and the Bolshevik Revolution, which displaced many Russian Jews across East Asia, all contributed to the growth of Jewish presence in Japan and the community. The Second World War marked a dramatic

turning point, when over 4,000 Jewish refugees passed through Kobe with temporary permission to stay. Many of them arrived with transit visas issued by Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese vice-consul in Lithuania, who defied official orders to help Jews escape Nazi-controlled at that time Europe. Support during their time in Kobe came mainly from the local Jewish community. [17]

In some ways, we can say that these early migration patterns laid the groundwork for how the community would continue to take shape. Unlike the Jewish communities of Europe, North America or the former Soviet-Union, where shared language, long established heritage and local community historical memory often shape communal belonging and characteristics, the Jewish community in Japan formed without rooted continuity in Japan. Jewish identity in Japan was not established by a shared language or inherited from place, but assembled across spaces, constructed through various shifting pathways, rather than passed down in a fixed location with specific characteristics. Even today, many Jewish residents in Japan are short-term residents: diplomats, businesspeople, educators, or spouses in intercultural marriages.[18] Although, as we will see later, in recent years there has been a shift, and a small core of long-term residents has formed within the JCC. This change reflects the broader rise in long-term foreign residency in Japan and the growing number of intercultural marriages, an issue I will return to in more detail in the following chapters. Despite its small size and high turnover, the community eventually has developed a complex institutional setup. Following the war, the focus of Jewish community life shifted from Kobe to Tokyo. The JCJ (or the JCC Japan), established in the 1950s, became the core institution through which Jewish life in Tokyo could be maintained, in terms of education, culture, religion and social life. With support from figures such as Rabbi Marvin Tokayer and Shaul Eisenberg, the JCJ gradually became a

site where Jewish identity could be expressed and transmitted, even if only temporarily for some.[19]

While the JCJ offered a space for organized Jewish life, it did not create a single shared version of what it means to be Jewish. People brought different traditions, expectations, and relationships to Judaism. In this context, Jewish identity became something that individuals and families had to actively shape and to practice to preserve. As Satō's fieldwork in the 1980s already presented, Jewish residents in Tokyo and Kansai continuously reinterpret what to preserve, what to adapt, or what to let go of when it comes to maintaining or passing down Jewish identity.[20] In the absence of a larger Jewish social space or national context that reinforces Jewishness, identity becomes something that must be negotiated within families, between generations, and between the community and the Japanese society that surrounds them.

Existing research on Jewish people in Japan has emphasized external perception: antisemitism, philosemitism, and imagines symbolic representations of Jews and Jewishness. Silvia Pin's recent work critically explores how Jewishness in Japan is often constructed through the lens of foreignness, prestige, and imagined power rather than lived religious or communal experience.[21] Earlier studies, including those by Shillony, Goodman and Miyazawa, and Kowner, focused on wartime geopolitics, cultural comparisons, and ideological projection rather than internal dynamics.[22] While these contributions are vital, they leave unexamined the micro-level, everyday practices through which Jewish identity is formed and maintained in contemporary Japan.

While this section outlines the history and the timeline of Jewish presence in Japan, it is important to also note that the evolution of the Jewish communities here has been

continually shaped by the changing conditions of the host country itself. Japan's geopolitical position, immigration policies, economic openness, and social norms have always influenced who came, who stayed, and how Jewish identity was expressed in different times: from early commercial migrations to wartime refugee flows and postwar expatriate settlement. As we will see in the next section, this influence continues in the formation and transformation of the Jewish Community Center (the JCC) and the community that it hosts, the Jewish Community of Japan (the JCJ).

2.2 Japan as Host Country: Layers of Foreignness and Recognition

As of late 2023, over 3.2 million foreign nationals are registered as residents in Japan.[23] This number does not include individuals who have acquired Japanese citizenship, a process that is not uncommon, but still relatively rare. One reason for this is Japan's strict stance on dual nationality. Japanese law does not permit holding two nationalities beyond the age of twenty-two, and individuals who voluntarily acquire another citizenship automatically lose their Japanese one.[24] For those born with two nationalities, a legal choice must be made between them by early adulthood.[25] Between 2009 and 2023, Japanese citizenship was granted predominantly to individuals from other Asian countries, particularly those of Korean and Chinese origin.[26] While the overall number of naturalized citizens remains modest, this pattern suggests that naturalization is more common among communities with longstanding historical and regional connections to Japan. In contrast, countries with bigger Jewish populations, such as the United States, Israel, France, Canada, and the UK- account for very few cases of naturalization in Japan.[27] According to the *American Jewish Year Book 2023*, the core Jewish population in the U.S. alone exceeds 6.3 million, with additional major communities in France (440,000), Canada

(398,000), and the UK (312,000).[28] These countries have little historical migration flow to Japan, and it is highly unlikely that many Jewish individuals have acquired Japanese citizenship. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the Jewish residents in Japan, including those in the community examined in this study, are primarily foreign nationals living on long-term or temporary residence visas.

In practice, this policy seems to discourage many long-term foreign residents from naturalizing, especially those who have no strong reason to give up their original nationality, such as people from stable countries with no geopolitical or economic crisis. As a result, a significant number of residents remain legally foreign, even if their lives are deeply tied to Japan through family, work, or community. And yet, whether someone holds a visa, a permanent residence status, or was born abroad but raised in Japan, they are often collectively understood under the term *gaikokujin*.

The word *gaikokujin* (foreigner) is widely used in everyday conversation in Japan. But it tends to group people with different backgrounds, appearances and legal statuses. It often refers not just to someone from another country, but to anyone whose ancestry, language, or appearance might be perceives or seen as unfamiliar. While not necessary always hostile the term might flatten difference, reducing a wide range of identities into a single and external category. As a result, individuals who do not "look Japanese" may be treated as outsiders regardless of how long they have lived in the country.

John Lie calls this the "myth of monoethnicity", not because diversity does not exist, but because it is rarely named. Groups like Koreans, Chinese, Okinawans, and Burakumin are part of Japan's social fabric, but their presence is often left out of public narratives. In this atmosphere, cultural and ethnic difference is not actively erased, but it is often

unacknowledged. [29] The label *gaikokujin* allows difference to be noticed but not necessarily understood.

These conditions create the ambiguous reality that forms part of the social backdrop for this study. The community examined in this paper is not specifically targeted or openly excluded, but it is often left outside of dominant categories. In a space where identity is noticed but not named, individuals are left to explain themselves, or to let certain parts of themselves remain unseen.

This complexity becomes even more pronounced when it comes to religion. In his study of religious practice in Japan, Ian Reader observes that while most Japanese people participate in religious rituals, from New Year shrine visits to ancestral memorials, they rarely identify as "religious" in any formal sense. [30] Religion in Japan is often framed as a matter of custom, not belief. Reader describes it as a structure of "implicit religion," where participation in rites and festivals is widespread, but without doctrinal commitment or institutional membership. [31] This makes it difficult for strongly structured religious traditions, including Judaism, to be seen or understood. While Japanese society may appear tolerant, it often lacks the cultural vocabulary to recognize religious practices that fall outside of familiar forms or that exists along a scale of secular and religious practices that might be difficult to explain within the local term of understanding.

Judaism, with its emphasis on collective identity, textual learning, and visible practice, exists outside of these normative categories. It is not part of Japan's historical religious landscape, nor is it widely understood through Christian analogies as in Christian countries. This can be particularly challenging for secular Jews who identify strongly as Jewish but practice only moderately or selectively, as is the case for many individuals in

the community examined in this study. As a result, as explored in chapters 3 and 4, Jews in Japan often find themselves explaining basic aspects of their identity, not in the face of hostility, but because of a lack of recognition. This form of religious invisibility is not always intentional or explicit, but it is constant. It shapes daily decisions for individuals: what to explain, how much to share, and when not to mention anything at all.

For Jewish individuals living in Japan, this broader social environment where difference is noticed but not always understood, forms the backdrop against which identity is expressed. As Silvia Pin explains, most Japanese people have never met a Jew in person.[32] Their impressions are shaped not through direct experience, but through media, literature, and foreign ideas - many of them imported.[33] Jewishness, in this context, is not recognized as a local religious or ethnic identity. This symbolic construction is often marked by contradiction. As Pin notes, Jewishness in Japan tends to carry both admiration and suspicion: a mix of philosemitism and antisemitism, which coexist and shift depending on political or cultural need.[35] As a result of the historical absence of Jewish presence in the region, these associations are not grounded in familiarity. They reflect distant perceptions of intellect, influence, wealth, or foreign power, projected onto people who are rarely encountered in everyday life. The result is a kind of over visibility and under recognition at the same time. In her study, Satō also observed that Jewish identity in Japan often develops without external reinforcement.[36] There are few public frameworks for recognizing Jewish cultural or religious practice, and very little shared language to engage with it socially. For community members, this means that identity must be chosen, explained, and maintained relatively quietly, especially in those situations and settings where understanding cannot be assumed.

These conditions do not determine identity, but they do shape how it is negotiated. As we will see in the analysis of the community, many Jewish residents in Japan make ongoing decisions about what to share, how to frame their identities, and when to remain unseen.

2.3 The Evolution of Tokyo's Jewish Community Center (JCC)

In settings where Judaism is not part of the public or cultural landscape, Jewish communities around the world have often formed institutions to create a space where Jewish life can be maintained. This is especially true in countries with small Jewish populations, where the absence of Jewish communal infrastructure makes everyday Jewish practice difficult or impossible for some.

As Kowner notes, the Jewish presence in Japan has historically been fragmented and transient, shaped more by individual adaptation than by long-term communal continuity.[37] In a place without generational presence, there is often no natural framework through which Jewishness can be maintained organically or carried forward especially to second generations or mix heritage families. Jewish communities in Japan, including the establishment of the Jewish Community Center in Tokyo in 1953, have been created to fill that gap. In a country where Judaism is not widely known and cannot be practiced in the flow of daily life, these communities offer something essential. Especially in places where kosher food is not readily available, where holidays pass unmarked in the public sphere, and where no Jewish educational or religious systems exist, the creation of communal frameworks becomes not only cultural, but truly existential.

Throughout Japan's modern history, Jewish life has been shaped by mobility and reinvention. Individuals arrived for business, diplomacy, or education, often planning

only a short stay. But over time, new forms of community began to take shape - not by inheriting established structures, but by creating new ones in unfamiliar surroundings. The JCC in Tokyo was part of this shift. It emerged not out of historical continuity, but out of necessity: to serve as a cultural and religious anchor for Jews living in a society that offered no external reinforcement of Jewish life. It was designed to provide not only a space for prayer or ritual, but also a site of gathering, education, cultural preservation for the next generations, and mutual recognition.

In this section I will trace how that institution evolved from its early postwar roots, through different phases of membership, structure, and community life, and into the present day. Drawing on archival materials and oral histories shared by long-term members during interviews, this section explores how the JCC has responded to the shifting needs of its members, and how it continues to hold together a diverse, mobile, and sometimes temporary community.

The founding of the Jewish Community Center in Tokyo in 1953 marked the beginning of formal Jewish institutional life in the city. At that time, there was no synagogue and no existing communal infrastructure to support Jewish practice in Tokyo. According to internal archival documents and photographs housed at the JCC, the first building was a Western-style mansion located near the current site in Shibuya. The building included a garden, swimming pool, and parking lot, and was used for religious services, social gatherings, and educational activities. The purchase of this property was facilitated by one of Israel's early diplomatic representatives in Japan, who, although at the time not yet formally recognized as an ambassador, identified the building and referred it to the group of Jews who would go on to establish the center. [38]

These founding members included Anatole Ponve, Robert M. Lury, Shaul N. Eisenberg, and Walter & Judith Citrin. All were businesspeople with previous ties to Japan, China, or the broader East Asian region. Many of them spoke Japanese and had lived through the war years in Asia. Their children often attended school in Japan, but most families eventually relocated to the United States. Their aim in establishing the JCC was not solely religious; the center was envisioned as a hybrid space for both Jewish worship and social life. During this phase, the JCC also attracted many non-Jewish foreign residents and Japanese guests, especially because restaurants and Western-style gathering spaces were scarce in Tokyo. Archival records and event photographs from the 1950s and 60s show a lively, diverse crowd, often gathering for meals and community events, with a Hebrew school conducted on Sundays composed primarily of foreign children. *(See Figure1.)*

Danny Feldman's bar mitzvah. Danny is second from right. (1965)

Figure 1 Sunday school students at the Jewish Community Center, Tokyo, 1960s. Source: The Jewish Community of Japan 50th Anniversary Yearbook *(2003), p.444.*

Religious observance during this period was relatively flexible. The kitchen, for example, was not kosher in its early years, reflecting the preferences of some of the founding

Russian Jews who prioritized cultural identity over dietary law. Yet the space functioned as an important node of Jewish life, with holiday celebrations, life-cycle events, and informal Jewish education taking place regularly. *(See Figure 2.)* The synagogue was not just a place of prayer, but a platform for maintaining a sense of collective Jewish presence in an otherwise unfamiliar environment.

Figure 2 *Purim party at the Jewish Community Center, Tokyo, c. 1950s.* Source: The Jewish Community of Japan 50th Anniversary Yearbook *(2003), p. 14.*

By the mid-1970s, this first generation of founders began to retire or relocate. In 1976, the original building was sold and replaced with a second facility built on the current JCC site. This shift coincided with a new wave of community members: Jewish expatriates, primarily from the United States, who arrived in Japan for corporate or diplomatic assignments. This "expatriate phase" of the community lasted from the mid-1970s to the 1990s. Internal JCC materials from this period - newsletters, board meeting notes, and photographs - reflect a strong emphasis on American-style Conservative Judaism. English

was the primary language of programming, and many families sent their children to international schools. According to Je., a long-time community member with extensive knowledge of the JCC's archival history who has been part of the community since its first building, this era was marked by a distinctly American atmosphere, complete with a functioning Hebrew school held on Sundays, a kosher kitchen, and structured holiday programming.

The current phase of the community, beginning in the 1990s and continuing today, reflects another major transition. As Japan's economy shifted and fewer corporate postings brought American Jews to Tokyo, the character of the JCC membership changed. Increasingly, the community has been shaped by long-term residents, many of whom are part of intercultural families. A significant number of members today are Jewish men married to Japanese women, raising bilingual children and intending to stay in Japan long-term. This shift has not only marked a transition from expatriate to local presence, but has also brought greater diversity to the community. The once predominantly Ashkenazi-American demographic has expanded to include Mizrahi, Sephardi, Ethiopian representatives, and members from a broad range of national and cultural backgrounds, including Syria, France, Australia, and Israel. According to the *JCJ 50-Year Anniversary Yearbook* (2003), which lists all weddings and Bar Mitzvah ceremonies conducted by the community, only 15% of marriages at the time involved a Japanese spouse, and just 5% of Bar Mitzvah listings reflected children from mixed-heritage families (with one Japanese parent). In contrast, today more than half of Bar and Bat Mitzvahs are for children from intercultural marriages, including, notably, cases with Japanese fathers and Jewish mothers, a family pattern that was rarely represented in earlier decades.[39] Je., who has also been responsible for preserving and narrating much of the institutional memory,

proposed a helpful framing for understanding this evolution by dividing the JCC's history into three phases: the founders' phase (1950s-70s), the expatriate phase (1970s-90s), and the current phase (1990s-present). This structure not only reflects demographic shifts but also changing expectations about what it means to sustain Jewish life in Tokyo.

This section shows us that these three phases of the JCC; the founders' period, the expatriate phase, and the current member-driven stage, do not exist in isolation from their surroundings. They each reflect broader shifts in Japan and the Japanese society that influenced who came to Japan, how long and where they stayed, and what kind of Jewish life could be sustained. The founders' phase was shaped by Japan's early postwar opening to global trade and diplomacy. The expatriate phase coincided with Japan's economic boom, which attracted American corporate families and fostered more structured institutional life. The current phase, which started as the expatriate wave began to slow, is defined by long-term residents, intercultural families, and hybrid forms of Jewish practice. It reflects a different Japan: more globalized, less economically expansive, and increasingly diverse. In this way, the JCC has continually responded to the conditions of its host society, not as a passive institution, but as a flexible, negotiated communal space.

These architectural changes visually reflect the broader historical and demographic shifts discussed above. *(See Figures 3, 4, and 5.)*

Figure 3. *The first JCC building (1950s–1970s), located near the current site in Shibuya. Source: JCJ 50th Anniversary Yearbook (2003) p.34*

Figure 4. The second JCC building (1976–early 2000's), constructed during Japan's economic boom. Source: JCJ 50th Anniversary Yearbook (2003).

Figure 5. The current JCC building, designed by architect Maki Fumihiko and in use since the early 2000s. Photograph taken in June 2024 (Rachel Fel).

Across these three phases: founders, expatriates, and mixed families, the JCC has adapted to demographic shifts, financial pressures, and changing expectations about what a Jewish community should provide. Yet throughout its history, it has remained a space where Jewish identity, however diverse in its expression, can find a point of connection and continuity in the Tokyo context.

2.4 Placing Tokyo: Jewish Life in the Diasporic Landscape

While Tokyo's Jewish community may appear unique, it forms part of a much broader global pattern. In many parts of the world, Jewish identity is sustained in unfamiliar or marginal settings often with limited institutional support and fluctuating populations. Looking beyond Japan, particularly within Asia, helps to situate Tokyo's case within the spectrum of contemporary Jewish diasporic life.

As shown in the *2023 American Jewish Yearbook*, the vast majority of the world's Jews live in Israel and the United States, which together account for over 85% of the global core Jewish population.[40] The remaining Jewish communities, while diverse, are concentrated in regions such as Europe, Canada, and the former Soviet Union - areas with long histories of Jewish presence, communal infrastructures, and broad institutional recognition. These communities benefit from scale: established neighborhoods, Jewish schools, synagogues, kosher infrastructure, and often formal legal or governmental acknowledgment. In contrast, East Asia remains marginal in numerical and institutional terms.

According to Kowner, the Jewish presence in Asia has historically been both small and fragile. Most communities east of the Middle East emerged only in the nineteenth or twentieth century, largely due to colonial trade, temporary labor, or refugee migration. These communities, including those in Shanghai, Harbin, Hong Kong, and Singapore, were typically centered in port cities and heavily reliant on external networks. While some, like Hong Kong or Singapore, maintained long-term institutions, others dwindled or disappeared as members left or assimilated. Today, Jewish communities in Asia remain relatively small in number and limited in institutional scope compared to other regions. For example, the Jewish community in Singapore, while small, benefits from visible infrastructure, including a school, mikveh, and state-recognized synagogue, supported by regional Jewish networks.[41]

While the JCJ (the Jewish Community of Japan) in Tokyo was initially established by a small group of Jewish businessmen, similar to how communities developed in places like Hong Kong or Singapore, its long-term continuity has followed a different path. Over

time, the community became increasingly shaped by intercultural families, long-term residents, and member-driven participation. Rather than relying on elite networks or institutional funding, the JCC today functions through volunteer work, shared responsibility, and a strong sense of emotional connection among its members.

A related point of comparison comes from Jewish communities in Latin America, where minority status and cultural distinctiveness require ongoing identity negotiation. Countries like Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Peru are home to sizable Jewish populations, yet Jewishness remains culturally distinct from the Catholic-majority public sphere. In her study of the Jewish community in Lima, Peru, Elman (2023) describes how Jewish identity is maintained through symbolic boundaries, including selective participation in civic life and tight communal ties, while individuals still strongly identify with the broader national context. This dual positioning echoes the kind of identity work seen among Tokyo community members, particularly those in intercultural families who balance national belonging, minority status, and ritual continuity. However, unlike Japan, Latin American societies often recognize Jewishness as a visible category and have longer historical relationships with Jewish communities, offering at least partial frameworks for understanding, support but sometimes also stronger discrimination. [42]

Some other comparative examples are Jewish communities in Australia, where Jewish communities operate within a much wider institutionalized and multicultural national context. In her study of South-East Queensland, Jennifer Creese (2020) describes how Jewish Australians negotiate their identity through public performance and civic engagement. Jewishness in this context is not hidden, but it is many times fused with Australian belonging in what she refers to as a “creolized” identity. Jewish Australians

participate in flag ceremonies, sing the national anthem during communal events, and blend religious identity with public national symbolism.[43] This reality of Jewish life is shaped by: a strong infrastructure (schools, synagogues, sporting and different organizations) and by a multicultural ethos that allows for Jewishness to be visible and normalized. In contrast, Jewish identity in Tokyo, as I will present, is negotiated much more quietly. There are no frameworks for public Jewishness, no state-supported infrastructure, and little recognition. Identity is maintained within the community and adapted contextually depending on setting.

A final example comes from Seoul, South Korea. There, the Jewish community is very small, transient, and centered primarily around a Chabad House serving expatriates, U.S. military personnel, and business professionals. The community is not inclusive and has strict rules of who can participate, depending on their Jewish background. Public familiarity with Jews is limited in South-Korea, but unlike Japan, Judaism is sometimes interpreted through a Christian lens, due to South Korea's large evangelical population.[44] In contrast, Jewishness in Tokyo is neither recognized nor integrated into dominant religious or cultural narratives. It remains invisible most of the time, not only in religious terms, but also in term of social understanding. While both cities host small, non-native Jewish populations, Tokyo's Jewish community has developed more consistent local continuity, rooted in long-term membership and internal diversity rather than external recognition.

Across all these cases; Latin America, Australia, South Korea, and Japan, it is notable that Jewish identity is shaped not only by community dynamics, but by the cultural and political logics of the host country. The history of immigration in general, the presence

(or absence) of prior Jewish migration, and the dominant religious and ethnic frameworks all play a role in structuring what forms of belonging are possible for Jewish communities. In Latin America and Australia, Jewishness is historically visible and embedded in national narratives, often facilitated by broader immigration flows and Judeo-Christian reference points. In Seoul, Jewish identity is still mediated through Christianity, while in Tokyo it exists without a strong reference and not always recognized or assumed. These examples highlight the idea that identity is not formed in a vacuum: it is continuously negotiated and shaped in relation to how each host society understands difference, religion, national belonging an Judaism.

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Chapter 3: Community Characteristics

This chapter presents the findings from the fieldwork and the interviews conducted with members of the Jewish Community Center (JCC) in Tokyo. It is based on data collected through 25 semi-structured interviews with adult JCC members and through participant observation conducted between September 2023 and May 2025. Participants were selected to reflect a range of national origins, cultural backgrounds, religious practices, and life stages. In addition to the interviews, the analysis draws on over 200 hours of presence at the JCC and approximately 60 hours of detailed fieldnotes documenting events, holidays, and both formal and informal community interactions.

Using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, I identified patterns related to community structure, diversity, participation, and atmosphere. This chapter organizes those findings thematically to provide a descriptive account of the JCC as a lived community space. The aim here is not to apply theoretical interpretation, but to offer a grounded portrait of how the community operates, how members engage with it, and what it feels like to be part of it. These findings serve as the empirical foundation for the analysis of identity negotiation that follows in Chapter 4.

Full details of the interview sample, as well as ethical considerations related to data collection and anonymity, are provided in Appendix A. The complete list of interview questions is included in Appendix B.

3.1 Diversity Within Shared Space

The Jewish Community of Japan (JCJ) refers to the community of Jews that are centered at the Jewish Community Center (JCC), which is its central institution. The JCC serving

as a physical and organizational hub for religious, cultural, and educational life. As of May 2025, it serves a diverse membership of approximately 140 families. While some members are long-term residents, others are diplomats, businesspeople, or academics living in Japan on temporary assignments. The community includes individuals and families from a wide range of national backgrounds, including the United States, Canada, Israel, France, South Africa, Russia, India, and Japan. Approximately 50% of the membership is North American, and about 40% of households include a Japanese spouse, often a Japanese woman married to a Western Jewish man.

Many members joined the JCJ after having children, motivated by a desire to provide some form of Jewish education or cultural continuity. Over time, many of those who arrived with short-term plans have stayed for decades. Several interviewees (Ar., Je., R., M., C., D., and J.) described coming to Japan without the intention of making it a long-term home. As Ar. shared:

"Japan wasn't really a long-term plan. I came here through JET to teach for two years, met my wife, and we were supposed to go back. But things kept lining up… she converted, we joined the JCC, and now we've been here almost a decade."

Similarly, Je., one of the longest-standing members of the community, said:

"I was coming here to learn Japanese and then go back to graduate school in the United States, which I never did." …. "We ended up living here for three years. We went back to the US for a few years and then came back. It was never the plan to stay this long."

Now, after more than fifty years in Japan, Je. remains a central figure in the community.

A defining feature of the JCJ is its diversity. This was frequently emphasized by members. Yo., a naturalized Japanese citizen originally from Syria, remarked:

"Morocco, Syria, Russia, South Africa, the U.S., Australia... people like me, people who converted. Mixed kids. You don't see that in one synagogue in other places."

He added, *"It's still one place."*

Through the interviews and my fieldwork I was able to define that this diversity appears along several intersecting lines:

1. **Cultural and heritage background** (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, Ethiopian, Cochin, converts)
2. **Country of upbringing and language**
3. **Level of religious observance and ritual practice**

The range of religious practice is especially visible. Some members attend weekly services, observe Shabbat strictly, and walk to the JCC without using electronic devices or cars to arrive. Others keep their phones on during events, arrive by car and don't even keep Kosher. Some identify as very religious, others describe themselves as secular or culturally Jewish. Despite these differences, mutual respect is a norm: members who use their phones tend to step in a different room to avoid disturbing those who do not. J. described this as an *"unspoken agreement to let each other be."*

The range of backgrounds is reflected in the life stories that brought members to Tokyo. A woman from a Cochin Jewish family raising children with her Ashkenazi husband; an Ethiopian heritage man raised in the United States, now married to a Japanese woman and raising bilingual children; a Holocaust survivor from Hungary who moved to Japan

after falling in love with a Japanese woman in New Zealand; a Syrian-born member who could only practice Judaism openly after becoming a Japanese citizen; and a British Ashkenazi man married to a Japanese Jewish convert, all active participants in the same community.

The community's openness to religious and cultural difference was a recurring theme in interviews. T. said:

"It's the only place where I don't feel like I have to explain myself."

Y., who is both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, American and the daughter of Israeli parents, shared:

"In other places I always felt like I had to choose one side of who I am. Here, I don't."

A. reflected that the JCC was the first Jewish space where her Cochin background *"wasn't seen as strange or in need of explanation."*

The physical layout of the JCC contributes to this sense of inclusion. As D. put it:

"It's all in one: the school, the synagogue, the community hall, the kitchen. That brings us all together, different people, but in the same space."

What emerges is a small, diverse, and constantly shifting community that still feels connected through the space they share and what they do together. The JCC does not eliminate difference; it allows people with different practices and backgrounds to share the same space meaningfully.

3.2 Organization Structure

The JCC is a formally religious institution, registered as a *shūkyō hōjin* (宗教法人) under Japanese law. This legal status designates it as a nonprofit religious organization, enabling

it to hold property, collect membership dues, and operate in accordance with religious purposes. This formal recognition structures its governance in a way that balances institutional stability with openness to member participation.

The community is overseen by a board of elected members. Voting rights in the Annual General Meeting of the board and specifically board membership are restricted to Jewish members, although there are many non-Jewish members at the JCC as well. This policy reflects a protective mechanism intended to preserve the JCC's Jewish character and to avoid the (unlikely but not impossible) scenario of non-Jewish majority influence that may make the Jewish community not Jewish anymore. The board includes individuals assigned to specific domains such as religious affairs, social programming, lifecycle events, youth education, and community outreach. These board members meet regularly to address ongoing matters and to ensure the community is responsive to the needs and concerns of a highly diverse membership. Topics discussed often include logistic improvements, security coordination, upcoming events, and strategies for inclusion for different members and differ in national, religious, and cultural backgrounds.

At the center of the JCC's daily functioning stands the rabbi**,** who serves as a full-time salaried employee. The JCC has maintained a rabbinical position without interruption since 1968 and has been documenting the rabbis since then in the JCJ archive. The current rabbi, Andrew Scheer, who has been in the position since 2020, occupies a very multifaceted role encompassing religious services, lifecycle ceremonies, Hebrew school instruction, event organization, member counseling, and supervision of the kitchen and food-related practices, especially during religious holidays. His position includes

flexibility to initiate or support member-led projects, such as cultural programming or educational events.

The rabbi's work is supported by two administrative staff members, who manage event registration (which is required in all cases), mailing lists, internal communications, scheduling, and coordination with vendors and participants. Registration and authorization procedures apply to all events, primarily for security reasons. Non-Jewish participants are welcome and frequently attend, including non-Jewish spouses, friends and visitors. However, individuals who express violent speech or demonstrate hateful intentions are not allowed to participate.

Security is a sensitive matter at the JCC. For large events, external professional security services are employed. Coordination with Japanese authorities has increased since October 2023, following both international and local antisemitic incidents- including an attempted attack on the Israeli embassy in Tokyo and a small number of disturbances in front of the JCC itself. These developments have shaped a more structured and proactive security posture within the community.

The JCC also maintains a fully kosher kitchen supervised by the rabbi. While the kitchen staff are not Jewish and with no Jewish background, they are trained in Kashrut practices and are expected to maintain the same standards found in Kosher facilities elsewhere in the world. This includes keeping meat and dairy strictly separate; in practice, the JCC kitchen is designated for meat only. No dairy is permitted on the premises. During Passover, the kitchen undergoes a rigorous cleaning and koshering process (making something Kosher), aligned with traditional Jewish halachic requirements. This

involves removing all *chametz* (leavened products), boiling and re-koshering utensils and surfaces, and adhering to strict rules under rabbinical supervision.

The JCC has also modernized its internal systems. A CRM platform is used to manage event participation, track dues, and maintain communication records. Weekly emails from the rabbi include community updates, Jewish news and humor from around the world, and reflections related to Jewish life in Japan, actively aiming to represent different Jewish heritages and traditions (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Ethiopian, secular, Orthodox, and all in between) to ensure members of all backgrounds feel included.

In addition to the formal structure, the JCC creates space for member-led activities and initiatives. For example, while some committees are ongoing, such as those responsible for social events or ritual matters, others emerge in response to shifting needs. A recent example is the re-establishment of a women's sisterhood group. The Sunday school, described in more detail in the following section, also operates under its own structure, relying on a core group of dedicated long-term volunteers and educators.

3.3 The Physical Spaces

The building that houses the Jewish Community of Japan (JCJ) serves not only as a place for worship or organized activity, but as a foundational space of Jewish life in Tokyo. In a country with no Jewish neighborhoods or long-standing communal infrastructure, the simple existence of a dedicated space for Jewish life allows the community to cohere. As Rabbi Andrew Scheer reflected, *"The community exists a lot thanks to this building. If we didn't have this space, I'm not sure we'd have much of a community."*

The current building was designed by Fumihiko Maki, one of Japan's most celebrated architects and a recipient of multiple international awards. The community's decision to work with Maki was deliberate. As Rabbi Scheer explained, *"We said no, we're the Jewish Community of Japan, we want a Japanese architect. And not just any Japanese architect—the best one."* Maki's office, located nearby in Daikanyama, worked closely with community members to ensure that the building would reflect both Jewish function and Japanese form. Funding for the project came from within the community and from supporters abroad, including the families of original founders. As both Je. and Rabbi Scheer emphasized, this process reflected a deep investment in the continuity of Jewish life in Tokyo.

The architectural features reflect this hybrid identity, the most notable is the Kagome latticework; a traditional Japanese woven pattern used throughout the building's windows and railings. To many Jewish visitors, the interlocking hexagons resemble the Magen David (Star of David). *"It's a perfect expression of the Jewish community in Japan,"* said Rabbi Scheer. *"When Jews see it, they see stars of David. When Japanese people see it, they see something entirely native."*

Inside the sanctuary, the pluralism of the community is visible in the seating arrangement. Rather than enforcing one mode of prayer, the room includes three sections: one for men, one for women, and one mixed. Je. explained that this layout grew out of earlier debates between more traditional and more egalitarian members: *"The three sections were a compromise, but they work. The seating arrangement allows members to sit in a way that aligns with their own practice, without marginalizing others."*

The building also houses classrooms, a kosher kitchen, administrative offices, and event spaces. It is used for a wide range of purposes: from Hebrew School and holiday celebrations to weddings, lectures, concerts, and community meetings. Members often describe it as one of the few places in Japan where they can "just be Jewish" without needing to explain themselves. *"When I walk in,"* said R., *"even the smell of the building is familiar, like kugel and coffee. It sounds silly, but it matters."*

On Sunday mornings, the building takes on a particularly vibrant character. The Hebrew School, or Sunday School, occupies nearly every room, children recite Hebrew letters in classrooms, songs echo from the sanctuary, and the hallway fills with conversation in English, Hebrew, French, and Japanese. For many families, Sunday School is their primary connection to the community. As I. described, *"It feels like the whole building wakes up on Sunday.''* Many of the students come from intercultural families and are growing up as minorities in Japanese society. The school provides not only education, but a sense of belonging, for the children and for the parents who gather alongside them. Teachers include long-time community members, young parents, and rotating volunteers, creating a setting that blends formal learning with personal connection.

The building is not just a functional space; it becomes a kind of anchor in a community where many members arrive temporarily but end up staying long-term. *"People come and go, but the JCC stays,"* said J., a Holocaust survivor from Hungary who found a lasting home in Japan. *"You can disappear for a year and then come back and find the same space waiting for you."* Others emphasized the emotional weight the space carries for families. Br. and Ag. both noted how important the building was for their children, offering a rare environment in which being Jewish did not feel marginal or misunderstood.

Despite its elegance, the building also holds a sense of vulnerability. *"I always behave as if we could close tomorrow,"* said Rabbi Scheer. *"Even with a beautiful building, no synagogue is guaranteed. Communities need to keep showing up."* His words reflect a deep awareness that what sustains the space is not the structure itself, but the people who gather inside it week by week, show up and participate, they are the ones that make this possible.

3.4 Community Events and Participation at the JCC

The JCC in Tokyo hosts a wide range of events throughout the year; religious observances, cultural activities, social gatherings, and educational programs. These events are not always just scheduled occasions, they are the spaces in which members encounter Jewish life and build relationships and connections. Participation patterns vary, but most members find at least one form of engagement that resonates with their needs, interests, or life stage.

The core of the JCC's calendar includes religious events such as weekly Shabbat services, High Holiday observances, and annual Seders for Passover. These are complemented by cultural programs like Yiddish classes, guest lectures, cooking workshops, and film screenings. The community also hosts regular social events, including bowling nights, ski trips, concerts, CrossFit sessions, and informal meetups. As Y. shared, *"There are so many kinds of events, and I don't go to all of them, but I always feel there's something that I COULD go to. That's comforting. It keeps the door open."* For families, holiday party events like Purim and Hanukkah are particularly attractive, with children's programming, themed meals, and different performances. Older members may prefer musical events or speaker nights. Je. noted, *"Some events are intimate, twenty, thirty*

people. Others, like Purim, it's packed. You see people you don't normally see. I always say, the JCC is like a train station, you get different passengers depending on the time and destination."

Although approximately half of the members are North American and Ashkenazi in background, recent years have brought growing attention to Jewish diversity. Under Rabbi Andrew Scheer's leadership, the JCC has hosted events recognizing a range of Jewish cultural heritages, including a celebration of Ethiopian Sigd**,** a Jewish LGBTQ+ gathering**,** and a Moroccan Jewish cooking night. Several members described these events as moments of visibility that made them feel personally recognized. T., a Japanese member who converted to Judaism and identifies as gay, referred specifically to the LGBTQ+ gathering when he shared:

"I never expected to see that here. It wasn't a big event, but it was something that made me feel safe. Like, this community sees me as a full person, not just a token." He added that the event helped him meet others who *"don't always talk about identity openly but were clearly relieved to have that space."*

In his interview, T. also explained the complex relationship many LGBTQ+ Jews have with religion and described his efforts to welcome visiting queer Jews to the JCC. *"Gay guys have conflicted feelings towards religion... but here, people accept us. We're not the only couple anymore. That means something."* Another example comes from an interview of J., a Holocaust survivor from Hungary described Shabbat with mixed feelings. *"The melodies are different from what I knew, but I stay because of what it gives me now. The food after service, the people talking, that's community. That's what counts."* This

example reflects the emotional resonance that events can carry, even across generational and cultural divides.

Some events explicitly incorporate Japanese cultural elements. On certain holidays, members wear kimono, Purim is full of Japanese Anime characters costumes. Jewish foods appear with Japanese adaptations, such as gefilte fish onigiri, Origami decorations on Sukkot and other examples. One collaborative performance with the Beit Shalom Choir (a Japanese Christian group that sings Hebrew songs), left a impression on many. As Dt.. reflected, *"That night, when they sang Hatikvah in Japanese - I just cried. It was so unexpected. That's the magic of living Jewishly in Japan."*

Guests and tourists are also frequent participants. The JCC allows non-Jewish guests at all events, as long as they register and are respectful. This has included local Japanese partners, children's friends, diplomats, academics, and curious visitors. The center maintains ties with the Israeli Embassy as well, and occasionally co-hosts events such as Holocaust Memorial Day.

Events at the JCC are initiated through multiple channels. Some are part of a recurring cycle (e.g., holidays, Hebrew School ceremonies), while others arise from member initiative, board discussions, or direct proposals to the rabbi. All the events have to be approved by the board. Rabbi Scheer plays an active role in encouraging experimentation and supporting grassroots ideas. As Y. put it, *"He doesn't just wait for things to happen. He suggests, he helps plan, and he really listens."* The board has designated members responsible for specific domains, such as religious affairs, life-cycle events, education, and social programming - who propose and coordinate activities. Ad hoc committees or informal groups (such as the revived Sisterhood) also organize events. C. described the

process as *"open-ended but supported",* anyone with an idea can bring it forward, and the infrastructure exists to make it happen.

Participation at the JCC is shaped by life stage, personality, and individual background. Some members come weekly for services; others attend only for major holidays, guest speakers, or Hebrew School events. Parents of school-aged children tend to form their own subgroups, attending events together and supporting one another through life-cycle moments. Some non-Jewish spouses are deeply involved, while others attend selectively. As B. explained, *"People don't come to everything. But that's fine. The JCC offers so many options that everyone can find what suits them."* Several interviewees also emphasized that just showing up- even occasionally, can be meaningful. *"When I go, it's not always because I'm religious,"* said A., *"It's because I want to see people. It's a way of remembering who I am."*
Br., reflecting on her own participation, noted: *"Sometimes I feel very distant from synagogue rituals, but then I show up for a Shabbat dinner and end up staying for two hours, talking to people I didn't expect to see. It reminds me that I'm still part of something."*

Rabbi Andrew described this fluid model of belonging as part of the community's strength: *"Some people come to every service. Some come once a year. Some never come, but they pay dues and check the newsletter. And they're still part of it."* He emphasized that affiliation and identity are not always tied to visible participation**:** *"I have members who haven't set foot in the building in two years. But when they call to ask about lighting Yahrzeit candles or to ask me to officiate a funeral, they're asking from a place of belonging."*

3.5 Atmosphere, Emotion, and the Role of the Rabbi

Beyond structure, programs, and participation, the JCC is also defined by how it feels to be there: a layered atmosphere of warmth, informality, and shared care that many members described as essential to their sense of belonging. In interviews and observations, members often described the JCC not only as a place to "do" Jewish life, but as a space where they could feel safe, welcomed, and connected. Several mentioned that simply walking into the building created a sense of exhale. Ag. said during his interview: *"It smells like Jewish food and sounds like Hebrew, it reminds me of where I come from, even if I didn't grow up going to synagogue."* Others emphasized how important it was to have a place where being Jewish did not have to be explained or defended, where it could be lived without translation.

This emotional quality is especially meaningful for those raising children in Japan. Many parents spoke of the JCC as the only place where they could pass and introduce to their children, traditions, holidays, and Jewish knowledge in ways that felt natural. Dt. shared that their son asked, after his Bar Mitzvah, *"So, do we still come here now?"*, a moment that revealed how deeply the space had become part of their family rhythm. Others described small but resonant moments: singing in Hebrew while setting up folding chairs, lending a kippah to a visitor, or a hallway conversation turning into an unexpected discussion about identity.

This atmosphere, according to many members, is shaped as much by the people as by the leadership. Out of 25 interviewees (including Rabbi Andrew Scheer), 23 explicitly mentioned the rabbi as central to maintaining the community's spirit. Many described him as the glue that holds the community together. *"The community wouldn't be what it*

is without him," said T. Similarly, Je. noted: *"He's everywhere: with the kids, in the kitchen, on the newsletter, leading services."* Y. added: *"He speaks differently to each of us and it works."* Their words express not only admiration but trust in his sensitivity to the variety of identities within the JCC.

Rabbi Scheer's leadership was consistently described as active, responsive, and grounded in personal connection. He answers messages quickly, sends reminders before services, helps families with life-cycle planning, supervises the kitchen, and teaches in the Hebrew School, often while maintaining warm and attentive relationships. Jo. said, *"I'm not sure when he sleeps."* Br. shared, *"He looks for ways to include people, not to define whether they fit."* From my dual role as researcher and participant, I observed this attentiveness firsthand: acknowledging non-Jewish spouses, greeting children by name, quietly stepping in to offer help without being asked.

However, this communal atmosphere has not always been so harmonious. Many long-time members reflected on previous periods marked by tension, particularly around differing religious approaches and interpretations of what Jewish life in Tokyo should look like. Some members felt uncomfortable with the JCC's open and pluralistic structure, and chose instead to affiliate with Chabad, which offered a more traditional framework. Conflicts often emerged from differences in ritual observance or expectations around synagogue conduct and holiday practices. Yet in recent years, especially under Rabbi Scheer's leadership, many of those who had distanced themselves began returning to the JCC for services and holidays. Yn. is one such example. He described how, in the past, he often felt his more traditional background was not fully understood at the JCC, and he had stopped attending regularly. Under Rabbi Scheer, however, he returned and now

participates more actively. As he explained, *“Now my views are respected, I feel like my background is seen, not something I have to tone down.”*

The current atmosphere, members agreed, is the result of deliberate bridge-building. Several credited Rabbi Scheer for narrowing divides between different levels of observance and cultural background. His inclusive approach, one that makes space for Orthodox, secular, and everything in between, was widely cited as essential. *“He understands how everyone practices and makes sure no one feels pushed out,”* one participant explained. He is known for knowing members individually and for crafting services and events with that knowledge in mind. But this atmosphere is not created by the rabbi alone.

The sense of care and participation extends across the community. Members frequently described how witnessing the rabbi’s effort motivated them to give their own — whether by helping plan events, initiating new projects, or simply showing up. Parents spoke of children in the Hebrew School who asked to arrive early or help set up chairs. Volunteers prepared meals, decorated spaces, or offered rides. As one member put it, *“When people see someone giving so much, they want to do the same.”* Belonging, in this sense, is not just a feeling, but it is something enacted through shared effort.

Importantly, Rabbi Scheer was not brought in from outside he was part of the community before. Before becoming rabbi in 2020, he had long been involved as a Sunday School teacher and regular member. After completing his rabbinic training in the States, the board approached him to take on the role at the JCC. His election reflected not only his capabilities, but also the kind of leadership the community wanted: pluralistic, familiar, and relational. In this sense, the JCC’s atmosphere is shaped both by his influence and by

the membership that chose him. It raises a question: does leadership shape the community, or does the community choses and shapes the leadership it wants? In this case, it seems to be both.

3.6 Jewish Identity Beyond the JCC

While the JCC offers a space where members can freely express their Jewish identity, many described a sharp contrast in their experiences outside its walls. In broader Japanese society, Jewishness is rarely recognized and often reduced to a generic "Western" or "foreign" identity. This produces an ongoing negotiation: identity is lived inwardly, but often bracketed or adapted in public.

Many interviewees described this contrast as a quiet act of self-protection. *"I don't really talk about it,"* said S., a long-term resident. *"People ask, 'Is that like Protestant or Catholic?'... I just avoid the topic."* Br. recalled being asked, *"Are Jews gypsies?"* and added, *"I didn't even want to start explaining… I'm tired of this."* Ar. echoed the same sentiment: *"I usually don't mention it. Not because I'm hiding it, but because no one would understand anyway."* In professional settings, he added, *"There's nothing in my appearance or behavior that would mark me as Jewish. And that's easier. I wear my kippah at home or at the JCJ, but I wouldn't wear it with my Japanese co-workers, even though I used to wear it always in the States."*

Yo., originally from Syria and now a naturalized Japanese citizen, shared: *"They really don't know the difference between a Moroccan and a Moroccan Jew, or a Syrian and a Syrian Jew."* He added, *"They just hear the name of the country and judge you based on*

that. I really struggle to explain my identity outside of the JCJ, people in the community just get it."

This lack of recognition is sometimes accompanied by seemingly positive but ultimately problematic stereotypes. Several interviewees noted being told things like, *"Jews are so smart,"* or *"Jews have money."* Others recalled seeing Japanese books in popular bookstores with titles like *How to Be Successful Like the Jews*. These comments, while intended as compliments, were experienced as unsettling, reflecting a form of exoticization that reduces Jewishness to stereotype or myth.

Many members, including C., R., Ar., and Ag., also described the difficulty of navigating Jewish practices in spaces like Japanese schools. Because Jewish holidays and customs are largely unfamiliar, schools rarely accommodate them. Parents spoke of the challenge of pulling children out for holidays such as Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur or explaining why their child could not attend an event on Saturday. While some schools have begun to recognize Muslim holidays or dietary restrictions, Jewish traditions remain largely unknown, making even small requests difficult to frame or justify.

In Japanese society, Jewishness is many times reduced to stereotype, many choose not to express their identity publicly, not out of rejection, but out of caution, discomfort, or a sense of irrelevance. This tension became especially pronounced after October 7th, 2023, as global events heightened fears of antisemitism and increased the desire for safety and understanding. In the interviews, every single participant mentioned the aftermath of October 7th when asked about antisemitism (even though the topic was never directly introduced by the researcher) highlighting the emotional weight of the event. T. reflected, *"Since October 7th, younger people are more actively involved… You want to*

be with people who understand." R. noted, *"People seem to care more now, there's more conversation, more showing up, more awareness."* According to Rabbi Andrew Scheer, between October 2023 and January 2024, attendance rose by approximately 30%, and many people who had previously stayed on the margins began attending again. *"I have members who didn't show up for years,"* he said, *"and now they're here every week."* For many, the JCC became not just a cultural space, but a sanctuary, one of the only places where they could process difficulties with others who shared their fears and language. As Yo. put it simply, *" After these events, I needed to be with people who get it."*

This reality, which became even more emphasized after October 2023, led many participants to choose not to disclose their Jewish identity in daily life. In fieldnotes, I observed members taking kippot from the entry shelf upon arriving at the JCC and quietly removing them as they exited, even at non-religious events. One member folded his kippah and slipped it into his pocket on the stairs. Several told me, *"I just don't want to stand out,"* or *"I already feel different enough."* Even small decisions, whether to wear a Star of David necklace, whether to mention a Jewish holiday at work, were often marked by hesitation.

What emerges is not a rejection of Jewishness, but a strategic adjustment. Identity is expressed differently depending on space, audience, and perceived risk. Inside the JCC, it is embodied and affirmed. Outside, it is more often cautious, coded, or quiet.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has described a picture of the Jewish Community of Japan (JCJ) as it takes shape through the life of its central institution, the JCC. What we can see is a small but

layered community, diverse in heritage, background, and practice. These are held together through a one shared space, active and non- active participation, and emotional investment. Members do not necessarily agree on how to be Jewish, but they show up, contribute, and sustain a sense of community connection.

There is a sense of pluralism. The building, the Hebrew School, and community events all function as meeting points across difference. The atmosphere is shaped by a leadership style that is inclusive and personal, but also by members' willingness to give their time, energy, and initiate their ideas. This sense of mutual investment was described by participants, many of whom described feeling motivated to contribute after witnessing others do the same and in the background of the understanding that if they wont do, the community might fade.

As presented, this atmosphere was not always a given. Several long-term members recalled past tensions over ritual practice and inclusion, with some choosing to attend Chabad services instead. But in recent years, particularly under Rabbi Andrew Scheer's leadership, many have returned. Members described his attentiveness and relational approach as helping to bridge divides and create a space where a wide range of Jewish experiences can coexist.

Outside the JCC, however, many members face a different reality. In broader Japanese society, Jewishness is often misunderstood or stereotyped. These external conditions became more intense after October 7th, 2023, when global events led to a rise in fear, disconnection, and the need for safe community. Every participant mentioned that moment as significant. Attendance rose sharply, and many who had once stayed on the

margins began showing up again. For many, the JCC became not just a cultural or religious space, but a place of refuge, recognition, and shared understanding.

Across all these categories - space, participation, leadership, and emotional resonance, the JCJ reflects a community that continues to shape itself in response to the needs of its members and the realities of its setting and the surrounding. The following chapter builds on this foundation by examining how these conditions shape the negotiation of Jewish identity.

Chapter 4: Identity Negotiation & Analysis

4.1 Framing Identity: A Theoretical Entry Point

This chapter explores how Jewish identity is constructed and expressed by members of the Jewish community in Tokyo. Rather than treating identity as something fixed or given, I approach it in this paper as a dynamic process shaped by historical memory, cultural negotiation, and everyday positioning. This understanding follows Stuart Hall's conception of identity as something formed in context and over time, not an already accomplished fact but as a 'production' that is never complete and always in process. [45]

In this sense, identity is not simply about where a person comes from, but how one becomes, how individuals interpret and express themselves in relation to the spaces, people, and stories that surround them. As Hall explains, cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past.[46] This perspective is especially relevant in to this community with a layered diasporic contexts, where people carry multiple histories and shift between many cultural and linguistic worlds. It allows for some contradictions or hybridity, and the ongoing reflection and negotiation of self understanding of each person.

To make sense of this negotiation, I also present and analyze through the lens of Avtar Brah's concept of *diasporic space* the intersection where different trajectories of displacement, belonging, and identity-making meet, and Homi Bhabha's notion of *third space* and *hybridity*, which help to reveal the ambivalent positions that individuals inhabit when navigating between different aspect of culture. While Hall provides the foundation

for understanding identity as processual and performative, Brah and Bhabha help interpret the spatial, relational, and cultural conditions through which that process unfolds.

These theories are not used in isolation or as separate lenses. Together, they offer a one framework: Hall's theory defines identity as a discursive and ongoing construction; Brah helps us see how this construction happens within a space like the JCC, where different histories, positionalities, and forms of belonging intersect; and Bhabha makes us realize of how individuals move between categories, making meaning in contexts that are hybrid, unstable, or in unfamiliar background. This combined perspective allows us to analyze identity as both practiced and negotiated inside (within a pluralistic community) and negotiated in relation to the outside (in relation to the host society).

To explore this more fully, I organize the chapter around two interrelated processes. The internal process refers to how members of the JCC, coming from diverse national, religious, and cultural backgrounds, construct a shared sense of Jewish belonging. The external process refers to how individuals navigate, adapt, or withhold their Jewish identity in relation to Japanese society.

These two layers are not separated but interconnected. The shared culture that emerges inside the JCC is shaped by the pressures and limitations experienced outside of it. And the choices made in public life reflect the support, recognition, and flexibility found within. Both processes are embedded in the broader structure of Japan as host society, a setting in which Jewish identity is not institutionally reinforced, and therefore must be sustained through deliberate effort. Following Hall's formulation, identity is formed "across a division," from the place of the Other.[47]

In the following sections, I apply this framework to fieldwork data drawn from the thematic analysis made after conducting the interview and the participant observation, sone of which was presented in Chapter 3. First, I examine how identity is formed through participation, parenting, and internal negotiation within the JCC (Section 4.2). Then, I shift to explore how identity is performed, translated, or withheld in relation to Japanese cultural expectations (Section 4.3). Taken together, these sections analyze not only what Jewish identity looks like in Tokyo but how, and where, it is made – constantly.

4.2 Internal Process: Constructing Shared Jewish Identity in a Diverse Community

4.2.1 The JCC as a Space of Belonging

In the Japanese settings, the Jewish Community Center (JCC) in Tokyo serves as a central site of visibility for its members that can have familiarity, and meaning making. For many community members, it is not only a place of worship or practice culture, but a really rare space in which their Jewishness can be safely and fully expressed. This section explores how the JCC operates as a site of belonging, where Jewish identity is continually negotiated and affirmed through practice, ritual, and relationship. Drawing on Stuart Hall's view of identity as "always in process" and Avtar Brah's framing of diasporic space, I show how the JCC provides a context in which fragmented or latent aspects of identity are activated and made intelligible.[48]

For many members, the JCC is the only place in Japan where Jewish identity is not downgraded to a stereotype or misunderstood. This is not because of shared nationality or language, but because it is one of the only spaces where Jewish presence is recognized

and being meaningful. Hall argues that identity is not a fixed essence located in the self, but rather “a positioning,” formed through interaction, story, and the ways we are seen and see ourselves.[49] The JCC, in this sense, is not a mirror but a structure: a space that enables these positionings to occur.

Belonging at the JCC, among its leaders and members is often described not in theological terms, but in terms of comfort, ease, and mutual permission. It is a space where members can “just be Jewish” without explanation, where the burden of translation of ‘what is Judaism’ and ‘who I am’ temporarily lifts and people can express it easily. This is not because all members share the same traditions or background, or even language, but because the setting allows for difference to be held under one umbrella of Jewishness. For many of the interviewees, this comfort was tied not only to the religious function of the space, but also to the cultural, familial, and emotional landscape it offered. The JCC is simultaneously a religious, educational, and social space, a hybridity that allows people with very different Jewish trajectories to find points of connection.

This atmosphere becomes most visible during large communal celebrations, where diversity converges into temporary cohesion. One example was the Purim party in 2025, attended by around ninety people: children, parents, grandparents, diplomats, businesspeople, and educators. A Japanese klezmer band played, costumes replaced business suits, and circles of people danced hand in hand. Its significance lay in what it made possible: people who do not wear a kippah in public wore one that day; Hebrew was sung by those who rarely speak it elsewhere; adults who would never wear costumes did so freely. These behaviors are not neutral; they would feel out of place elsewhere. But within the JCC, they are expected. In Tokyo’s broader context, where Jewishness is

largely unrecognized, the JCC becomes the only space where these expressions are both safe and intelligible.

This is what Brah means by *diasporic space* a space shaped by intersecting histories and affiliations, but bound together by the emotional and symbolic work of creating a sense of home.[50] The JCC does not remove difference. It holds it, while offering a temporary suspension of the need to explain.

Importantly, this space is not static. It is sustained through ongoing participation and adjustment. Several members described how they adapt their visible Jewishness depending on whether they are inside or outside the JCC: hiding kippot or tzitzit until inside the building; using Hebrew terms in the center but avoiding them elsewhere; celebrating holidays at the JCC but downplaying them at work or school. These shifts are not denials, they are negotiations. Hall's view of identity as "always constituted within representation" is especially relevant here.[51] The JCC creates the conditions for a different kind of representation: one that is legible to others and affirming to the self.

In this way, the JCC becomes a diasporic home not because of shared belief, but because of shared need. Belonging here is not about sameness. It is about participation, mutual recognition, and the ability to say *I am Jewish here*, and to have that make sense in the eyes of others.

4.2.2 Parenting and Transmission: Jewish Identity Through the Next Generation

Within the Jewish community in Tokyo, parenting is one of the most powerful sites where Jewish identity is constructed, reflected upon, and passed on. For many members, the desire to raise Jewish children in Japan is what brings them to the JCC in the first place.

Yet what it means to "raise Jewish children" is not self-evident. It involves decisions about language, rituals, education, names, holidays, and cultural markers that take on new meaning in the context of Japan. Here, Jewishness is not reinforced by a larger social framework - there are no Jewish neighborhoods, schools, or public symbols of recognition. Instead, Jewish identity must be actively produced through engagement. This process reveals how identity is not inherited in a fixed form, but shaped by the possibilities and constraints of a given setting.

One of the most visible structures for this identity work is the JCC's Hebrew School. Parents from a wide range of national, ethnic, and denominational backgrounds send their children to the same classroom. In interviews and field observations, it became clear that many families would not have intersected in the same Jewish institution if they lived elsewhere. As Dr. explained, *"In New York, I would have sent my child to an Ashkenazi school, because that's who we were. Here, I'm just Jewish like everybody else, I'ts beautiful."* The context of Japan, where Jewish subcategories are invisible to the outside world and irrelevant within the community's only Hebrew School, creates a condition in which shared identity is not assumed, but made. This reflects and echoes Hall's idea of identity as relational and context-dependent. [52] The boundary that matters in Tokyo is not between Sephardi and Ashkenazi, but between being Jewish in private and being able to express Jewishness in community.

Fieldnotes from community events support this. At Sunday School, it is not uncommon to see parents of vastly different backgrounds - an Ashkenazi father from New York, a mother from Cochin, an Israeli Mizrahi mother, A Japanese spouse to a Jewish partner, or a convert with no Jewish ancestry, gathering casually while their children learn Hebrew

words or rehearse songs for the next holiday. In one conversation, several parents discussed Bar and Bat Mitzvah preparation. Outside of Tokyo, they might have belonged to different synagogues or denominations. In Japan, these distinctions collapse. There is only one Hebrew School, and all children, regardless of halachic status or family denomination, prepare for the same milestone, often side by side. The community does not erase difference, but the shared goal of continuity overrides internal boundaries and the community lets each of the members to express their uniqueness.

This pattern also reflects identity negotiation shaped by setting. The social landscape of Japan, where Jewishness is rarely recognized, reduces the pressure to conform to inherited Jewish subcategories. In their place, a more inclusive communal identity emerges, constructed through shared practice rather than strict lineage. This shift illustrates what Hall describes as the positionality of identity, how individuals and families adopt new articulations of self in response to their environment. [53] This will be further discussed in section 4.3.

This also reveals something basic about the internal process of identity construction in diasporic space. What makes this negotiation possible is the understanding rooted in Hall's theory that identity is always in motion. The Ashkenazi mother is still Ashkenazi, but in this context, that specificity becomes secondary to a broader identification with the local community. Her child is not being raised as a New York Ashkenazi Jew, but as part of a small, diverse Jewish collective in Japan. The same logic applies to a Moroccan father, a Cochin mother, or a Japanese-Jewish household; they are not erasing difference, but reconfiguring its meaning. The institutional singularity of the JCC, being the only viable Jewish framework for their children, requires them to step into a common space of

articulation. Here, identity is not reduced, but reoriented. What unites these families is not sameness, but a shared act of shaping Jewishness into something that works, that can be lived, and that their children can carry forward.

Parents often describe this process as grounded in experience more than ideology. Ar., a father of two, explained that joining the JCC was not about religious obligation, but about creating a framework for his children. *"We gave them exposure from the get-go... It's not what they're taught, it's who they are."* His approach reflects the understanding that Jewish identity, especially in diasporic contexts, is not something that can be explained once and retained forever. It must be enacted, practiced, repeated, and supported. That repetition happens through the calendar, through songs and meals, and through seeing other children who also say Shabbat Shalom. As Rabbi Andrew described, *"For many of the kids, the only thing they are certain of is that they are Jewish."* That certainty is not given - it is nurtured through participation.

Several interviewees noted that raising Jewish children in Japan requires a level of intentionality they might not have needed elsewhere. B., a mother of two, described the JCC as not only a site of education but of social survival: *"In France, we didn't need the Jewish community in the same way. We had our own networks. But here, it gives our family something to belong to."* What is striking in these reflections is the absence of rigid doctrine. Few parents spoke in terms of transmitting theological content. Instead, what they described was the importance of continuity, connection, and emotional grounding. As Hall suggests, identity functions as a "naming": a way of locating oneself in relation to a history and a present. [54] What the JCC provides is not certainty, but a shared space in which that naming can occur.

This process of transmission is not about reproducing old identities, but about producing new forms that work in the current context. The boundaries are looser, the practices more plural, and the definitions of who counts as Jewish are often more flexible than in larger, more structured Jewish communities elsewhere. But this looseness is not a weakness, rather it is the condition that makes continuity possible. The JCC becomes a diasporic space in Brah's sense, not just a place for Jews to gather, but a field in which multiple histories and aspirations converge. [55] It is in this convergence that a shared identity is constructed not because everyone agrees on what Jewishness is, but because they are building something together for their children to inherit, adapt, and perhaps even one day redefine.

4.2.3 Negotiating Internal Diversity

The Jewish community in Tokyo is not unified by similarity. Its members come from widely different backgrounds: Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, Cochin, Ethiopian, converts, and families with one Japanese parent. Religious practices range from Orthodox observance to secular cultural affiliation, and national identities span across continents. Despite these differences, the community has formed a sense of belonging that is not dependent on homogeneity. In fact, difference is not only present it is structurally accommodated and often celebrated. What makes this cohesion possible is not a denial of diversity, but a shared recognition that identity is something made in relation to space, to others, and to the moment.

Stuart Hall writes that identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. [56] Rather than beginning with sameness and then adding diversity, the JCC builds belonging in the opposite direction. Members enter from very different positions, but the communal space

invites them to participate without first demanding alignment. This reflects Hall's emphasis on identity as a "position of enunciation" - something that emerges in the act of speaking, doing, or participating. [57] In the context of the Tokyo JCC, this means that members do not need to present a certain version of Jewish identity to belong. Belonging is constructed through presence, participation, and mutual recognition.

This is perhaps most visible in the ritual space of the synagogue, which is physically divided in a way that allows members to choose how they relate to tradition. One side has a mechitzah: a physical partition between men and women, while the other side is open seating. Members choose where to sit according to their comfort and practice. No one is corrected or judged. This layout reflects a deeper ethic: that there is more than one way to be Jewish, and that those ways can coexist.

This principle extends beyond the sanctuary. At communal events, services, and educational activities, diversity is not only tolerated but it is actually visible and integrated. During the 2024 Passover Seder, for example, the Haggadah was read in Hebrew, Japanese, French, Russian, Czech, and English. The act was symbolic, but also deeply functional. It made the ritual accessible to all present, and reminded everyone that their voice had a place in the tradition. In this way, difference became not a threat to unity, but the ground on which unity could be built.

Many participants expressed that in Tokyo, they feel more accepted and less judged than in other Jewish communities where denominational divisions are sharper and they needed to fit in a specific standard. Rather than needing to conform to a specific standard of observance or cultural background, they are welcomed into a community that values shared presence over doctrinal alignment.

Avtar Brah's concept of diasporic space helps to explain why this model works. In Brah's framing, diaspora is not simply about dispersion, but it is a space where multiple histories, affiliations, and modes of belonging coexist. [58] What matters is not sameness, but the negotiation of difference in a shared field. The JCC does not resolve difference, it holds this difference. It does not demand consensus, but it creates a structure in which people can participate without friction. This is not always easy. There are tensions, disagreements, and moments of discomfort. But the shared condition of being Jewish in Japan in a context where Jewishness is often misunderstood or invisible, creates a common foundation. What emerges is not a flattening of difference, but a layering of identities that are lived in proximity.

This internal diversity is not incidental to the community's identity, it is constitutive of it. Members do not belong despite their differences, but through them. The community's ability to accommodate variation becomes part of its shared identity. As Hall would argue, it is precisely through the negotiation of difference that identity becomes meaningful. In Tokyo, this means that a Cochin Jew, an American convert, a Japanese-Israeli child, and a Holocaust survivor from Hungary can all stand side by side, not because they agree on what Jewishness is, but because they have decided that this is the space where they will live it together.

4.2.4 conclusion

These three themes show that in the specific settings of Japan, where Jewishness is largely unfamiliar, people who come from very different backgrounds are brought together under one shared space. Through the shared participation and a shared umbrella of Judaism in

Japan, they construct a communal identity, not by erasing their differences, but by negotiating those differences in relation to one another.

This internal process of identity construction depends on the structure and atmosphere of the JCC, but it is also strongly shaped by the host society's settings. The lack of public recognition and institutional support for Jewish life outside the JCC makes the community's inclusiveness, cohesion, and diversity even more important. It is precisely because Jewishness is not externally affirmed that members turn inward to build something together.

The next section turns outward, examining how individuals navigate Jewish identity within the broader Japanese society, and how this external positioning, in turn, reinforces the need for the kind of internal community described here.

4.3 External Process: Negotiating Jewish Identity within the Japanese Context

This section turns from the internal processes of identity construction within the JCC to the outward-facing question of how Jewish identity is navigated in the broader context of Japanese society. While Chapter 4.2 examined how diverse members come together to co-construct a shared sense of belonging within a community framework, this section explores the ways in which individuals' position, perform, and sometimes withhold their Jewishness in everyday life outside of that communal space. The analytical focus shifts here from collective cohesion to personal negotiation, how identity is articulated, adjusted, and sometimes reinvented in relation to the norms, expectations, and constraints of the host culture.

The themes presented in this section were developed through the same process of thematic analysis described earlier, but they reflect a different perspective. Rather than examining the internal logic of community formation, they focus on external positioning: how participants make sense of their Jewish identity in a society where that identity is often unrecognized, unfamiliar, or misunderstood. This is not a simple story of marginality. Rather, it is one of agency, adaptation, and complex belonging, in which absence, ambiguity, and silence can play as significant a role as visibility or affirmation.

To understand these dynamics, I draw on Stuart Hall's conception of identity as always relational and constructed through difference, Avtar Brah's theorization of diasporic space as a site of convergence between multiple histories and social locations, and Homi Bhabha's notion of the third space, where cultural meaning is negotiated and remade. These perspectives help illuminate how identity, in the Japanese context, is not merely something inherited or declared, but something practiced, positioned, and continually reshaped.

4.3.1 Structural Absence and the Problem of Recognition

For many participants in this study, the challenge of navigating Jewish identity in Japan begins with a fundamental condition: the absence of recognition. As discussed earlier, unlike in countries where Judaism is a known minority religion or where Jewish communities have long institutional presence, Japan offers little in the way of cultural familiarity, legal accommodation, or historical reference points. This absence is not only symbolic. As discussed in Chapter 2, Japanese nationality laws do not allow dual citizenship, and the concept of being Japanese is often entangled with ideas of ethnic sameness, linguistic fluency, and cultural conformity. While these structures affect all

foreigners to some extent, they create a particular kind of invisibility for Jews, whose identity is not generally legible within the categories available in Japanese public life. As Ri. observed, *"Judaism doesn't really mean anything to most people here. They don't have a box to put it in."*

Participants often described experiences of being misrecognized, questioned, or simply rendered unintelligible when trying to explain their Jewish identity. This was not typically hostile or negative. More often, it was a form of cultural blankness. Ds. a participant who grew up in a Conservative Jewish community in New Jersey noted that when he mentioned Purim or Yom Kippur in casual conversation, *"people have no idea what that is. If you say it's a holiday, they ask if it's like Christmas. If you say it's religious, they ask if it's Protestant or Catholic."* T., a Japanese convert to Judaism similarly explained that his efforts to learn Hebrew and participate in Jewish rituals were often seen by others as a quirky foreign hobby. *"They think it's like doing yoga or calligraphy,"* he said, *"not something spiritual or communal."*

These interactions reflect not only cultural unfamiliarity, but a deeper structural absence of Judaism in the Japanese imagination. Although Jewish-themed books and conspiracy literature circulate in some bookstores, there is no widespread understanding of Jews as a living community within Japan. As David Goodman and Masanori Miyazawa have noted, Japan's engagement with Jews has often been abstract, filtered through tropes of global finance or Holocaust representation, rather than grounded in lived experience or civic inclusion. Jewishness in Japan, in this sense, tends to appear as something external to society rather than part of it, reinforcing a sense of dislocation even among long-term residents.[59]

Stuart Hall's concept of identity as constructed through difference is especially relevant here. Hall argues that identities are not fixed essences, but are produced in specific historical and cultural contexts through processes of differentiation and recognition. They emerge, he writes, "not outside but within the discourse of the Other."[60] In Japan, the "Other" is not necessarily hostile, but it is unfamiliar. There is no dominant narrative of Jewishness into which participants can insert themselves. As a result, many described the need to decide when and how to identify themselves, and to whom. Some chose silence. Others explained only when asked directly. Still others actively performed Jewish identity in limited social settings but avoided doing so in public or work contexts, as presented earlier.

This condition of structural absence, where Judaism is neither visible nor anticipated, produces a specific kind of diasporic experience. Jewish identity in Japan is not reaffirmed by institutional cues, public holidays, or ambient cultural knowledge. Instead, it must be maintained through conscious effort, often in the face of indifference. B., explained: "Here, being Jewish is something you have to build. It's not around you. You have to carry it with you."

This experience aligns with Avtar Brah's theorization of diaspora not as a mere scattering, but as a field of tension between historical displacement and present positioning. Diasporic space, for Brah, is defined not only by movement, but by how structures of recognition, power, and locality shape belonging.[61] In Japan, where there is little historical or institutional grounding for Jewish life, participants find themselves negotiating identity in a setting where their presence is largely unnoticed. Japan is not hostile to Jewishness - but neither does it make room for it.

Within this void, Jewish identity takes form through positioning. It becomes, in Hall's terms, a practice of articulation rather than an essence.[62] What emerges in this context is not simply invisibility, but a condition in which visibility must be chosen, managed, and explained - or sometimes withheld. In the absence of stable recognition, identity becomes relational, situational, and contingent in the Japanese context for the members of this community.

4.3.2 All in One

In the absence of a broader Jewish infrastructure in Japan, the Jewish Community Center (JCC) in Tokyo has long functioned as the central place of Jewish life. Unlike cities with multiple congregations, denominational affiliations, or informal networks, Tokyo's JCC stands as the only pluralistic institutional space where Jewish communal life is consistently organized and sustained in one inclusive building. This status is not incidental. Until the beginning of the 2000s, when Chabad formally opened a center in Tokyo, the JCC was the only space where Jews of any background could gather for religious, cultural, or educational purposes. Even today, for those seeking a setting that is neither ultra-Orthodox nor narrowly defined by one national origin or ritual practice, the JCC remains the primary option.

This centralization has structural consequences. It has made the JCC into A. called an *"all-in-one place,"* where people who might not otherwise share communal space in other contexts find themselves side by side. A French-speaking Sephardi family attends services alongside secular American Jews. Israeli expatriates drop off their children for Sunday School while a Japanese convert helps prepare the kiddush lunch. As Ds., longtime member noted:

"This is the only Jewish space here that isn't primally for tourists. If you want community, you come here. Even if you only come once a month. There's nowhere else."

This spatial necessity produces a kind of diversity by default**.** It is not the result of a deliberate pluralistic ideology, but a practical response to context. In countries where Jewish communities are larger or more institutionally diverse, different ritual styles, cultural traditions, or levels of observance are often housed in separate organizations. In Tokyo, however, the scarcity of Jewish spaces means that the JCC must accommodate them all at once. As a result, the boundaries between different forms of Jewish practice are softened. As Ra. explained, "*We come from a Sephardi background, and my son was surprised the first time he heard blessings in English here sometimes. But we adjusted. Everyone here adjusts. That's how it works."*

Avtar Brah's concept of diasporic space is particularly useful for understanding this dynamic. For Brah, diaspora is not simply a matter of physical displacement or cultural nostalgia. It is a relational field, produced by intersecting histories, trajectories, and social positions.[63] Diasporic space is shaped as much by constraints and proximity as by shared tradition. In the case of Tokyo, the JCC becomes a diasporic space not because of common origins, but because it is the only space in which those with very different origins converge and sustain communal life. Its diversity, therefore, is not a reflection of cohesion but of convergence.

The pluralism that emerges from this convergence is practical, not ideological. Participants often acknowledged that they would not necessarily be part of the same community elsewhere. *"In France, we had our own shul,"* said Ra. *"Here, we go to JCC because it is close and it is welcoming. And we all need that here."* Another member, S.,

explained: "*It's not always easy to feel connected to everyone. But the thing is, the JCC is what we have. So people make the effort.*"

Within this convergence, new norms develop. Services blend Ashkenazi and Sephardi melodies. Events reflect both North American and Israeli customs. Language use toggles between English, Hebrew, French, Japanese and sometime others, depends on who showed up at the moment. Such flexibility would be difficult to sustain in larger, more segmented communities, but in Tokyo it is a condition of communal survival. As Brah emphasizes, diasporic space is not defined by unity, but by its capacity to hold tension and complexity.[64] The Jewish Community of Japan does not erase difference. It gathers difference it into a shared space of negotiation, because of this given reality .

4.3.3 From Constraint to Engagement: Identity as Practice

The scarcity of institutional resources for Jewish life in Japan does not lead to passivity. On the contrary, it frequently gives rise to heigh personal and collective engagement. In a context where Jewishness is neither reflected in the public sphere nor supported by state institutions, individuals often become more active in constructing their identity and sustaining communal life. Participants repeatedly described how they began doing more for their Jewish identity after arriving in Japan than they had in their countries of origin. R., who had rarely attended synagogue while living in New York remarked, *"I never did anything in the U.S., but here I teach, I plan, I bake. If I don't help, it won't happen."* M. also said, *"Everyone here is doing something for the community, because if we don't, no one else will."*

This active behavior toward Jewish life was not limited to ritual observance. It extended to event planning, teaching, cultural initiatives, and acts of care. Throughout the course of fieldwork, I observed and participated in dozens of events initiated and led by community members themselves. These included a speaker night featuring Noa Argamani, a recently released Israeli hostage and a survivor who spoke about her experience; a jazz night themed around Jewish musical traditions; a Moroccan-Jewish cooking class; and a book reading and discussion session centered on diasporic literature. Other activities emerged in response to specific needs or interests: a Sukkot-themed origami workshop for children, a Jewish LGBTQ+ gathering, and a Holocaust testimony evening with J., a survivor who shared his story with the community.

What ties these events together is not only their variety, but the fact that they were not directed from above. They were initiated by members who identified a gap, a desire, or an opportunity, and then took action. These events were hosted at the JCC, some funded through member donations, or built on informal collaborations. They reflect a pattern of grassroots responsibility that is particularly visible in smaller diasporic communities, where identity is not institutionally managed, but communally practiced.

This pattern can be read through Stuart Hall's formulation of identity as a process of positioning.[65] Identity, for Hall, is not a fixed essence to be discovered, but a set of practices that unfold through action and in relation to particular cultural and historical contexts. In Japan, where there is little structural support or social recognition for Jewishness, identity is produced through what people do: organizing, attending, building, doing by themselves. The absence of scaffolding does not eliminate identity - it relocates it into lived behaviors.

This also resonates with Brah's view that diasporic space is produced through affective and material practices of belonging.[66] The JCC is not meaningful only because of its physical structure, but because of what is made possible within it. While the building itself provides a place to gather, it is the events, rituals, and everyday collaborations that transform it into a lived space of diaspora. All of the events described above whether a Holocaust testimony or a children's Sukkot craft session, took place within the JCC, but they reflected the diverse social relationships, cultural imaginations, and individual motivations that members brought with them. The diasporic space, then, is not the building alone. It is the social world temporarily constructed inside it.

Participants frequently linked this sense of engagement to the feeling of being needed. "In big communities, you can just show up," C. said. *"Here, if you don't show up, it doesn't happen."* This awareness produces a form of accountability that transforms identity from something inherited into something enacted. People here do not merely "have" a Jewish identity they work hard to have it.

4.3.4 Strategic Invisibility

In contrast to the expressive dynamics of communal life within the JCC, many participants described an external reality shaped by strategic navigation. The negotiation of Jewish identity in broader Japanese society often involved choices about how, when, and whether to identify as Jewish at all. These choices were not framed as acts of denial. Rather, they emerged from a context in which Judaism is largely unfamiliar, and where recognition cannot be assumed. In this sense, the Japanese setting does not oppose Jewishness but renders it illegible.

This kind of illegibility produced a need for selective positioning. As noted earlier, many participants chose not to disclose their Jewish identity in work or neighborhood settings. Others rephrased or softened explanations when Jewish practices affected daily routines. This management takes many forms: removing kippot outside the JCC, avoiding references to holidays at work, using general terms like "cultural event" or "family thing" to avoid detailed explanations, or choosing not to correct assumptions altogether. These adaptations are not always conscious acts of concealment. Often, they reflect a desire for coherence in a setting where Jewishness may not have a ready referent.

The decision to disclose or remain silent, then, cannot be understood without reference to the cultural field in which it occurs. As Stuart Hall has argued, identity is not an essential core to be expressed but a position taken up in relation to specific conditions.[67] It is through this lens that we can understand the patterned quietness described by many participants, not as absence of identity, but as a calculated articulation of it. In Japan, where religious affiliation is often treated as private, and where minority traditions are generally absent from public discourse, not naming oneself can be a way of protecting clarity rather than withholding truth. This is particularly evident in the contrast between spaces. Within the JCC, Jewishness is taken for granted. Outside, it must be translated, or managed. The same individual who speaks Hebrew at kiddush may choose not to mention a Jewish holiday to colleagues. The contrast is not contradictory. It is responsive. Identity becomes something that moves, flexes, and calibrates itself to its setting. As Hall notes, identities are the positions which the subject is obliged to take up, always shaped within discourse and power.[68] In a cultural setting like Japan, where Judaism is not a visible category, silence may be the only legible position available.

Yet silence is not neutral. It reflects both the effort of navigating ambiguity and the affective weight of never being fully understood. Some participants described this as a form of quiet fatigue, one that accumulates not from oppression, but from continual translation. Others preferred it. For them, the freedom from explanation felt protective, even liberating. In either case, Jewish identity in Japan is not fixed or uniform. It is conditional. It is positioned.

This condition is not unique to Japan, but the Japanese context intensifies it. The relative absence of public religion, the emphasis on social harmony, and the historical distance from Jewish life all shape how Jewishness can be expressed, or not.[69].

4.3.5 Conclusion

This section has examined how Jewish identity is negotiated in the Japanese public sphere, where recognition is limited and visibility often requires careful calibration. Unlike the internal dynamics of shared community life within the JCC, these are individual acts, decisions about when to explain, when to downplay, when to translate, and when to remain silent. Each participant, in their own way, performs a balancing act between presence and invisibility.

Stuart Hall's framing of identity as a positioning helps interpret these adaptations as relational, context-driven responses rather than inconsistencies. [70] Avtar Brah's concept of diasporic space adds that identity is not only performed individually but also shaped by the structural realities of the host society.[71] In Tokyo, where Judaism is neither visible nor supported institutionally, the very act of identifying as Jewish becomes a form of cultural labor. But this negotiation does not remain outside. The decisions individuals

make in daily life, how to speak, when to disclose, how to frame Jewishness - are carried into the JCC and shape how identity is later expressed within its communal space.

This overlap between external pressures and internal meaning-making can be best understood through Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space"; a space not defined by origin or destination, but by the cultural hybridity that emerges when individuals live between systems of meaning.[72] The members of the JCJ are not simply moving between two identities (Jewish and Japanese), but living in a space of negotiation where both are reshaped through contact. In this third space, Jewishness becomes something neither entirely traditional nor entirely assimilated, but something newly formed through movement, compromise, and creativity.

What becomes clear is that these two processes, the internal and the external, are not separate**.** They shape one another constantly. Each individual is negotiating Jewish identity on two fronts: internally, in conversation with other Jewish members who bring diverse backgrounds, and externally, in relation to a broader society that often lacks the categories to recognize Jewishness at all. Their experiences outside shape how they enter and engage within the JCC, and their experiences inside give them strength, language, and community to face the outside world.

Ultimately, it is these individuals, with their plural backgrounds and ongoing identity negotiations, who collectively produce the identity of the JCJ**.** That identity is not formed solely within the walls of the JCC, nor entirely in the public streets of Tokyo, but in the movement between them**.** And in both spaces, the Japanese context is never neutral. It presses in gently but persistently, shaping the ways that identity can be expressed, the boundaries of visibility, and the emotional work required to belong. What results is not a

single Jewish identity, but a diasporic and situated identity, constantly adapted and redefined within the Japanese environment, by the people who live it.

Footnotes

45. Hall, Stuart. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, 222–237. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990.
46. Ibid., 225.
47. Ibid., 226.
48. Hall, Stuart. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, 222–237. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990.
49. Ibid., 226.
50. Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 1996, 242.
51. Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 226.
52. Stuart Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), pp**. 1–6**.
53. Ibid., 6.
54. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 225.
55. Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 181.
56. Stuart Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?” 4.
57. Ibid., 6.
58. Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 181
59. David G. Goodman and Masanori Miyazawa, *Jews in the Japanese Mind: The History and Uses of a Cultural Stereotype* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), 17–24.
60. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222.
61. Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 181–186.
62. Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 225.
63. Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 181–186.
64. Ibid., 193.

65. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.
66. Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 190–192.
67. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.
68. Ibid., 226.
69. Mark R. Mullins, *Christianity Made in Japan: A Study of Indigenous Movements* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1998), 34–36.
70. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.
71. Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 192.
72. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), esp. pp. 53–56.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis has examined how Jewish identity is constructed, negotiated, and expressed within the Jewish community of Tokyo. Drawing on interviews, participant observation, and theoretical frameworks, it has explored both the internal dynamics of the community and the external forces shaping it. What emerges is a portrait of a community that is neither static nor uniform. Rather, Jewish identity in the JCJ is formed through movement, participation, and constant negotiation, not only within the community, but also in relation to Japan as a host society.

The history of Jewish life in Japan has shaped the foundation upon which the current community stands. As Chapter 2 showed, Jews in Japan never arrived as a unified group. From wartime refugees to Cold War expatriates, each wave of settlement was shaped by broader geopolitical forces. Unlike other Asian Jewish communities that developed around merchant networks or formal Jewish institutions, the Tokyo community grew incrementally, shaped by individuals, families, and temporary settlers who chose to stay. The result is a small but enduring presence that has consistently adapted to its environment.

The Jewish Community of Japan (JCJ), described in Chapter 3, reflects this history of flexibility. Originally structured to serve a narrow set of expats, it gradually evolved into a pluralistic hub. Today, the JCC is home to families from across the world, many of whom are bicultural and long-term residents. It is a place where children of mixed heritage attend Sunday School, Japanese spouses light candles on Shabbat, and interfaith families celebrate Jewish and Japanese holidays together. As Chapter 3 argued, this is not

a community that relies on inherited continuity. Rather the community survives and often thrives through active participation.

This participation, however, does not occur in a vacuum. The uniqueness of Tokyo as a context, explored in Chapter 2, deeply shapes the character of the JCJ. Japanese society does not offer Jews full visibility, but neither does it challenge their presence in overt ways. Most members are read not as Jews but as generic foreigners. Religious diversity and Jewishness is tolerated, but often misunderstood. Cultural norms of discretion and social conformity also influence how members express their identity in public. These conditions are distinct from those found in Hong Kong, Singapore, or Australia, and as such, they produce a distinct kind of Jewish communal life.

The analytical chapters (Chapter 4) brought these processes into focus. As argued in Section 4.2, Jewish identity in Tokyo is not inherited, but it is produced. Members are not simply being Jewish; they sustain Jewishness through action, engagement, and emotional labor. Stuart Hall's theory shows us that identity is not fixed, but formed through positioning. In the JCJ, that positioning takes place in a shared space marked by difference. People arrive with different languages, rituals, and experiences, and yet they co-construct a sense of belonging. This process often begins with their children. The Sunday School, in particular, becomes a site where identity is transmitted not by reproducing fixed norms, but by producing new ones that can survive in the Japanese context.

This shared space is also, as Avtar Brah suggests, a diasporic one. It is shaped by also routes rather than only roots. The JCJ is not only a place where people gather it is a space of convergence, where pasts and futures are negotiated together. Belonging here does not require an absolute sameness regarding Jewishness and it requires effort. This is

especially visible in the emotional labor of those raising mix heritage children, supporting converts, or creating Jewish meaning in interfaith households. It is in this convergence that a collective identity emerges.

In Section 4.3, the thesis turned outward, showing how individuals navigate their Jewish identity in the wider Japanese context. For many, Jewishness is not always publicly visible. Some avoid mentioning it. Others explain dietary needs or holidays only when necessary. These decisions are shaped by Japan's norms around modesty, group behavior, and foreignness. In this context, silence becomes another form of identity performance. Yet, as Bhabha reminds us, identity is often formed in this "third space" which is between cultures, within ambiguity. Tokyo Jews do not simply assimilate or preserve. They create hybrid practices: kimono at Jewish weddings, gefilte fish adapted with Japanese flavors, Hebrew songs sung by children who speak Japanese at home.

What this paper ultimately shows is that Jewish identity in Tokyo is both relational and contextual. Each member is negotiating their identity, internally, in relation to other Jews who bring their own diverse histories, and externally, in relation to Japanese society. These negotiations are not separate. They shape one another. The JCC is built by those individuals. Its internal character is inseparable from the conditions around it. The atmosphere of cautious belonging, of pluralism without doctrine, is a reflection of the broader environment in which this community exists.

Throughout its history, the JCJ has responded to geopolitical shifts, demographic changes, and cultural realities. Its current form is not inevitable. It is contingent, shaped by who is here in Japan and what is possible in these settings in a certain time spot. This is also true of other Jewish communities, each of which reflects different host conditions. What sets

Tokyo apart is not only the absence of antisemitism or its relatively small size, but the specific way its members have created space for themselves. This community does not ask for alignment before participation. It invites participation as a path to identity. This highlights how an ethnic community, including a diasporic ethnic community, is shaped by the setting in which it exists. The host society, in this case Japan, plays a powerful role in influencing how identity is expressed, sustained, and transformed.

Of course, this study has its limitations. It focused on those who are active in the JCJ, and does not include the perspectives of Jews in Tokyo who chose not to join the community. It also did not follow the emerging generation of mixed-heritage children into adulthood, nor those who grew up in the JCJ and eventually left it. These are important questions for future research.

Yet within its scope, the study offers a close view of how Jewish identity can be shaped in a place with no indigenous Jewish presence in a society where Judaism is unknown, and Jewishness must be explained, translated, and embodied again and again. What emerges is not a fragile identity. It is adaptive, hybrid, emotionally grounded, and alive.

The JCJ reminds us that diaspora is not only a condition of displacement, but also a space of creativity in which Identity is always in movement, in process. It is a reminder that identity is not something we carry unchanged. Rather it is something we make together, in the places we live.

Limitations and Further Research

This study focused specifically on current adult members of the Jewish Community Center (JCC) in Tokyo and therefore does not represent the full spectrum of Jewish life in Japan. It did not include Jews living in Tokyo who are not affiliated with the JCC, nor did it follow the younger generation of mixed-heritage children who are currently growing up in the community. In addition, the study did not consider the perspectives of individuals who were raised in the JCC but have since chosen to leave, nor did it examine other Jewish communities in Japan, such as Chabad houses or smaller independent networks. Finally, the research was limited to the Jewish context and did not draw comparative insights from other ethnic minority or diasporic groups in Japan. Future studies could expand on these areas to build a broader understanding of how identity is negotiated in different communal and cultural settings.

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Appendix A: Interview Overview and Participant Information

1. Interview Procedure and Ethical Considerations

This research is based on 25 semi-structured interviews conducted between January and May 2025. All interviews were conducted in English with adult members of the Jewish Community Center (JCC) in Tokyo.

All interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical research standards for human subjects. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidential handling of their personal data. Informed consent was obtained either verbally or in writing prior to each interview. All interviews were conducted in private settings, either in person or online. Most took place in a private room at the JCC, while three were conducted via Zoom, three in participants' offices, and one in a participant's home.

Participants were explicitly told that they could refuse to answer any question they did not feel comfortable with and were free to end the interview at any point without consequence. Most interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent. One interview was not recorded, as per the participant's request; it was fully transcribed in real time by the researcher.

Throughout the interview process, I was careful to maintain a neutral and non-directive stance. I refrained from expressing personal opinions or giving verbal or non-verbal feedback (such as facial expressions) that might influence participant responses. I also avoided leading follow-up questions. Instead, I used open-ended prompts such as "Can

you elaborate on that point?” or “Do you have an example?”, encouraging participants to expand in their own words. The guiding principle in all interviews was to allow participants to speak at length and in their own terms, without interruption or researcher influence.

In selecting interviewees, I aimed to reflect the diversity of the JCJ membership by including participants from a wide range of ages, national and cultural backgrounds, professions, and roles within the community**.** All participants are anonymized in this thesis using coded initials (e.g., Y., J., T., R., B.).

Interview Length: All interviews lasted between 50 and 100 minutes.

Recording:

- 24 interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent.
- 1 interview was not recorded, as per the participant's request. That interview was fully transcribed by hand during the session by the researcher.

Location:

- The majority of interviews were conducted privately at the JCC, usually in the library or classroom.
- 3 interviews were conducted online via Zoom.
- 3 interviews were held at the participants’ offices.
- 1 interview took place in a participant’s home.

2. Summary of Participant Characteristics

Below are summaries of the participants' basic demographic and background characteristics.

2.1. Gender and Age Range

Gender	Count
Male	16
Female	9

Age Range	Count
30`s	5
40`s	6
50`s	6
60`s	5
80`s	3

2.2 . Japanese Spouse

- 14 out of 25 participants reported having a Japanese spouse.

2.3 . Country of Upbringing

Country of Upbringing	Count
USA	8
Israel	2
France	2

Syria	1
Japan	1
Hungary, NZ	1
Canada	2
Brazil	1
German	1
Ethiopia, America	1
India, America	1
Morroco, Israel	1
Australia	1
Germany	1

2.4 . Jewish Heritage / Identity Categories

Heritage Category	Count
Ashkenazi	13
Sepharadi	5
Mizrahi	2
Ashkenazi & Mizrahi	1
Ethiopian	1
Cochin (India)	1
Convert	2

2.5 . Professions

Profession	Count
Business Executive	5
Retired Academic	2
IT Specialist	2
Software Engineer	1
HR Professional	1
Engineer	1
Legal Professional	1
Business Owner	1
Medical Doctor	1
Accounting Professional	1
Performing Arts	1
Musician	1
Homemaker	1
Writer	1
Entrepreneur	1
Banker	1
Psychologist	1
Rabbi	1
Diplomacy	1

3. Participant Code Reference Table

No.	Code	Gender	Role in Community
1.	Rabbi Sheer	Male	Rabbi
2.	Jo.	Male	President
3.	Je.	Male	Board member
4.	C.	Male	Board member
5.	S.	Female	Board member
6.	M.	Female	Sunday school
7.	I.	Female	Sunday school
8.	K.	Female	Sunday school
9.	Yo.	Male	Regular member
10.	T.	Male	Regular member
11.	Ra.	Male	Regular member
12.	B.	Female	Regular member
13.	J.	Male	Regular member
14.	Ar.	Male	Regular member
15.	Ri.	Male	Regular member
16.	R.	Female	Regular member
17.	Yn.	Male	Regular member
18.	A.	Female	Regular member
19.	Y.	Female	Regular member
20.	Dt.	Male	Regular member
21.	Ds.	Male	Board member

22.	Br.	Female	Regular member
23.	Dr.	Male	Regular member
24.	D.	Male	Regular member
25.	Ag.	Male	Regular member

APPENDIX B: Interview Questions

For All members:

A. Personal Background & Jewish Identity

1. Can you tell me your story? What has shaped your background, your nationality, Jewish upbringing, age, occupation, languages, and places you've lived?
2. What brought you to Japan? Can you describe your journey leading up to living here?
3. Has your Jewish identity changed since moving to Japan? Can you share a moment when you felt this shift?
4. How do you usually introduce yourself in Japan? Can you recall a time when you had to decide whether or not to mention your Jewish identity?
5. If you had to narrate your identity journey, which aspects would take center stage (e.g., nationality, religion, profession, ethnicity)? Which parts have shifted over time?

B. Jewish Community & Participation in Japan

6. Can you describe your first experience with the JCC or another Jewish community space in Japan? What was it like?
7. How has your involvement in Jewish community events changed over time? Can you recall any turning points that influenced your level of participation?
8. Do you feel a sense of belonging in the Jewish community here? Can you share a story that illustrates this?

9. What makes the JCC or Jewish spaces meaningful for you? Is there a specific event or tradition that feels particularly special?
10. Do you play a specific role within the JCC? How did that come about?
11. How have you seen the JCC evolve? Can you recall a moment when you noticed a significant change in how the community functions?

C. Diversity & Integration within the Jewish Community

12. What are your impressions of the diversity within the Jewish community here? Can you describe an interaction that made you aware of different Jewish backgrounds?
13. Would you say the Jewish community in Japan has a shared identity? Can you think of a moment where this was particularly clear—or unclear?
14. Do you feel that members of different backgrounds can fully express their identities here? Can you recall a situation that illustrates this?
15. Do you think any Jewish person—or someone connected to Judaism—would feel at home here? Have you seen an example where this was or wasn't the case?
16. Have you been involved in other expatriate communities (e.g., American, French)? Can you describe a moment when you had to choose between Jewish spaces and other communities?
17. Some people say Jewish individuals in Japan are seen more as 'Westerners' than Jews. Have you personally experienced this? How did it make you feel?
18. Do you think Jewish identity here is more flexible or hybrid than in other places? Can you describe a situation where you felt this hybridity?

D. Japanese Influence on Jewish Life & Cultural Hybridity

19. Can you describe a time when Japan's cultural norms shaped how you express your Jewish identity?
20. How do you think Japanese society perceives religious diversity? Have you had any interactions that made this perception clear?
21. How does being Jewish in Japan compare to other places you've lived? Can you tell me about a moment when this difference was particularly striking?
22. Has the idea of 'foreigner' (外人/外国人) affected how you see yourself as Jewish here? Can you describe an experience that shaped your view?
23. Have you integrated any Japanese cultural elements into your Jewish identity or daily life? Can you share an example of when this felt natural or challenging?
24. Have you seen any unique Jewish-Japanese cultural blends? (e.g., holiday celebrations, food adaptations like gefilte fish onigiri). Can you describe one that stood out to you?
25. Does being in Japan allow you to experience your Jewish identity in a way that feels different from anywhere else? Can you recall a moment when you felt this?
26. If you have a Japanese partner or children, how do you balance Jewish and Japanese traditions? Can you share a specific experience that illustrates this?

E. Challenges & Reflections

27. What has been the most difficult part of maintaining your Jewish identity in Japan? Can you share a specific moment when this challenge was particularly evident?
28. Have you ever experienced misconceptions about Judaism from Japanese people? Can you describe a time when this happened?

29. Do you think antisemitism is present in Japan? If so, how has it affected how people express Jewish identity here?
30. When you think about 'home,' what places come to mind? Can you describe a moment when you felt most at home in Japan—or most distant from it?
31. If you have children (or plan to), how do you want them to experience Jewish identity in Japan? Do you have any stories that illustrate how this might unfold?
32. What do you think the future holds for the Jewish community in Tokyo? Can you imagine a scenario that represents where it might be in 10 years?
33. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences? If you could tell a future Jewish resident of Japan one thing, what would it be?

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Additional Questions for Key JCC Members

A. Background & Role in the JCC

1. Can you tell me your story? How did you become involved in the JCC?
2. What motivated you to take on your role? Can you describe the moment when you decided to engage with the community?
3. How has the JCC changed over time? Can you share a significant turning point in its evolution?
4. What do you see as your personal responsibility within the JCC? Was there a moment when this role became particularly meaningful?
5. How do you keep members engaged and attract new ones? Can you share an example of a successful strategy?

6. Has your role in the JCC changed your own Jewish identity? Can you recall a moment when this became evident?

B. The JCC's Role in Community Identity & Diversity

7. How does the JCC help shape Jewish identity in Tokyo? Can you share a specific example of its impact?
8. What cultural, religious, and social activities define the JCC? Are there any events that feel especially important?
9. How does the JCC create a sense of belonging? Can you describe a time when you saw this happening?
10. How does the JCC serve its diverse members? Can you share an example of how different backgrounds are embraced?
11. How do you navigate religious diversity within the JCC? Can you recall a moment when this was particularly challenging or rewarding?
12. Would you say the JCC fosters a shared community identity? What moments have reinforced this?
13. Do members freely express their differences, or is there an expectation of unity? Can you recall a time when this balance was tested?
14. Is there anyone who might feel excluded? Can you share a time when inclusion was a challenge?
15. How has the community's demographic composition shifted over time? Do any specific changes stand out?

C. Japan as a Host Culture & Cultural Adaptation

16. How does Japanese culture shape JCC events? Can you share an example?
17. Are there Japanese influences in JCC traditions? Have you seen any unique adaptations?
18. How does Jewish identity in Japan differ from other Jewish communities worldwide? Can you recall a moment when this was clear?
19. Does the JCC engage with the local Japanese community? Can you describe an interaction that stood out?

D. Challenges & Future Outlook

20. What is the biggest challenge the JCC faces today? Can you describe a time when this challenge was particularly evident?
21. How does the JCC support Jewish families raising children in Japan?
22. What do you see in the future for Jewish life in Tokyo? Can you imagine what it might look like in 10 or 20 years?