



Belonging: What It Is, Who It Includes, and How We Build It

One community's journey toward understanding, defining, and promoting belonging in Jewish life

Jewish Federation of San Diego • June 2026

The Question of Our Moment

Belonging has become one of the defining questions in Jewish communal life. Across North America, federations, synagogues, JCCs, and Jewish organizations of every kind are asking what belonging means, how to recognize it, and how to cultivate more of it. The question is urgent, and it is also genuinely complicated. It touches on identity and inclusion, on relationships and institutions, and ultimately on the oldest question Jewish communities have ever asked: who belongs to us, and to whom do we belong?

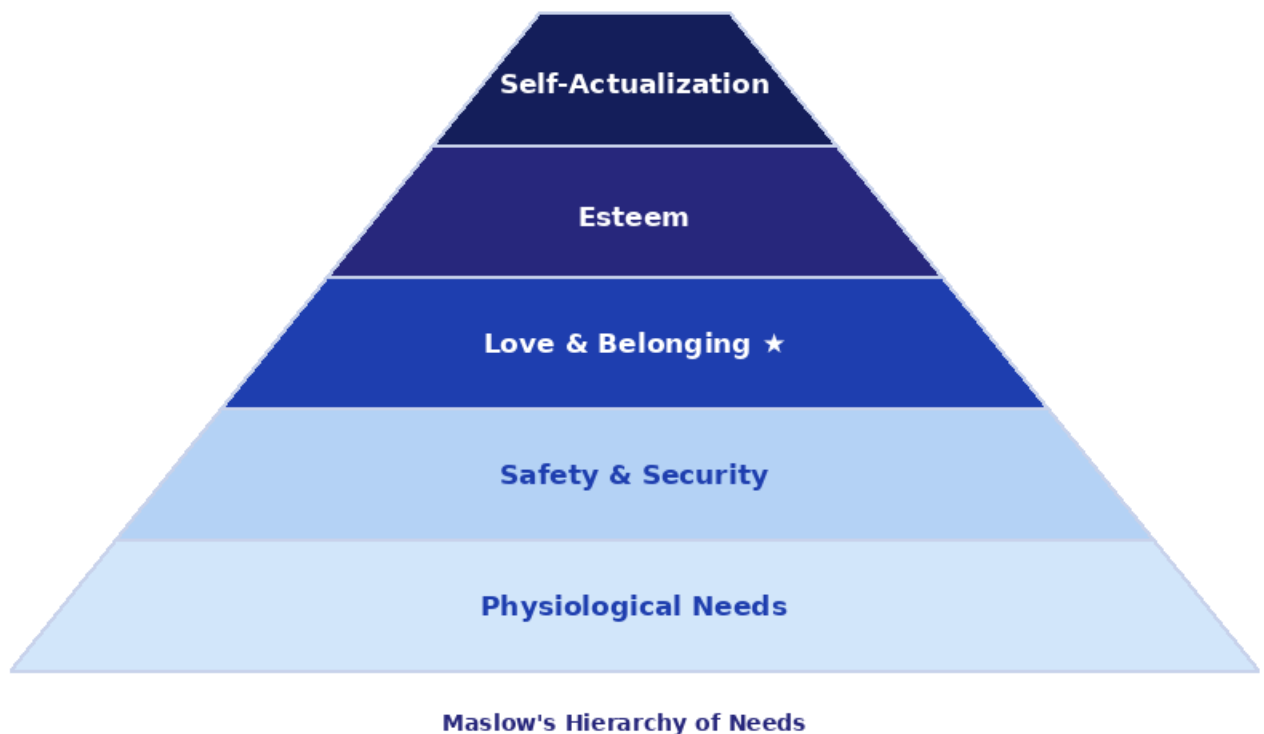
In San Diego, the question is anything but abstract. The 2022 community study, *A Blueprint for Our Future*, found that only 39 percent of Jewish adults feel a meaningful sense of belonging to the local Jewish community, and barely one in ten (11%) describes that sense as strong. Only 24 percent are very satisfied with their level of participation in Jewish life, while 38% are not. Most telling of all is what stands in the way. The most common barrier was not cost, distance, or lack of interest. It was people. Sixty-seven percent cited not knowing anyone as the primary obstacle to participation, and 84 percent said they feel more comfortable at Jewish events when they know people in the room.

The events of October 7, 2023 sharpened the question further. In the months that followed, many Jews returned to communal spaces, and the surge of engagement was real. But it taught us an essential distinction: engagement and belonging are not the same thing. Attendance can rise while genuine connection lags behind. The *Blueprint* data make the same point from another angle. Among the community's most involved engagement group, 42 percent report being not too satisfied with their participation. People are showing up but not feeling fulfilled. Counting participation tells us who came; it does not tell us who felt they belonged.

So, what is belonging? How should we define it? Who does it include? And how do we promote it? What follows is an account of our evolving insights, understanding, and answers. It has been an intellectual journey as much as a programmatic one for Federation, and it is far from over. And it's a journey Federation wants to go on together with our community.

What Belonging Is: From the Individual to the Communal

We began where most of the field begins. The traditional understanding of belonging centers on the individual's experience of being seen, heard, and valued. This framing has deep roots in psychology. Cornell University defines belonging as the feeling of security and support that comes from acceptance, inclusion, and identity within a group. Carl Rogers described it as a yearning for connection to others. Baumeister and Leary's landmark 1995 research identified belonging as a universal human need, hardwired into our species through our evolutionary history, and Maslow placed it on the third tier of his hierarchy, just above food, shelter, and safety. The absence of belonging is not a soft problem: it is linked to depression, anxiety, loneliness, and measurable harm to physical health.

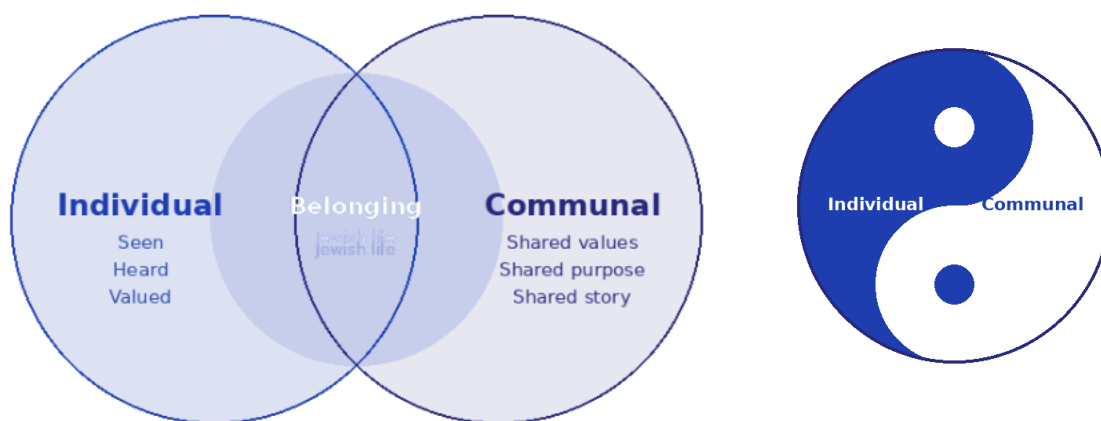


All of this is true, and none of it is sufficient. As our work matured, we noticed a limitation in the framing itself. If belonging is only about being seen, heard, and valued, then



belonging is all and only about the person. It treats community as a mirror whose job is to reflect the individual back to themselves. But belonging is, at its root, a communal concept. No one belongs alone. A definition of belonging that never looks beyond the individual cannot explain what people are belonging to, or what the community may rightly ask of them in return.

Belonging: Individual and Communal



So, we grew our understanding. To the individual dimension we added a communal one: being connected to others through shared values, shared purpose, and shared story. This is hardly a modern invention. The collectivist impulse is woven into the basic fabric of Jewish life. Many forms of Jewish prayer require a minyan of ten. On Yom Kippur, Jews confess in the plural. The very concept of peoplehood, the ties that bind Jews across place and time, asserts that Jewish belonging extends beyond the people we can see to a collective we can only imagine, and yet feel intensely.

Our working definition is therefore two sides of the same coin. On one side is the individual: who they are, what they bring, and whether they are seen, heard, and valued for it. On the other side is the communal: where and how they fit, whether they are connected to others through shared values, and whether they show up for the collective good. A strong Jewish community holds both at once. It meets individual needs for meaning, identity, acceptance, care, and growth, and it calls each individual into real relationship and responsibility with others. Belonging lives at the intersection of these two truths.



Three Levels of Belonging

As our definition matured, so did our understanding of where belonging actually happens. We have come to see belonging as operating on three distinct levels, each with its own role and purpose in how a person comes to feel at home in Jewish community.

Friendship (the local level). The first and most intimate level is friendship: knowing people and being known by them. This is where the San Diego data speak loudest. Nearly two thirds of adults under 50 say that not knowing many people is a barrier to participation, and roughly half of Jewish adults report having no or hardly any close Jewish friends. Seventy-four percent say that knowing other people is the single condition that most makes them feel welcome at Jewish events. Friendship is not a nice-to-have on top of community; it is the entry point to it.

Membership (the organizational level). The second level is formal affiliation with institutions: synagogues, JCCs, schools, Federation, and other organizations. In San Diego only 14 percent of Jewish households hold synagogue membership, and barely a quarter (23%) are members of any Jewish organization or group, reminders that institutional membership and belonging are not the same thing and that belonging is far broader than the membership rolls. Yet institutions still matter enormously. They provide the structure, ritual, continuity, and convening power within which friendships form and citizenship is exercised.

Citizenship (the communal level). The third and most mature level is felt membership in a community larger than one's own social circle: the San Diego Jewish community as a whole, the Jewish people across the world, and the Jewish people across time. Citizenship in this sense carries both rights and responsibilities. It is the level at which shared values, collective memory, and mutual obligation do their work, and it is the level October 7 activated so powerfully for so many. It is also the level this community's Blueprint process has been building toward: a San Diego Jewish community whose members are not merely present but genuinely invested, accountable, and bound to one another across time.

Each level has its own role, and a deficit at one level cannot be solved at another. A peoplehood program will not cure a friendship deficit, and a friendship circle will not by itself sustain institutions. This insight now shapes how we measure belonging: the framework we contributed to JFNA's Flourishing Communities Pulse Survey distinguishes five dimensions (relationships, recognition, peoplehood, participation, and shared values





and purpose) precisely so that we can see which kind of belonging is thriving and which kind needs attention (see Appendix A).

Who Belongs?

Defining belonging turns out to be only part of the challenge. The other, equally challenging, part is deciding who the definition is for.

Some approach belonging strictly as a matter of diversity, equity, and inclusion, focused on Jews of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, people with disabilities, and other traditionally non-aligned or disenfranchised groups. The data justify the concern. In San Diego, 18% of adults identify as non-white and 13% of children are considered as Persons of Color, only 30 percent of Jewish adults say Jewish organizations are very welcoming to Jews of color, 35 percent say the same about LGBTQ+ individuals and 38 percent about people with disabilities - despite San Diego being ranked by The Human Rights Campaign on top if it's first ever Municipal Equality index.

Others insist that belonging is a universal question, affecting everyone regardless of age, sex, gender, denomination, or marital status. The data justify this view too. Dissatisfaction is not confined to the margins of our community; it spans the community. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of all adults say that they are not at all, or not too, satisfied with their level of participation in the San Diego Jewish Community. This figure rises to 50% when we look at those in the Cultural, Holiday and even Involved engagement groups. One Blueprint respondent put it in words that have stayed with us:

I imagine I'm not the only person kind of waiting in the wings, wanting to reconnect with our Jewish roots but not knowing how to do so... I don't really know what to connect to, what's available, whether I have standing to do so.

Blueprint for Our Future respondent

We have concluded that these two framings are complementary rather than competing. Belonging is a universal human need, and particular populations face particular barriers to it. An initiative that addresses only the universal will miss the specific gaps in welcome; one that addresses only specific identity groups will miss the involved volunteer quietly drifting away and the newcomer who never found a way in.

But there is a still deeper question beneath both framings: who counts as part of the Jewish community in the first place? What about the non-Jewish spouse in an interfaith marriage?



The non-Jewish children being raised in an interfaith family? The non-Jews who work in, volunteer for, and love Jewish organizations*? In San Diego these are not edge cases. Fifty-one percent of partnered Jews have a non-Jewish partner. Fifty-nine percent of Jewish children live in households with one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent. A full quarter of all people living in Jewish households are not themselves Jewish. When only 35 percent of Jewish adults say organizations are very welcoming to interfaith families, the belonging question and the continuity question become the same question.

*Of the approximately 120,000 people who work in Jewish spaces, nearly 35% are non-Jews. This is not an insignificant number.

The Shalom Hartman Institute's recent white paper, *Building Communities of Belonging*, has given our community invaluable language. Drawing on the late Rabbi Dr. David Ellenson, it distinguishes three concepts that are often collapsed into one. **Identity** is a person's own understanding of who they are. **Status** is conferred by communal authorities according to their criteria, regardless of self-understanding (identity). **Standing** is a person's place and reputation within a particular community. The power of the distinction is this: a person who lacks Jewish status (is not Jewish) may nevertheless be a member in good standing of a Jewish community, with real rights and real responsibilities, on the basis of their affiliation, participation, contribution, and care.

History supports the generosity of this framework. The biblical "ger", the non-Israelite who lived within the Israelite community, was integrated through shared rituals, legal protections, communal celebrations, and the simple act of embrace commanded in Leviticus: love the stranger who resides with you, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. The "ger" belonged without ceasing to be who they were. Today's Jewish-adjacent individuals, to use Hartman's term, often express their connection in ways indistinguishable from native-born Jews: keeping Shabbat rhythms, raising Jewish children, studying Jewish texts, serving on boards, and giving generously of their time and resources. As the white paper puts it, "Jewish uniformity is not a prerequisite for Jewish unity."

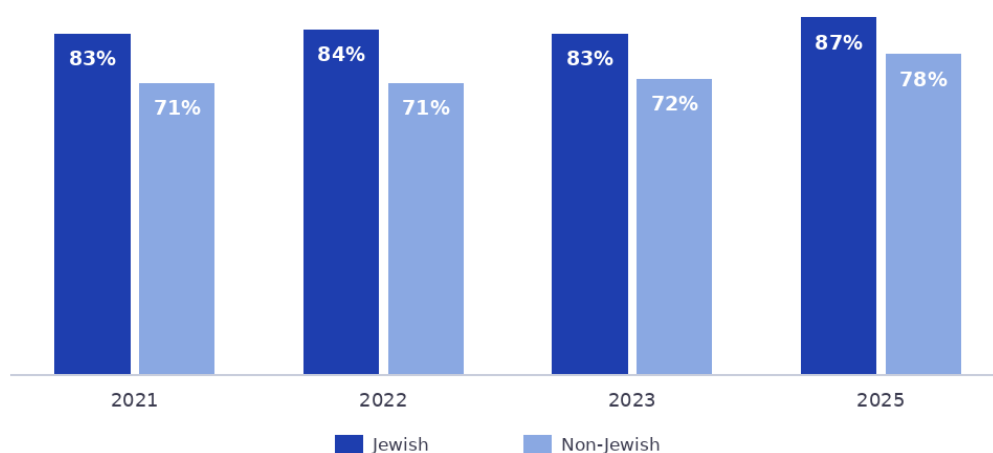
Federation's commitment to belonging raises a question worth asking plainly: who belongs to the Jewish community? If the answer includes not only Jews, but the people who staff our institutions (~36% of the estimated 120,000 people who work in Jewish spaces nationally are not-Jewish), and the non-Jewish partners who marry Jews and raise Jewish children (59% of children in Jewish households in San Diego have a non-Jewish parent*), then belonging is not only a net we must cast wide, but it is also something we build, not something we verify at the door.



*Recent data from 18Doors indicate that “73% of multi-heritage couples don't feel a sense of belonging in the Jewish community.”

The people who staff Jewish institutions offer a particularly clear window into this question, because they are among the most committed non-Jews in Jewish life and their experience is measured every year. Leading Edge’s national Employee Experience Survey has tracked belonging among Jewish and non-Jewish employees of Jewish nonprofits since 2021. The pattern is instructive in both directions.

I feel like I belong at my organization



Source: Leading Edge, Employee Experience Survey, State of Jewish Nonprofit Talent 2025

The encouraging news is that belonging has risen for everyone, and it has risen fastest for non-Jewish employees, climbing seven points since 2021 against four points for their Jewish colleagues. Deliberate investment appears to work: the gains follow the period in which the field began offering dedicated support to non-Jewish professionals. The sobering news is the gap that remains. In 2025, 87 percent of Jewish employees said they feel they belong at their organization, against 78 percent of non-Jewish employees, a nine-point difference that has narrowed but not closed. It holds across racial lines, which tells us the gap is about Jewishness itself and not a proxy for some other difference.

These are people who have made Jewish communal life their career. Sixteen percent of them have worked in the field for more than a decade. If belonging is still measurably harder to come by for the colleague who has given ten years to a Jewish organization, the question of who belongs is not an abstraction we can defer. It is a live question about people already in the room.



Honeymoon Israel (HMI) is a program that brings couples in interfaith relationships to Israel to explore Jewish life together, then helps them build lasting community back home. Since there is recent data for only 13 individuals from San Diego, not enough to conduct any significant analysis, the national HMI office shared its full national evaluation dataset with the Federation to analyze. The data, and subsequent analysis, show how impactful a single, intentional experience can be to promote a sense of belonging.

The data comes from a before-and-after national survey of 307 recent participants, and focused its measurements on one thing: how strongly people feel connected to a Jewish community, before the trip and after it. Results are reported for the whole group and for three groups within it: partners who were born Jewish, partners converting to Judaism, and partners who are not Jewish.

The Honeymoon Israel national data shows what building belonging can look like in practice. Among participants who are not Jewish, the partners often assumed to be on the edges of Jewish life, the sense of belonging to a local Jewish community rose from 35 percent to 83 percent after a single program. Their connection to Jewish community climbed 29 points overall, the largest gain of any group. One well-designed experience moved people from the margins to the center. It is a reminder that belonging is not a status the community grants to insiders. It is a welcome the community extends, and when we extend it deliberately, people accept.

Federation's own evaluation data supports this finding. Federation's data set is small but when our Giborim mission traveled to Israel and Sha'ar HaNegev, the cohort included two non-Jewish participants. One of them showed among the largest and most significant gains of anyone on the trip in the metrics that matter most: increased connection to the San Diego Jewish community, to global Jewish peoplehood, and strong motivation to engage more actively in the Jewish community at home.

Belonging work, it turns out, is not only for Jews, and each community must still set its own criteria for status and standing, and reasonable communities will set them differently. But a community that cannot make room, in some honest and dignified way, for the people who share its tables, raise its children, and carry its work, is not protecting or promoting belonging. It is rationing it.

Necessary, but Not Sufficient

A new source of evidence has since arrived. San Diego took part in the Jewish Federations of North America Flourishing Community Pulse Survey, a post-October 7 diagnostic of engagement and belonging built on the same five-dimension framework we helped shape.



Its findings confirm the heart of our three-level model, and they sharpen it in one crucial way: relationships are necessary for belonging, but they are not sufficient.

The Pulse sorts the community into engagement types, and two of them make the point vividly. The largest single group are the socially engaged, Jews whose Jewish lives run mostly through friends and peers. Virtually all of them, 100 percent, have regular Jewish friends, yet only about half, 53 percent, say they have found a place in the community where they feel they belong, and only 54 percent feel connected to a local Jewish community. A second group, whose Jewish life is anchored in the practices of the home, shows the same shortfall from the other direction: rich in private ritual and personal ties, only about a quarter, 27 percent, feel they have found their place in the wider community. Friendship and home practice are real and valuable, but on their own they stop at the threshold of the larger community.

In the language of our three levels, many San Diego Jews have reached friendship, and some have built deeply Jewish homes, without ever reaching citizenship: felt membership in a community larger than their own circle. This is precisely what we meant in saying that a deficit at one level cannot be solved at another. Having Jewish friends does track with belonging, but loosely; what tracks most tightly is depth. Only 31 percent believe anyone would notice if they stopped showing up. The task, then, is not simply to help people make friends. It is to help friendship deepen into being known, needed, and missed, and to open doors from the living room and the friend group into the life of the whole community.

How We Promote It

If belonging is relational at the individual level, collective at the communal level, and structured at the institutional level, then promoting it requires working on all three at once. Six commitments now guide our approach.

Invest in relationships as infrastructure. The consistent message of our data is that people need people, not simply more events. The traditional model of program-based engagement (attend, learn, go home) is insufficient on its own. We are shifting investment toward small groups and cohorts, personal invitation practices, and peer-to-peer connection, treating relationships not as a byproduct of programming but as the product itself. The Pulse data confirm this and add a caution: relationships are the foundation, not the finish, so we treat them as the starting point for belonging rather than its destination.

Turn connection into being known. If friendship is necessary but not sufficient, the work is to help it deepen. We are designing for the conditions the Pulse ties most closely to belonging: being noticed and missed, having people to count on, and sharing a common



purpose. In practice that means creating intentional spaces to be heard and to talk, not only to attend, such as listening circles, hosted conversations, and small cohorts that meet again and again, where a familiar face becomes someone who knows you, and where private and social Jewish life open outward into the whole community.

Learn from what already works. Our strongest evidence comes from immersive travel. Across three recent Federation missions (Cuba, Mexico City, and Israel/Shar HaNegev), 90 percent of participants reported a strengthened sense of belonging to the San Diego Jewish community, 100 percent formed new friendships they intend to continue, and 94 percent returned motivated to engage more actively at home. Travel works because it concentrates the conditions belonging requires everywhere: knowing people, being known, sharing meaningful experience, and feeling part of something larger than oneself. The task now is to embed those conditions in local life.

Meeting People Where They Are. Geography fragments our community: residents of the South and Inland regions, where 39 percent of young adults live, feel disconnected and have fewer Jewish friends. Finances constrain participation for 19 percent of households, rising to 30 percent of young adults and 37 percent of parents. Belonging strategies that ignore distance and cost will structurally exclude the very people we most need to reach, which is why mobile and neighborhood-based models, and affordability by design, are central rather than peripheral.

Coming Together. Through our Building Belonging initiative, Federation is convening the work across the community: a grassroots incubator that invests in individual, local community-builders, relational community-level engagement through Women's Philanthropy, and a Belonging Think Tank to develop shared language and strategy across organizations. The initiative also includes an internal belonging audit of Federation itself, because an organization cannot credibly build externally a culture it does not practice internally. Belonging must begin at home.

Measure what matters. Feelings can be measured, and measured well. Validated instruments now exist for social connectedness, loneliness, and belonging, and our five-dimension framework lets us track which kinds of belonging are growing and for whom. Continuous measurement keeps the work honest: it tells us whether the post-October 7 surge of engagement is hardening into durable belonging or fading as a temporary spike. The Flourishing Community Pulse now gives us that baseline, measuring belonging across engagement types so we can see not only how much belonging exists but for whom it is missing.



A Coin, Three Levels, and a Wide Tent

Our journey has taken us from a familiar starting point to a richer destination. Belonging begins with the individual experience of being seen, heard, and valued, but it does not end there. It is two sides of one coin: the individual, with who they are and what they bring, and the communal, with where and how they fit. It operates on three levels, friendship, membership, and citizenship, each with its own role in binding a person to community, from the most personal to the most mature. And it extends, in forms each community must define for itself, to a wider circle than formal status alone would suggest: to the spouse who builds the Jewish home, the child finding their way, the colleague who gives years of devoted work.

The data tell us our community has a belonging deficit. The same data tell us exactly where it lives and what closes it: people, invited personally, into relationships that deepen, within communities of shared value, supported by institutions willing to widen their embrace. The question “who belongs?” is finally best answered not in the abstract but by communities willing to ask it honestly, together. That is the work we have begun.

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Appendix A:

Federation's five core dimensions of belonging:

- **Relationships** – Having meaningful and supportive relationships with other Jews in San Diego that provide friendship, trust, and mutual support.
- **Recognition** – Feeling respected, valued, and accepted in the Jewish community for who I am, including my background, identity, family, and life circumstances.
- **Peoplehood** – Feeling a sense of emotional or cultural connection to Jewish people, traditions, and the local Jewish community.
- **Participation** – Being able to take part in Jewish community life through events, programs, learning, volunteering, rituals, or other activities.
- **Values / Shared Purpose** – Feeling part of a community that comes together around shared Jewish values and a collective commitment to supporting one another and making a positive impact.

JFNA's community survey measures 8 pillars of a flourishing community:

- Engaged
- Educated
- Belonging
- Active (community relations)
- Healthy
- Safety
- Caring
- Connected to globally (Israel and global Jewry)

