



Looking at Jewish Pluralism in Israel

One of the ongoing sticking points in Israel-Diaspora relations is the disconnect between Israel's Jewish-Israeli public space and the expectations of some Jewish communities throughout the world. Non-Israeli Jews (and quite a few Israelis) complain of the lack of Jewish 'pluralism' in Israel. They mainly refer to the fact that Orthodox Judaism in Israel is accorded superior status to that of other Jewish denominations. This year, the never-ending saga of the conflict over non-Orthodox space at the Western Wall prompted some to protest Israel's lack of resolve in adapting certain aspects of Jewish life to meet the expectations of Diaspora Jews, even when compromise decisions are reached for doing exactly that.

A JPPI study conducted earlier this year reveals a **built-in difficulty in bringing about an accepted mode of Jewish pluralism in Israel** because, despite widespread agreement over the need for tolerance and diversity, **the question of what Jewish pluralism is supposed to look like and exactly what it implies** is in dispute. It is also

difficult to persuade the Jewish public that a change is needed since 90 percent of Israeli Jews feel comfortable living in Israel "just the way they are." As far as they are concerned, no acute problem exists that absolutely necessitates change. Moreover, among those with a higher comfort level the study found a right-leaning political and religious orientation. Thus, the coalition presently managing Israel's affairs seems representative of contented Jews who feel comfortable with the existing situation.

The Pluralism in Israel survey was conducted as part of a broader JPPI project examining pluralism in Israel. Integral to this project was the establishment of a Pluralism Index with the capacity to track changes and trends concerning the ability of different Israeli communities to live alongside each other in mutual respect.¹ The first iteration of the Pluralism Index, released in May 2016, focused exclusively on Israeli Jews, under the working definition of Jewish pluralism as: "The condition in which Jews of different social classes, ideologies, religious streams, levels of beliefs and

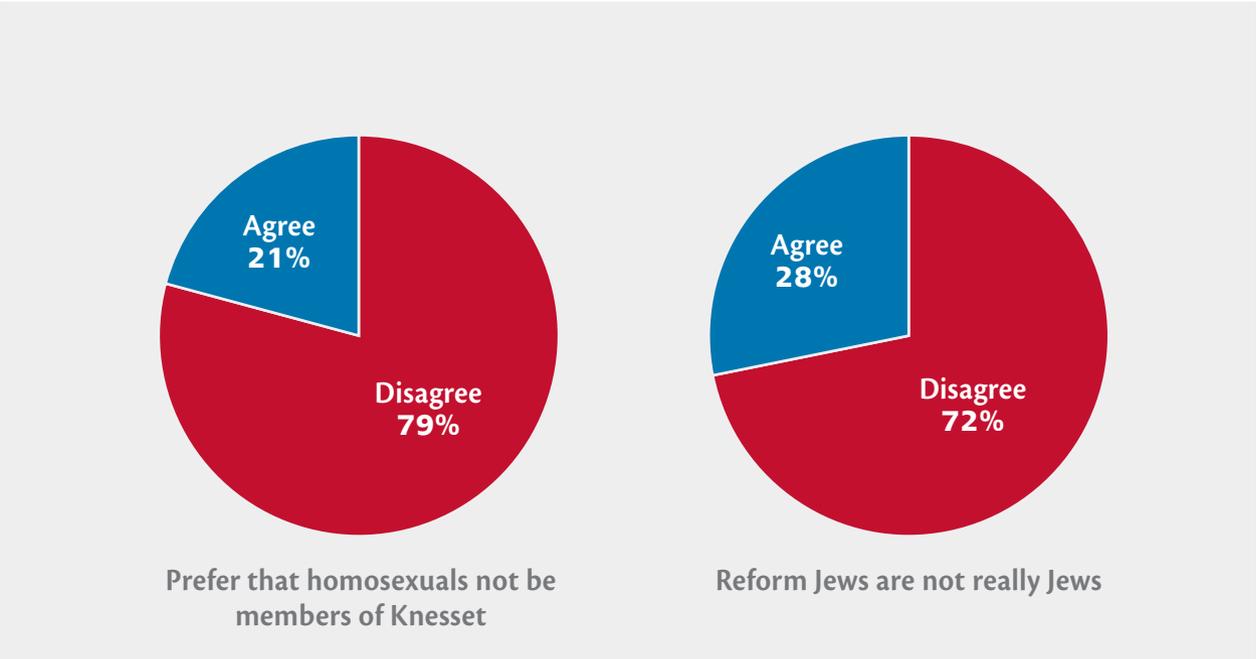
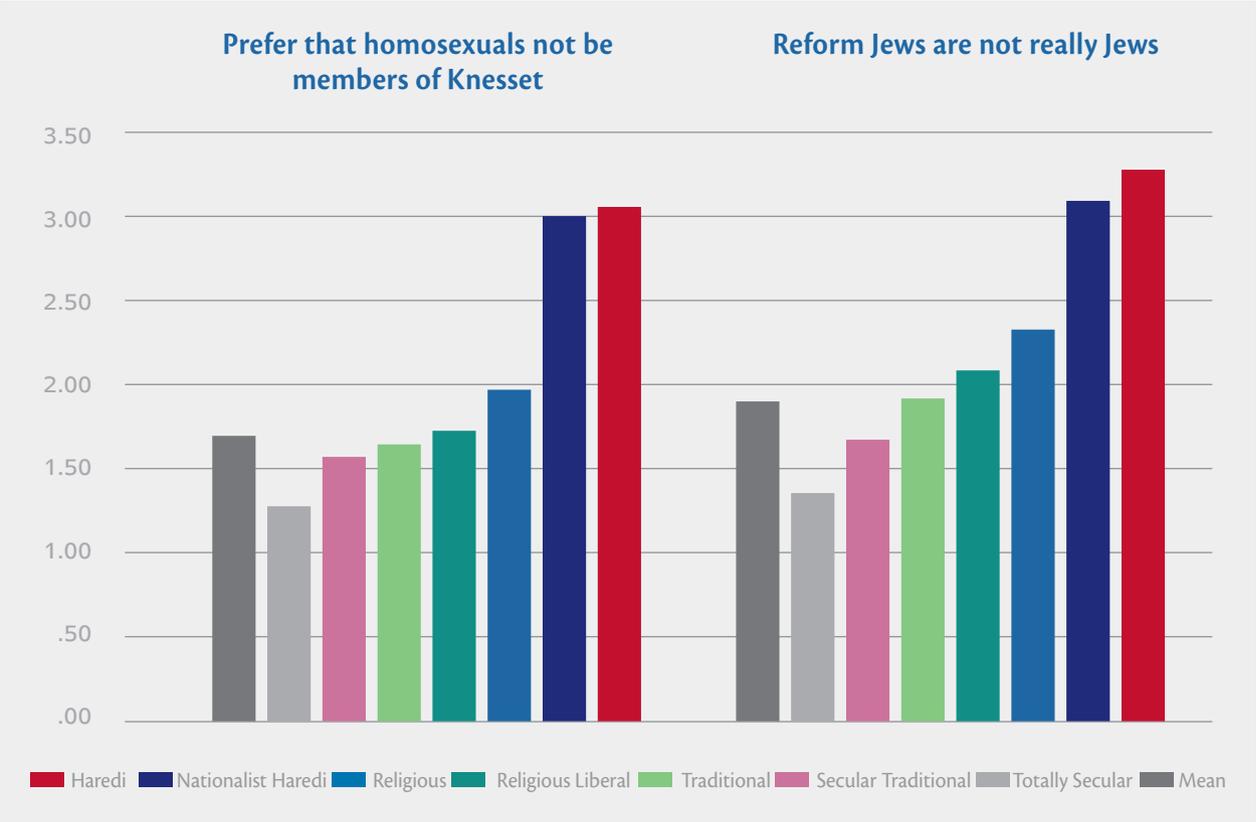
practices, genders, and ethnic backgrounds have equal opportunity to legitimately exercise their differences in the public sphere.”

The Institute's study reveals that different Jewish groups in Israel tend to accept the undergirding assumption that variation among Jews is natural and legitimate, and that it doesn't necessarily harm national unity. For example, the statement that "religious, traditional and secular Jews are all equally good Jews" is broadly agreed upon² as is the statement "the Israeli government needs to be much more considerate of minority opinions." Nevertheless, other significant studies conducted this year in Israel³ show that gaps exist between different groups on numerous fundamental issues, according to both political orientation and level of religiosity. For example, in regard to the question of whether Israel should allow civil marriage, the extent of agreement increases as one moves along the religious spectrum, from religious to secular, as it does when moving along the political scale from right to left.

Additionally, gaps are evident in the fundamental attitudes of different Jewish population groups toward one another. From a religious standpoint, for example, the *secular*, the *secular but somewhat traditional*, and the traditional sectors have an extremely negative estimation of the *Haredi* sector's contribution to the country. On the other hand, the religious sector (*liberal-religious, traditionally religious, and Haredi*) has a correspondingly negative opinion concerning the contribution of *Reform* Jews to the country. Left-leaning Israelis have a rather negative opinion of settlers, while right-leaning Israelis have a clearly negative opinion of those to their left.

Unsurprisingly, this and other studies reveal a gap between the positions of Jews in Israel and the positions of Jews in other Diaspora communities. This will likely make any attempt to fashion a Jewish pluralistic space that would enable large numbers of Jews to “feel at home” in Israel difficult. The government of Israel has a significant role to play in dealing with this challenge, primarily: sketching out a policy that strives to strike an optimal balance enabling as many Jewish groups as possible to express their Judaism in the public sphere amid an atmosphere of mutual respect. A striking example of the difficulty Israel faces involves an issue the government has dealt with over the past year, and which has not yet been fully resolved. The majority of those with an opinion among Israeli Jews do not accept the position that "we should allow women to put on *tefillin* at the Western Wall" – a position widely accepted in Jewish communities worldwide. In the eyes of many, this issue is a litmus test for assessing the state of Jewish pluralism in Israel.

Furthermore, within the Israeli society there is a fierce dispute between different Jewish groups over the question of permitting women to pray at the Western Wall. This disagreement can even be seen between those who define themselves as “totally secular” and those who define themselves as “secular and somewhat traditional” (see graph).⁴ And, as mentioned, Jews are distinguished not only by their attitudes to positions but also to other groupings of Jews. Thus, in their attitude toward the two statements "It's preferable for homosexuals not

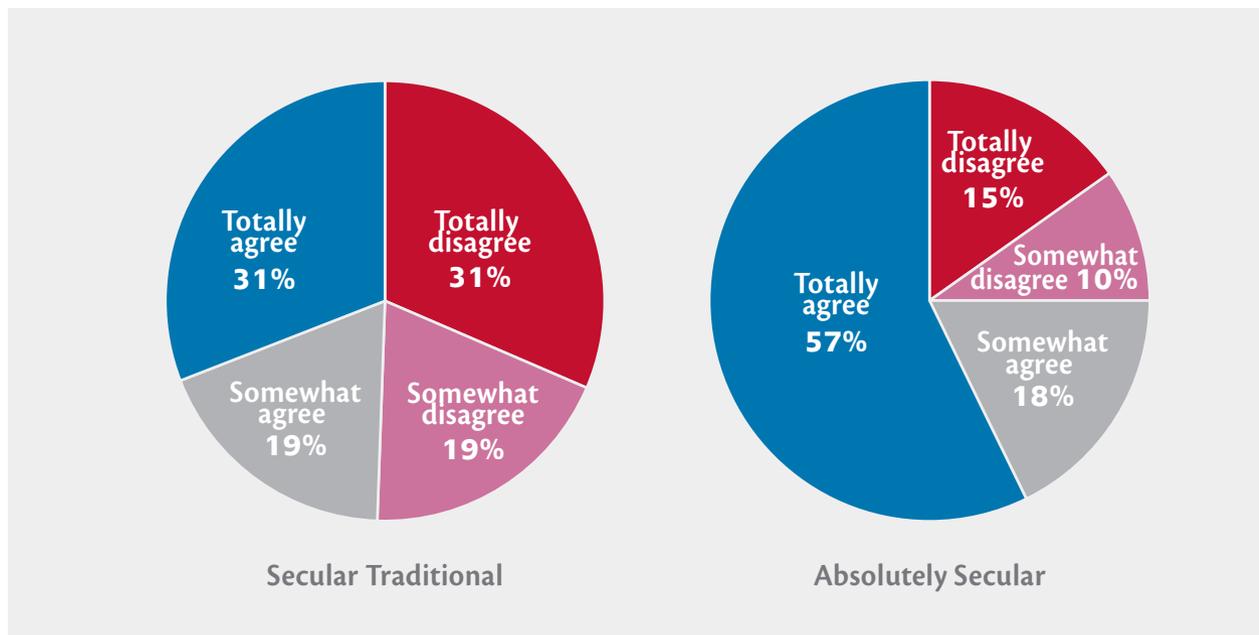


to be members of Knesset" and "Reform Jews aren't really Jews," a clear Jewish-Israeli majority disagrees with both (79 percent don't agree that it's problematic having homosexuals serving as Knesset members, and 72 percent do not agree that Reform Jews aren't really Jews). Once again, significant gaps are found in positions toward these groups (homosexuals and Reform Jews) based on religiosity levels (see graph).

Several of the Institute's studies performed this year under the umbrella of the Pluralism project reveal that Jews in Israel – and in other places around the world – often have difficulty (sometimes considerable difficulty) in supplying consistent answers when asked to consider their Jewish identity and how it can coexist with the Jewish identities of others.

In Israel, for example, this difficulty comes into sharp relief when trying to reconcile the stance of half of Israeli Jews who say that it is "quite important" or "very important" to "live in a place that is as diverse as possible in every aspect" with the fact that most also say that it is "quite important" or "very important" to live in a place where the majority of citizens are similar with respect to religion.⁵ Or, when we address the gap between the wide agreement that "all are good Jews" (with regard to religious and secular Jews) and the tendency of certain groups, mainly the religious and Haredi, to state that Reform Jews "aren't really Jews." In other words, the tolerance of religious Jews in Israel toward secular Jews, a considerable portion of whom are theologically indifferent, does not extend to tolerance for Jews whose beliefs challenge orthodoxy.

Women should be allowed to put on T'filin at the Western Wall (Kotel)



This Jewish state of affairs in Israel, which exhibits both the aspiration for unity and deep divisions, muddles the perceived willingness of different groups to fashion a way of life in Israel that grants all Jews "equal opportunity to express their variance in a legitimate manner in the public arena." At the same time, it complicates the task of characterizing precisely the state of Jewish pluralism in Israel. Thus, what one group of Jews perceives to be detrimental to pluralism – for example, segregating men and women at various events – is perceived by other Jews as demonstrative of pluralism (after all, separation allows Jews who normally would be prevented from participating in such events to take part in them). At bottom, the fundamental nature of pluralism is an openness to divisions of opinion. Therefore, any attempt to measure pluralism must take into account the points of departure of both the measurers and the measured, and characterize the trends accordingly.

Endnotes

- 1 The Institute's survey was conducted among 1,032 Jews in Israel via Panels Politics and supervised by survey expert Menachem Lazar. A portion of the sample was surveyed online and the other by phone. The data were analyzed by the Institute's staff: Prof. Steven Popper, Prof. Uzi Rebhun, Dr. Shlomo Fischer, and Noah Slepko.
- 2 For a detailed presentation containing more aspects of the data appearing in this document, see: www.jppi.org.il
- 3 See the study conducted by the esteemed Pew Research Center and published in March 2016: Israel's Religiously Divided Society. <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/08/israels-religiously-divided-society/>.
- 4 In the survey conducted by the Institute we differentiated between seven groups based on their level of religiosity: totally secular (31%), secular and somewhat traditional (21%), traditional (23%), liberal religious (4%), religious (10%), national-Haredi (1%), and Haredi (10%).
- 5 In regard to diversity: 35.1% responded 'quite important', 22.6% 'very important'. As for religiosity: 29% responded 'quite important', 25.9% 'very important'. Respondents did not ascribe similarly high importance to living alongside Israelis with the same denominational origin, age or income level; however, they did ascribe importance to education level (although not to the same extent as religiosity level).