

What are the Main Components of Jewishness? Results of JPPI Surveys

Summary

Connected Jews from different communities and backgrounds claim that "Peoplehood" and "Culture" are the main components of Judaism – more than "Religion" and "Ancestry." And while we cannot always know for sure what they mean by that, there are clues in the way they answer questions about the practicalities of Jewish life: They value "caring for other Jews" more than "keeping the laws of the Torah."

Report

"What is Judaism?" is the underlying question for those seeking to explain what "Jewishness" means to a variety of Jews from different backgrounds and armed with different beliefs. In this chapter it is not our ambition to definitively answer such a complex and loaded question. Rather, our goal is to shed some light on what some Jews say about the meaning of Judaism and their definition of

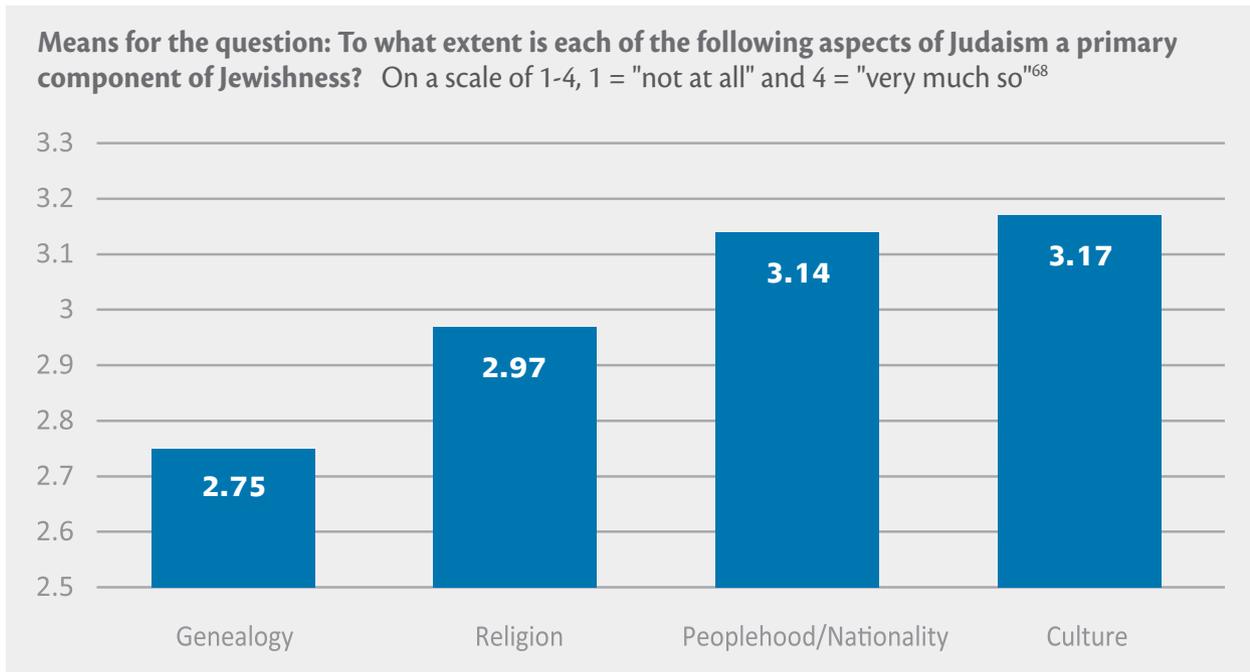
it.¹ This chapter is a section from JPPI's report on the 2016 World Jewish Structured Dialogue that considered: Exploring the Jewish Spectrum in a Time of Fluid Identity.

This is the third year JPPI has conducted a global Dialogue process. Last year (2015), the topic was "Jewish Values and Israel's Use of Force in Armed Conflict."² The year before (2014) focused on Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State.³ In both cases, JPPI's concluding reports were recognized as significant achievements in advancing the Israel-Diaspora discourse.⁴ This chapter, taken from the Dialogue's final report to the communities, is based on research carried out by JPPI during the Dialogue, and also on JPPI's research carried out for its Pluralism Index, which included a large survey of Israeli Jews. In both the Dialogue survey and JPPI's Pluralism in Israel survey we asked respondents to rank the importance of four definitions that could explain what Judaism means to them. The exact question

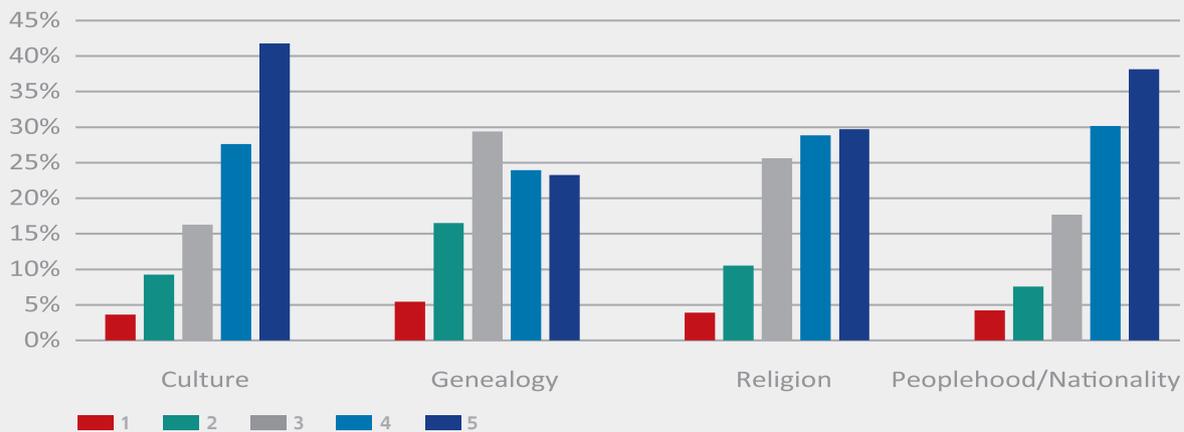
in the Dialogue survey was: “To what extent is each of the following aspects of Judaism a primary component of Jewishness: Religion; Culture; Genealogy; and Nationality\Peoplehood? (1 = “not at all” a primary component of Jewishness, and 5 = “very much so” a primary component of Jewishness.)⁵

A word of caution: Because when we asked about “religion” or “culture,” we did not define the terms but rather relied on the personal meaning each participant attaches to these terms, we must take into account the subjectivity involved in understanding terms such as “nationality,” “religion” and “culture.”

That said, we still believe that how Dialogue participants ranked these four terms is telling: “culture” and “nationality\peoplehood” ranked highest. The more traditional definitions – religion and genealogy – lagged behind. So a first impression clearly points to the possibility that Jews today feel more comfortable with definitions of their Jewishness that are compatible with non-religious, non-traditional lives.⁶ And this is the case, as a Dialogue participant in Philadelphia noted, even when the criteria of belonging to Judaism they follow is religious in nature: “We are using religious definitions to be a part of a nation of a people. Yet many are part of this people, who have no feeling of religion.”⁷



How participants ranked the categories: To what extent is each of the following aspects of Judaism a primary component of Jewishness? On a scale of 1-5, 1 = "not at all" and 5 = "very much so"



Similar examinations of Jewish ranking of these categories are available to us in studies of Israeli and North American Jews, the two communities that together constitute the vast majority of Jews.⁸ JPPI's Pluralism in Israel survey of early 2016 included a question very similar to one of the Dialogue survey questions.⁹ The two Pew Research Center studies of Israel (2016) and of US Jews (2013) included a different question on the same topic.¹⁰

What we clearly see in all these reports is that:

1. Nationality is by far the most important identity component to Jewish Israelis. Eighty-one percent ranked Le'om (nationality) as being either "highly significant" or "somewhat significant" (56 and 25 percent respectively); Culture ranked second (76 percent, 42 and 34 percent respectively); Religion was ranked third (68 percent, 45 and 23 percent respectively); and Motza (ancestry/genealogy) was ranked last (42 percent, 19 and 23 percent respectively).

2. Religion is not the main component of Judaism: A minority of both Jewish Americans and Israelis consider religion to be the main component of Jewishness. The two Pew studies showed that only 22 percent of Israeli Jews regard Judaism mainly as a religion; the number drops to 15 percent for Jewish Americans. An attempt to interpret Judaism solely as a religion (to make it compatible with modern realities in which Diaspora Jews live) would not resonate with the current generation of Jews.

3. Orthodox put more emphasis on religion: Orthodox respondents thought religion to be the main feature of Jewishness, ranking it higher than the other identity components.¹¹ This is seen in the Pew studies, and also in JPPI's Pluralism in Israel survey in which "totally secular" Israeli Jews rated Religion 2.15 (on a 1-4 scale of importance); 3.05 for "secular somewhat traditional." For religious

Israeli Jews Religion rated a 3.75 by National Religious (Dati-Leumi) respondents, and 3.88 by Haredi respondents).

It is important to mention that “totally secular” Israeli Jews tended to rank all options lower than other Jews overall, both in Israel and

elsewhere. “Totally secular” Israeli Jews constitute approximately a third of Israel’s total Jewish population – 32 percent according to JPPI’s Pluralism in Israel survey. This is probably due to a generally lower enthusiasm about Judaism on the part of this group.

Pew Surveys: Percent of Jews in U.S. and in Israel who say being Jewish, to them personally, is mainly a matter of...

	Religion	Ancestry/Culture	Both
U.S. Jews	15%	62%	23%
Orthodox	46%	15%	38%
Non-Orthodox	11%	68%	21%
	Religion	Nationality/Culture	Both
Israeli Jews	22%	55%	23%
Orthodox	60%	10%	30%
Non-Orthodox	11%	68%	20%

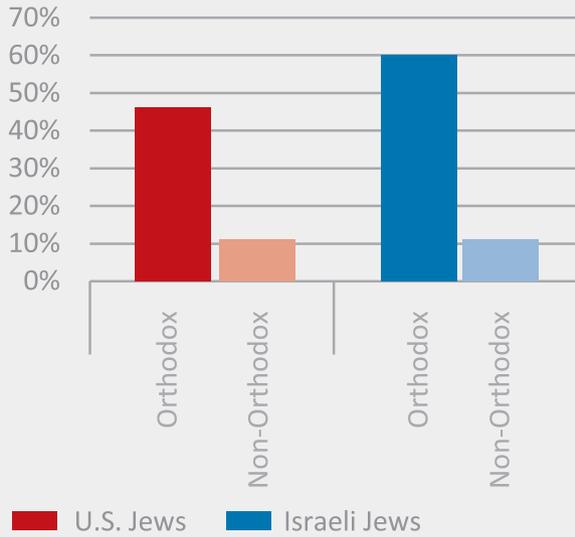
JPPI’s 2016 Dialogue Survey (U.S. participants): To what extent is each of the following aspects of Judaism a primary component of Jewishness? Mean response on a scale of 1-4, 1 = not at all important, 4 = very important:

	Religion	Nationality/Peoplehood	Culture	Genealogy
U.S. Jews	3.07	3.2	3.06	2.8
Orthodox	3.32	2.9	2.51	3.32
Non-Orthodox	3.02	3.26	3.13	2.71

JPPI’s 2016 Pluralism in Israel survey: To what extent is each of the following aspects of Judaism a primary component of Jewishness? Mean response on a scale of 1-4:

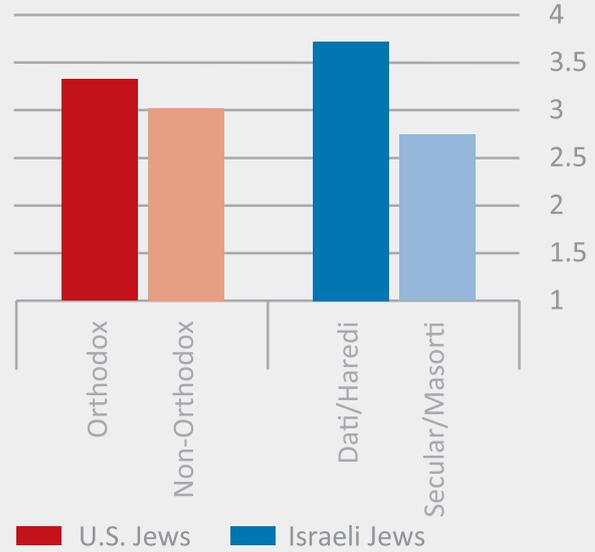
	Religion	Nationality	Culture	Ethnicity
Israeli Jews	2.99	3.32	3.12	2.99
Dati/Haredi	3.72	3.56	2.95	2.27
Secular/Masorti	2.74	3.24	3.18	2.30

Pew Survey: percent of Jews in U.S. and in Israel who say being Jewish, to them personally, is mainly a matter of religion.



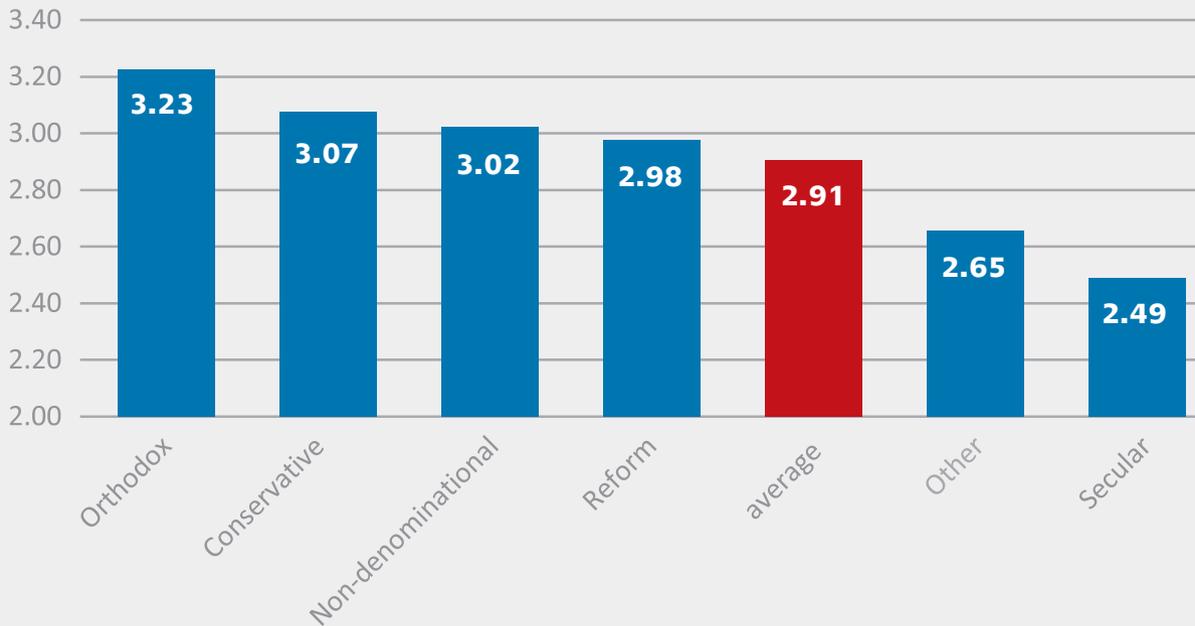
JPPI surveys: To what extent is religion a primary component of Jewishness?

Mean response on a scale of 1-4:



To what extent is religion a primary aspect of Jewishness?

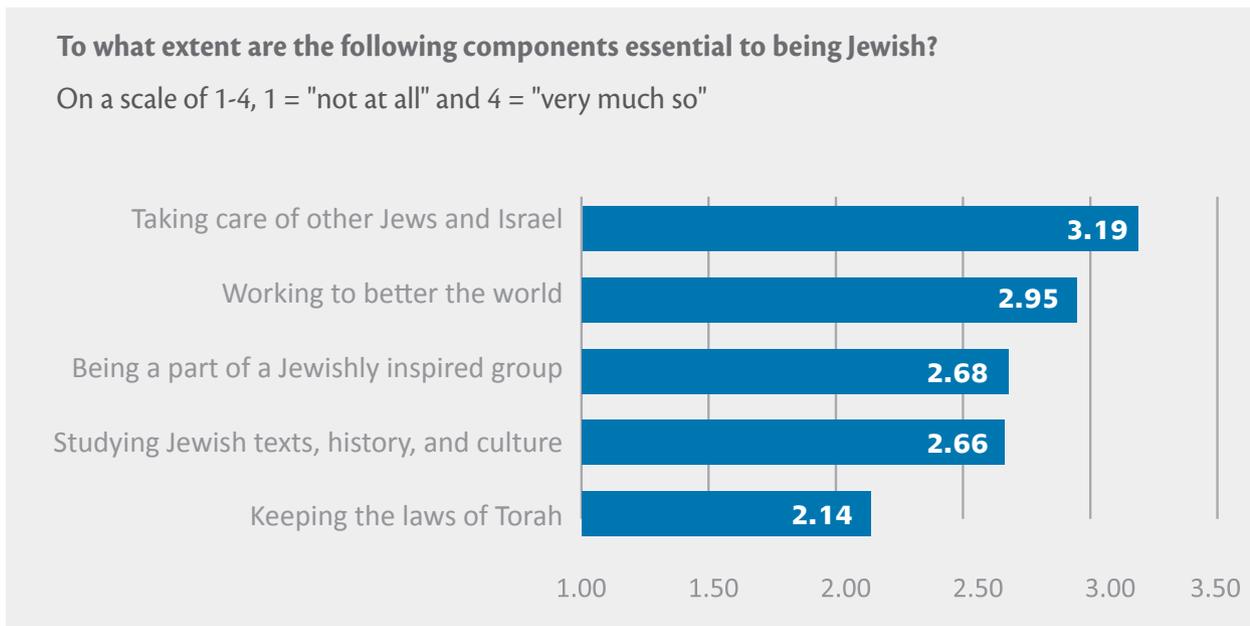
Mean response on a scale of 1-4, 1 = "not at all" and 4 = "very much so"



In addition to the relative value of four main components of Judaism, JPPI asked all Dialogue participants to identify the actions they consider “essential for being Jewish.” Five actions were offered in broad terms without elaboration. That is to say, participants were not asked about particular deeds that often appear in surveys, such as “lighting Shabbat candles” or “attending services” or “going to a Jewish day school.” They were, instead, asked to rank five broad fields of Jewish expression:

1. Keeping the laws of the Torah
2. Working to better the world
3. Studying Jewish texts, history, and culture
4. Taking care of other Jews and Israel
5. Being a part of a Jewishly inspired group

In ranking these five fields of activity, Dialogue participants gave us another layer with which to understand what Jewishness means to them. Here is how they ranked these fields and how their ranking of the five fields in this question corresponds with their ranking of the four components of Judaism in the earlier question:



The comparatively low ranking of “keeping the laws of the Torah”¹² (except for the Orthodox) clearly corresponds with the tendency of Jews to consider the “religious” component of Judaism as less important than other components. Interestingly, not even among the Orthodox was “keeping the laws of the Torah” overwhelmingly predominant

as an essential to being Jewish.¹³ In fact, Orthodox respondents more highly rated “studying Jewish texts.” And their ranking of “taking care of other Jews” was even higher; more than 40 percent of them gave it the highest possible ranking.

The relatively high ranking of “taking care of other Jews and Israel” should not come as a surprise:

if Jews, as we have seen, value “nationality/peoplehood” more than “religion” (and Israeli Jews value it more than any other component of Judaism), then it follows that they would rank “taking care of Jews” above “keeping the laws of the Torah.” A Dialogue participant in Pittsburgh put it this way: “The Jews are first and foremost a people and they need to take care of whom they consider other members of the people, and this does not mean that their worry for the rest of the world is less valued. You can be a caring person, a loving person, and still care for your family more than you care for other people.”¹⁴

Caring for other people – other than Jews – is indeed important for many Jews. “Working to better the world” was the second most important Jewish activity for Dialogue participants. It was somewhat more important for Diaspora Jews than to Israelis (for Brazilians it was the most important),¹⁵ as other surveys, including Pew’s two surveys of Jews in the United States and Israel, have arguably shown.

According to Pew: “U.S. Jews are more likely than Israeli Jews to say leading an ethical and moral life is essential to their Jewish identity (69 vs. 47 percent); the same is true of working for justice and equality (56 vs. 27 percent).”¹⁶ Although not an exact match to JPPI’s phraseology “working to better the world,” all three correspond with the notion of Tikkun Olam familiar to most Jews. That in JPPI’s Dialogue survey “caring for other Jews and Israel” tops Tikkun Olam, even among most non-Israeli Jews, while the Pew survey shows that North-American Jews prioritize “leading a moral life” and “working for justice” over “caring about

Israel” is due to both survey language differences (caring for Jews vs. specific focus on Israel) and the differences in sample composition. Dialogue participants are much more likely to give high priority to Israel than the “average” Jew polled by Pew.¹⁷

At least for some of the Dialogue participants there was hardly any tension between the tribal notion of caring-for-Jews and the more universal caring-for-the-world notions. Participants in several Dialogue sessions explicitly expressed a desire for partnership between all Jews to “better the world” – as a participant in Washington put it: “What if instead of looking for artificial ways for connection we connect by doing Tikkun Olam together as a group?”¹⁸ So for these participants what might be seen as a challenge becomes, in fact, an opportunity.

What are the Main Components of Jewishness? (younger vs. older)

A lot of discussion in recent years has been dedicated to the differences between older and younger Jews on various matters, including – especially in the case of Diaspora Jewry – generational differences in reading identity issues and approaches to Israel. We also know that the composition of age groups is becoming increasingly disparate, as a result of late marriage, low birth rates, and high rates of intermarriage.

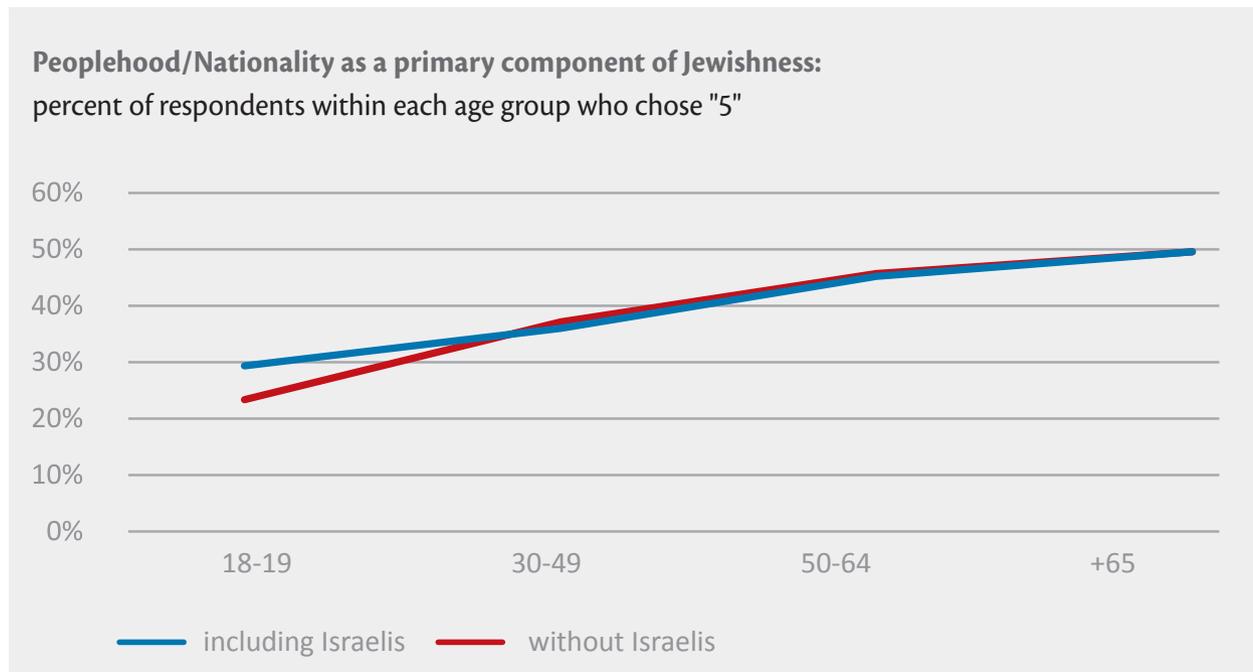
The Dialogue survey captures some of the generational differences, and, in some of the discussions we saw these differences come to life. Young participants expressed views somewhat

more radical than those of their elders, and young participants answered some of JPPI's questions markedly differently than older cohorts.

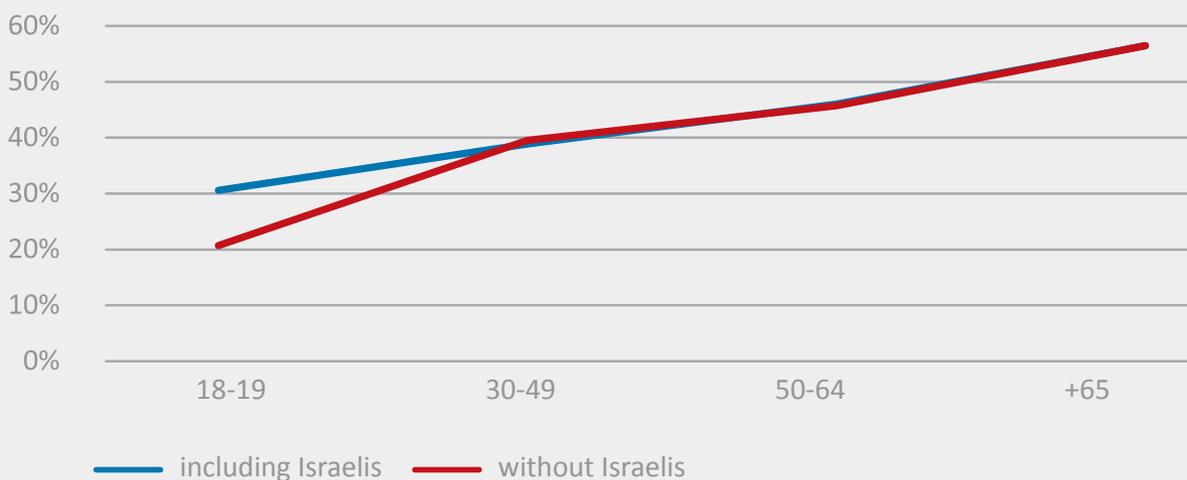
For example, as we look at the ranking of the four components of Judaism, it is clear that younger Jews – even though Dialogue participants tend to be relatively committed Jews – put slightly less emphasis on the national component of Judaism than their older colleagues. Overall, they still consider nationality and peoplehood important components of Judaism, but the younger they are, the less they consider it worthy of the highest ranking (5 on a 1-5 scale). This becomes especially pronounced when we exclude the Israeli

respondents from the survey sample, and examine the views of Diaspora Jews by age cohort:

A similar result is evident in the relative ranking of “taking care of other Jews and Israel.” As mentioned earlier, this is the Jewish activity most valued by Dialogue survey respondents. However, when examined by age cohort it is yet again clear that the younger the participant, the less his or her tendency to rank this activity highest (again, 5 on a 1-5 scale). While more than half of JPPI participants 65 years old or older ranked “taking care” as 5 – the highest possible – less than a third of the youth cohort (18-29 years old) found “taking care” worthy of a 5.



Taking care of other Jews and of Israel is essential to being Jewish:
percent of respondents within each age group who chose "5"



To summarize, this chapter shows that for connected Jews today Judaism is viewed primarily through the lenses of culture and peoplehood, and the result is that they value the concern for other Jews more than other practical expressions of Judaism. On the other hand, we see that for younger Jews the peoplehood component is weaker than it is for older Jews (this can be a difference based on life-cycle trends or a generational shift). There are many things that Jewish institutions and the State of Israel can learn

from these trends of identification. To mention just two possible inferences: The need for Jewish communities worldwide to think creatively about ways to connect distanced Jews, and especially Jews from mixed families, who see Judaism mainly as a religion to what connected Jews view as the more central components of their Judaism – the people and the culture. There is a need for Israel to further develop a language and practice of Jewish culture that is genuinely separated from religious Orthodoxy.

Endnotes

1 For a short discussion of the question “what is Judaism” and the ways to approach it, see: The Jews: Frequently Asked Questions, Shmuel Rosner, from page 13 (Dvir and Beit Hatfutzot, 2016, Hebrew).

2 The report Jewish Values and Israel’s Use of Force in Armed Conflict- Perspectives from World Jewry can be found here: <http://jppi.org.il/news/175/58/Jewish-Values-and-Israel-s-Use-of-Force-in-Armed-Conflict--Perspectives-from-World-Jewry/>.

3 The report Jewish and Democratic: Perspectives from World Jewry is here: http://jppi.org.il/uploads/jewish_and_democratic-eng.pdf.

4 Media reports about the 2014 dialogue can be seen here: <http://jppi.org.il/uploads/09-07-14%20Selected%20Press%20Clippings.pdf>. Reports about the 2015 dialogue, here: http://www.timesofisrael.com/a-wartorn-israel-directly-affects-diaspora-jewry-so-where-its-voice/?fb_comment_id=915104805226877_915535288517162, here: <http://forward.com/opinion/317923/israeli-study-finds-jews-fretful-as-israeli-actions-stir-bias/>, and here: <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-news/1.667542>.

5 The survey asked respondents to rank the categories on a scale of 1-5, and all graphs showing the responses of participants are on a scale of 1-5. However, in order to compare to other surveys, all graphs showing the mean of the responses have been adapted to show the division of responses on a scale of 1-4.

6 Jews in America (and half of Israel’s Jews) tend to be more secular than members of other religions. “They are secular, in terms of their beliefs & religious participation. About as religious as non-churched Christians” (See: “Does Political Liberalism Undermine Jewish engagement? Implications for Research, Education and American Jews”, Steven Cohen, presentations to Network for Research in Jewish Education).

7 JPPI 2016 Dialogue Philadelphia seminar, April 18, 2016. Notes by Lajonel Brown.

8 See: JPPI, annual assessment 2015: http://jppi.org.il/uploads/JPPI_2014-2015_Annual_Assessment_English-Jewish_People_Demography.pdf

9 The pluralism survey asked about religion, ancestry, nationality (but did not have peoplehood attached to it) and culture. It used a 1-4 scale rather than a 1-5 scale.

10 While the JPPI survey asked participants to rank four options, the Pew report on Israel included three options from which to choose: religion, nationality and culture. The report in English was erroneous in translating the Hebrew word that means “nationality” (in the original question in Hebrew: עניין לאומי) to “ancestry”. In this

report we refer to the question as it was asked in Hebrew. The Pew survey of Jewish Americans had religion, culture and ancestry. Thus, exact comparisons between the U.S. and Israel based on the Pew questions is impossible, even though Pew did include such comparison in the report on Israel.

11 Interestingly, the Dialogue survey shows that “non-denominational” participants ranked “religion” quite high (3.02) in comparison to the Orthodox participants (3.23). Seculars ranked religion as low as Israel’s seculars in JPPI’s Pluralism in Israel survey (2.49, 2.51).

12 The gaps between the categories are not always very wide, but this is partially a result of the way the question was framed. Each participant ranked each category on the scale, and since few participants would rank any of the components as a 1 the result is a scale in which all categories amount to something. The above Pew graph is an example of what happens when Jews are asked to choose between categories, rather than rank all categories. In such case, the gaps are much more pronounced.

13 Only about half the Orthodox ranked it a 4 or a 5 (out of 5).

14 JPPI 2016 Dialogue Pittsburgh seminar, April 4, 2016. Notes by Shmuel Rosner.

15 When comparing the percentage of participants that ranked each of the activities at 4 or 5 (on a 1-5 scale).

16 “Israel’s Religiously Divided Society”, Pew 2016, page 62.

17 The number of times non-Israeli Dialogue participants traveled to Israel compared to average Jews is telling: only 4% of JPPI Dialogue participants have not been to Israel.

18 Washington JPPI seminar, April 11, 2016. Notes by Shmuel Rosner.