



THE JEWISH PEOPLE POLICY INSTITUTE  
המכון למדיניות העם היהודי  
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# AMERICAN SERMONS & ISRAELI POLITICS

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## POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN AMERICAN SYNAGOGUE SERMONS

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# Preface

Sermons play a central role in shaping religious communities, serving as platforms for clergy to convey theological perspectives, moral guidance, and social values. Despite growing scholarly interest in the intersection of religion and politics, systematic analysis of political discourse in Jewish sermons – particularly across different denominations – remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining political content in American Jewish sermons delivered between 2021 and 2024 in Modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform congregations.

Utilizing computational text analysis, the research applies ChatGPT-4o to a dataset of 4,302 sermons, enabling a nuanced exploration of political themes, sentiment, and structural patterns. The study's timeframe aligns with three key political moments in Israel: the 2021–2022 Bennett/Lapid-led unity government, the 2022–2023 judicial reform protests, and the 2023–2024 period following the October 7 attacks and the ensuing war in Gaza. This chronological framework facilitates an assessment of how political discourse in sermons evolved in response to these events.

Key research questions include the extent of political content in sermons, the proportion of discourse focused on Israel, and shifts in sentiment toward Israel across different periods. Additionally, the study examines how clergy address contentious topics such as humanitarian concerns in Gaza, political leadership, governmental policies, settler violence, the lack of ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) conscription, attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community, the absence of a post-conflict strategy, and how they relate to political figures such as Benjamin Netanyahu and Itamar Ben Gvir, as well as issues such as hostages, ceasefire, and Aliyah. The analysis also explores the structural composition of politically focused sermons, assessing whether they begin with political themes before transitioning to religious content – a pattern that may indicate an explicit and primary focus on political messaging in synagogue settings. Beyond critical

discourse, the study identifies recurring positive themes, including calls for unity, compassion, tolerance, and the reinforcement of Jewish identity and connection with Israel.

The findings highlight the role of synagogues as spaces where political engagement and religious expression intersect, providing insights into how American Jewish communities navigate their relationship with Israel and broader political issues. The study suggests that sermons in American Jewish congregations are strongly political in nature and remain closely attuned to developments in Israel.

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# Introduction

Sermons have long been a cornerstone of religious practice, serving as a primary medium through which religious leaders convey theological teachings, moral guidance, and communal values to their congregations. Beyond their spiritual and educational roles, sermons often reflect and respond to the socio-political contexts in which they are delivered, addressing pressing societal issues or subtly shaping the political perspectives of the faithful.

The significance of sermons in religious life is multifaceted. They function as “sites in which the beliefs, values, and sentiments of a tradition are spelled out, maintaining continuity and change in sometimes-dramatic ways.”<sup>1</sup> Clergy frequently incorporate political discourse into religious settings to inform their congregations, influence perspectives on political issues, and encourage civic engagement.<sup>2</sup> To date, a substantial body of literature has explored political activism within religious organizations, primarily through surveys of religious leaders and congregants, case studies of specific churches, and qualitative analyses. These studies have demonstrated that pastors frequently engage in political communication within churches and that congregants actively receive and interpret these messages.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, sermons can serve as vehicles for political discourse within religious settings. A recent empirical study found that a substantial proportion of sermons delivered by Protestant pastors in the United States incorporate political content. The study analyzed over 110,000 sermons and determined that approximately 37% addressed political topics, with subjects ranging from the economy and war to civil rights and social welfare. This suggests that many clergy members engage with contemporary political issues, potentially shaping the political attitudes and participation of their congregants.<sup>4</sup>

However, despite this specific study,<sup>5</sup> our understanding of the political content of religious sermons remains very limited. Moreover, knowledge about political discourse in sermons delivered in Jewish synagogues across different denominations is even scarcer, if not nearly nonexistent.<sup>6</sup>

This study addresses this gap by analyzing political discourse in American



Jewish sermons delivered between 2021 and 2024 across the Modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform denominations. Utilizing computational text analysis tools, the research employs ChatGPT, selected for its advanced natural language processing capabilities, contextual understanding, and efficiency in analyzing large textual datasets. Specifically, the study utilizes ChatGPT-4o, with communication to the model facilitated through the Langchain Python library and the OpenAI API. Compared to traditional methods such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), ChatGPT-4o provides a more profound semantic comprehension, enabling the detection of nuanced political discourse and sentiment within sermons.

By analyzing a substantial corpus of 4,302 sermons, this research aims to quantify the presence of political discourse and identify recurring themes. **Specifically, the study examines the extent and nature of political content in American Jewish sermons across three distinct periods: 2021–2022, 2022–2023, and 2023–2024. It seeks to determine the percentage of sermons containing political content and analyze the proportion of references to Israel within these sermons.**

**A key focus of the research is to explore how Jewish clergy engage with Israel in their sermons and how their congregations perceive Israel through this discourse.** The selected timeframes correspond to significant events in Israel: the 2021–2022 period, which coincided with the Bennett/Lapid-led unity government; the 2022–2023 period, marked by widespread judicial reform protests; and the 2023–2024 period, following the October 7 attacks and the ensuing conflict in Gaza. This chronological framework allows for an analysis of variations in the volume and nature of political content over time.

The study, utilizing ChatGPT for computational text analysis, addresses several key research questions, including: the volume of political content in sermons across different denominations before and after October 7; the general tone toward Israel (whether positive or negative); the structural characteristics of politically focused sermons (whether they begin with political content or religious content); the volume of political content in the sermon; and the frequency of criticism directed toward Israel across the specified periods. The research also quantifies the prevalence of criticism on specific issues, such as civilian casualties in Gaza, humanitarian aid, international law, political figures including Benjamin

Netanyahu and Itamar Ben-Gvir, the lack of Haredi conscription, attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community, governmental policies, the absence of a post-conflict strategy, and settler violence.

In addition to analyzing critical discourse, the study examines the positive messages conveyed by rabbis, including encouragement to embrace Jewish tradition, calls for compassion and mutual support, promotion of tolerance, and efforts to strengthen the connection with Israel.

The findings of this research will contribute to a broader understanding of the role of politics in Jewish sermons across different denominations and the ways in which congregations and their rabbis engage with and reflect on the political situation in Israel. The significant presence of political content in these sermons is noteworthy, particularly the extensive focus on Israeli political affairs, which underscores the profound connection Jewish communities across denominations in the United States maintain with Israel. Further, the prominent inclusion of political discourse positions the synagogue as a critical space for articulating and disseminating political messages within the religious sphere.

A structural analysis of the sermons indicates that the majority of sermons, across denominations, commence with a political issue, topic, or message before transitioning to discussions centered on religious themes or the weekly Torah portion (*parsha*). This pattern highlights the politicization of the synagogue environment in the United States, suggesting that political engagement is an integral aspect of religious discourse. Future research would benefit from a comparative analysis to determine whether a similar trend is observable within synagogues in Israel, thereby providing a broader perspective on the intersection of religion and politics in different cultural and national contexts.

Moreover, an analysis of the tone of the sermons reveals a generally positive attitude toward Israel, despite the numerous specific criticisms expressed. This trend is consistent across denominations, although Reform congregations exhibit a slightly less positive stance compared to others.

This study aligns with the objectives of the digital humanities by integrating computational methodologies with humanistic inquiry, facilitating the large-scale analysis and interpretation of textual data. Following a review of the study's research methodology, each of these specific findings will be examined in detail.

# Methodology

This study draws on a dataset of 4,302 American Jewish sermons, including 2,556 delivered between October 2021 and October 2024 across Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox congregations. Sermons were collected through a combination of automated transcription tools and direct outreach, standardized into a unified format to enable systematic analysis across denominations and time periods.

The analytical framework employed advanced computational discourse analysis techniques, using AI tools such as ChatGPT-4o. Methodologically, the study relied on prompt engineering, few-shot learning, decomposed prompting, and Chain of Thought (CoT) reasoning to structure the AI's interpretive processes. Sermons were analyzed individually to preserve contextual integrity, and AI-generated outputs were formatted in structured JSON for consistency.

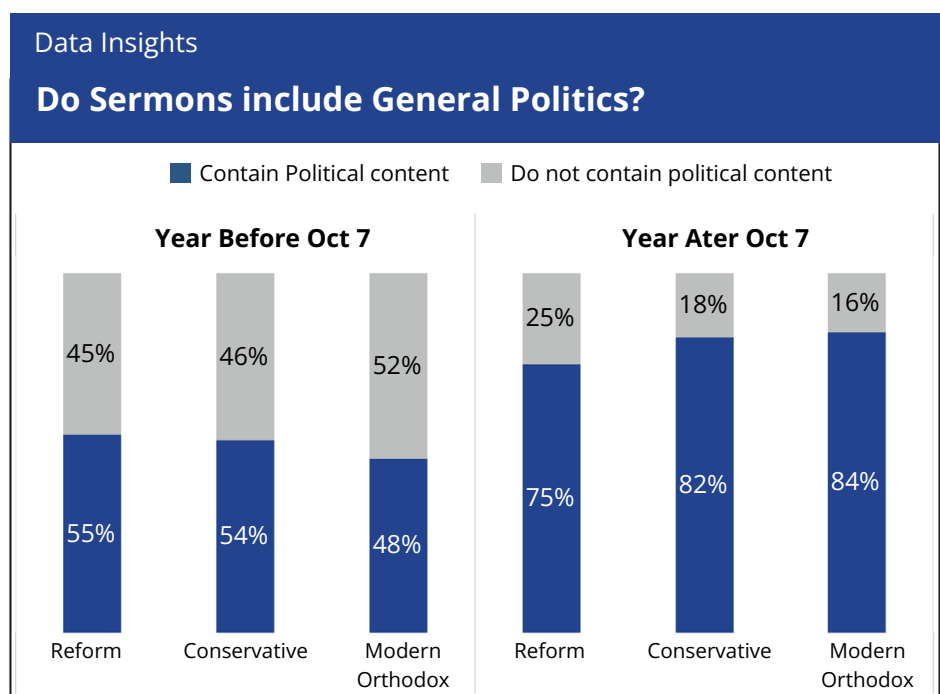
The analysis proceeded in stages: identifying political content; detecting criticism of Israel; classifying sentiment and structure; and assessing specific topics like hostages, ceasefire, and Aliyah. To validate findings, a human-in-the-loop (HITL) approach was adopted, supplemented by standard metrics (accuracy, precision, recall) to evaluate AI performance.<sup>7</sup>

# Findings

## The Politicization of American Jewish Sermons Before and After October 7

### The Role of Political Discourse in American Jewish Sermons

The following two graphs provide a look into the role of political discourse in American Jewish sermons and how it evolved before and after October 7.<sup>8</sup>



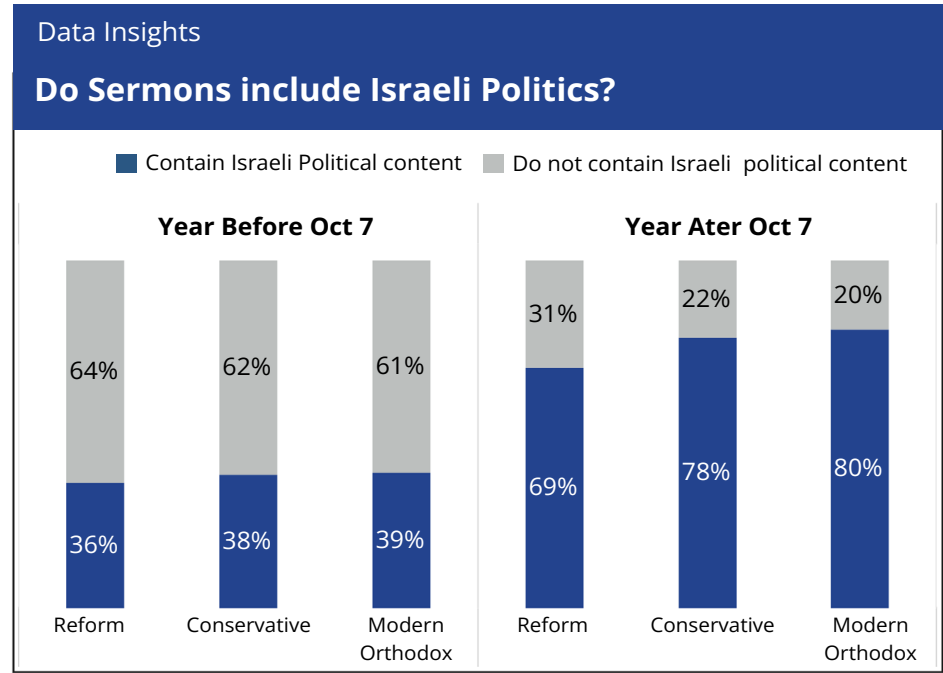
The first graph shows that before October 7, during the judicial reform controversy in Israel, political themes were already a significant component of sermons across denominations. Political discourse was frequently present, with at least 48% of sermons in Modern Orthodox synagogues and up to 55% in Reform congregations incorporating political content. However, the outbreak

of war following the October 7 Hamas attacks led to a dramatic shift in sermon content. The prevalence of political discourse surged across denominations, with political content in Reform congregations rising to 75%. At the same time, Conservative and Modern Orthodox sermons saw an even greater increase, reaching 82% and 84% respectively.

This remarkable shift highlights the deeply political nature of American Jewish sermons, demonstrating the extent to which religious leaders engage with contemporary political events. The data underscores that synagogues, far from being solely spaces of spiritual reflection, serve as platforms for political discourse, shaping congregational perspectives on key issues. The sharp increase in political engagement after October 7 suggests that Jewish clergy play a crucial role in interpreting and responding to crises, reinforcing the intersection of religious leadership and political activism. This finding has important implications, as it points to the synagogue as not only a religious but also a civic arena where political narratives are constructed and disseminated, influencing communal attitudes toward both American and Israeli political realities.

### The Centrality of Israel in American Jewish Sermons

The second graph sharpens the focus further, revealing how discussions of Israel’s political situation changed in response to the war.<sup>9</sup>



Before October 7, only 36% to 39% of all sermons explicitly addressed political content connected to Israel. But after the attacks, these figures more than doubled, reaching **69% in Reform, 78% in Conservative, and 80% in Modern Orthodox** congregations. This dramatic increase indicates that Israel became a dominant political topic in American Jewish sermons following the war's onset.

The contrast with the earlier judicial reform debates in Israel is particularly striking. While that issue did lead to some level of political engagement in sermons, it did not trigger nearly the same degree of response as the war. The data suggests that **existential threats to Israel fundamentally shape the way American Jewish clergy engage with political issues from the pulpit**, making security crises a catalyst for intensified religious-political discourse.

Ultimately, these findings paint a vivid picture of how deeply intertwined politics and religion are in American Jewish communities. Even before October 7, political discourse about Israel was a defining feature of sermons, but the war amplified this trend to an unprecedented level. **The pulpit is not just a space for spiritual guidance – it is also a platform for processing and responding to contemporary geopolitical realities, particularly when Israel is at the center of global attention.**

## Volume of Political Content & Sermon Structure

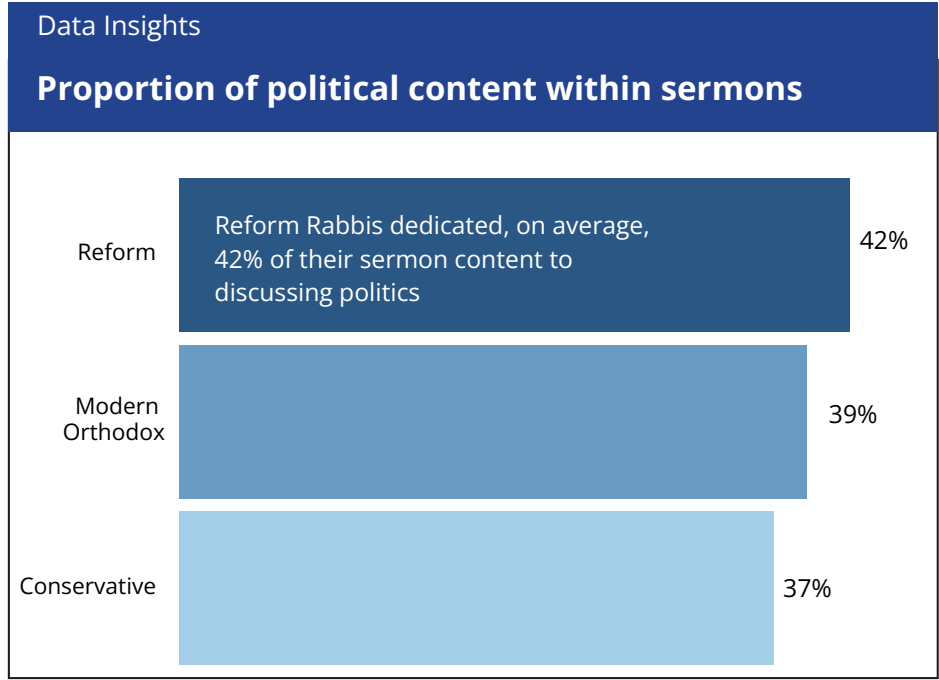
To truly grasp the extent of politicization in American Jewish sermons, it is essential to examine not just the presence of political themes but also the depth of their integration into the discourse. This analysis focuses on two key dimensions. First, it considers, on average, the proportion of each sermon devoted to political content in cases where politics was addressed. This provides insight into whether political discussions were brief mentions or substantial portions of the sermon.

Equally important is the structure of these sermons – whether they opened with a political theme or if political topics emerged gradually, following an initial focus on religious themes. How politics is woven into sermons reveals much about its role in synagogue discourse. A sermon that begins with politics suggests a deliberate prioritization of the topic, while one that transitions from religious discussion into politics may indicate a more integrative or cautious approach by clergy.

Together, these elements offer a clearer picture of not only how frequently political issues appear in sermons, but also how central they are to the overall message. They shed light on the willingness of clergy to place politics at the forefront of religious teaching and the extent to which synagogues are arenas for political engagement as well as spiritual reflection.

### Political Content Volume in Sermons

The first analysis examined **the proportion of political content within sermons classified as political.**<sup>10</sup>



Rather than passing references or brief asides, politics occupied a substantial portion of these sermons across denominations. On average, Reform sermons dedicated 42% of their content to political discussion, Conservative sermons allocated 37%, and Modern Orthodox sermons 39%.

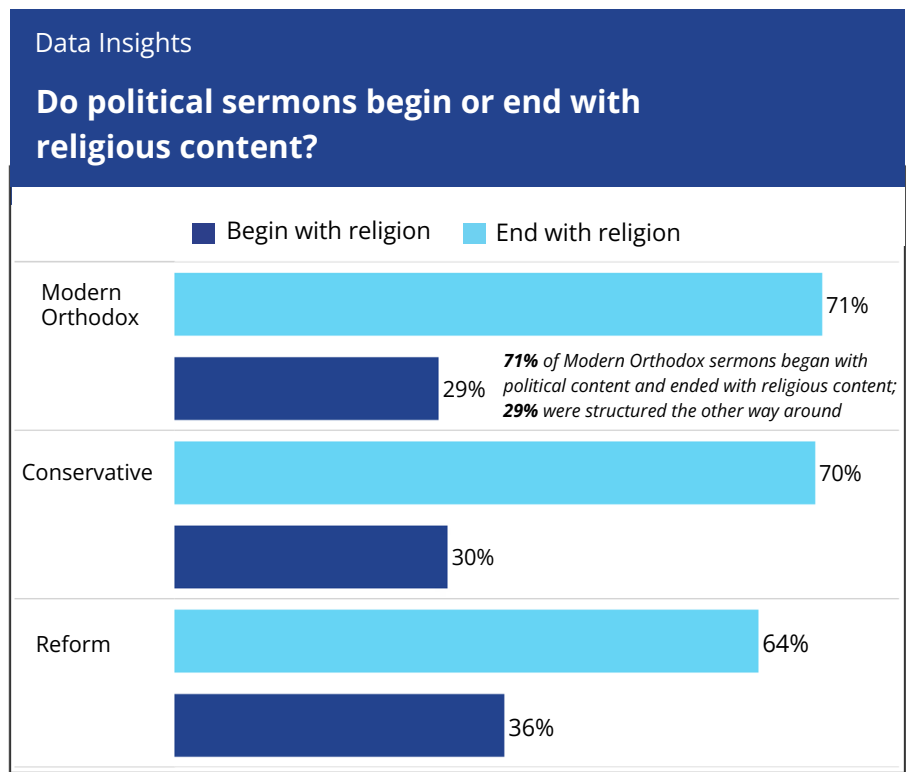
The fact that over a third, and in some cases nearly half, of the sermon is explicitly political reveals that political discourse is not incidental but rather a dominant and integral feature of that particular sermon. Moreover, the relatively small variation between denominations suggests that political

engagement is a fundamental aspect of religious communication across the spectrum of American Judaism, rather than a characteristic unique to any one denomination.

### The Structure of Political Homiletics

The structure of a sermon – whether it begins with political discourse or with religious themes – offers a deeper understanding of how political engagement is embedded in synagogue life. It is not just a question of whether politics is discussed, but how central it is to a sermon’s overall message. If political themes are introduced from the outset, it signals that political issues are not merely secondary concerns but central pillars of religious discourse.<sup>11</sup>

The following graph depict the structural sequencing of sermons for each of the denominations examined in this study:



The analysis of sermon structures across denominations reveals a striking



trend. Among Reform sermons, 64% transitioned from political themes into religious content, while 36% took the reverse approach, and began with religious themes before moving to politics. The numbers were even higher for Conservative and Modern Orthodox sermons, where approximately 71% began with politics before incorporating religious themes. This pattern underscores that in the vast majority of politically engaged sermons, political messaging is not subtly woven into religious discussion but is often dominant from the outset.

These findings have profound implications for understanding the role of synagogues as spaces for political engagement. The significant presence of politics at the beginning of sermons suggests that synagogues are not only places of worship but also platforms for political discourse. Rabbis across denominations feel comfortable addressing political issues directly, without necessarily softening them with religious framing. This shift points to a synagogue culture where the boundaries between political and religious discourse are blurred. Political themes are not occasional or supplementary aspects of sermons – they are the central focus. Moreover, the near-uniformity across denominations in the prominence of politics-first sermon structures highlights that the politicization of sermons is not confined to any single ideological or theological stream.

One of the most striking revelations is the depth of political engagement within Modern Orthodox communities. As one might assume that Modern Orthodox sermons would emphasize traditional religious content and focus more heavily on religious teachings, grounding the sermon in Torah or halachic discussion before introducing contemporary political issues, the high volume of political content and the predominance of politics-first structures are particularly noteworthy. This suggests that political discourse is deeply embedded in Modern Orthodox religious life in the United States, with rabbis in these communities feeling comfortable using their sermons as a platform for political messaging. The findings ultimately point to a synagogue culture in which political discussions are not only accepted but are often placed at the very heart of religious teaching.

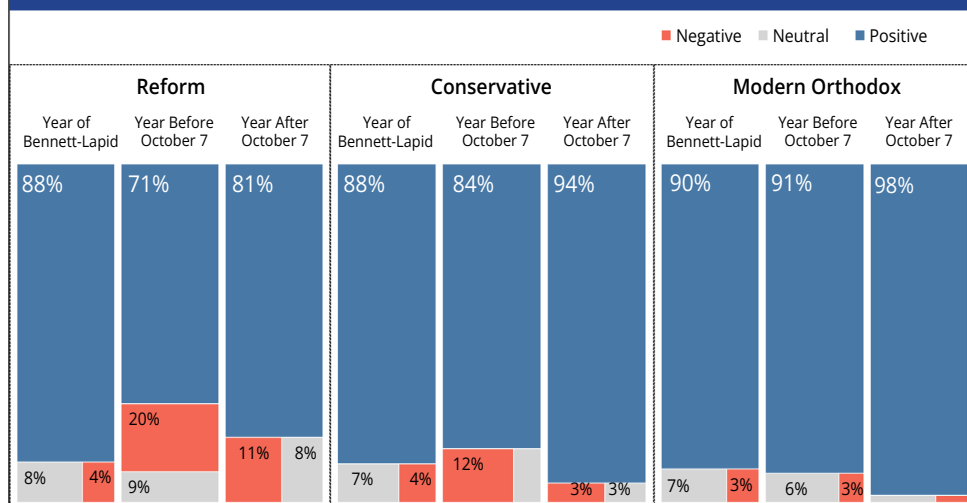
## Analysis of the Tone Toward Israel and Criticism in Sermons Across Time Periods

The next phase of this research focused on examining the general tone toward Israel in sermons that contained political content concerning Israel and analyzed shifts across three distinct timeframes. Additionally, the study explored the extent to which political sermons about Israel included critical perspectives within the three major Jewish denominations – Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox.<sup>12</sup>

The findings present a nuanced picture. Across all three denominations, the overall tone toward Israel remained overwhelmingly positive, with negative sentiment consistently representing only a small fraction of the discourse. This trend persisted throughout the periods under observation, reinforcing the idea that American Jewish sermons tend to frame discussions about Israel in a supportive light.

At the same time, the data reveals fluctuations in the presence of negative tonalities vis-à-vis Israel, which varied across different periods. Yet, while negativity peaked at certain moments, particularly at the time of the government's attempted judicial overhaul in Israel, it never became the dominant narrative. Even when sermons engaged in negative criticism of Israeli policies or government actions, the overarching sentiment remained largely positive. This suggests that critique does not equate to opposition but rather reflects an engaged and deliberative discourse within American Jewish communities. The following graphs illustrate these patterns:

## Rabbinic Sermons: Tone toward Israel



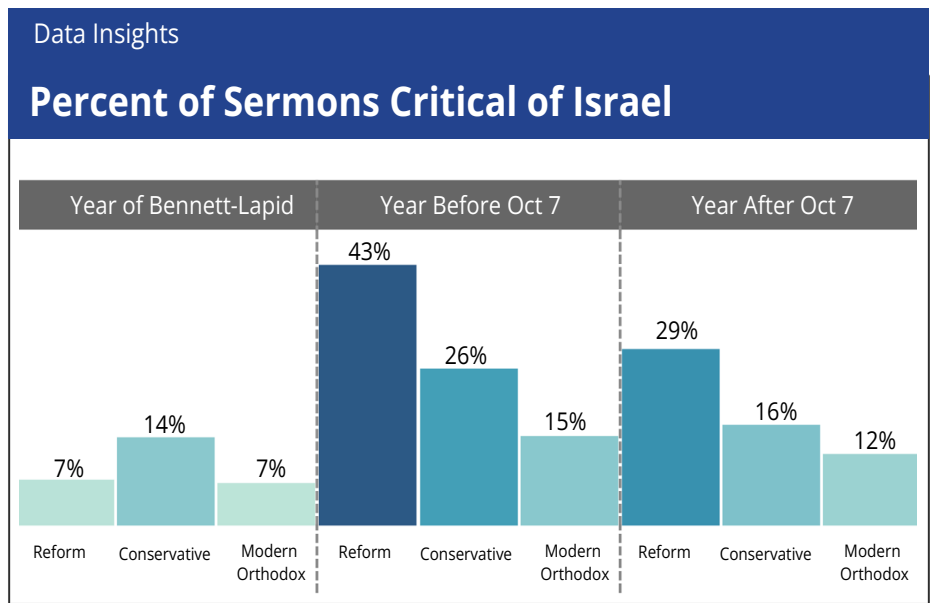
As the graphs show, during the Bennett/Lapid-led Unity Government (June 2021-December 2022), the positive tone toward Israel was at its highest across denominations, reaching 88% in Reform, 88% in Conservative, and 90% in Modern Orthodox sermons, while the negative tone remained very low, at 4%, 4%, and 3%, respectively. However, during the judicial reform government, there was a small decline in positive tone in Reform sermons, dropping to 71%, while Conservative remained relatively high at 84%, and Modern Orthodox continued to show strong support at 91%. Negative sentiment, meanwhile, rose most noticeably in Reform sermons, reaching 20%, while Conservative saw a smaller increase to 12%, and Modern Orthodox remained the least negative at 3%. This shift coincided with the judicial reform controversy in Israel, suggesting a slightly more divided discourse in non-Modern Orthodox communities. By contrast, Modern Orthodox sermons maintained a consistently high level of positive tonality, perhaps indicating less engagement with internal Israeli political controversies on this matter. Still, it is important to underscore that most of the sermons across denominations continued to evince a positive tone toward Israel.

Following the October 7 attacks and the ensuing war, the tone across denominations shifted once again, showing a resurgence of positive sentiment toward Israel across denominations. This shift was most pronounced in

Conservative and Modern Orthodox sermons, where positive sentiment rose to 94% and 98%, respectively, nearly eliminating negative discourse, which dropped to just 3% in Conservative and 0.7% in Modern Orthodox sermons. Even in Reform communities, which featured the highest levels of negativity, positive sentiment rebounded substantially to 81%, while negative sentiment nearly halved, dropping from 20% to 11%. These figures demonstrate a clear trend of communal solidarity in response to crisis.

### Criticism of Israel in Sermons

The next graph offers a detailed perspective on how American Jewish sermons have engaged in critical discourse about Israel across different time periods and denominations while still maintaining an overall positive tone, as demonstrated in the previous graph.<sup>13</sup> By examining the percentage of sermons that include criticism of Israel, a clear pattern emerges, illustrating how different Jewish



During the period of the Bennett/Lapid-led unity government (2021-2022), criticism within sermons remained relatively low across denominations. Reform sermons included criticism at a rate of 7%, Conservative at 14%, and Modern Orthodox at just 7%.

A significant shift occurred during the judicial reform debates (2022-2023), which sparked concern and discussion within American Jewish communities. Criticism surged dramatically, particularly in Reform congregations, where 43% of political sermons contained political criticism of Israel. Conservative sermons also saw a notable rise in criticism, reaching 26%, while Modern Orthodox sermons, although less critical, still ticked upward to 15%. This period reflects heightened engagement with Israeli domestic affairs, as the judicial overhaul prompted broader discussions about democracy, governance, and Israel-Diaspora relations. Reform communities, in particular, evinced the most vocal engagement, indicating a strong inclination to address internal Israeli political matters from the pulpit.

Following the October 7 attacks and the outbreak of war in Gaza, a notable decrease in critical discourse emerged across denominations. While Reform sermons continued to exhibit the highest levels of critique at 29%, this represented a significant decline from the previous year's peak. Conservative sermons saw a similar trend, with criticism dropping to 16%, while Modern Orthodox sermons reflected the least amount of critique at just 12%. This downward shift suggests that in moments of external crisis, the discourse within American Jewish communities tends to pivot toward unity and support for Israel. Even among the most engaged and critical denominations, such as Reform, the overall trend indicates a prioritization of solidarity over political critique.

These findings highlight several key dynamics within American Jewish discourse regarding Israel. First, while critique is present, it does not define the overall tone of sermons, which remain largely supportive of Israel. Even at the height of critical engagement during the judicial reform period, a majority of sermons still conveyed an overwhelmingly positive stance toward Israel, as shown in the first graph. This reinforces the notion that expressing critique does not equate to condemnation but rather reflects an ongoing, invested engagement with Israeli affairs.

These findings highlight the relationship between American Jewish communities and Israel. The high levels of engagement, both critical and supportive, suggest that American Jews increasingly see themselves as active participants in shaping Israeli discourse rather than passive supporters. As

Israel continues to evolve politically, especially regarding issues that directly impact the Diaspora – such as religious pluralism, democratic governance, and minority rights – American Jewish communities are likely to continue navigating their relationship with Israel based on both emotional ties and political considerations. The willingness to criticize Israel, particularly among Reform and Conservative congregations, underscores a growing expectation that Diaspora voices have a role to play in shaping the country's future. **Israel is not just a distant state for American Jews – it is a political, cultural, and moral concern they actively engage with.**

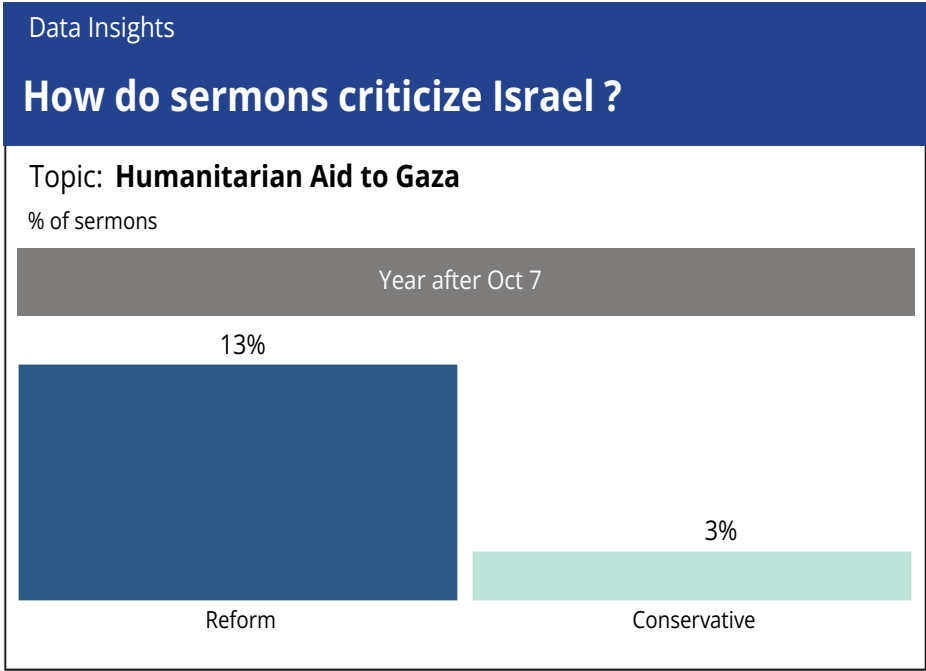
Denominational differences in critical discourse are revealing. Modern Orthodox communities consistently demonstrated the least amount of Israel critique, even during politically contentious periods, indicating a strong emphasis on unwavering support for Israel. Conservative communities engaged in a more moderate level of critique, while Reform congregations showed the highest willingness to criticize Israeli policies. However, across denominations, the post-October 7 shift underscores a broader communal instinct to rally behind Israel in times of existential threat, prioritizing solidarity over debate.

These patterns provide a broader understanding of how American Jewish communities navigate their relationship with Israel. While there is a space for critique – particularly during periods of internal Israeli political strife – such engagement is deeply shaped by external events. Moments of security crisis, such as the aftermath of October 7, see a return to more unified and supportive discourse, demonstrating that American Jews (as represented in pulpit sermons) balance their political engagement with a fundamental sense of solidarity with Israel.

# Analysis of Criticism of Israel in Sermons: Breakdown by Specific Issues

The analysis now turns to an examination of the specific areas of criticism expressed in political sermons critical of Israel following the October 7 attacks. The data highlights how different Jewish denominations have engaged with key issues that emerged during the war, including humanitarian aid to Gaza, concerns over civilian casualties, and Israel’s strategic planning for the future. These topics have been at the center of global discourse, and their presence – or absence – in sermons reflects broader ideological divides within American Jewish communities.<sup>14</sup>

## Criticism Related to Humanitarian Aid to Gaza

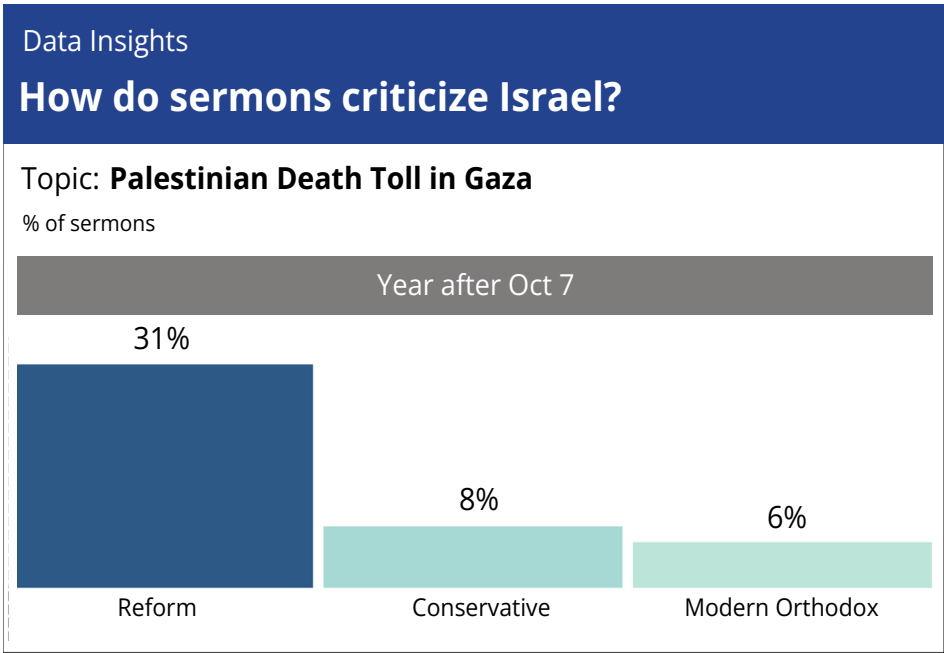


Note: Modern Orthodox value = 0%

**Humanitarian aid to Gaza:**<sup>15</sup> Reform sermons had the highest level of engagement with this issue, with 13% of critical sermons addressing concerns about the humanitarian situation. Conservative sermons engaged with this topic at a much lower rate (3%), while Modern Orthodox sermons did not include any reference to humanitarian aid at all. This suggests that Reform

communities are the most attuned to humanitarian concerns in the context of the war, aligning with their broader emphasis on progressive values and human rights. The minimal engagement in Conservative sermons and complete absence in Modern Orthodox sermons indicate that these communities are either less inclined to frame the war in humanitarian terms or are more aligned with the Israeli government’s stance on aid restrictions.

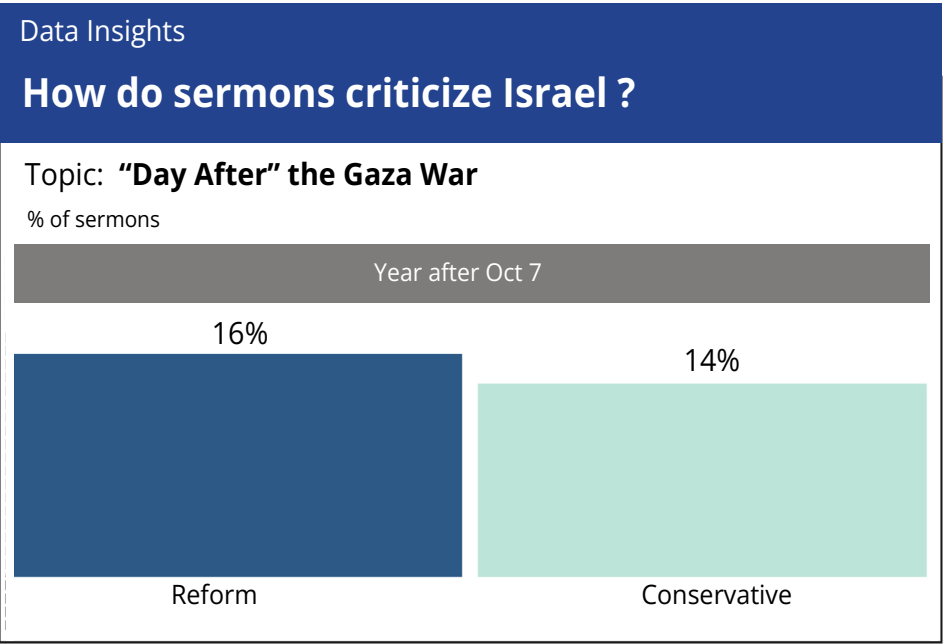
Criticism Related to Gaza Casualties



**Civilian casualties in Gaza:**<sup>16</sup> A similar pattern holds here, with Reform sermons exhibiting the highest level of concern – 31% of critical sermons addressed the issue. By contrast, only 8% Conservative sermons engaged with this topic, and just 6% Modern Orthodox sermons did so. This disparity suggests that Reform communities are far more likely to grapple with the ethical implications of Israeli military actions than are their Conservative and Modern Orthodox counterparts, whose sermons tend to focus on other dimensions of the conflict. The lower engagement in these latter groups may indicate a greater prioritization of Israeli security concerns over the humanitarian impact of the war.



# Criticism Related to Israel’s Lack of a Post-War Strategy (“The Day After” Strategy)



Note: Modern Orthodox value = 0%

**Israel’s lack of a clear long-term strategy for the post-war period:**<sup>17</sup> Reform and Conservative sermons were similarly engaged with this issue, at 16% and 14% respectively. Modern Orthodox sermons, once again, did not address this concern at all. The engagement of both Reform and Conservative communities with strategic critique suggests that these denominations are not only focused on ethical considerations but also on practical political and military outcomes. The lack of engagement in Modern Orthodox sermons underscores the less critical tone of this denomination toward Israeli policy.

These findings provide a deeper understanding of how different Jewish denominations engage with the complexities of Israeli wartime policies. Reform sermons are the most critically engaged, particularly on humanitarian and ethical matters, reflecting their broader ideological emphasis on human rights and moral responsibility. Modern Orthodox sermons, by contrast, show almost no engagement with these topics, reinforcing their role as spaces for solidarity with and support for Israeli policy. Conservative sermons occupy a

middle ground, engaging with strategic critiques and Gaza casualties while largely avoiding humanitarian discourse.

The broader implications of these findings are significant for understanding Israel-Diaspora relations. The Reform movement's strong focus on humanitarian concerns suggests potential tensions with Israeli government policies, particularly regarding military ethics. The Modern Orthodox movement's lack of criticism aligns it more closely with right-wing Israeli political positions, emphasizing alignment over critique. Conservative Judaism, while positioned between these two poles, aligns more closely with the Modern Orthodox approach, maintaining strong support for Israel while allowing for some measured criticism.

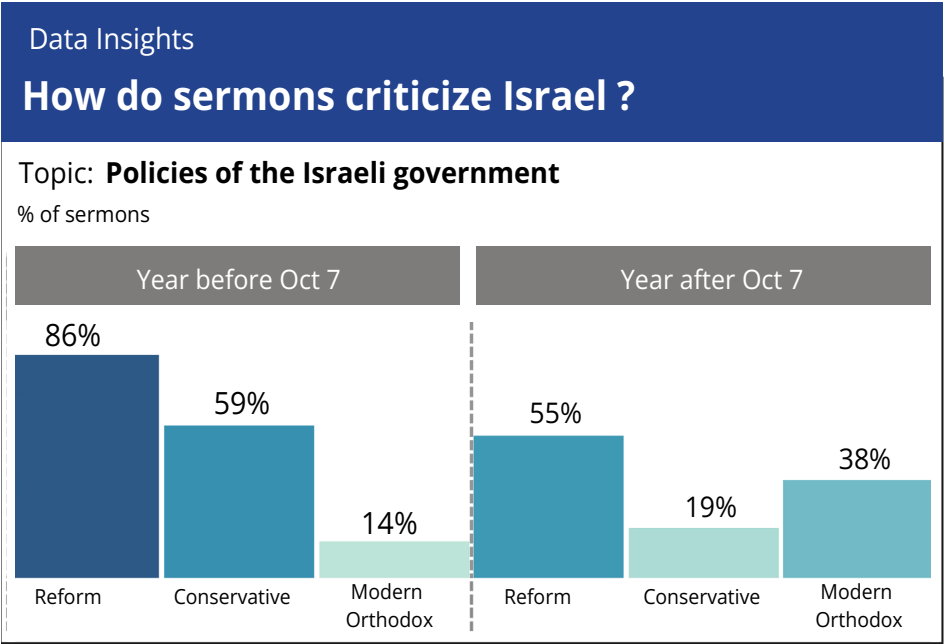
## Criticism on Long-Term Issues

While some critiques in sermons emerged in direct response to the events following October 7, others reflect deeper, long-standing debates that have shaped discourse on Israel for years. These discussions go beyond the immediate wartime context, addressing broader political and societal issues that continue to resonate within some American Jewish communities.

The following analysis delves into how different American Jewish denominations engage with criticism of Israel's political leadership and social issues. In examining these patterns, we gain insight into how the sermons of different denominations portray Israel's political landscape, the social concerns most frequently raised, and how these themes have evolved in response to recent events and allows a better understanding of how major geopolitical shifts influence religious engagement with Israeli politics and society.

# Criticism of the Israeli Government Before and After October 7

The evolution of criticism toward the Israeli government in American Jewish sermons reflects a dynamic shift in political engagement across denominations. The intensity and focus of this discourse have fluctuated significantly over the past two years, shaped by key political developments such as the judicial reform crisis and the outbreak of war following the October 7 Hamas attacks.<sup>18</sup> The results are shown in the following graphs:



During the 2022-2023 period of controversial judicial reform initiatives, criticism of the Israeli government was a significant theme in American Jewish sermons. Reform sermons showed the highest level of critique, with 86% of political sermons addressing concerns over governance. Conservative sermons also engaged with this issue extensively, with 59% raising criticisms of the government. Even in Modern Orthodox communities, where direct criticism of Israeli leadership is typically rare, there was a notable 14% level of engagement in critique. These findings suggest that the judicial reform efforts, which many viewed as a threat to Israel’s democratic foundations, deeply resonated within Jewish communities in the U.S., and led to substantial political engagement in sermons.

However, the discourse shifted following the October 7 attacks and the subsequent war. While criticism of the government remained significant within Reform sermons, it dropped to an incidence of 55%, signaling a recalibration of priorities. Conservative sermons exhibited an even steeper decline, with only 19% continuing to express concerns over government policies. By contrast, Modern Orthodox sermons saw a sharp increase in government critique, rising to 38%. This marks a significant shift, as Modern Orthodox communities, which had previously maintained strong support for Israeli leadership, began to express frustration with the government's handling of the war.

### *Broader Implications: The Impact of Crisis on Political Discourse*

The peak in government criticism during the judicial reform crisis underscores the deep concerns among Reform and Conservative communities regarding Israel's democratic trajectory and the increasing influence of religious parties in governance. However, the subsequent decline in critique following the onset of war suggests that in moments of existential crisis, national security and unity often take precedence over internal political disputes.

The rise in Modern Orthodox criticism, on the other hand, presents an intriguing development. Historically, Modern Orthodox communities have been among the most steadfast in their support for Israeli leadership. The fact that nearly 40% of politically engaged Modern Orthodox sermons now contain some level of government critique suggests that frustrations have surfaced even within this traditionally supportive base. This shift may reflect dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the war, military preparedness, or broader strategic decisions during the conflict.

### *The Recalibration of Priorities in American Jewish Discourse*

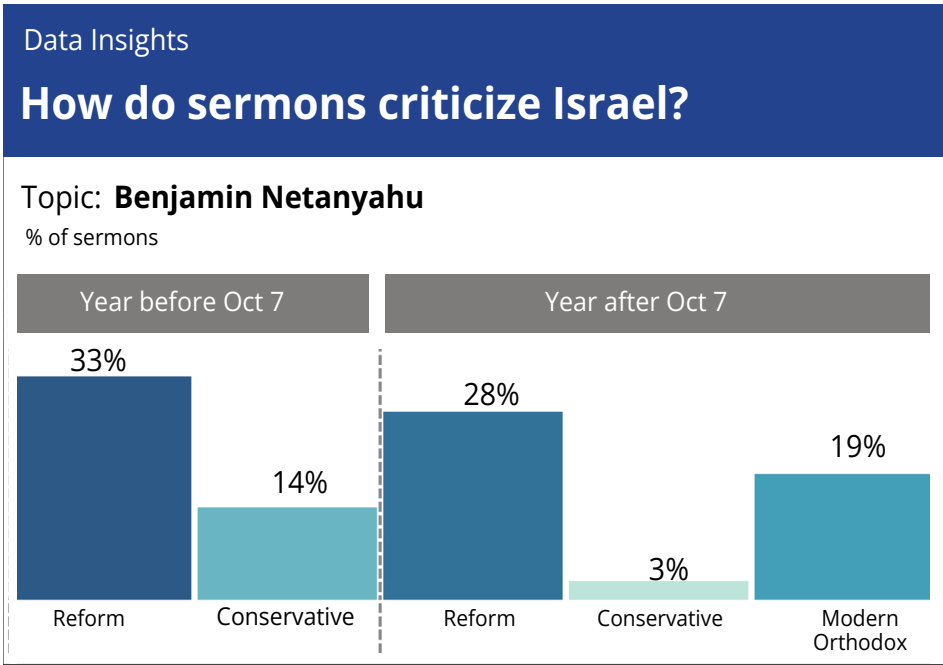
These shifts in homiletic discourse highlight the fluidity of American Jewish engagement with Israeli politics. While periods of political controversy, such as the judicial reform crisis, can trigger intense critique, moments of external crisis often redirect discourse toward themes of Jewish solidarity. At the same time, the emergence of Modern Orthodox post-October 7 criticism raises important questions about the durability of this trend. Will this newfound engagement with government critique persist, or will it subside once the immediate wartime concerns abate? Ultimately, these findings underscore how political discourse

in American Jewish communities is shaped by both ideological commitments and external events.

### Criticism of Israeli Leadership: Netanyahu and Ben-Gvir

The discourse surrounding Israeli leadership, particularly Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu<sup>19</sup> and far-right politician Itamar Ben-Gvir,<sup>20</sup> has undergone notable shifts before and after the October 7 attacks. While criticism of both leaders was present in American Jewish sermons before the war, the patterns of engagement changed significantly in its wake, reflecting evolving priorities within different Jewish denominations.

#### Criticism of Netanyahu



Note: Modern Orthodox value for Bibi = 0% during the year before Oct 7

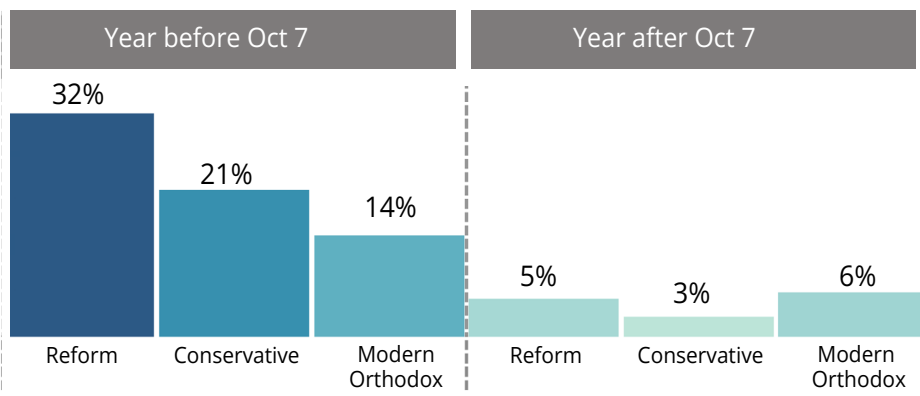
## Criticism of Ben-Gvir

Data Insights

### How do sermons criticize Israel?

Topic: **Itamar Ben-Gvir**

% of sermons



#### *Contrasting Approaches to Netanyahu and Ben-Gvir*

During the pre-war judicial reform period, criticism of Netanyahu was largely confined to Reform and Conservative sermons. Reform clergy were the most vocal, with 33% of politically engaged sermons containing criticism of him, while Conservative sermons evinced disapproval of him at a lower rate of 14%. Notably, Modern Orthodox sermons entirely avoided any direct criticism of Netanyahu, reflecting a broader tendency within these communities to maintain strong support for his leadership.

Itamar Ben-Gvir, on the other hand, drew criticism more evenly across denominations. Again, Reform sermons led the way with 32% addressing concerns about his policies and rhetoric, followed by Conservative sermons at 21%. Unlike their consideration of Netanyahu, Modern Orthodox sermons did engage in some level of critique of Ben-Gvir, with 14% raising concerns about him, signaling that even within more right-leaning religious circles, his controversial political style was not condoned.

The political discourse changed significantly after October 7, with distinct patterns emerging in how different denominations regarded Netanyahu and

Ben-Gvir. Netanyahu remained a relevant and contested figure, but the nature of critique evolved. Reform sermons continued to voice the highest level of criticism, though slightly reduced (28%), while Conservative sermons saw a sharp drop to just 3%, suggesting a shift in focus away from political concerns toward national unity. The most notable change occurred in Modern Orthodox sermons, where criticism of Netanyahu, previously absent, rose significantly to 19%. This shift is in line with what we have seen in the previous graphs about the Modern Orthodox criticism toward the Israeli government after October 7 and suggests growing dissatisfaction within Modern Orthodox communities, likely related to frustrations over Netanyahu's handling of the war and its consequences.

By contrast, criticism of Ben-Gvir declined dramatically across denominations. Reform sermons, which had previously engaged with Ben-Gvir's role at a rate similar to Netanyahu's, saw their critique plummet to just 5%. Conservative sermons dropped to 3%, and Modern Orthodox sermons, which had previously contained a notable level of criticism, also saw a decline to 6%. The near-disappearance of criticism leveled against Ben-Gvir suggests that the war reshaped communal priorities, diverting focus away from internal Israeli political disputes and toward broader security concerns. It may also indicate a rallying effect around right-wing leadership in times of crisis, where figures like Ben-Gvir, often associated with hardline security policies, became less controversial within religious discourse.

### *Broader Implications: The Recalibration of Political Discourse in American Jewish Sermons*

These findings reveal several important trends in how different Jewish denominations engage with Israeli politics. The persistence of Netanyahu as a subject of critique – even as the focus of criticism shifted – indicates that his leadership remains a divisive topic across Jewish movements. However, the newfound presence of criticism in Modern Orthodox sermons suggests that the war created fissures even in Netanyahu's traditional support base.

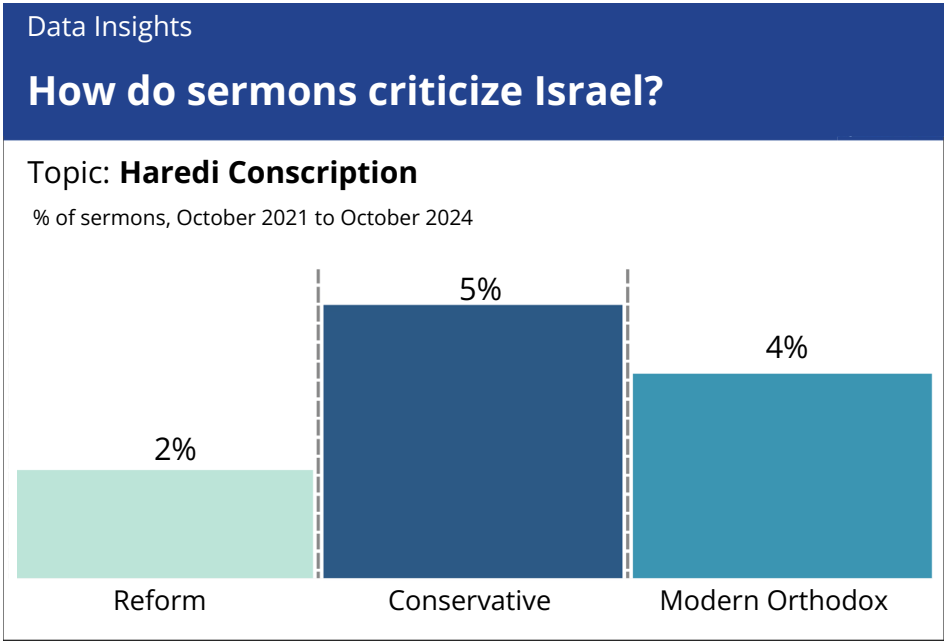
The dramatic decline in criticism of Ben-Gvir, on the other hand, points to a reevaluation of priorities within Jewish communities. His controversial role in Israeli politics, which had previously been a significant topic of discussion, seemed to fade in prominence after October 7.

Ultimately, the changing discourse surrounding Netanyahu and Ben-Gvir

illustrates how external crises can reshape political engagement within American Jewish communities. The war not only redirected communal concerns toward security and unity but also altered the dynamics of political critique, particularly within Modern Orthodox and Conservative movements. As the situation in Israel continues to evolve, it will be important to monitor whether these shifts persist or whether critiques of Israeli leadership reemerge in new forms as the conflict stabilizes.

### Criticism of Haredi (ultra- Orthodox) Enlistment Policies

The graph below presents data on the proportion of sermons that included criticism of Israel in relation to Haredi enlistment across Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox Jewish movements.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, this analysis reflects a long-term critique of the issue, rather than a reaction to any specific event, such as October 7. The data spans from October 7, 2021, to October 7, 2024, offering insight into how frequently this topic appears in synagogue discourse over time.



The issue of Haredi IDF conscription, a long-standing political and social controversy in Israel, appears to have only a marginal presence in the discourse of American Jewish communities. Although one might expect such a contentious subject to feature prominently in sermons that engage critically with Israeli

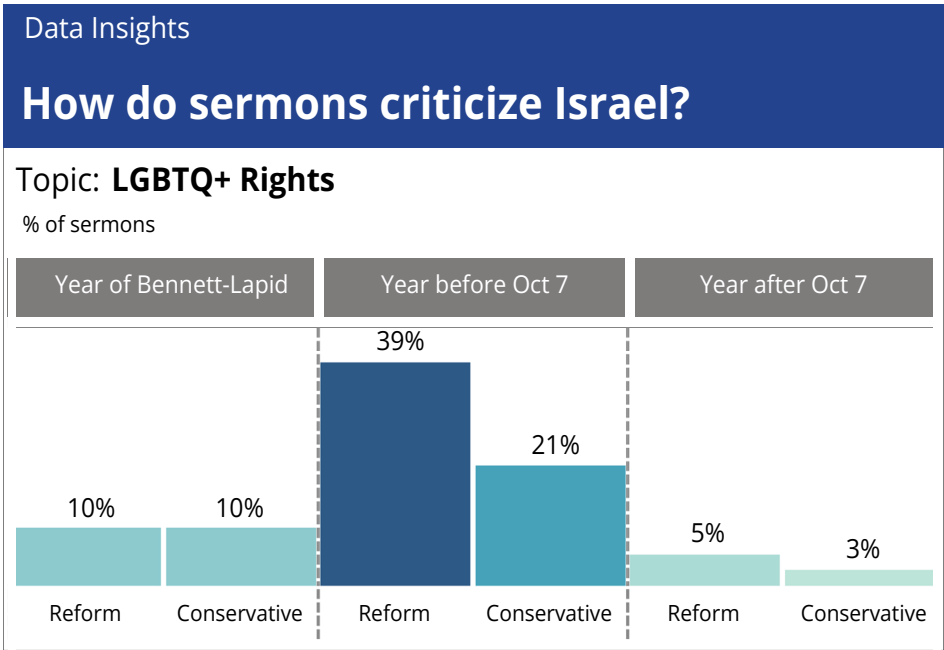


policies, the reality is quite different. References to the debate over Haredi military exemption remain rare in Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox sermons in the United States.

This absence speaks volumes. It suggests that while American Jews may engage with Israel’s broader political and ethical challenges, the question of Haredi military service is not a primary concern. Perhaps, for these communities, especially the two non-Modern Orthodox ones, issues of religious pluralism, democracy, and broader social justice questions trump this particular internal Israeli dispute. The conscription controversy, though deeply consequential within Israel itself, remains somewhat removed from the priorities shaping Jewish thought and discussion abroad.

Criticism of LGBTQ+ Rights in Israel

The graphs below illustrate shifts in the frequency of sermons criticizing Israel’s stance on LGBTQ+ rights over three distinct time periods: the Bennett/Lapid-led Government (2021-2022), the judicial reform period (2022-2023), and after October 7 (2023-2024).<sup>22</sup> These visualizations provide insight into how American Jewish communities across different denominations engaged with this issue and how their focus shifted in response to broader political and security events.



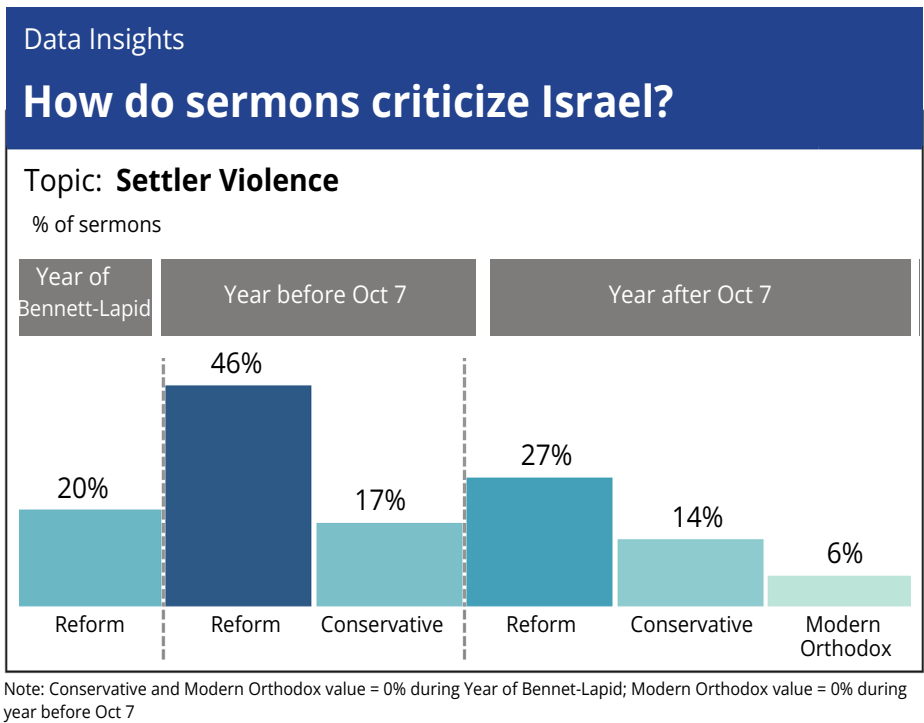
The data reveals a clear pattern. Before the judicial reform debate gained traction, criticism of LGBTQ+ rights in Israel was present but relatively moderate, particularly within Reform and Conservative communities. The issue gained significant momentum during the judicial reform protests, reflecting growing anxieties over the direction of Israeli democracy and concerns about increasing religious influence in Israeli society and politics. In this period, Reform sermons more than doubled their engagement with the topic, and Conservative sermons also saw a notable rise. Yet, within Modern Orthodox communities, the issue remained entirely absent from homiletic discourse.

However, this trend did not last. In the aftermath of October 7, discussions about LGBTQ+ rights in Israel largely disappeared from synagogue sermons. Both Reform and Conservative engagement with the issue dropped dramatically, suggesting that the focus of Jewish communities shifted away from Israeli social issues toward broader concerns about Israel's security and survival. Modern Orthodox communities, which had never engaged in the debate to begin with, remained silent.

This trajectory highlights a revealing dynamic. Liberal Jewish communities appear to criticize Israel's policies on LGBTQ+ rights primarily in moments when the broader state of democracy is under discussion. In times of peace, the LGBTQ+ issue emerges as a particularly central concern for Reform communities, much more so than the Haredi conscription. This emphasis reflects the broader priorities of American progressive societies, where human rights issues carry significant weight. The question of whether Israel remains a democratic and human rights-oriented state seems to be of greater interest to these communities than internal political debates over Haredi military service. However, when faced with national security crises, critiques of LGBTQ+ policies recede, as communal priorities shift toward more existential concerns. The absence of LGBTQ+ discourse in Modern Orthodox sermons further reinforces the idea that the issue does resonate for this community as it does for its more progressive counterparts.

## Criticism of Settler Violence Over Time

The following graphs depict the shifting focus on settler violence within liberal Jewish discourse across three distinct periods: the Bennett/Lapid-led government (2021-2022), the judicial reform protests (2022-2023), and post-October 7 (2023-2024).<sup>23</sup> These visualizations highlight the extent to which American Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox communities engaged critically with this issue over time.



Settler violence emerged as a more prominent concern, particularly within liberal Jewish communities, during the judicial reform protests and remained a topic of criticism post-October 7. Before the judicial reform period, criticism of settler violence was limited primarily to Reform communities, where 20% of critical sermons addressed the issue. Conservative and Modern Orthodox communities, on the other hand, did not engage with it at all.

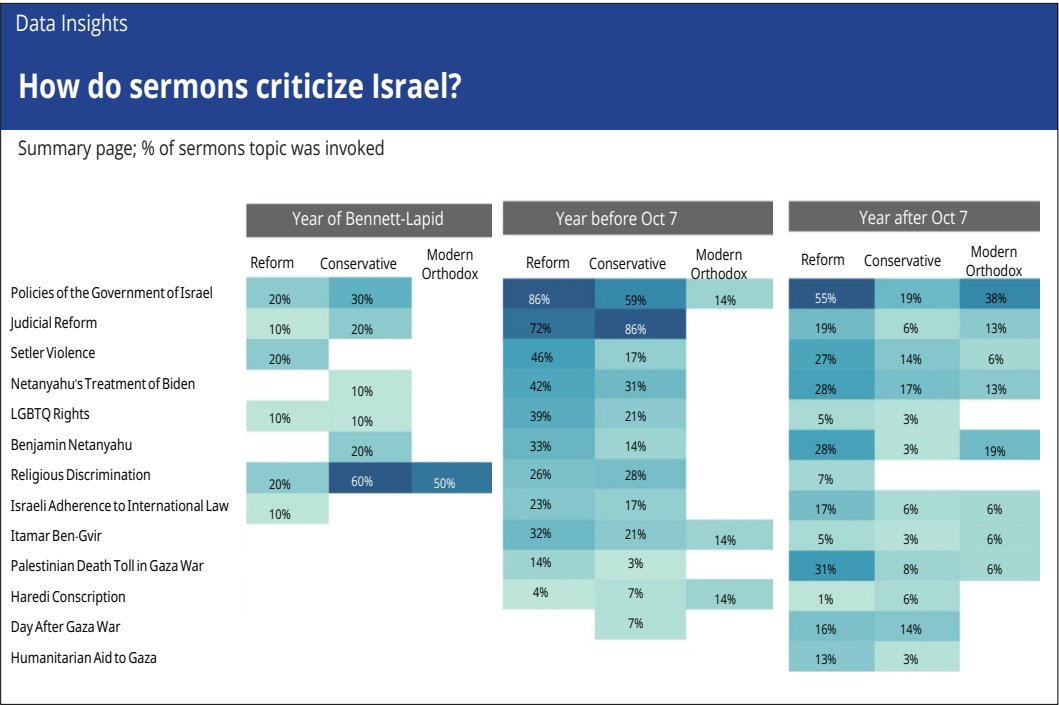
A dramatic shift occurred during the judicial reform protests. In Reform sermons, criticism of settler violence surged to 46%, reflecting a growing concern over Israel's broader political trajectory and its impact on democratic values.

Conservative sermons also saw a rise, albeit a more modest one, reaching 17%. Modern Orthodox communities, however, remained silent on the issue.

Following October 7 and the outbreak of war in Gaza, the discourse shifted once again. While criticism of settler violence declined in Reform communities (dropping to 27%) and Conservative communities (dropping slightly to 14%), the issue did not disappear. Instead, it seemed to be overshadowed by immediate security concerns and broader war-related discussions. Interestingly, for the first time, Modern Orthodox communities engaged with the issue, with 6% of critical sermons addressing settler violence. This suggests a rare moment of debate within Modern Orthodox circles, possibly reflecting concerns about the role of settlers in exacerbating tensions or complicating Israel's military strategy.

Overall, the data suggests that settler violence is viewed through the lens of democratic values by liberal Jewish communities, peaking in moments of political upheaval such as the judicial reform protests. However, during times of national security crisis, discourse around the issue declines but does not disappear entirely. The introduction of settler violence into Modern Orthodox sermons for the first time marks a potentially significant shift, indicating that even traditionally non-critical circles may be beginning to grapple with the implications of settlement policies and their broader impact on Israel's stability.

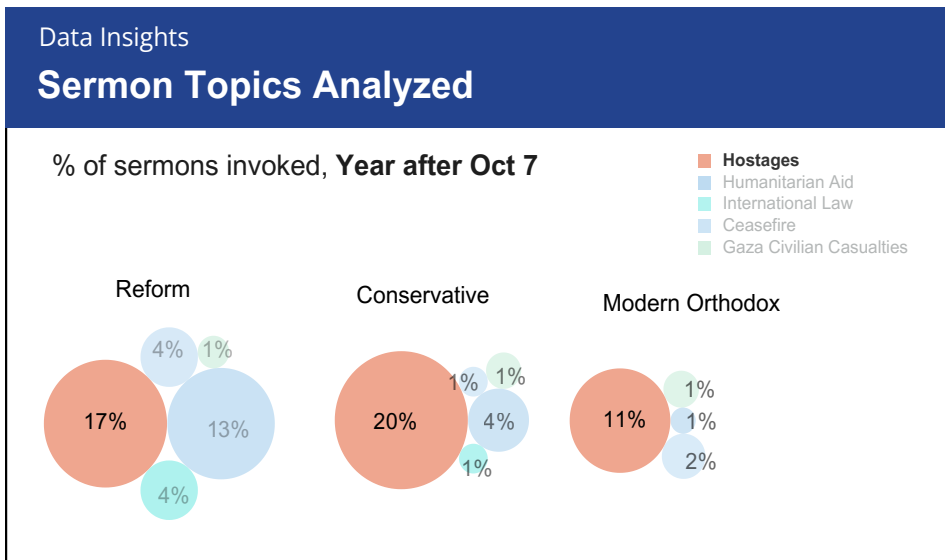
# Below is a summary of all the criticism topics analyzed



# Topics Analysis

## Analysis of Sermon Mentions of the Gaza Hostages since October 7

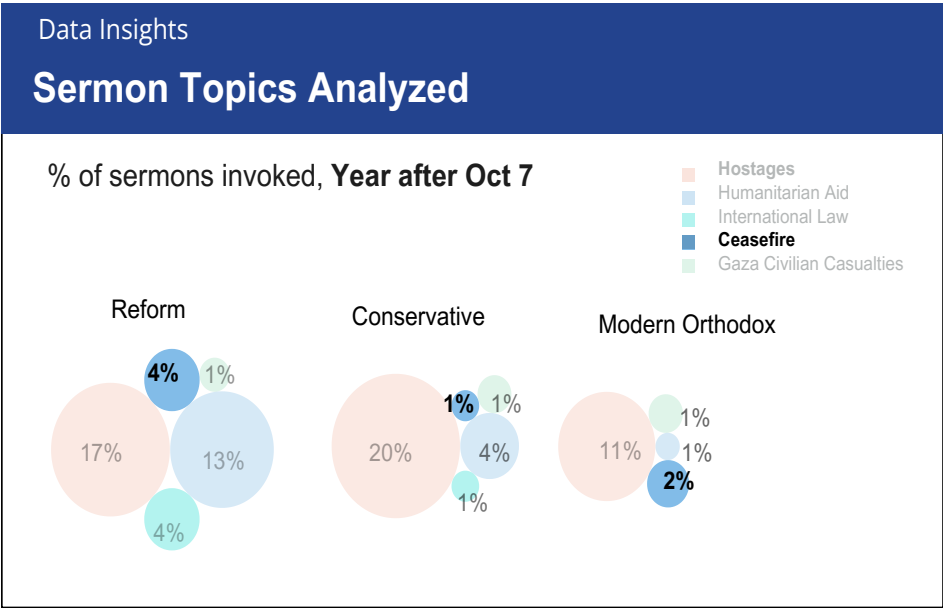
Since the October 7 attacks, the issue of hostages has occupied a central place in public discourse, political activism, and Jewish communal concerns worldwide. Yet, when we turn to synagogue sermons about Israel – the spaces where moral, religious, and communal values are articulated – we find a more complex, perhaps unexpected picture.<sup>24</sup>



An analysis of sermons about Israel delivered in Modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform congregations reveals distinct denominational approaches. Conservative sermons have referenced the Gaza hostages most frequently, in 20% of sermons. Reform sermons follow closely behind, with 17% referencing the hostages. Modern Orthodox sermons, in contrast, contain the fewest references to hostages, appearing in only 11% of sermons. Given the centrality of this issue in both Israeli and global Jewish discourse, this lower-than-expected engagement raises compelling questions about how different Jewish movements prioritize political and humanitarian topics in religious settings.

# Analysis of Mentions of Ceasefire in Sermons

Since the outbreak of the Israel-Gaza war on October 7, 2023, discussions around a ceasefire have dominated international diplomacy, media coverage, and advocacy campaigns. However, an examination of synagogue sermons about Israel across Modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform denominations reveals a strikingly different trend. Despite the global prominence of ceasefire debates, references to the topic remain sparse in Jewish sermons.



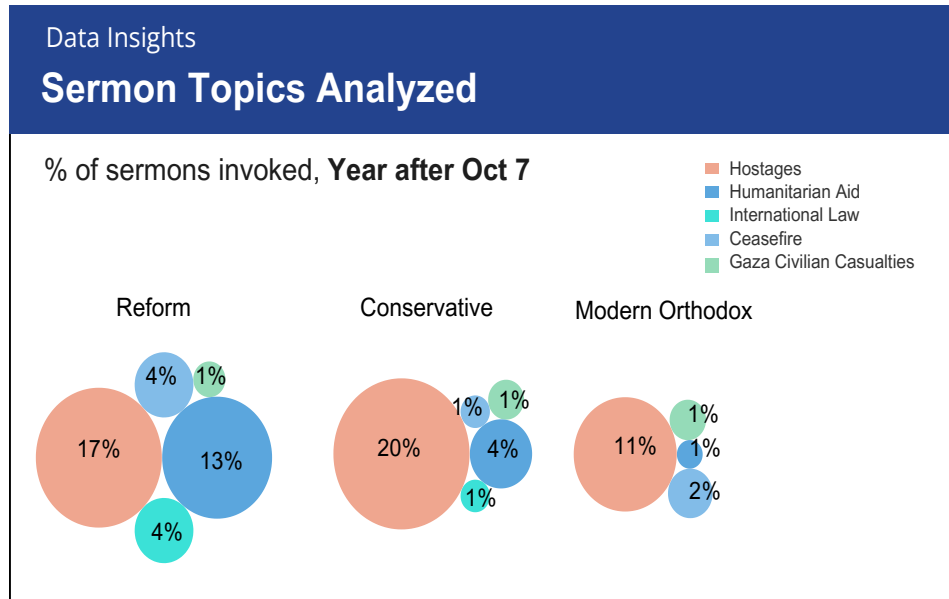
The data indicates that Reform sermons include the highest percentage of ceasefire mentions, but even within this movement, just 4% of Israel-related sermons have addressed the issue. Modern Orthodox sermons follow with 2%, while Conservative sermons contain the fewest references, at just 1%. These findings suggest that although Jewish clergy engage with various aspects of the conflict, calls for a ceasefire are not a dominant theme in religious discourse. There are several potential reasons for this. One possible explanation is that clergy are navigating congregational sensitivities, avoiding direct discussion of a ceasefire due to the deeply polarized views within their communities. Given the range of opinion, from strong support for Israel’s military actions to calls for de-escalation, rabbis may be reluctant to introduce sermon topics that could cause division among congregants. Another consideration is that the limited

emphasis on a ceasefire may reflect an alignment with mainstream Jewish communal organizations, many of which have not prioritized ceasefire advocacy in their public messaging. Instead, these organizations have focused on other aspects of the war, such as supporting Israel’s security concerns and addressing humanitarian issues.

This limited engagement with ceasefire discussions contrasts with the relatively higher mentions of other topics, such as humanitarian aid to Gaza, the plight of the hostages, and discussions of international law. This suggests that while Jewish clergy acknowledge aspects of the humanitarian crisis, they do not necessarily frame these concerns within the broader ceasefire debate. The following graph shows this more clearly.

### Comparison Between Mentions of the Hostages and Other Political Topics

To understand these trends more fully, it is helpful to compare discussions of the hostage crisis with other politically charged topics such as humanitarian aid, civilian casualties, and international law.



The chart illustrates how post-October 7 Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox sermons engage with political and humanitarian concerns. The most striking trend is the overwhelming focus on the hostage crisis, which dominates discussions across all three denominations. Conservative sermons mention



hostages the most at 20%, followed by Reform at 17%, and Modern Orthodox at 11%.

Beyond the hostage issue, Reform sermons stand out for their broader engagement with politically charged topics. Humanitarian aid is the second most discussed subject, appearing in 13% of Reform sermons, while ceasefire and international law are both mentioned at 4%. Gaza civilian casualties receive some attention at 1%. By contrast, Conservative sermons, while still primarily focused on the hostages (20%), engage with humanitarian aid at 4%, ceasefire at and Gaza civilian casualties at 1%, while international law is nearly absent. Modern Orthodox sermons remain the most narrowly focused, with the hostages dominating at 11%, and only minimal mentions of a ceasefire (2%), humanitarian aid and Gaza civilian casualties (1%). International law is entirely absent from Modern Orthodox sermons.

These trends suggest that each denomination approaches these issues through a distinct lens. Reform sermons reflect the most extensive engagement with ethical, humanitarian, and legal concerns, and incorporate a more diverse range of political discussions. Conservative sermons, though still hostage-focused, offer limited engagement with humanitarian issues. Modern Orthodox sermons remain almost exclusively centered on the hostages and largely avoid broader political or humanitarian debates. This divergence underscores the varying ways different Jewish communities interpret and prioritize aspects of the Israel-Hamas conflict in their public discourse, shaped by theological perspectives, communal expectations, and broader ideological affiliations. While Reform communities tend to reflect on a wider range of humanitarian and legal issues, Conservative and Modern Orthodox communities maintain a more concentrated focus on the hostage crisis.<sup>25</sup>

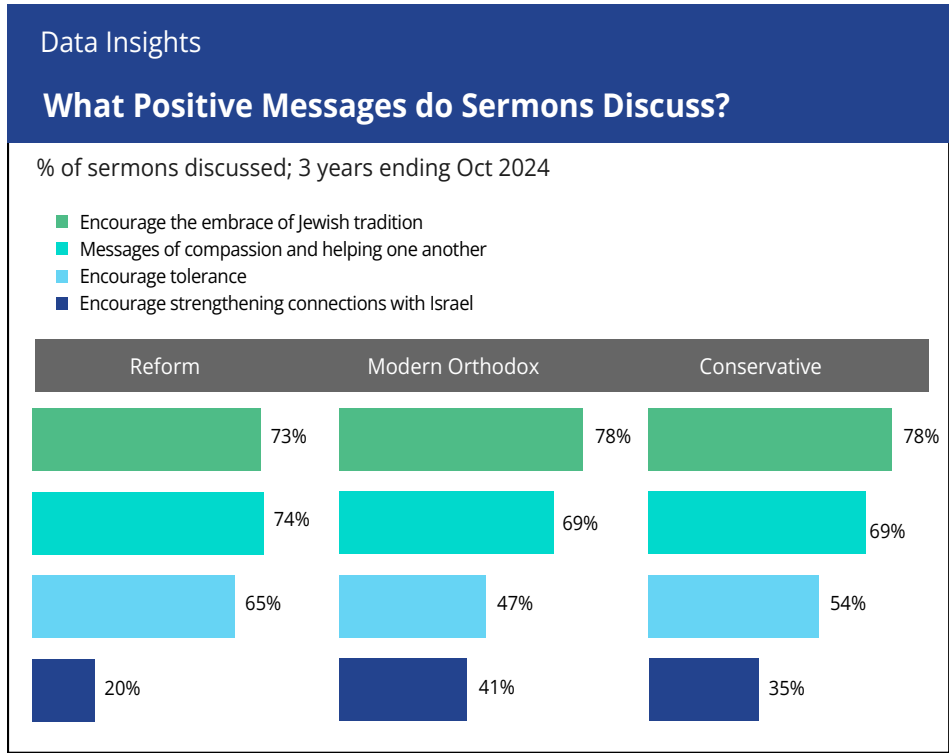
## **Analysis of Positive Messaging in Sermons Across Jewish Denominations**

The following graphs provide insight into the positive messages conveyed in sermons across Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox denominations over the past three years. By analyzing the presence of each theme across all 4,302 sermons, these graphs illustrate how different movements emphasize key themes that reflect their values and priorities. They also highlight variations

in emphasis and offer a comparative view of how each denomination engages with and relates to these themes.<sup>26</sup>

- **Encouragement to strengthen connections with Israel:** Sermons in this category promote ties with Israel in various ways. Some highlight the spiritual and religious bond between the Jewish people and the land of Israel, reinforcing its central role in Jewish faith and heritage. Others encourage active support for Israel through advocacy, expressions of solidarity, or visiting the country. Many sermons frame Israel as a unifying force for Jews worldwide,
- **Encouragement of tolerance:** Sermons in this category underscore the importance of acceptance, peace, and coexistence. These messages often promote respect for others, regardless of differences in beliefs or backgrounds, and call for unity among different Jewish denominations and communities. Many also extend beyond intra-Jewish relations, advocating interfaith and multicultural understanding as a means of fostering peaceful relationships with non-Jewish communities.
- **Encouragement to embrace Jewish tradition.** These discussions stress the importance of maintaining Jewish customs, heritage, and identity. Sermons in this category frequently urge observance of mitzvot, such as keeping Shabbat, following kosher dietary laws, and engaging in regular prayer. Others focus on deepening cultural and historical appreciation, strengthening Jewish identity, and emphasizing Torah study and Jewish teachings. There is also a strong emphasis on transmitting Jewish traditions to future generations to ensure continuity in faith and practice.
- **Compassion and mutual responsibility:** These values are central to many sermons and focus on kindness, empathy, and communal responsibility. Calls to perform acts of charity (tzedakah) and to support those in need are prevalent, as are messages stressing the importance of uplifting and assisting fellow community members in difficult times. Kindness and empathy in daily interactions are frequently cited, as is the value of volunteerism and service. In times of hardship, sermons reinforce the need for unity and collective strength, reminding communities of the importance of standing together in facing challenges.

Analysis of these themes can help better understand how Jewish communities use sermons to reinforce religious values, social unity, and a deep, enduring relationship with Israel. Each denomination weaves together spiritual guidance, communal support, and a commitment to Jewish continuity in ways that resonate with its respective audiences.



Analysis of these graphs provides a deeper understanding of how Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox Jewish communities have prioritized different themes in their sermons over the past three years.

One of the most striking findings is the variation in emphasis on strengthening connections to Israel. Reform communities place the least emphasis on this theme, with only 20% of sermons highlighting it, whereas Conservative and Modern Orthodox communities dedicate significantly more attention, 35% and 41% respectively. This aligns with broader ideological tendencies – Reform Judaism, which often engages in critical discourse on Israeli policies, focuses less on Zionist messaging compared to Conservative and Modern Orthodox movements, which demonstrate a clearer commitment to strengthening ties with Israel.

Tolerance emerges as another key theme, with Reform communities leading the discourse in this area (65%), followed by Conservative (54%) and Modern Orthodox (47%). This trend reflects the broader philosophical approach of Reform Judaism, which prioritizes inclusivity and social justice. Beyond the stronger emphasis on this theme in Reform sermons, the data demonstrates that tolerance remains a central topic across denominations, reinforcing its fundamental role in Jewish religious discourse.

Embracing Jewish tradition remains a unifying theme across denominations, with high levels of engagement: 73% in Reform sermons, 78% in Conservative, and 78% in Modern Orthodox. Despite theological and ideological differences, Jewish tradition remains central in religious discourse across movements. Even within Reform communities, often viewed as more flexible in observance, there is still a strong emphasis on heritage and religious continuity.

Messages of compassion and mutual support are also prevalent across denominations, with relatively similar percentages – 74% for Reform, 69% for Conservative, and 69% for Modern Orthodox. This suggests that regardless of political and theological orientation, Jewish communities prioritize values of kindness and communal responsibility, particularly in times of hardship. The near-equal emphasis across denominations highlights the universal importance of compassion in Jewish teachings and reinforces its fundamental role in Jewish religious discourse.

## Broader Implications of these Findings

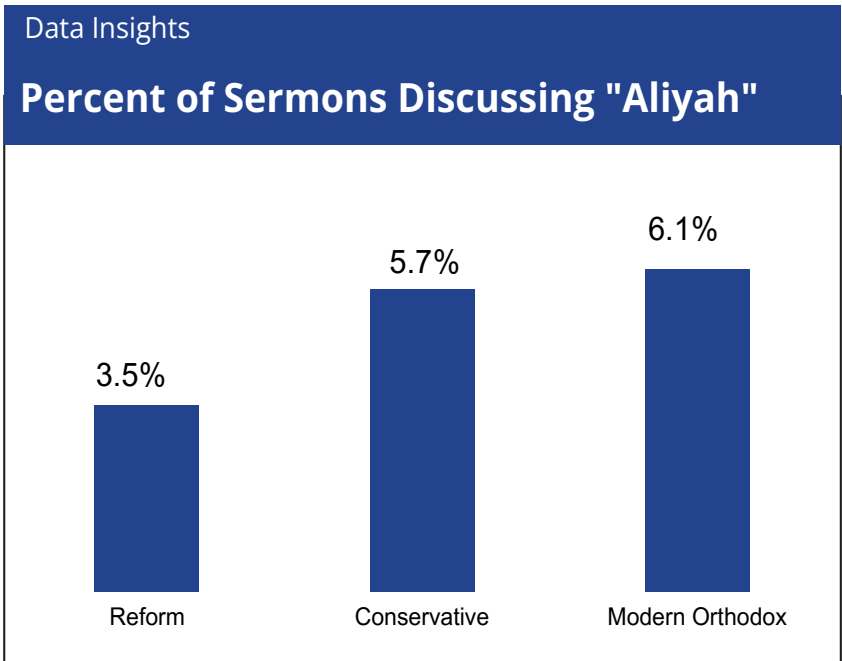
- 1. Reform Judaism prioritizes social values over Israel:** Reform sermons focus significantly more on tolerance (65%) and compassion (74%) than on strengthening ties with Israel (20%). This suggests that Reform communities prioritize ethical values and social justice over Zionist messaging, in contrast to Modern Orthodox and Conservative communities, where Israel plays a more central role.
- 2. Modern Orthodox and Conservative communities have a stronger Zionist emphasis:** Modern Orthodox and Conservative sermons are nearly twice as likely to include positive messages about Israel compared to Reform sermons. This reflects a stronger ideological commitment to

Zionism within these communities.

- 3. Jewish tradition as a common thread across denominations:** Despite theological and political differences, all denominations emphasize Jewish tradition, with more than 70% of all sermons highlighting it. This underscores the role of Jewish identity and historical continuity as shared elements binding all denominations together.
- 4. Compassion and tolerance as central values:** Messages of compassion and mutual support are widespread across all Jewish denominations, and despite ideological divides, the importance of community care and solidarity remains strong.

### Analysis of Sermons Containing the Word "Aliyah"

An analysis of sermons about Israel that referenced “Aliyah” (immigration to Israel) provides a picture of how different Jewish denominations engage with this concept.



What stands out most is that Aliyah is rarely mentioned across the three movements, with only slight variations between them.

Modern-Orthodox referenced Aliyah most frequently, appearing in 6.1% of sermons, followed closely by Conservative sermons at 5.7%, and Reform sermons at 3.5%. While Modern Orthodox communities have historically been more closely associated with Zionism and Aliyah, these numbers suggest that, in practice, Aliyah is not a central focus in sermons for any denomination. Instead, Jewish communities across the spectrum, regardless of their ideological stance on Israel, appear to prioritize discussions on other aspects of Jewish life over the promotion of immigration. Rather than emphasizing Aliyah, sermons tend to focus on strengthening the connection with Israel in broader ways. This suggests that Diaspora Jews – regardless of denomination – recognize Israel’s importance but do not necessarily frame Aliyah as an urgent or essential objective.

These findings highlight the complexity of Diaspora Jewish identity – while Israel remains a central point of reference, Aliyah is not a primary focus in American Jewish religious messaging. This underscores that despite ideological differences, Jewish communities across denominations remain deeply invested in maintaining a vibrant Jewish life outside of Israel while fostering strong connections to the Jewish state.

# Conclusion

This study elucidates the significant role political discourse plays in American Jewish sermons across Modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform denominations. By analyzing over 4,302 sermons delivered between 2021 and 2024, we have identified patterns that reflect both denominational differences and broader communal responses to key political events in Israel. The findings show that political engagement is a defining feature of Jewish homiletic discourse, with Israel consistently occupying a central place in religious messaging.

The data shows that political content in sermons intensified in the wake of the October 7 attacks, reflecting the deep connection between American Jewish communities and Israeli affairs. This increase in political engagement underscores the extent to which American synagogues function not only as religious spaces but also as platforms for interpreting and responding to geopolitical events. Across denominations, discussions about the Gaza hostages dominated the discourse, but the presence of issues such as humanitarian aid, Gaza civilian casualties, and ceasefire considerations varied significantly. Reform sermons exhibited the broadest engagement with humanitarian and ethical concerns, while Conservative and Modern Orthodox sermons remained more narrowly focused on Israel's security and political stability.

Structural analysis further highlights the integration of political themes into sermons. In most politically engaged sermons, political content appears at the outset before transitioning into religious discussion, suggesting that political messaging is not merely supplementary but central to religious discourse. The study also identifies critical trends in how different denominations engage with Israeli government policies, leadership, and controversial issues such as judicial reform, LGBTQ+ rights, settler violence, and Haredi military conscription. Notably, critique of the Israeli government surged during the judicial reform debates but decreased significantly following the October 7 attacks, as sermons shifted toward messages of Jewish solidarity and unity.

Despite political critique, the overall tone toward Israel remained

overwhelmingly positive across denominations, reaffirming the strong connection between American Jewish communities and the Jewish state. Even among denominations expressing criticism, the discourse reflected deep engagement rather than outright opposition. The emphasis on positive messages – including strengthening Jewish identity, calling for tolerance, and fostering compassion – further illustrates how sermons serve as vehicles for both political engagement and communal cohesion.

This study's findings contribute to a broader understanding of the intersection of religion and politics in American Jewish communities. The synagogue emerges not only as a site of religious instruction but also as a critical space where political discourse is shaped, reinforced, and disseminated. Future research could expand this analysis by incorporating sermons from Israeli synagogues or exploring how political messaging in Jewish sermons compares to Haredi sermons and to other religious traditions. Additionally, further investigation into the reception and impact of these sermons on congregants could provide deeper insights into the role of clergy in shaping political perspectives.

Ultimately, this study underscores the inextricable link between Jewish religious life and political consciousness and shows how sermons serve as a lens through which Jewish communities navigate, interpret, and engage with contemporary political realities.



# Appendix 1

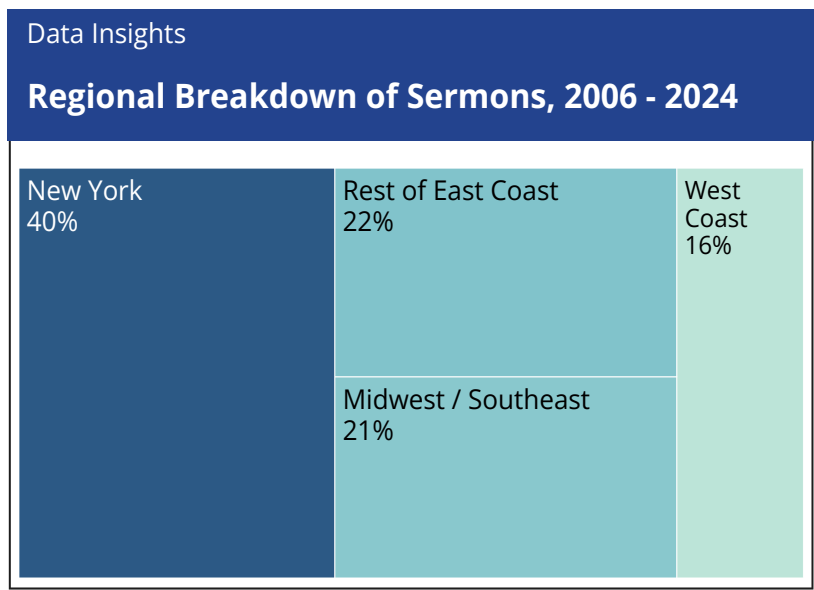
## Methodology

### Data Collection

This study analyzes a corpus of 4,302 sermons, 2556 of which were delivered between October 2021 and October 2024 across Modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform synagogues in the United States. The distribution of sermons across denominations reflects both the varying levels of digital accessibility and availability, as well as the overall proportion of Jews affiliated with each denomination. The dataset includes 1,276 sermons from Reform synagogues, 878 from Conservative synagogues, and 412 from Modern Orthodox synagogues, with the majority of Modern Orthodox sermons originating in the past two years.

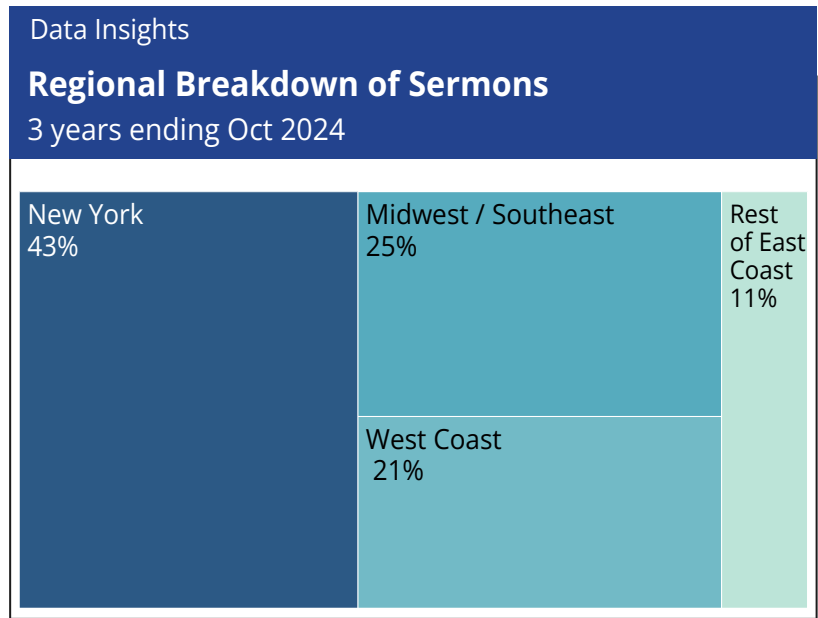
The graphs presented here offer insights into the geographical distribution of sermons and the broader trends in sermon documentation over time.

The first chart illustrates the percentage of sermons from 2006 to 2024 categorized by four major geographical regions: New York, the West Coast, the East Coast (excluding New York), and the Midwest/Southeast.



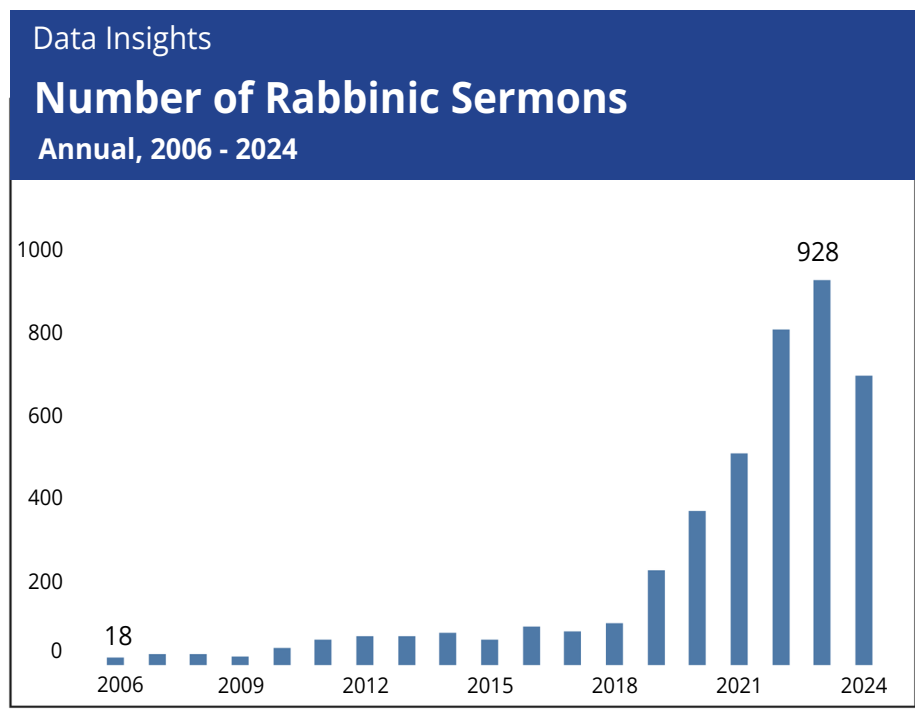
New York has the largest share, with **40%** of recorded sermons. The East Coast and the Midwest/Southeast regions follow with **22%** and **21%**, respectively, and the West Coast accounts for **16%**. The high proportion of sermons from New York corresponds to its large Jewish population, where many congregations, synagogues, and religious institutions are based.

The second graph focuses on the period between **October 2021 and October 2024**, showing a slightly different distribution.



During this timeframe, New York’s share of sermons increases to **43%**, while the share from the East Coast decreases to **11%**. The Midwest/Southeast region accounts for **25%**, and the West Coast for **21%**. This snapshot offers a more recent look at the geographical spread of sermons within the defined timeframe, which is the source of most of the following analysis.

The third graph illustrates the **number of sermons uploaded each year from 2006 to 2024**.



The data shows a gradual increase in the early years, with relatively low numbers of uploads until around **2016**. After that point, the number of sermons uploaded each year rises significantly, reaching its highest point in **2023**. The decrease in 2024 is because the sermons included in the dataset only extend until October 2024, meaning there are two fewer months of data compared to previous years. The overall trend indicates an expansion in the documentation of sermons over time.

For the Reform and Conservative denominations, the sermons were primarily collected using a Python-based API, which transcribed sermons directly from YouTube. This process involved extracting sermons from designated playlists specifically curated for this purpose. The API facilitated the automated retrieval of key metadata, including sermon titles, full transcriptions, and timestamps. In leveraging this method, the study ensured a systematic and efficient collection of sermon data, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of political discourse across these denominations.

By contrast, the collection of Modern Orthodox sermons required a more direct approach, given the relatively limited online availability of sermon content. These sermons were obtained through direct outreach to rabbis and communal leaders and were provided in diverse formats, including PDF and Word documents. To ensure uniformity, all Modern Orthodox sermons were first converted to PDF format and subsequently processed using Python libraries to extract text and structure them into a standardized CSV file, containing sermon title, full text, date, and rabbi's name. In cases where sermons lacked explicit Gregorian dates or contained only Hebrew calendar references, ChatGPT-4o was employed to determine at least approximate dates, ensuring temporal consistency across the dataset. This standardization enabled the comparison of sermons across different time periods.

To maintain consistency across denominations, all collected sermons were consolidated into a unified CSV format. This step facilitated efficient data management and ensured comparability across sermons from different Jewish traditions.

## Analytical Stage

### Methodological Framework: Computational Discourse Analysis and AI Optimization

In conducting this study, a range of advanced **computational and linguistic methodologies** were employed to enhance the precision, coherence, and analytical depth of the data. Given the complexity of homiletic discourse and its intersection with political themes, it was imperative to structure the **interaction between AI and text** in a way that maximized interpretability while preserving the nuanced rhetorical elements of the sermons. This was achieved through a combination of **prompt engineering strategies, structured analytical workflows, and AI-driven reasoning techniques** that enabled a deeper engagement with the material.

### Few-Shot Learning: Guiding the Model through Exemplars

To refine the model's interpretative accuracy, a **few-shot learning approach** was taken.<sup>27</sup> Rather than presenting AI with decontextualized queries, **multiple examples of expected response structures were embedded within the**

**prompts**, guiding the model toward a more coherent and contextually attuned analysis.

### Chain of Thought (CoT) Reasoning: Encouraging Sequential Interpretive Logic

Recognizing the **layered rhetorical structure of sermons**, the study integrated **Chain of Thought (CoT) prompting**, a technique that compels the AI to **articulate its reasoning process** step by step before generating a final response.<sup>28</sup> By structuring responses in a way that mirrored **human-like interpretative sequencing**, this approach ensured that the AI's analyses **mimicked the kind of structured reasoning employed in human discourse analysis**.

### Decomposed Prompting: Segmenting Interpretative Tasks for Greater Precision

Rather than employing a conventional single-query approach, this study implemented decomposed prompting, allowing for a more precise and structured analysis of homiletic discourse. Instead of tasking AI with identifying and interpreting political content simultaneously, the analytical process was broken into distinct stages.

### Individualized Analysis: Preserving Contextual Integrity

As sermons operate as **discrete rhetorical events**, each text was analyzed **individually**, rather than in bulk. This methodological decision was informed by the recognition that **the homiletic voice is context-dependent** – its themes, audience reception, and rhetorical function vary significantly based on denomination, location, and sociopolitical climate. By treating each sermon as an **autonomous unit of analysis**, the study ensured that **contextual integrity was preserved**, avoiding dilution of meaning through aggregated processing.

### Structured Computational Output: Standardizing Discourse for Systematic Analysis

To facilitate a **methodologically rigorous approach to AI-generated insights**, responses were formatted in a **structured JSON schema**, ensuring

standardization across all stages of computational processing.<sup>29</sup> This structure not only **enabled efficient parsing and categorization** but also **allowed for cross-referencing between AI-generated analyses and human interpretative oversight**.

## Stages of Analysis

The analytical process was structured into multiple stages to ensure a **comprehensive and systematic examination of the homiletic discourse**. The methodology employed a combination of **AI-driven classification, sentiment analysis, and structural evaluation** to extract insights regarding **political content, critique of Israel, positive messaging, and thematic trends**.

## General Analysis of Sermons

The initial stage of analysis encompassed a broad examination of the entire dataset to establish foundational classifications and ensure methodological consistency. The first step involved verification that each analyzed text was indeed a sermon, distinguishing it from other forms of discourse. Once confirmed, the classification process extended to identifying whether a sermon contained political content, sorting sermons into political or non-political categories. This classification was further refined by determining the number of political sermons that focused on Israeli politics.

Beyond identifying political themes, in cases where political references to Israel were apparent, an additional layer of evaluation was introduced to assess the overall sentiment conveyed. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how political themes, particularly those related to Israel, were framed within different denominational contexts, enabling a comparative analysis of tone and emphasis across the dataset.

## Classification of Sermons Containing Criticism of Israel

To systematically identify criticism directed at Israel in sermons, we defined a set of specific, predefined critique themes. Instead of broadly asking whether a sermon contained criticism, we instructed ChatGPT-4o to assess each sermon individually for the presence of these specific themes. This approach ensured a **targeted, structured classification**, reducing ambiguity and improving precision. AI was prompted to evaluate sermons already identified as engaging

with Israel and determine whether any of the predefined critique themes appeared within them.

This methodology provided a more granular analysis, enabling us to compare how criticism of Israel varied across denominations and over time. By structuring the task in this way, we ensured that each critique theme was independently validated, providing a more rigorous assessment of the political discourse within Jewish sermons. This classification was applied **only to sermons previously identified as political and engaging with Israel.**

### Structural Analysis of Sermons

To examine the structural role of political discourse within sermons, a segmented content analysis was conducted to determine how and when political themes emerged within the homiletic framework. Politically focused sermons were analyzed with particular attention to their introductory sections, with the first 20% of each sermon extracted for closer examination. This method provided insight into whether political discourse was introduced at the outset or emerged later within a broader religious or moral discussion. ChatGPT-4o was tasked with identifying these structural patterns, distinguishing sermons that began with explicit political themes from those that opened with religious motifs. By supplying the model with structured examples of each sermon type, a consistent classification framework was maintained, ensuring a rigorous and systematic approach to evaluating the interplay between political and religious discourse.

### Classification of Positive Messages in Sermons

The classification of positive messages in sermons was conducted across the entire dataset to identify expressions of encouragement, unity, and calls to action. ChatGPT-4o was tasked with recognizing instances of positive messaging within each sermon and was subsequently instructed to return a structured list of these messages based on predefined categories. The analysis focused on general positive messages, which encompassed broad themes of encouragement and communal solidarity.

## Analysis of Specific Topics: Hostages, Ceasefire, and Aliyah

To further refine the examination of political discourse in sermons, additional targeted analyses were conducted on specific themes of contemporary significance. The topics of hostages and ceasefire were given particular focus due to their post-October 7 relevance. These themes were analyzed using a topic-based volume assessment, which evaluated their prominence within the sermons that focused on Israel, based on ChatGPT-4o's topic modeling capabilities.<sup>30</sup> This approach allowed for an assessment of how frequently these themes appeared. By contrast, the topic of Aliyah, Jewish immigration to Israel, was examined through word frequency analysis, given its more straightforward linguistic markers. This method enabled a precise measurement of the presence of the word Aliyah across different denominations, providing insight into whether religious leaders engaged with the theme of Jewish migration in their sermons.

## Refining the Analytical Model

This multi-layered approach ensured that the study went beyond basic keyword detection, incorporating thematic nuance, discourse structure, and sentiment shifts over time. The integration of AI-assisted content categorization with structured human oversight provided a methodologically rigorous framework, allowing for a detailed examination of political discourse within contemporary Jewish sermons.

## Validation Techniques

A human-in-the-loop (HITL) validation approach was implemented to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the AI-driven analysis.<sup>31</sup> This validation process combined human expertise with computational analysis, aiming to mitigate biases and enhance credibility. Rather than relying solely on automated classification, human reviewers systematically evaluated a sample of AI-generated classifications and compared them to manual interpretations to ensure consistency. Additionally, ChatGPT-4o's reasoning process was examined to gain insight into how the model arrived at its classifications. This step was crucial in refining the AI's interpretative accuracy and ensuring that its decision-making aligned with the nuanced nature of sermonic discourse.



To assess the performance of ChatGPT-4o in classifying sermons, **standard validation metrics – accuracy, precision, and recall – were applied.** These measures provided insights into the model's strengths and limitations across different analytical tasks.

Accuracy provides a measure of how often the model correctly classifies both political and non-political sermons, incorporating both correct positive and negative classifications. A high accuracy score indicates that the AI is effective in distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant sermons. However, accuracy alone is not always sufficient, particularly in cases where the dataset is imbalanced, and certain classifications are less frequent.

To address this limitation, precision was employed as a complementary metric, focusing on the reliability of the AI's positive classifications. Precision evaluates how many of the sermons identified as politically charged or containing criticism are indeed correctly classified. This metric is particularly important when identifying rare or highly specific classifications, such as sermons containing political critiques of a particular figure. A high precision score ensures that when AI classifies a sermon as political or critical, it is more likely to be accurate and not a false positive.

For instance, in a dataset containing both political and non-political sermons, accuracy would measure how well the model distinguishes between the two categories overall. However, in cases where only a small subset of sermons contains political criticism, precision ensures that when AI does flag a sermon as politically critical, it is indeed correct. In integrating both accuracy and precision into the validation framework, this study ensures a balanced and rigorous evaluation of AI-driven classifications, reinforcing confidence in the reliability of the computational analysis of religious discourse.

However, focusing solely on precision presents its own challenges. A model optimized for precision may become overly cautious, avoiding misclassification at the cost of overlooking relevant instances. This is where recall becomes essential. Recall measures the model's ability to retrieve all relevant cases within the dataset, quantifying how many politically charged or critical sermons were correctly identified out of the total that exist. A high recall score indicates that the AI is not merely accurate when it does classify sermons as political but

is also comprehensive in ensuring that it does not miss important instances of political discourse.

These validation measures aimed to mitigate biases and enhance the credibility of AI-driven insights, ensuring that the analysis aligns with the complex and nuanced nature of religious sermons.

By integrating computational analysis and human expertise, this study aims to provide a comprehensive examination of political discourse in American Jewish sermons across diverse denominations and socio-political contexts.

# Appendix 2

## Antisemitism in Press Releases: A Comparative Analysis of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jewish Discourse in the United States

As a complementary study to the one on sermons, we have analyzed the discourse on antisemitism, immigration, and LGBTQ+ issues within the major Jewish religious movements in the United States – Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox – through an analysis of press releases published over the past decade. Press releases serve as an official channel through which religious institutions articulate their positions on key social, political, and communal issues, making them a valuable resource for understanding how different Jewish movements frame and respond to contemporary antisemitism.

To systematically assess these perspectives, we compiled and analyzed 1,441 press releases from the past ten years, distributed as follows:

- **Reform Movement:** 775 press releases (Union for Reform Judaism and Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism – RAC).
- **Conservative Movement:** 190 press releases (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism – USCJ and Rabbinical Assembly).
- **Modern Orthodox Movement:** 425 press releases (Orthodox Union – OU Advocacy).

### Methodology

To conduct this study, we utilized web scraping techniques to systematically collect press releases published over the past decade by the major Jewish religious movements in the United States.

The first stage of analysis focused on identifying press releases that explicitly addressed antisemitism. To do so, we conducted a keyword-based search identical to the one conducted with the sermons using terms such

as “Antisemitism,” “Antisemitic,” and “Anti-Semitism.” This process resulted in a dataset of **210 press releases** that mentioned antisemitism in some form.

Once the relevant materials were identified, we turned to the question of attribution – how each movement defined and contextualized antisemitism in its discourse. To systematically assess this, we employed AI-based text analysis using ChatGPT. The model was instructed to determine whether antisemitism in a given press release was attributed to right-wing sources, left-wing sources, or both, based on predefined criteria. Right-wing antisemitism was categorized as including white supremacist ideologies, neo-Nazism, and broader racial supremacist movements, while left-wing antisemitism was defined as emerging primarily from anti-Israel rhetoric, BDS activism, and campus-based hostility toward Zionism.

To refine the accuracy of this classification process, a *few-shot learning* approach was used, in which the AI model was provided with multiple labeled examples before analyzing the full dataset. However, because automated text classification can sometimes struggle with contextual nuances, all AI-generated attributions were manually reviewed to ensure consistency and reliability.

The final dataset underscored significant differences in each movement’s attribution of antisemitism. Among the press releases analyzed, a considerable proportion engaged directly with the question of ideological origins. Orthodox organizations attributed antisemitism to either right-wing or left-wing sources in **33 press releases**, while the Reform movement made similar attributions in **41 instances**. The Conservative movement, by contrast, engaged with this issue less frequently, with only **13 press releases** explicitly linking antisemitism to a specific ideological source. Notably, a substantial number of publications across all three movements discussed antisemitism in broader terms, without pinpointing a particular political or ideological origin.

Through this methodological approach, we were able to construct a comparative framework that highlights significant differences in how the Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox movements engage with the issue of antisemitism in their public discourse. These findings provide insight into the ideological and political priorities of each movement and their evolving responses to one of the most pressing challenges facing Jewish communities today.

To assess how these movements engaged with LGBTQ+ and immigration issues, we conducted a similar keyword-based search, identifying press releases that included terms commonly associated with these topics.

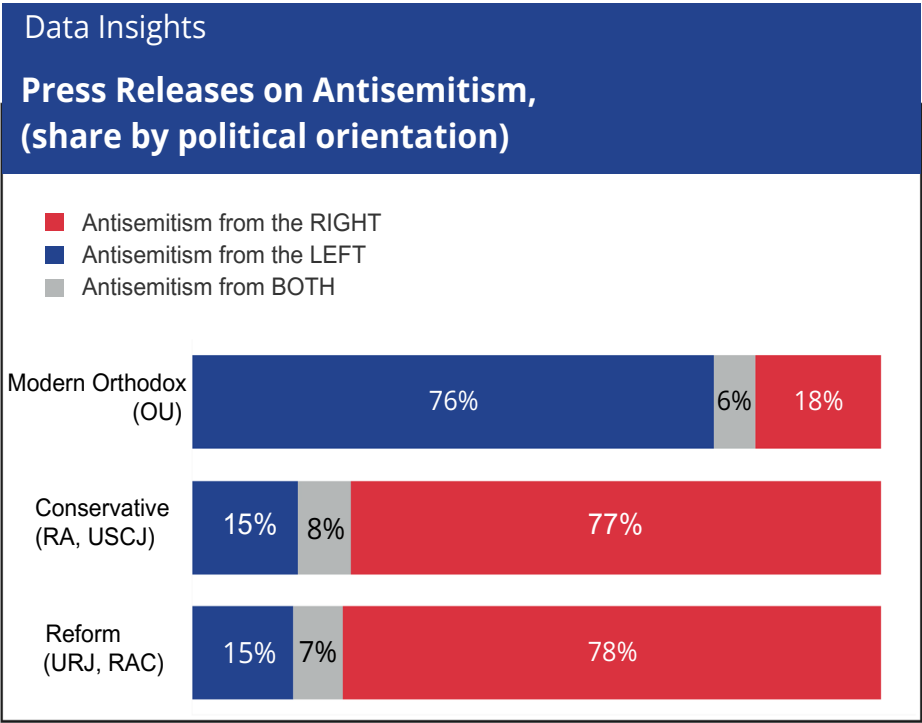
For **immigration**, we searched for words such as: *“immigrant, refugee, asylum seeker, visa holder, undocumented, permanent resident, displaced person.”* For **LGBTQ issues**, we looked for terms including: *“LGBTQ, queer, transgender, nonbinary, same-sex marriage, gender rights, conversion therapy, pride, sexual orientation.”* If a press release contained at least one of these words, it was included in our analysis.

Once we identified the relevant documents, we examined how frequently each movement addressed these topics over time. Instead of relying on raw numbers – which could be skewed by differences in publication rates – we calculated the percentage of total press releases per year that referenced immigration or LGBTQ+ issues. This allowed us to visualize trends, highlighting which movements were most engaged, how their focus shifted over time, and whether their attention to these issues was consistent or reactive to political events. Through this comparative framework, we were able to assess patterns of public engagement, revealing how different Jewish movements prioritize and frame major social and political issues in their discourse.

Findings

Antisemitism: Perspectives from the Right and the Left

The graph presents a striking comparison of how antisemitism is attributed by the three major Jewish movements – Orthodox Union (OU), United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ), and Union of Reform Judaism (URJ) – revealing significant ideological differences in their framing of the issue. Each movement exhibits a clear tendency to emphasize particular sources of antisemitism, reflecting broader political and communal concerns.



The OU overwhelmingly attributes antisemitism to the left, with **76%** of its press releases identifying left-wing sources as the primary drivers of antisemitic rhetoric and actions. This aligns with a narrative that views anti-Zionism, BDS activism, and hostility toward Israel on college campuses as central to contemporary antisemitism. Only **18%** of Orthodox press releases attribute antisemitism exclusively to the right, and an even smaller fraction (**6%**) acknowledges that it originates from both political extremes. This pattern underscores a broader orientation within Orthodox discourse, where

antisemitism is frequently discussed in connection with threats to Zionism and Jewish statehood rather than the racial or white supremacist ideologies typically associated with the far right.

By contrast, the Reform and Conservative movements present a near mirror image of this trend, with **78%** and **77%** of their respective press releases attributing antisemitism primarily to right-wing sources. These movements frame antisemitism predominantly through the lens of rising white nationalism, neo-Nazism, and far-right extremism, which they perceive as the most immediate and dangerous threats facing Jewish communities. The relatively smaller percentages of Reform (**15%**) and Conservative (**15%**) press releases that link antisemitism to the left suggest that while these movements recognize anti-Zionist and left-wing hostility toward Jews, they do not consider it as pressing or widespread as the dangers emanating from right-wing ideology.

Interestingly, all three movements allocate only a small proportion of their discourse to acknowledging antisemitism as a phenomenon that emerges from both sides. Orthodox press releases recognize this dual threat in just **6%** of cases, while the Reform and Conservative movements do so at slightly higher rates, **7%** and **8%**, respectively. This suggests that, while some within each movement acknowledge antisemitism as a multifaceted issue that transcends political divisions, the dominant narratives tend to frame it as primarily stemming from a single ideological extreme.

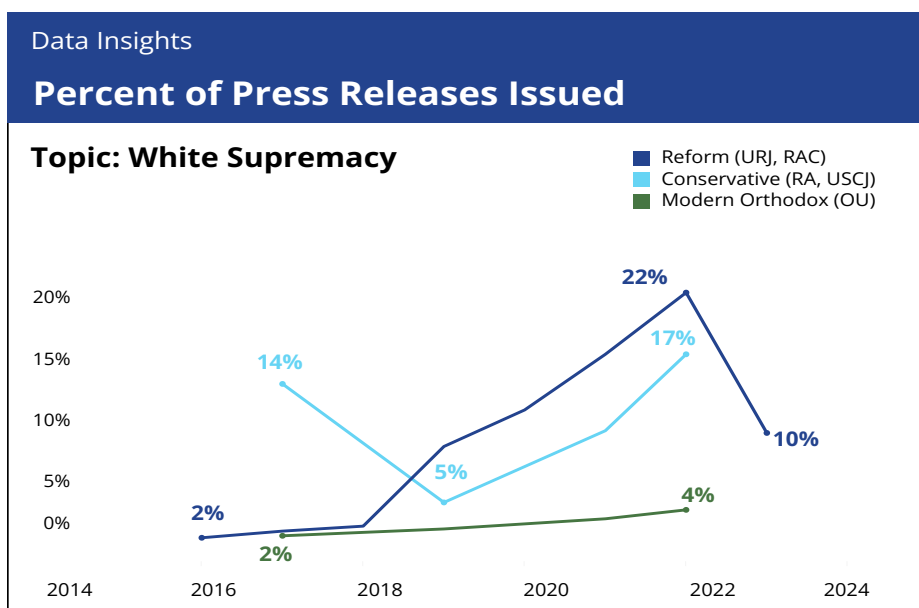
These findings illuminate a deep divide in how antisemitism is understood and communicated across different segments of American Jewry. The OU's emphasis on left-wing antisemitism reflects its prioritization of threats to Israel and Zionism, while the Reform and Conservative movements, which traditionally align with more progressive political values, focus on the dangers of right-wing extremism. This divergence has far-reaching implications, shaping not only the advocacy strategies and communal priorities of each movement but also influencing the potential for cross-denominational collaboration in confronting antisemitism. In emphasizing different sources of antisemitic threats, the three movements may at times find themselves at odds in determining which issues demand the most urgent response, complicating broader efforts to forge a unified Jewish communal strategy against antisemitism.

## Mentions of “White Supremacy” and “Antisemitism”

The next two graphs provide a comparative analysis of the frequency of engagement of different Jewish movements – Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox – with the terms “white supremacy” and “antisemitism” in their press releases over the past decade.

### Mentions of “White Supremacy”

This graph tracks the percentage of articles mentioning “white supremacy” across the three denominations.



As expected, the URJ (dark blue) and USCJ (light blue) have consistently referenced white supremacy more frequently than the Orthodox Union (green), reinforcing the trend that these movements view right-wing extremism as a central driver of contemporary antisemitism.

A notable outlier occurs in 2017, when the Conservative movement shows a sharp spike, seemingly surpassing both Reform and Orthodox movements in references to white supremacy. However, this anomaly is likely because only seven press releases were issued by the Conservative movement in that year, making the percentage appear disproportionately high. Beyond

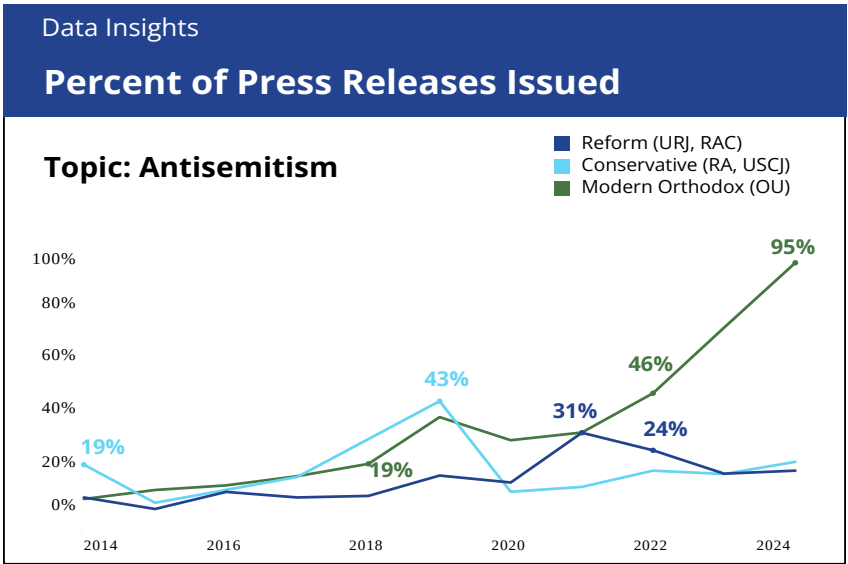


this irregularity, the data indicates a steady increase in references to white supremacy by the Reform movement, peaking around 2022 before declining.

Meanwhile, the Modern Orthodox movement makes minimal mention of white supremacy throughout the period, with only a modest uptick around 2021–2022. This further supports the broader observation that Modern Orthodox discourse is generally less focused on right-wing extremism and more concerned with left-wing antisemitism or issues tied to anti-Zionism.

Mentions of “Antisemitism”

This next graph illustrates the percentage of press releases that mention “antisemitism” across the same period. Unlike the previous graph, which showed a stark divide between movements, this graph reveals a more **universal increase** in references to antisemitism over the last decade. However, significant differences emerge in the **rate** of that increase, particularly in recent years.

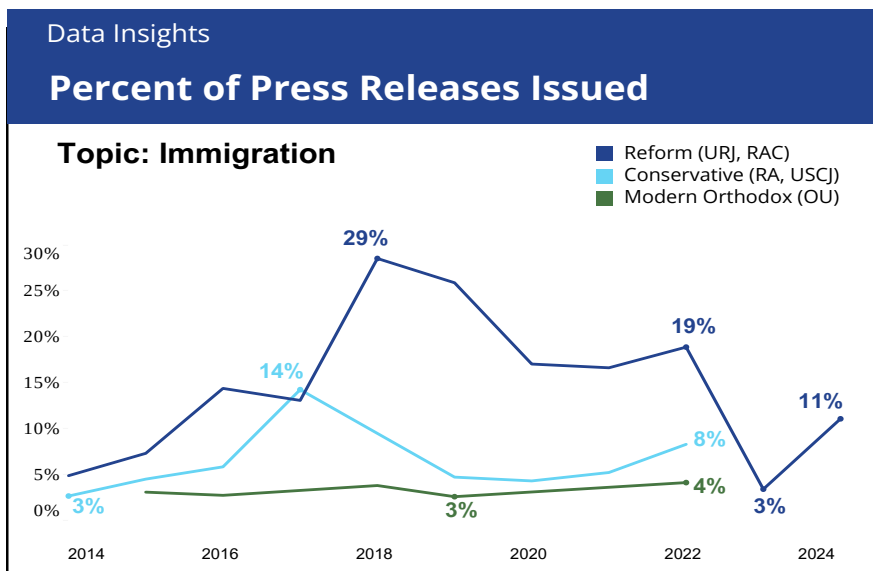


Between 2014 and 2020, all three denominations followed a similar pattern, with relatively low and fluctuating mentions of antisemitism. However, beginning in 2021 and accelerating after 2023, Orthodox discourse on antisemitism intensified substantially. This period coincides with a global increase in anti-Israel activism, rising hostility on university campuses, the mainstreaming of BDS rhetoric, and violent antisemitic attacks in major Western cities. The data

suggests that Orthodox institutions have responded to these developments by dramatically increasing their focus on antisemitism as a central concern.

By contrast, while Reform and Conservative discourse on antisemitism has increased over time, it has remained more moderate and did not rise significantly during the war, suggesting a different set of priorities. Although these movements acknowledge the overall rise in antisemitism, they continue to frame it predominantly in terms of right-wing threats, even as antisemitism linked to anti-Zionism has intensified. As a result, their discourse on antisemitism remained relatively limited during the war.

## Mentions of Immigration



The way Jewish religious movements engage with immigration issues tells us a great deal about their **political, ethical, and communal priorities**. Looking at the following graph, which tracks the **yearly percentage of press releases mentioning immigration-related terms** from 2014 to 2024, a clear trend emerges: **Jewish movements do not address immigration with the same frequency, nor do they place equal emphasis on it in their public discourse.**

This **strong engagement is not incidental**; rather, it reflects the Reform movement's **long-standing alignment** with **progressive social justice causes**. Immigration is framed not just as a **political issue** but as a **moral imperative**,

deeply rooted in **Jewish ethical teachings** on welcoming the stranger. Even in years when **public attention to immigration declined**, the Reform movement continued to address the issue, reinforcing its role as **a leading Jewish voice in advocating for immigrant rights**.

Given the Reform movement's **active engagement**, one might expect the **Conservative movement** to act as a **bridge between Reform and Orthodox positions**, balancing **religious tradition with modern ethical concerns**. However, the data tells a **different story** – Conservative Judaism actually **engages very little** with immigration issues overall. While **there are peaks in 2017 and 2022**, these **do not indicate sustained engagement**. Instead, they suggest a **reactive rather than proactive approach** – the movement addresses immigration when it **becomes an unavoidable public issue** but does not **consistently advocate** for it. After **2017**, engagement levels **drop to nearly negligible levels**, demonstrating that immigration is **not a core focus** of Conservative Jewish public discourse. Rather than serving as a **middle ground between Reform and Orthodoxy**, the **Conservative movement's low level of engagement** places it much closer to the **Orthodox pattern of minimal engagement**.

This brings us to the **Orthodox movement**, which exhibits the **lowest level of engagement** with immigration-related issues. Throughout the decade, **Orthodox press releases rarely mention immigration**, with only **small increases in 2018 and 2022**. These **modest spikes** may be linked to **specific events**, such as the **family separation crisis in 2018** and the **refugee crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine in 2022**. However, these moments of engagement remain **limited and situational**, rather than reflecting an ongoing commitment to immigration discourse.

Jewish institutions are often viewed as **active participants in public debates** on moral and political issues. Yet, this data **highlights a deep divide** in how different movements **prioritize immigration**. Reform Judaism treats it as a **key social justice concern**, while **Conservative and Orthodox movements largely refrain from sustained advocacy on the topic**.

While it is expected that Orthodox organizations would engage **minimally** with immigration, what stands out most in this analysis is the **low level of engagement from the Conservative Movement as well**. Although **theologically more progressive than Orthodoxy**, Conservative Judaism **does not translate that**

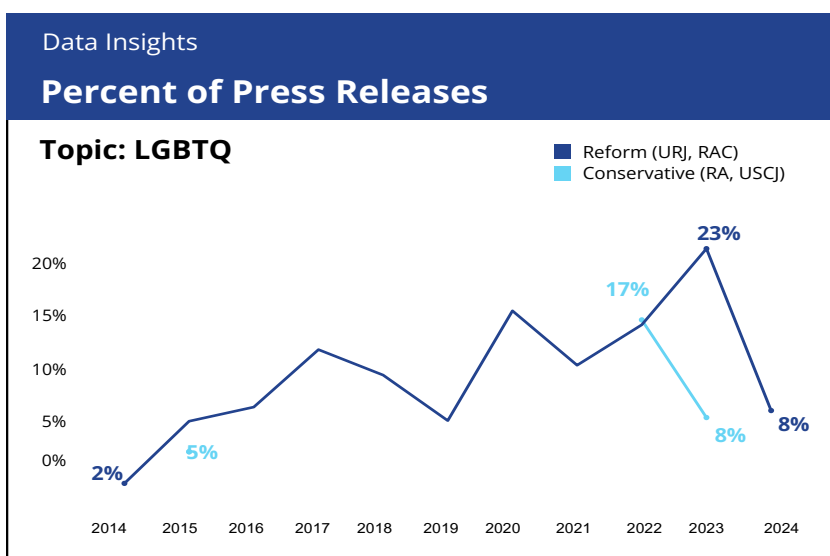
**stance into a sustained public discourse on immigration.**

Ultimately, this **challenges the assumption** that the Conservative Movement serves as a **balanced middle ground** between Reform and Orthodox Judaism. Instead, when it comes to immigration, the data **positions the movement much closer to Orthodoxy**, reflecting a **limited and inconsistent level of engagement** that contrasts sharply with the **Reform Movement’s proactive and sustained advocacy**.

## Mentions of LGBTQ+

The question of **LGBTQ+ inclusion, rights, and advocacy** has been a central issue in American public discourse over the past decade. Within Jewish religious movements, responses to LGBTQ+ concerns reflect deeper ideological and theological commitments – some emphasizing **inclusivity and social justice**, while others approach the topic with **religious caution or silence**.

This graph, which tracks the **yearly percentage of press releases mentioning LGBTQ-related terms** across **Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox** Jewish denominations from 2014 to 2024, tells a compelling story: **engagement is not equal across movements, nor is it consistent over time**.



From **2014 to 2024**, the **Reform movement’s engagement with LGBTQ+ issues remains steady and sustained**, with **noticeable peaks in 2018 and 2022**. These increases correspond to **major national debates on LGBTQ+ rights**, including

policies affecting **transgender military service, legal battles over religious exemptions, and state-level laws restricting LGBTQ+ rights in schools.**

This **high level of engagement** is unsurprising – Reform Judaism has long positioned itself as an advocate for inclusivity and social justice, viewing LGBTQ+ rights as a **Jewish ethical imperative rather than merely a political issue.** Whether celebrating victories like same-sex marriage equality in 2015 or speaking out against anti-trans legislation in 2022, Reform leaders consistently frame their stance as an **extension of Jewish values,** emphasizing **the inherent dignity of every individual and the duty to fight for marginalized communities.** Even when **public discourse on LGBTQ+ issues quiets down,** the Reform movement **does not retreat.** Instead, it remains **proactive,** ensuring that **LGBTQ+ inclusion is not just a reaction to legal battles but an ongoing commitment within Jewish communal life.**

By contrast, **the Conservative movement demonstrates a much lower level of engagement.** Although often positioned as a **middle ground between Reform and Orthodox Judaism,** Conservative Judaism **does not maintain a sustained public discourse on LGBTQ+ issues.** This pattern mirrors its approach to **immigration discourse** – while the movement **occasionally engages with social justice issues,** it does not **consistently prioritize them in its press releases.** Instead, its engagement is **minimal, intermittent, and largely dependent on external political developments.**

Similarly, **the Orthodox movement remains entirely absent from public discourse on LGBTQ+ issues.** Over the ten-year span of this analysis, its **engagement is non-existent.** This reflects the Orthodox community's **fundamentally different approach to LGBTQ+ concerns, shaped by halachic (Jewish legal) considerations.** While **individual Orthodox rabbis and communities** have debated how to approach LGBTQ+ inclusion, the **Orthodox Union as an institution has largely avoided engaging in public advocacy on LGBTQ+ rights.**

While the **Orthodox movement's lack of engagement is expected,** given its **religious framework,** what stands out in this analysis is the **Conservative movement's silence on LGBTQ issues.** As **its theological stance allows for greater flexibility,** one might expect **stronger engagement** on LGBTQ+ concerns. However, the data suggests that **institutionally, the Conservative movement has largely chosen to avoid LGBTQ+ advocacy.**

## Endnotes

- 1 Abdulkader Tayob, "Sermons as Practical and Linguistic Performances: Insights from Theory and History," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 47, no. 1 (2017): 132–44.
- 2 Constantine Boussalis, Travis G Coan, and Mirya R Holman, "Political Speech in Religious Sermons," *Politics and Religion* 14, no. 2 (2021): 141.
- 3 James L Guth, *The Bully Pulpit: The Politics of Protestant Clergy* (University Press of Kansas, 1997); Paul A Djupe and Christopher P Gilbert, "The Political Voice of Clergy," *Journal of Politics* 64, no. 2 (2002): 596–609; Melissa Deckman, Sue ES Crawford, and Laura R Olson, "The Politics of Gay Rights and the Gender Gap: A Perspective on the Clergy," *Politics and Religion* 1, no. 3 (2008): 384–410; Rebecca A Glazier, "Bridging Religion and Politics: The Impact of Providential Religious Beliefs on Political Activity," *Politics and Religion* 8, no. 3 (2015): 458–87.
- 4 Boussalis, Coan, and Holman, "Political Speech in Religious Sermons."
- 5 A key distinction between this study and previous research lies in the methodological approach. Earlier studies relied on classical machine learning techniques, such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), which analyze sermons by identifying statistical patterns in word co-occurrence. While these methods are effective for detecting broad trends, they are inherently limited in their ability to capture deeper semantic meaning or the nuanced ways in which political discourse is embedded within religious rhetoric. By treating texts as mere collections of words without considering their contextual relationships, LDA struggles to grasp the complexities of meaning, tone, and implicit messaging that characterize sermons. In contrast, our study employs large language models (LLMs), specifically ChatGPT-4o, which offer a more sophisticated means of textual analysis. LLMs understand text contextually, allowing for a richer interpretation of themes, sentiment, and rhetorical strategies. This enables us to move beyond simple keyword frequency and uncover more complex patterns of political discourse within sermons.
- 6 For previous studies on the history of Jewish sermons consider: Robert V Friedenberg, "Hear O Israel': The History of American Jewish Preaching, 1654-1970," (No Title), 1989; Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War, 1800-2001* (Liverpool University Press, 2012).
- 7 A full description of the data collection, computational methods, and validation procedures can be found in the Appendix: Methodology.
- 8 Based on sample analyses of 20 sermons, the ChatGPT model demonstrated an accuracy rate of approximately 92.5% in correctly identifying political content within sermons.
- 9 The analysis achieved a precision rate of 90% on a sample of 10 sermons. Additionally, it attained a recall rate of 100% based on another sample of 10 sermons.
- 10 The analysis conducted by human readers of a sample of sermons confirmed that it is inherently challenging to precisely quantify the proportion of political content within a sermon. However, their evaluation indicated that sermons classified as political contained a substantial volume of political discourse across all three denominations. This finding aligns with the results generated by ChatGPT, further reinforcing the conclusion that political themes constitute a significant component of sermons identified as politically oriented. The analysis of both the volume of political content and the structure of sermons was conducted across all 4302 sermons, specifically focusing on those categorized as political, regardless of the specific time period. In subsequent analyses, only sermons from the three main periods outlined above will be considered.
- 11 The result was of 100% accuracy on a random sample of 20 sermons.

- 12 Based on a sample of 20 sermons, an accuracy rate of 92.5% was achieved.
- 13 The analysis achieved a precision rate of 93.33% in identifying whether a sermon included criticism, based on a sample of 15 sermons. This means that out of 15 sermons classified as containing criticism, 14 were correctly identified, demonstrating a high level of accuracy in detecting critical discourse within the dataset. Additionally, to evaluate recall, we selected a separate sample of 15 sermons where we already knew which ones contained explicit criticism. We tested whether ChatGPT would miss any of these, and it achieved a recall rate of 100%, correctly identifying all sermons with explicit criticism in this sample
- 14 To assess the model's ability to retrieve all relevant cases within the dataset, the **recall metric** was employed. Two samples were analyzed: one consisting of 15 sermons and another of 20 sermons, both selected from a dataset previously identified as containing critical content. The primary objective was to evaluate the extent to which ChatGPT accurately and comprehensively identified and analyzed nuanced criticism across various topics. For general criticism, recall was assessed using the 15-sermon sample, which focused on themes such as settler violence, Benjamin Netanyahu, and related issues. The 20-sermon sample, in contrast, was used to evaluate recall concerning criticism directed at the government, judicial reform, and the Haredi community.
- 15 The analysis achieved a precision rate of 100% and Recall of 100%.
- 16 The analysis achieved a precision rate of 100% and Recall of 100%.
- 17 The analysis achieved a precision rate of 100% and Recall of 100%
- 18 The analysis achieved a precision rate of 86%.
- 19 The analysis achieved a precision rate of 100% and Recall 100%.
- 20 The analysis achieved a precision rate of 100%. And Recall 100%.
- 21 The analysis achieved a precision rate of 100% and Recall 100%.
- 22 The analysis achieved a precision rate of 83% and Recall 100%.
- 23 The analysis achieved a precision rate of 100% and Recall 100%.
- 24 For all topic analyses, we took a sample of 10 sermons and achieved an accuracy rate of 100%, meaning that every sermon identified as containing a certain topic was correctly classified.
- 25 For the task of topic classification we got accuracy of 100%.
- 26 The analysis based on a sample of 20 sermons achieved a precision rate of 85% and Recall of 100%.
- 27 On Few-shot learning consider: Chanathip Pornprasit and Chakkrit Tantithamthavorn, "GPT-3.5 for Code Review Automation: How Do Few-Shot Learning, Prompt Design, and Model Fine-Tuning Impact Their Performance?," *arXiv Preprint arXiv:2402.00905*, 2024; Zhengfei Ren, Annalina Caputo, and Gareth Jones, "A Few-Shot Learning Approach for Lexical Semantic Change Detection Using GPT-4," 2024, 187–92.
- 28 See: Jiuhai Chen et al., "When Do You Need Chain-of-Thought Prompting for Chatgpt?," *arXiv Preprint arXiv:2304.03262*, 2023; Zhipeng Chen et al., "Chatcot: Tool-Augmented Chain-of-Thought Reasoning on Chat-Based Large Language Models," *arXiv Preprint arXiv:2305.14323*, 2023.
- 29 See: Michael J Mior, "Large Language Models for JSON Schema Discovery," *arXiv Preprint arXiv:2407.03286*, 2024.
- 30 On interpreting topic modeling consider: Emil Rijcken et al., "Toward Interpreting Topic Models with ChatGPT," 2023.

- 31 On the Human in the Loop approach consider: Padma Iyengar, “Clever Hans in the Loop? A Critical Examination of ChatGPT in a Human-in-the-Loop Framework for Machinery Functional Safety Risk Analysis,” *Eng* 6, no. 2 (2025): 31; Carl Orge Retzlaff et al., “Human-in-the-Loop Reinforcement Learning: A Survey and Position on Requirements, Challenges, and Opportunities,” *Journal of Artificial Intelligence Research* 79 (2024): 359–415; Xingjiao Wu et al., “A Survey of Human-in-the-Loop for Machine Learning,” *Future Generation Computer Systems* 135 (2022): 364–81. \\uc0\\u8221} {\\i}Eng} 6, no. 2 (2025



## About JPPI

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