



THE JEWISH PEOPLE POLICY INSTITUTE
המכון למדיניות העם היהודי

2023 Jewish World Dialogue

MANAGING THE GROWING CHALLENGES TO JEWISH COHESION

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FOREWORD

This year, the Jewish People Policy Institute's Jewish World Dialogue examined the phenomenon of polarization among Diaspora Jewry, particularly in North America, in relation to Israeli government policy on controversial issues – primarily regarding the geopolitical question of the Palestinians in Judea and Samaria, and the religion and state matter of religious pluralism. It is important to note that a significant majority – but not all – of the participants hold liberal worldviews.

Historically, Jewish leadership, as a rule, pursued a shared agenda rooted in a covenant of fate among Jews, wherever they were. Today, cracks in this unity are increasingly apparent, especially in regard to attitudes toward the State of Israel. Heartbreaking reports are heard about denying acceptance to other fellow Jews based on their positions, categorizing them as either “loyal” or “disloyal” to their Judaism. Interestingly, and paradoxically, the polarization among Diaspora Jews according to their stance on Israel may point to the centrality of the state as a nexus of Jewish identity. People argue about what is important to them.

The authors of this report identify three contributing factors to this polarization: the first is universal – the social, political, and cultural polarization trends that currently characterize the zeitgeist of the Western world. The second corresponds to what is happening in Israel – the liberal majority among North American Jewry is grappling with its relationship to the Israeli government and its policies, which represent a right-wing, conservative worldview. The third, and perhaps most interesting and complex of all, relates to the meaning of Jewish identity in the Diaspora. Some interpret their Judaism through the lens of a particularist Jewish identity grounded in national and religious uniqueness, and others emphasize the liberal-universal characteristics of Judaism. In the past,

embracing this duality of identity was made possible by a spirit of tolerance; today, many feel the need to “choose a side” and delegitimize other Jews based on the interpretation of their own Judaism – hence the polarization.

In light of this, the leaders of JPPI’s Jewish World Dialogue pose an important and urgent question: could this polarization, which largely derives from a dispute over the meaning of Jewish identity, lead to a historical rift within Diaspora Jewry that will not only compromise joint action in confronting challenges (such as antisemitism), but which may also dictate redefined boundaries within the Jewish collective, such that certain Jewish identity groups will not recognize the affiliation of other groups to the Jewish people writ large?

It is important to emphasize that the seismic events of the past year, including some that occurred after the 2023 Dialogue process was completed, may reshape some of the positions voiced in the Dialogue discussion groups. The sociopolitical struggle within Israel in response to the government’s proposed judicial overhaul exacerbated polarization within Israeli society; the “Iron Swords” war activated a reverse vector, as Israelis rallied around the slogan “Together we will win.” Might the pathological outbreak of antisemitism in North America and elsewhere in the world similarly inspire a renewed sense of Jewish unity? How will all of this effect polarization trends within Diaspora Jewry? On the one hand, we tend to come together in the face of attacks from the outside – on Israel and on Diaspora Jewry; on the other hand, the way Israel has conducted the war could be perceived as illegitimate by some Diaspora Jews. Furthermore, the focus of the polarization within Diaspora Jewry has shifted in recent months to weighty and existential questions about the justification and legitimacy of a Jewish nation-state and Zionism.

In addition to the task of describing and analyzing the phenomenon of polarization, this report presents recommendations for action: expanding “Israel Studies” in a way that will broaden the knowledge base among

Diaspora Jewry; cultivating experience-sharing encounters between Jews with different viewpoints and adopting a criterion that is both clear and inclusive to grant an “entry ticket” to the arena where the Jewish conversation takes place in the Diaspora: an explicit and public recognition of the right of the Jewish people to sovereignty in their historical homeland.

We are deeply grateful to the Dialogue’s talented and dedicated project heads, the authors of this report, Dr. Shlomo Fischer and Dr. John Ruskay; both are JPPI senior fellows.

Prof. Yedidia Stern, President
The Jewish People Policy Institute

A Note to the Readers

The Jewish World Dialogue is one of JPPI's signature annual initiatives. It provides a context for convening Jewish leadership groups throughout the Jewish world to solicit their views on challenging issues. As with all projects of this kind, planning and implementation requires many months. In the case of this year's Dialogue, planning, convening the discussion sessions, and the preparation of this report, took place, before the horrific hostilities that began on October 7/Simchat Torah. Hence, reading our report today appears (even to us) as if it is from a prior period as it focusses on an issue that was previously seen as critical – the growing polarization in the organized Jewish world particularly over Israeli government policies vis-à-vis religious pluralism and the administration of the territories/occupied areas.

At the time of this writing, in mid-October 2023, as the war was in its first weeks, the organized Jewish world has never been more unified than it has in response to the horrific Hamas attacks on southern Israel. It is true that on the margins Jewish anti-Israel and anti-Zionist positions are more visible than ever, but, a month and a half into the war, the overwhelming majority of American Jews, not only support Israel but also the policies of the present government in regard to the Israel-Hamas War. Thus, only 16% support an unconditional ceasefire.¹

While it is our hope that this unity will continue long into the future, our intuition is that in the period that follows the war, the polarization will likely return. Thus, this report, which seems born an anachronism, from a different era in Jewish history, is and will be of value for decision makers in the future. That is certainly our intention.

The 2023 Dialogue

Introduction and General Background

JPPI's 2023 Jewish World Dialogue examined the growing polarization and uncivil discourse within Israel and Jewish communities worldwide – especially in regard to Israeli government policies affecting religious pluralism in Israel, the balance of power between the Israeli judiciary and the other branches of government, and the administered/occupied territories (Judea and Samaria, aka the West Bank) post-1967.

While this polarization takes place within, and in some ways reflects, the growing political and cultural polarization in the United States, Israel, and other Western countries, it is making it increasingly difficult for substantial segments of the “organized” Jewish community to come together and effectively advocate and mobilize for strategies long recognized as important in ensuring the security and flourishing of Israel and Jewish communities around the world.

The subject was selected to better understand how this growing polarization impacts diverse Jewish leadership groups and to identify potential strategies to reverse or mitigate it so the assets of Diaspora Jewish communities can continue to be mobilized to strengthen and enrich Jewish life.

We have long held these truths to be self-evident – every *pasuk* (verse) of Torah has “70 faces” (i.e., 70 ways of understanding); “We are one”; and “*alu v'alu*” (these *and* these), which reflects the recognition that there are different ways (Hillel and Shammai) to understand Torah and obligation; and yet we affirm “*kol yisrael arevim zeh lazeh*” (all of Israel are responsible one for the other).

While there is broad recognition that Jews share both history and destiny, there have frequently been divergent understandings of Torah – its source and the nature of the obligation it creates – and of how to ensure a flourishing Jewish future. That said, despite theological and cultural differences, Jews and Jewish

leadership – certainly in the 20th century – came together to defend other Jews facing external threats: antisemitism, military attacks on the State of Israel, and providing aid to communities in distress.

This degree of polarization is a new development in the post-war Jewish community. In recent years, political and cultural polarization has deepened in Western societies and has become increasingly divisive in Israel and Jewish communities throughout the world. In the mid and latter part of the 20th century, Diaspora Jews and Jewish leadership were broadly aligned around decidedly liberal political views on the role of government (supportive of Social Security, Medicare, public education, expanding civil rights for minorities, and far more). Jewish leadership, as described in Jonathan Woocher's 1986 book *Sacred Survival*, shared an agenda that had at its center being pro-Israel (i.e., supportive of the policies of Israel's government, whether led by political parties associated with the right or the left), rescuing Soviet Jews, combatting antisemitism, and supporting public policies to help the poor, the elderly, the hungry, and the homeless. This was the civil religion of America Jews in the latter decades of the 20th century.

Over the past 40 years, growing cleavages have surfaced among Jews and Jewish leadership. Differences in multiple areas have emerged, but none have been more visible or challenging than those related to evolving divergent views of the policies of successive Israeli governments. These differences have principally centered around religious diversity and pluralism – the recognition, rights, and support provided Reform and Conservative rabbis and institutions in Israel, or the lack thereof – and Israeli government policies vis-à-vis the administered/occupied territories.

An important caveat: Although polarization and debate over Israeli government policies have intensified, multiple studies also document American Jews abiding positive identification with, and pride in, Israel. With some exceptions, the extraordinary unity of world Jewry in the wake of the October 7 Hamas massacre seem to confirm this view. When attacked, when in crisis, Jews coalesce. The polarization around Israeli government policies attracts more attention, but the continuing sense of strong connection with Israel among

American Jews is of enormous import, an asset, and is one of the motivations for focusing on how leadership might more effectively manage intensifying polarization.

In Israel's first decades, Jewish communities outside the country had broad communal support to mobilize their communities to stand with State of Israel and its people, to advocate for them, and support the positions of successive Israel governments whether led by Labor or Likud. However, in recent decades, at first mild and more recently strident differences have emerged among groups who consider themselves "pro-Israel." Although Aipac and J Street both self-identify as "pro- Israel," many adherents view those who support the other as undermining the security and well-being of the State of Israel. Diaspora Jewish communal leadership finds it increasingly difficult to speak for the community as it becomes more divided and less monolithic. And when communal leadership speaks and leads, there is no real mechanism within Diaspora communities for other views to be expressed. There is no leader of the opposition. Growing numbers who disagree with the positions of communal leadership have experienced being ignored, denigrated, and on occasion castigated as anti-Zionist or antisemitic.

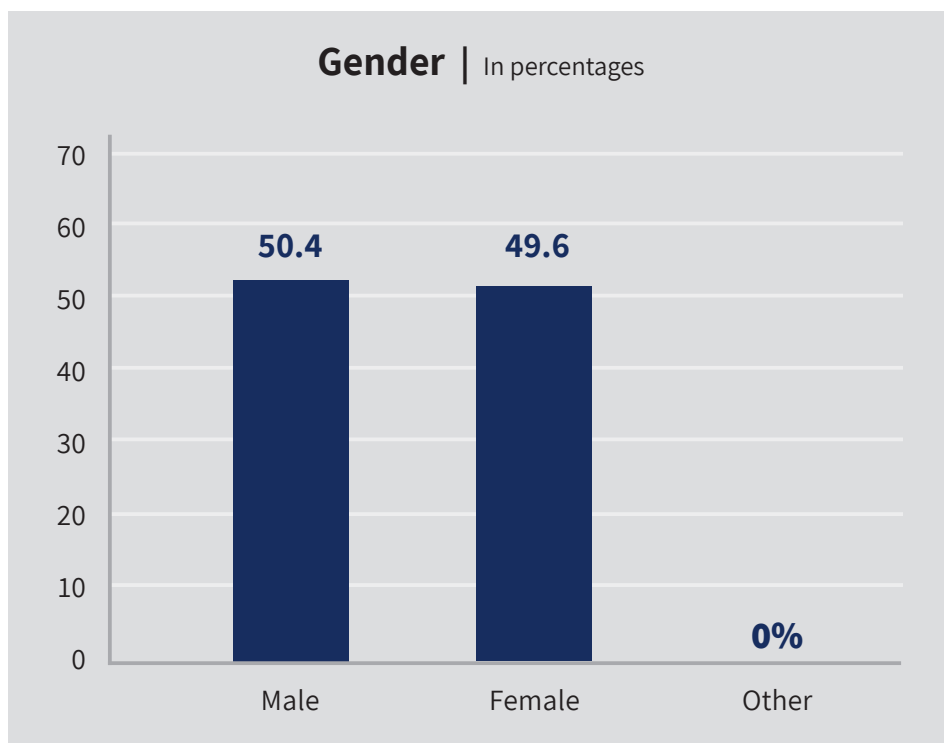
2023 Dialogue: Participants and Discussions

The 2023 Jewish World Dialogue – “Managing the Growing Challenges to Jewish Cohesion” – directly addresses the issue of polarization within the Jewish community. We conducted 13 sessions altogether, 11 in North America and one each in Germany and South Africa. For the first time, in addition to many federations convening groups of their leadership, this year, we also conducted dialogue sessions with groups convened by advocacy organizations, including the Conference of Presidents, the Nexus Project, and J Street. Thus, Dialogue participants were generally somewhat older and more deeply engaged in Israel and Jewish related issues than participants in previous Dialogues. The sessions though, did allow us “to take the temperature” of this important leadership cohort.

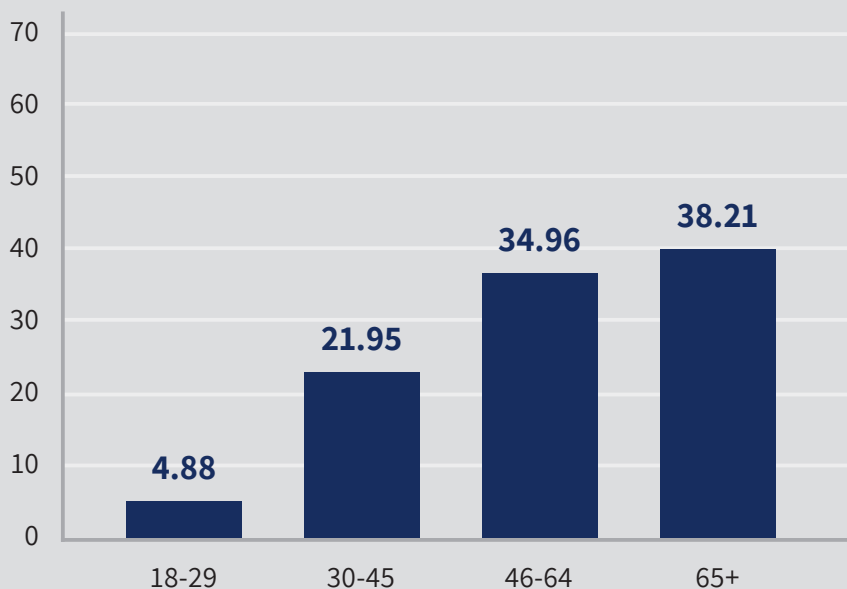
As in previous years since the onset of Covid-19, the Dialogue sessions were conducted via Zoom. The Zoom technology permitted participants to break out into small focus groups. Our experience has been that participants are more willing to express their more intimate thoughts, feelings, and experiences in these breakout groups. In the course of the Dialogue, two kinds of data were collected – quantitative and qualitative. All participants completed a short survey and were then asked the same or similar questions in the small focus groups. The online survey administered **does not** pretend to constitute a representative sample of North American Jewry, nor even of connected or engaged Jews. What it does do, to a certain extent, is provide an overview of the Dialogue participants. It gives us the opportunity to compare answers across the range of participants. In the small focus groups, participants were able to expand on their responses and give them further explication, nuance, and qualification.

247 people participated in the Dialogue sessions, more or less evenly split between men and women.² In terms of age, 70% of the group were over 46, and 38% were 65 or older.³ As regards the denominational streams, 33% identified as Conservative, which is more than twice the national level. Of those, 35%

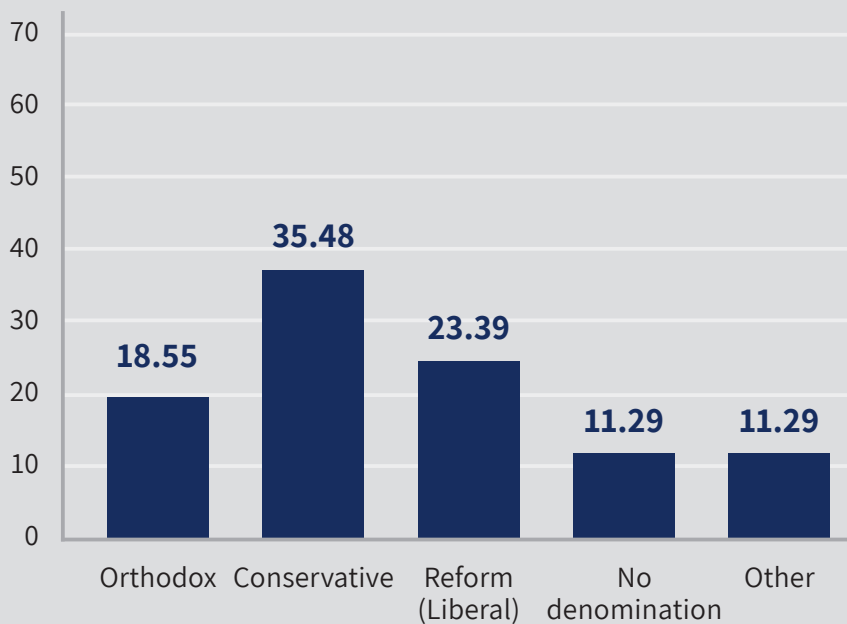
were 65 or older. Thus, the relatively advanced age of the group impacted its denominational distribution. The group reflected the liberal views of the American Jewish population – 39% identified as liberal and 68% as liberal leaning.⁴ Older participants, in particular, identified as liberal (58% of the 65+ cohort). The level of Jewish and Israel engagement of the entire group of participants can be inferred from the number of times they have visited Israel. Forty percent have visited Israel more than ten times.



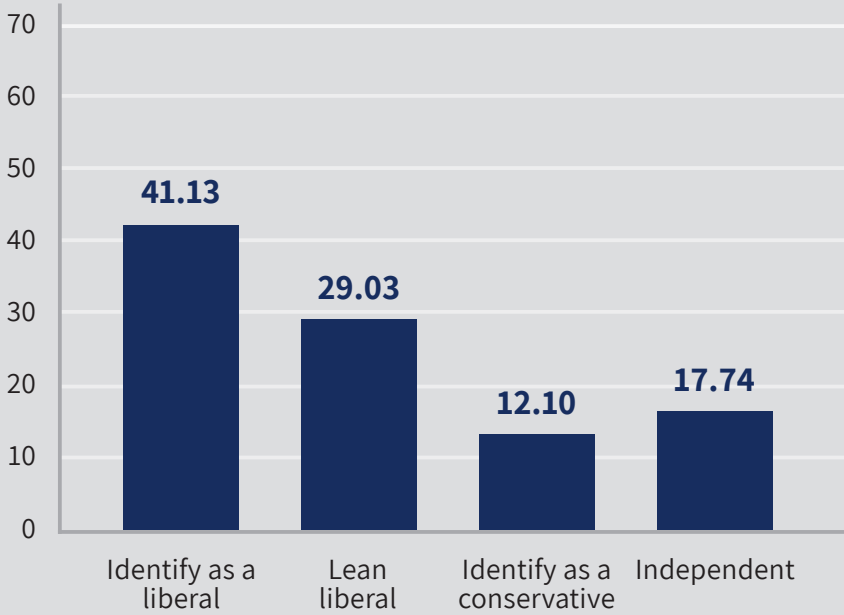
Age | In percentages



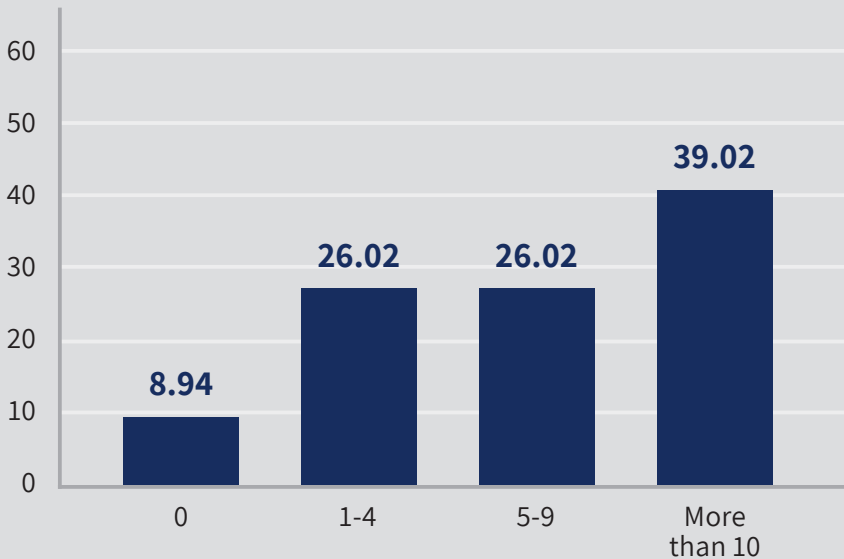
Do you identify as | In percentages



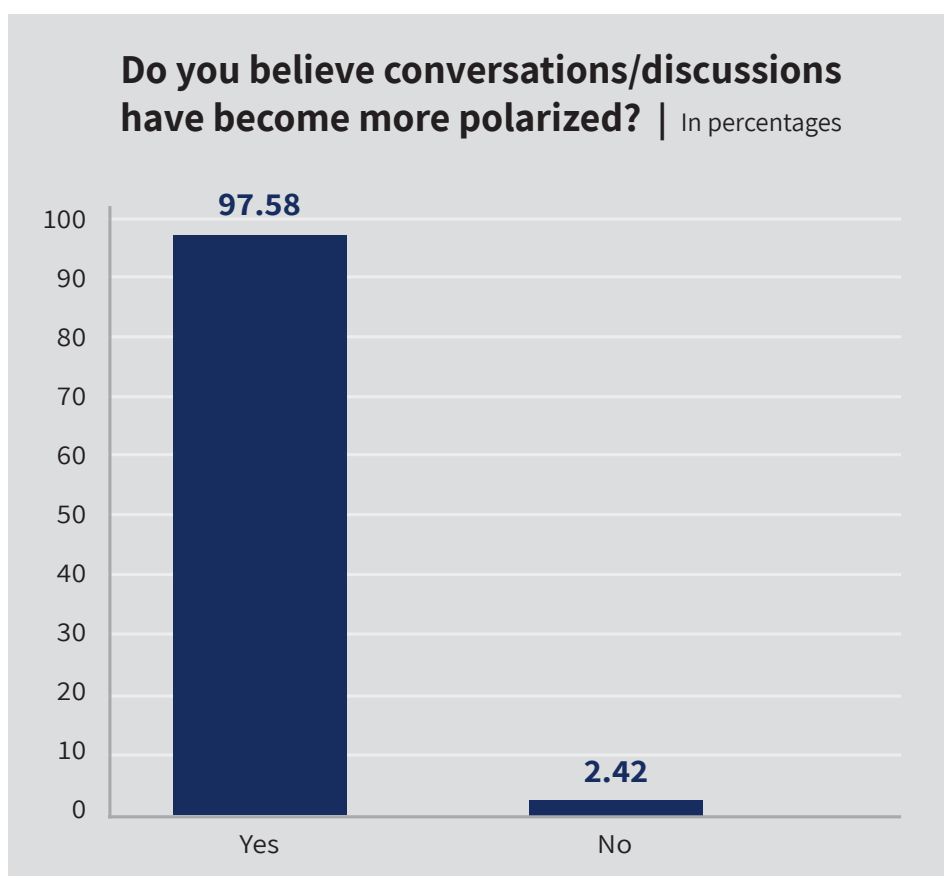
Political Orientation | In percentages



Approximately how many times have you visited Israel? | In percentages

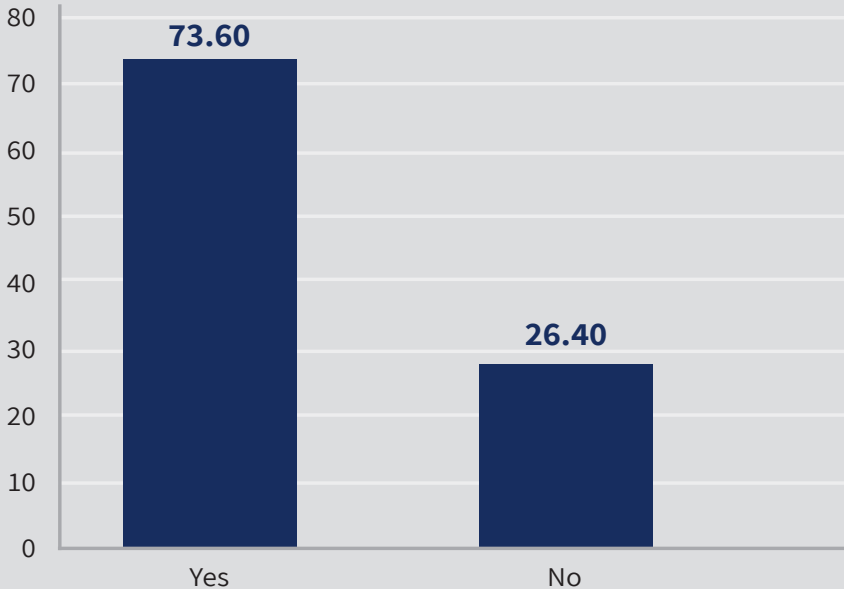


So, does this “leadership” type group experience polarization? If so, how? Ninety-seven percent reported that conversations have gotten more polarized. Moreover, 73% reported that discussions about Israel are more polarizing than other topics.⁵ In the breakout groups, we asked participants to relate their personal experiences in difficult, oppositional conversations. In practically every breakout group, participants related that they had stopped speaking to old friends and relatives about Israel because of disagreements over its policies, or that they had avoided discussing Israel with specific friends or at family gatherings and other occasions. At the same time, a participant from Toronto claimed that “issues of growing divisiveness and polarization were ‘generational.’” One participant from Palm Beach, even reported an occasion when a rabbi shut down a conversation concerning Israel in his synagogue.



Do you believe discussions about Israel are more polarizing in the Jewish community than discussions about other Jewish topics?

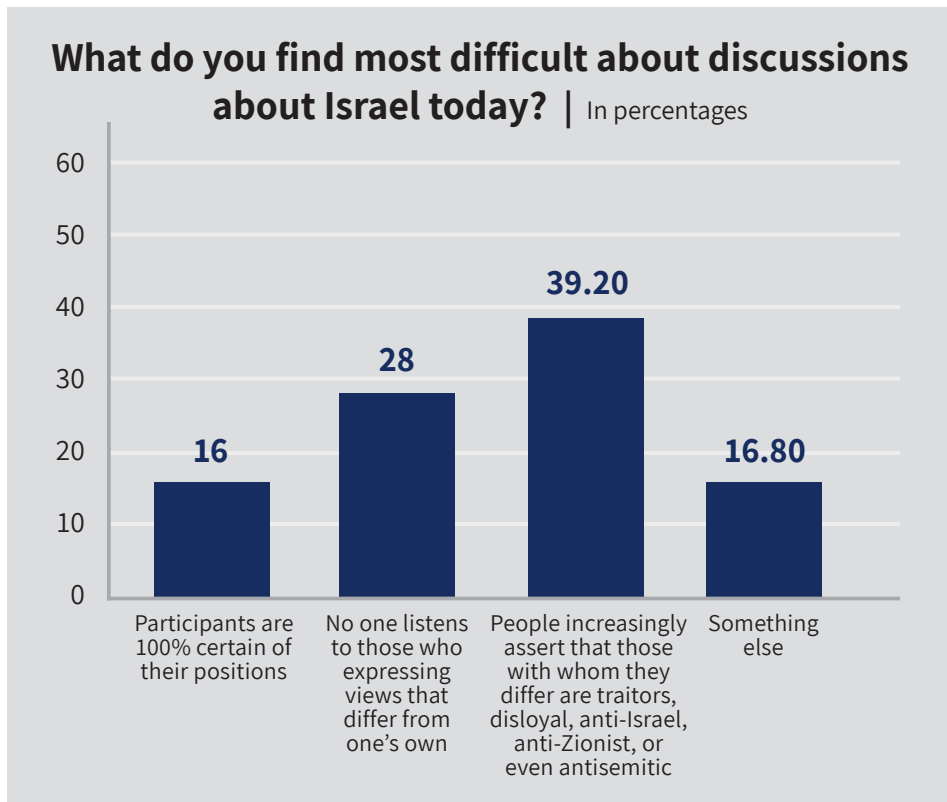
In percentages



Even when such conversations did not result in the dissolution of friendship or other relationships, participants described highly emotionally charged interactions around these topics. In Palm Beach, a woman reported she had left a meeting room because people “would not listen.”

It should be noted that the disagreements in question spanned a wide range of ideological and political perspectives. In other words, they took place between mainstream centrist Zionists and more extreme opponents from both the right and left wings. Tension emerged when interlocutors demanded more consideration of the Palestinian position and an end to the “occupation” and the settlement enterprise. At the same time, other controversies emerged from the “right.” One participant recalled asking right-wing interlocutors not to refer to the Israeli government as “Nazis” in relation to the 2005 disengagement from Gaza.

When asked in the survey “What do you find most difficult about discussions concerning Israel today?” 40% (the plurality) answered: “People increasingly assert that those with whom they differ are traitors, disloyal, anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, or even antisemitic.” The prevalence of this response indicates that participants in discussions about Israel use such discussions to structure Jewish identity, at least on an informal level. That is, to determine who is a “good Jew” and who is “disloyal,” “anti-Israel”, etc. This was confirmed by participant reports of their own experiences. Several J Street participants reported that they had been excluded from their synagogues or made to feel so unwelcome there that they left. One J Street participant related that he had held a national position in a major Jewish organization and once its leadership discovered his affiliation with J Street, he was removed from that position.” In the J Street convening, a woman said that she had been active in her community (Cleveland) AJC, but once she acknowledged that she was also active in J Street, she was told “you are dividing the Jewish people.”

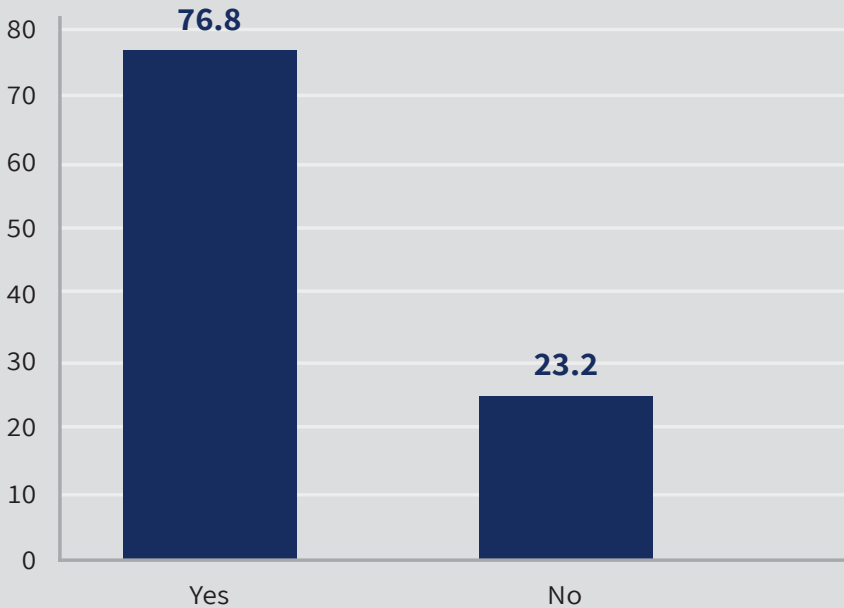


And it was not only members of advocacy organizations like J Street who complained of such exclusion. (One J Street participant spoke of being “exiled” from his community.) A former head of a Jewish day school in Palm Beach related that he was accused of “anti-Zionism” because he worked with someone who was critical of Israel. As he put it, “Any acceptance of discussion on Israel that isn’t fully supportive is shamed.”

The institutional exclusion of Jews for their opinions regarding Israel, seems to have predominantly taken the form of centrist or right-wing Jews excluding left-wing ones. Nevertheless, the practice of setting boundaries as to what sort of attitudes and speech are “legitimately Jewish” (that is, reflects authentic Jewish values and attitudes) and what is not, also takes place on the left, only it is of a more symbolic and less institutional nature. A good number of participants criticized Israel especially in regard to the “occupation,” the settlements, and Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians. Perhaps an even larger number criticized the right-wing Israeli government effort to enact a Judicial overhaul; with some asserting that its “anti-democratic” nature was, like the “occupation,” not in accord with “Jewish values.” In relation to the question as to whether Israel and America have “shared values,” 22% said that they do not. Sixty percent of those identifying as liberals gave that answer, and a third those answering in the negative were participants in the J Street Dialogue session. Notwithstanding our very small sample of political conservatives, in general liberals seem to experience de-legitimization of their attitudes and themselves more than conservatives. Ninety percent of liberal participants indicated that Israel is a more polarizing issue than any other. Only 63% of conservatives answered similarly.⁶ Fifty-seven percent of liberals said that what was most difficult in discussing Israel today is that their opponents accuse them of being traitors, disloyal, anti-Zionist, and even antisemitic. Only 16% of conservatives complained of being similarly labeled.

Perhaps one statistic best sums up this issue of polarization: 59% of participants said that due to polarization Diaspora Jews **would not be able to come together** to confront urgent phenomena such as antisemitism. We have already seen that liberal and conservative Jews tend to identify the threat

Do you continue to believe that Israel and America have “shared values”? | In percentages



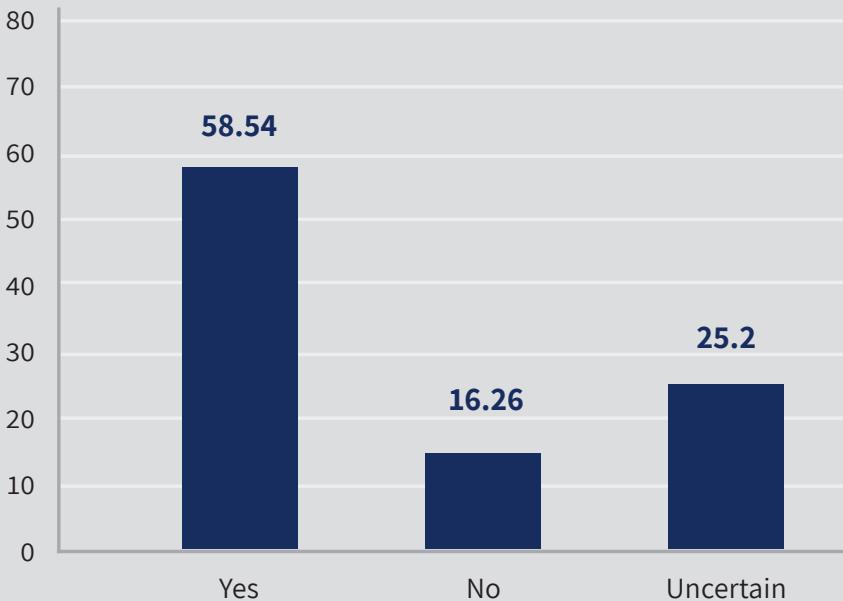
from antisemitism differently (see JPPI’s 2021 Jewish World Dialogue report). Again, liberal Jews felt this way more than conservatives – 57% vs. 42%. Some participants even raised the possibility of formal religious splits or schisms within the Jewish community:

“Jews have long had internal divisions, but today we are facing increased divisions on the religious front that exacerbate the political differences. The Jewish community will likely look very different 50 years from now as these religious differences could lead to different groups viewing one another as being of different religions rather than belonging under a single umbrella.”

A similar response put it this way:

“I believe that there will eventually be a schism like the one between early Christians or Samaritans where a current sect or group of Jews will eventually not be considered Jewish and get excommunicated by the rest. Likely determined by whatever Israel decides is the boundary between Jew and Non-Jew, and therefore who gets to have an opinion on Israeli policy from the “inside” will shift to the right and more Orthodox.”⁷

Tradition relates that increased divisions within the Jewish community led to losing the Jewish Commonwealths of the First and Second Temple periods. Do you believe that the increasing divides within the Jewish people will impede the ability of the Jewish people to come together in an effective fashion when the State for Israel and/or Jewish communities are threatened? | In percentages



Is the Polarization in Israel Good for Jewish Identity in the Diaspora?

When planning began for this Dialogue, we were focused on polarization within the organized Jewish community in the Diaspora, mainly in North America. Nevertheless, as we began conducting the Dialogue sessions in the winter of 2023 (January-March), we could not ignore the growing polarization in Israel over the governing coalition's proposed "Judicial Reform." This polarization expressed itself in massive demonstrations, by both opponents and proponents of the proposed reform, and forms of nonviolent civil disobedience such as blocking highways, or more radical action such as ceasing to volunteer for IDF reserve service. The sustained coverage of the protests against the judicial reform in both the general and the Jewish media in the Diaspora, and the interest it generated in Jewish communities, led us to include the "judicial reform" issue in the Dialogue sessions. It could not be ignored.

At a certain point we added a question concerning polarization in Israel and its effect on Dialogue participants. The answers to this and other questions surprised us. They indicated that as a result of this crisis there has been a rise in interest and curiosity about Israel on the part of at least some engaged Diaspora Jews, and this seems to have intensified post October 7. Undoubtedly, the constitutional-political crisis in Israel has also had a negative effect in most Diaspora communities, as indicated among other things, by a decline in Aliyah rates. During the first half of 2023, Aliyah was down 20% from the previous year earlier.⁸ The perception of Israel as a secure and stable keystone for Jewish life and identity has been damaged. Many of the participants also wrote (in response to the survey's open questions) that it would cause younger Diaspora Jews to tune out or become apathetic to Israel (an effect confirmed by anecdotal accounts from educators working with Jewish students).

Nevertheless, for our highly engaged leadership group (that is, for the participants themselves) it seems to have had a different effect. Most participants, who are highly engaged with their local Jewish communities and

federations, indicated that they feel more connected to Israel as result of this crisis (57%) and two thirds said that they were more likely to visit Israel. This rise in interest also expresses itself in the fact that Jewish groups in the Diaspora tend to side with their parallel groups in Israel. In fact, 75% said the crisis has increased their desire to contribute resources to those in Israel with whom they agree. Orthodox, Republican, and conservative Jews tend to side with the Israeli government, while liberal Jews tend to side with the opposition and the protest movement. Sixty-two percent of the participants said that polarization has led to an increase in discussions about Israel and its policies,⁹ and 64% said that they eagerly participate in such discussions.¹⁰

In other words, the political-constitutional crisis in Israel had, at the time of this writing, both positive and negative effects. It increased the engagement of these highly involved Jewish leaders with Israel and their attachment to it, and it revived curiosity about Israel and Israeli society. A successful resolution of the current crisis should try to preserve these positive aspects. At the same time, it seems to have increased apathy and “tuning out” among the younger generation.

The Causes of Polarization

Dialogue participants attributed the polarization to various causes. The most frequently cited was that political and ideological polarization is a worldwide phenomenon, attributed to multiple factors including extreme economic inequality, the bifurcation of the media super charged by social networks and more. The Jewish community is understood to function within the larger socio-political context of the trends and developments that are profoundly affecting the United States, Western Europe, and Israel.

Another factor, also cited by some, blamed Netanyahu, the Israeli government, and the “right” in general. One participant said that “the issue of the occupation is at the core of the polarization.” But others were more general in casting their blame, citing simply “Benjamin Netanyahu and the right movement,” or “Bibi

and right wing American Jewish fanatics.” Some also related to Netanyahu’s behavior and speech saying that “Netanyahu is far too polarizing...” and that “Bibi has exploited this tension for his purposes.”

To a certain extent, these charges of polarizing speech, especially related to Diaspora Jews, on the part of the Israeli government has a basis in reality. Thus, current Communications Minister Shlomo Karei has accused the Wexner Foundation of “spreading poison,” and Prime Minister Netanyahu has accused the New Israel Fund, which is based in the United States and relies upon American Jewish support of “receiving funding from factors which are hostile to Israel” and of aiming to “erase the Jewish character of the state.” He has even called for the establishment of a “commission of inquiry” to investigate the fund. (Needless to say, no such commission has been setup.)¹¹

While the former rationale, attributing polarization to global factors, was cited by many, the latter position, blaming Netanyahu and the “right,” was frequently articulated by those self-identifying as liberal, particularly those who had experienced exclusion from Jewish institutions such as organizations and synagogues because they were not considered sufficiently Jewish or “loyal.” Both perspectives reflect the fact that discourse within the Jewish community has a decidedly different character than it did decades back. Beyond the above factors – global polarization and a derisive Israeli government – as we listened to each of the Dialogues convened in communities and reviewed the results of the questionnaire, we came to the view that something deeper is underway, which we note below and believe merits serious study and monitoring moving forward. It appears it is time to recognize that the polarization underway in Israel and the Jewish world reflects deeper processes at play in Jewish collective identity.

Jewish collective identity can be understood and analyzed using three key lenses: first, the ethnic or ethnic national; second, the religious/sacred; and third the liberal/ethical/universalist. The last refers to the extension of human and civil rights to all human beings including minorities. The first two are rooted in traditional views of the Jewish people. First, that Jews are a people, an ethnos, with legitimate national aspirations. Judaism is also a religion and

over time, there was broad recognition that one cannot be Jewish if one is a member of another religion. The final dimension comes from the centuries-long Jewish experience of being a minority.

With the Emancipation (1791) most Jews sought civic equality and integration into the emerging modern nation-states. In practice, that meant supporting universal human and civil rights. These values were often seen as aligned with universal values in Judaism, such as we are all created in the image of God (*B'tzelem Elohim*). The identity configuration that served as the basis for the North American Jewish “civil religion” described in *Sacred Survival* (referred to earlier in this report) merged the ethnic, the religious, and the universal. Thus, working for the safety and flourishing of the Jewish people, rescuing Jews, supporting the young State of Israel as it battled external foes, was understood as a sacred undertaking with religious value (though not necessarily in a strictly Orthodox sense (see JPPI’s 2014 Annual Assessment of the Situation and Dynamics of the Jewish People). Similarly, as Jews having been “strangers” and a persecuted minority, supporting minority rights – political and economic – was championed. The ethnic, religious, and universalist wove together into a powerful braid of Jewish collective identity.

Said differently, from 1967 into the earliest years of the 21st century, the mainstream of Jewish life in the Diaspora – and in many ways, in Israel – understood that one could be Jewishly engaged, committed to strengthening and protecting Israel and the Jewish people, and at the same time deeply committed to liberalism. In recent years, for multiple reasons that merit further study, this configuration, this package of views, has started to disaggregate. The constituent elements have started to distance from each other. This has led to the emergence of different configurations of Jewish collective identity, which are vigorously vying for legitimacy and influence. On the liberal left, universalist values seem to have primacy – affording them religious or quasi-religious status – which often leads to severe criticism of certain policies promulgated by Israeli governments and Diaspora Jewish leadership alike. And on the right, there is a new configuration based on ethnicity and religion, which downplays “liberal Jewish values.” It views the well-being of the Jewish collectivity and

privileging the Jewish majority in Israel as sacred. In the US, it often aligns with socially and politically conservative groups. And the large middle – often in senior positions of responsibility in Diaspora communities – continues to work to sustain its allegiance to both Jewish ethnicity and liberal Jewish values, insisting that Israel remain a liberal Jewish state.

This disaggregation seems to have effected a change in the cultural “tone” of public Jewish life. The Sacred Survival mode of Jewish identity combined the ethnic, religious, and liberal/universalist dimensions of collective identity. However, in doing so, it was aware of inherent tensions between them. Nevertheless, it was able to “hold” all three dimensions simultaneously, believing that in the final analysis they were mutually reinforcing. However, this simultaneous holding of different, even somewhat clashing dimensions evinced a sense of ambivalence and irony. This, of course, was primarily expressed in the arts, especially in literature and film as manifest in the work of Jewish writers and artists from Heinrich Heine to Philip Roth, Woody Allen, and Michael Chabon. It also shaped the feeling and experience of “regular” Jews in business, the professions, and Jewish communal leadership. This ambivalence and sense of irony resulted in an attitude of tolerance and openness to opposing opinions. People did not necessarily believe that they were 100% right and could concede that there may be merit to opposing opinions.

That sense of irony and ambivalence seems to have disappeared. People increasingly act and conduct themselves as if they are a hundred percent right and that the other side is not only wrong but morally suspect. This position feeds the de-legitimization of the other side that so many Dialogue participants (particularly liberals) reported to have experienced.

We believe the trends and processes currently underway point to a continuing disaggregation of the components of collective Jewish identity as understood in the later decades of the 20th century, and may constitute a significant challenge for Jewish leadership moving forward. There are multiple global and local factors influencing this development, which we believe merit considerable study.

Exceptions: The German and South African Jewish Communities

We conducted two sessions outside North America in midsize Jewish communities in Germany and South Africa. Germany has a Jewish population of about 100,000; 60,000 Jews remain in South Africa. Dialogue sessions in both cases consisted of the Jewish leadership. Interestingly, neither community reported polarization to the same extent as the North American communities. In place of that they experience: 1) friction and even conflict with the non-Jewish environment; and 2) and a sense of remoteness from, and apathy toward, ideological and political controversies that engulf the larger communities in Israel and North America.

The problem of conflict with the non-Jewish environment was very much present in the discussion with the South African community. The South African government, headed by the ANC, is unabashedly pro-Palestinian and very critical of Israel. It has reduced diplomatic relations with Israel and has downgraded its embassy in Israel to liaison office. Although South African Jews took an active role in the anti-apartheid struggle, this hostility and other economic and political problems besetting South Africa, have turned the community somewhat inward and increasingly Orthodox. In this context, internal conflict has been minimized and intra-community solidarity has increased in the face of external threats. At the same time, the South African Jewish community tends to feel at some remove from the controversies and the struggles in Israel and the North American community. They would like to be part of world Jewry, but its agenda is not entirely relevant for them.

The German leaders expressed similar feelings. One participant said that, unlike the North American community, they don't have debates or arguments over Israeli government policies within their communal structures. They did, however, report that they are affected by what Israel does, because their non-Jewish environment views them as "representatives" of Israel and holds them

“responsible” for what Israel does or does not do. From this point of view, it would be useful if the Israeli government could implement a mechanism to estimate and report to Israeli decision makers the impact Israeli actions have, or would likely have, on Diaspora Jews. Despite this, because of their remoteness, the German leaders said that there is a certain degree of apathy toward recent internal Israeli controversies. Some suggested that it would be useful if they were given the intellectual resources – by the Israeli government, the Jewish Agency or other major Jewish organization – to hold an evening seminar in which Israel’s judicial reform controversy could be explained. They would like to have both sides of the controversy explained together with the advantages and drawbacks of each position.

Despite the differences in situations, the survey answers of the non-American participants were quite similar to those in Dialogue discussions convened by American federations. This was somewhat surprising in light of their indication that the controversies preoccupying the North American communities and Israel were less relevant for their communities. We suggest two approaches to reconciling the data that could dovetail and reinforce each other. The first is that the participants were communal leaders and hence more aware of, and involved with, trends and developments in North America and Israel. Second, because of the friction and conflict with the non-Jewish environment consensus and harmony are norms of communal life there. As one German participant explained, exposing disagreement and controversy in the public communal space is simply “not done.” However, when they privately and anonymously completed the survey, they allowed themselves to indicate an awareness of, and concern about, polarization.

Approaches to Mitigating Polarization

Many of the Dialogue participants, including those who are highly Jewishly engaged and committed, do not feel that they know enough about the controversies in Israel to form an educated opinion or take a position. As we have seen, the current sociopolitical-constitutional conflict in Israel has occasioned a great deal of curiosity and desire to learn more about Israel and its political and social life. This should be capitalized upon to increase and expand Israel Education (not Israel advocacy!) in the Diaspora. Ideally, engaged Jews should be able to place today's controversies in the broader context of Zionist and Israeli history, as well as a sophisticated understanding of Jewish collective identity (see below).¹² As a result of such exposure, participants would learn that Zionist identity and ideology accommodates a broad spectrum of opinions and attitudes on such issues as the territory of the Land of Israel, the interplay of religion and state, and relations with the neighboring Arab populations.

Two basic strategies emerged when we asked participants how they thought polarization could be mitigated. One strategy emphasized the things all (or most) Jews share, such as religious or cultural heritage, and ethical values. As one participant wrote: "Building a greater understanding of what we have in common. Focus on what is important to have fundamental unity even when we disagree on particular issues..." Another suggested "highlighting our commonalities and the need to work together in the face of external and internal threats."

Participants who adopted this approach pointed to joint meetings or activities that Jews of various and even opposing opinions could participate in, and where emphasis would be placed on what Jews have in common. As one participant from New York said, "We should convene groups and identify what we agree on and where we disagree..."

As a result of such meetings, participants might realize that although they have serious disagreements in regard to certain issues, they agree on far more of

the basic and foundational aspects of Jewish life. Presumably, such as exercise would enable them to put their disagreements in perspective and mitigate polarizing forces.

We further suggest that this emphasis on what opposing approaches hold in common be supplemented, as suggested by some participants, by the adoption by Jewish leadership of clear and public criteria as to who can participate in Jewish communal events and in the ongoing “conversation” concerning values and policy, both within the Jewish Diaspora communities and in Israel. Some participants tied this to making participation more inclusive. As one participant wrote:

“Make a concerted effort to build a broader tent that includes younger and other progressive Jews. Don’t automatically walk away from a table just because there’s someone – Jewish or not – with whom we disagree on Israel.”

We suggest that Jewish leadership groups accept the notion that all who affirm explicitly and publicly the right of the Jewish people to sovereignty in its ancient homeland can legitimately participate in Jewish communal events.

The other approach raised by some participants, emphasized listening techniques. For example, one wrote that what is needed is “a slower and more thoughtful convening in Israel and in the Diaspora and the willingness of both Israelis and Diaspora Jews to HEAR each other.” Another recommended “using the research on reducing racism and homophobia/transphobia and apply it to reducing prejudice against Israel and Israelis and breaking down barriers and building trust and personal relationships – changing hearts and minds. The personal is the political.” A third simply offered “connecting and listening more.”

Participants also suggested various tactical approaches such as meeting in small groups with moderators who could structure the dialogue so that participants are encouraged to listen to each other despite their differences rather than just reacting to stimuli that induce emotional overreactions. Another suggested “bring diverse voices from Israel with diverse views on issues; so people can hear them; [they] will be better able to hear from Israelis.”

Regarding small group meetings: presumably, if you meet others who hold a totally different position on a “hot button” issue in a small group, you would be more inclined to view them holistically, and as having many commitments and beliefs some of which are identical or similar to your own. Thus, one might be less inclined to demonize them or charge them with disloyalty. In other words, these strategies suggest employing techniques that encourage viewing one’s ideological opponents as whole people and that, in turn, might dispel hostility and mutual demonization.

These strategies are intended to be employed cumulatively. More Israel and Zionist Education is meant to be complemented by noting and even emphasizing what the various, and often opposing, approaches have in common, and by settings and arrangements that encourage listening and not just “knee jerk” emotional reactions.

Recommendations

1. As noted earlier, we believe the disaggregation of collective Jewish identity is an important development with long-term implications for the Jewish community and Jewish leadership. While research is not an area that generally attracts Jewish organizational attention and philanthropic investment, we believe this subject – the nature and substance of Jewish collective identity – deserves such attention and investment.
2. While Israel advocacy in both the Jewish and wider communities will continue to be required, as recent events have made abundantly clear, if polarization within Jewish communities is to be reduced, a massive investment in Israel Education is also needed. Serious Israel Education enables students to learn about the abiding connection of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, the historical context in which Zionism emerged and experience Israel’s cultural, economic, and technological vibrancy. And most important in terms of reducing growing polarization, serious Israel Education also introduces young and old to the broad range of diverse perspectives and ideological views advanced by Zionist thinkers, groups, and political parties. They will learn that committed Zionist leaders, who have served as Israel’s leaders, have sharply divergent views about how Israel should deal with the territories captured in 1967, about economic policy and far more.
3. There has been a rhetorical commitment to invest in Israel Education for many years and some important initiatives have emerged. To bring Israel Education to scale so it can have the impact that is needed will require a significant investment of resources — to prepare educators, and teachers and develop curriculum appropriate for different ages and settings (Jewish day schools; supplemental schools, Jewish summer camps, etc.).

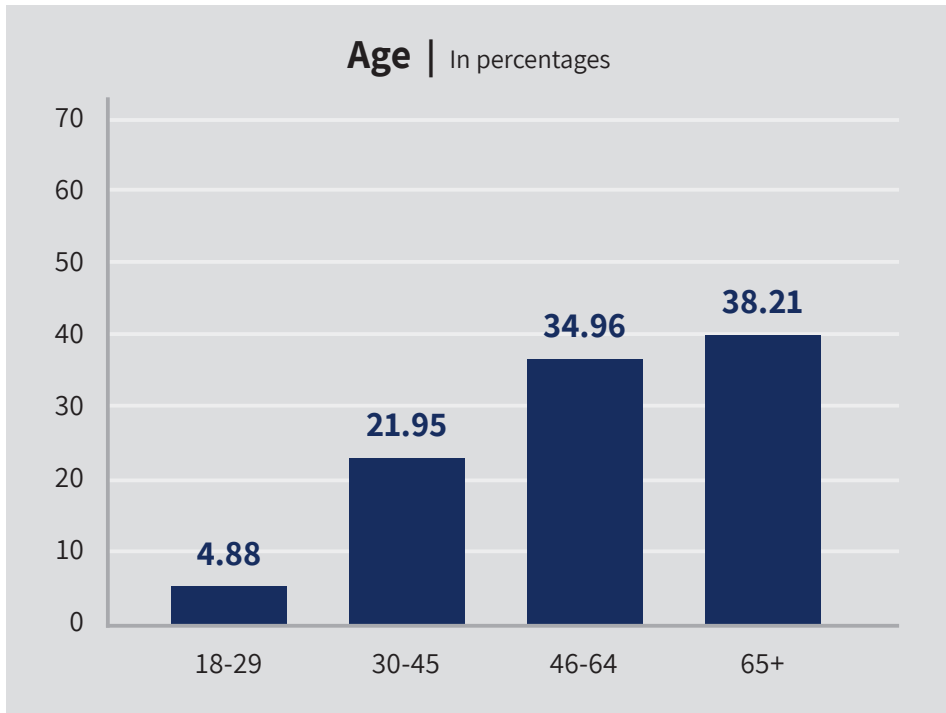
4. Many participants raised the arbitrary and unknown ways in which Jewish groups are permitted to participate in Jewish communal events and/or are excluded from doing so. We recommend that Jewish leadership groups – including The Conference of Presidents, federations, and others – accept the notion that all who affirm explicitly and publicly the right of the Jewish people to sovereignty in our ancient homeland can legitimately participate in Jewish communal events.
5. One exacerbating factor in the polarization between Israel and the Diaspora, and perhaps the distancing and alienation of certain Diaspora populations, is the incendiary language (including terms such as “poison,” “traitor,” “antisemite”) deployed by some Israeli government officials and other leaders toward Jewish individuals and organizations with whom they disagree (including liberal Jewish individuals and organizations in Israel and the Diaspora). We therefore recommend that these deleterious effects be taken into consideration when formulating their statements, especially if directed at organizations and individuals that affirm explicitly and publicly the right of the Jewish people to sovereignty in its ancestral homeland.
6. Efforts should be made in leadership training/development to deepen the ability of Jewish leaders to understand, work with, and listen to those with whom they differ substantially. Pilots were cited in the Dialogue sessions of community efforts that brought together those with markedly divergent views and which also highlighted what is shared. Participants would ideally come to realize that although they hold divergent views on a range of contemporary issues, what is shared is of deep, abiding significance. Many reported that such efforts enhanced the ability of leaders to work together despite a range of different, sometimes conflicting views.

Endnotes

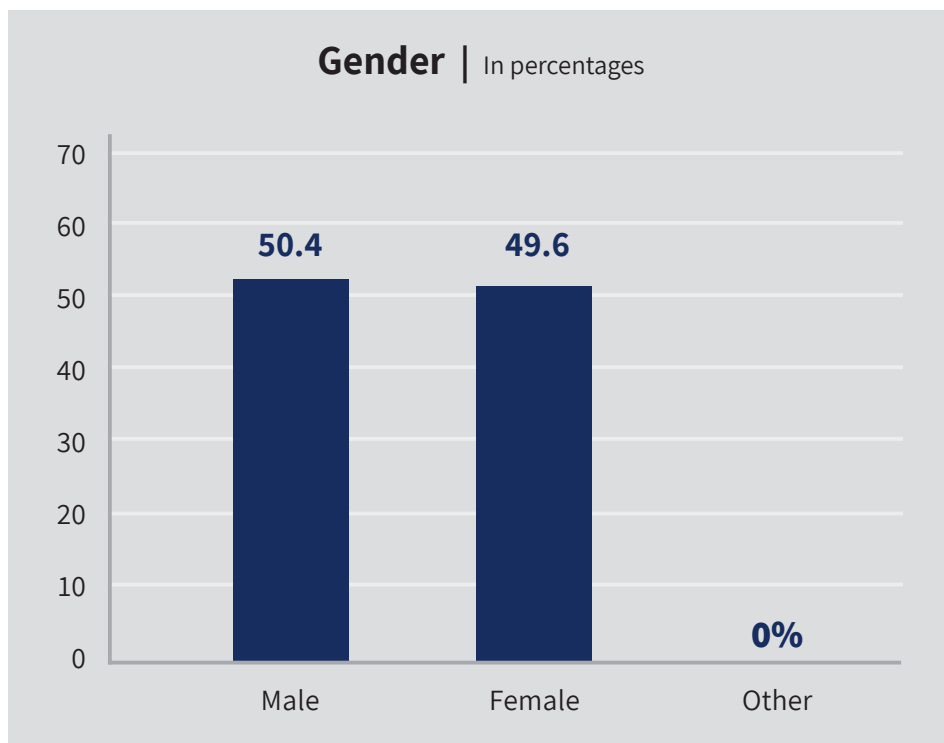
- 1 Benson Strategy Services, *JFNA Community Understanding Survey*, Nov. 21, 2023.
- 2 Out of those, because of various technical difficulties, only 176 participants completed the online survey. The numbers we cite are taken from the online survey, however the quotes and the qualitative analysis and conclusions are based upon the entire participant pool.
- 3 J Street was the clear outlier in age with 92% 65+ and everyone over 46.
- 4 Including non-North American participants. South Africa was predominately Orthodox yet liberal.
- 5 Most Germans did not think Israel was the most polarizing subject. Almost all J Street participants felt it was.
- 6 Orthodox respondents too, indicated that Israel was not as polarizing.
- 7 Both quotes were taken verbatim from the anonymous questionnaire.
- 8 *Haaretz*, July 17, 2023
- 9 The only group of whom the majority of participants (by 1) experienced a decrease in discussions was the Council of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.
- 10 The Cleveland Federation was the only group in which more participants said that they avoid such conversations than those who said that they seek them out.
- 11 Yehonatan Lis, The Knesset Constitutional Committee Discussed the Wexner Foundation; MK Karei: It acts so as to penetrate poison." *Haaretz*, July 15, 2020. Moran Azulai, The New Israel Fund: Netanyahu has Crossed a Red Line in his Incitement Against Us." *ynet*, April 3, 2018. (See box with Netanyahu's Facebook post).
- 12 See John Ruskay, "Israel Advocacy and Israel Education," *E-Jewish Philanthropy*, April 21, 2021

Appendix 1: The Dialogue Questionnaire

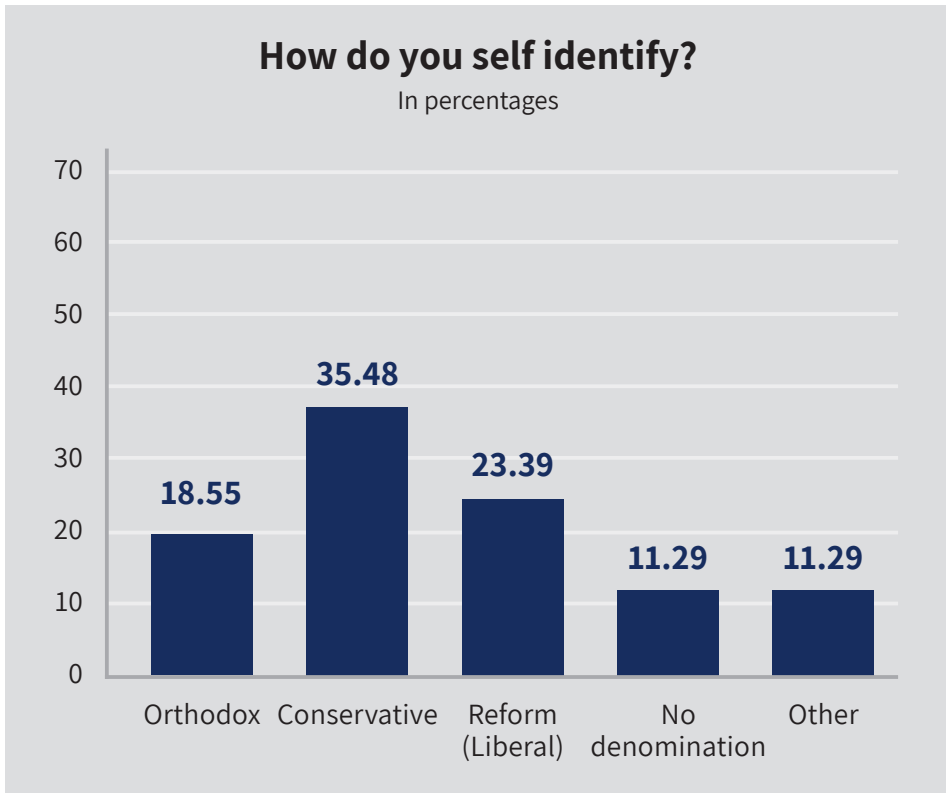
Question 1: Answered: 123 | Skipped: 3



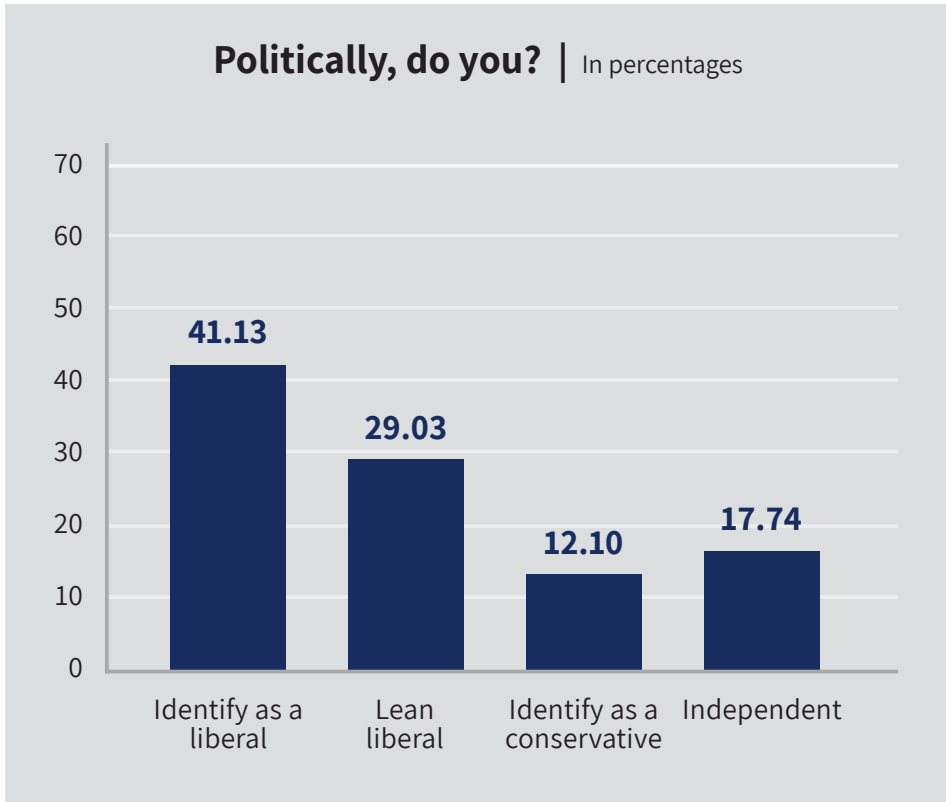
Question 2: Answered: 125 | Skipped: 1



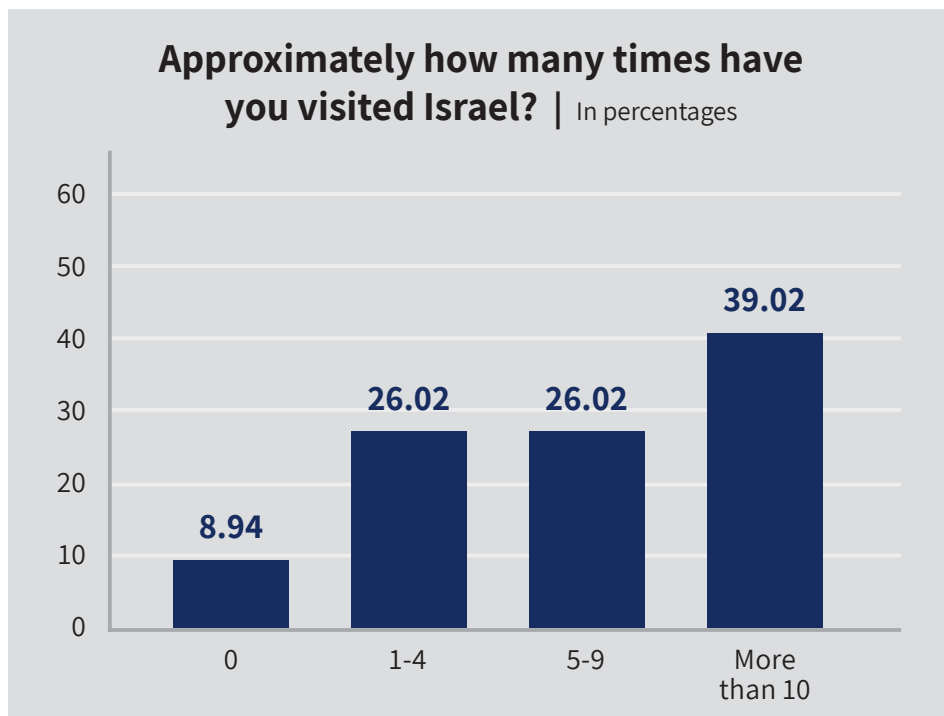
Question 3: Answered: 124 | Skipped: 2



Question 4: Answered: 124 | Skipped: 2



Question 5: Answered: 123 | Skipped: 3



Question 6: You first visited Israel in _____(year)

Answered: 118 | Skipped: 8

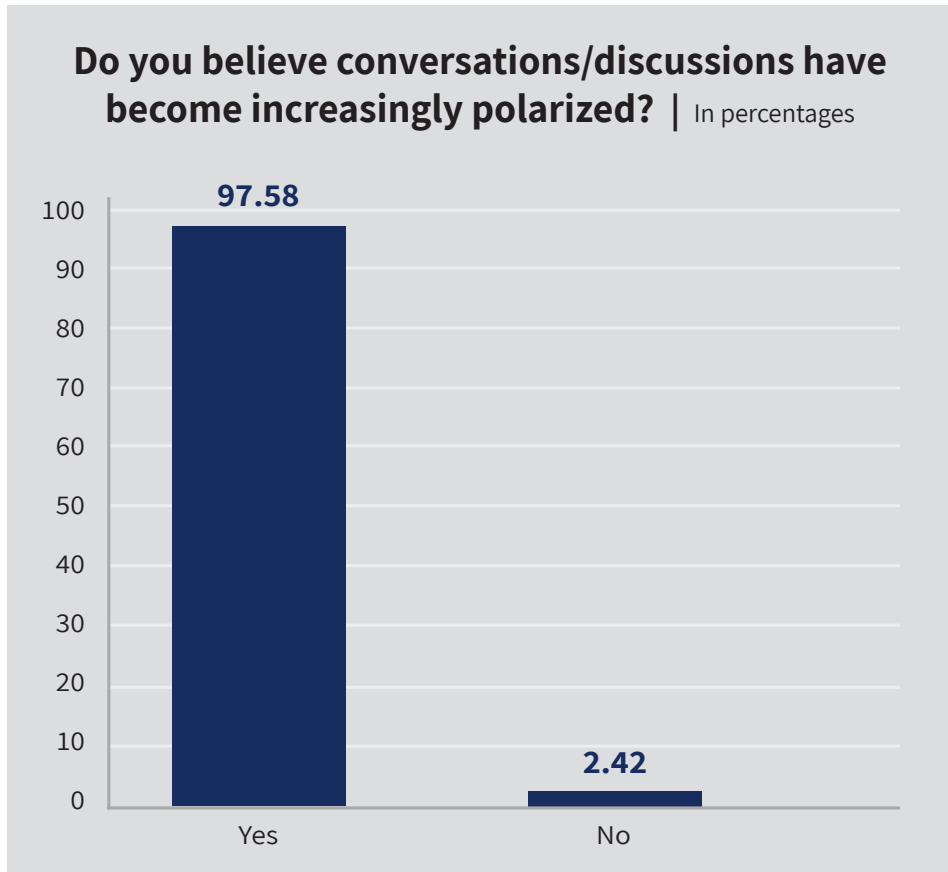
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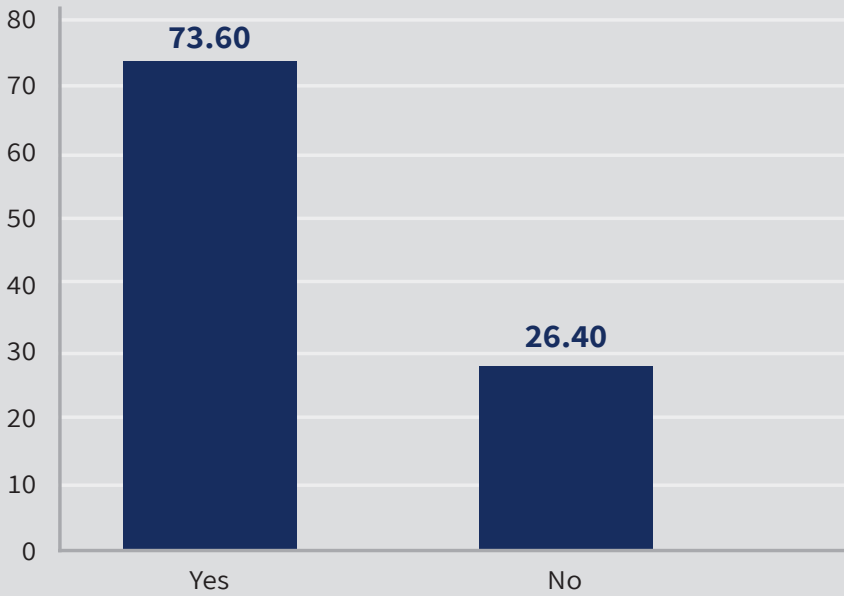
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Question 7: Answered: 124 | Skipped: 2



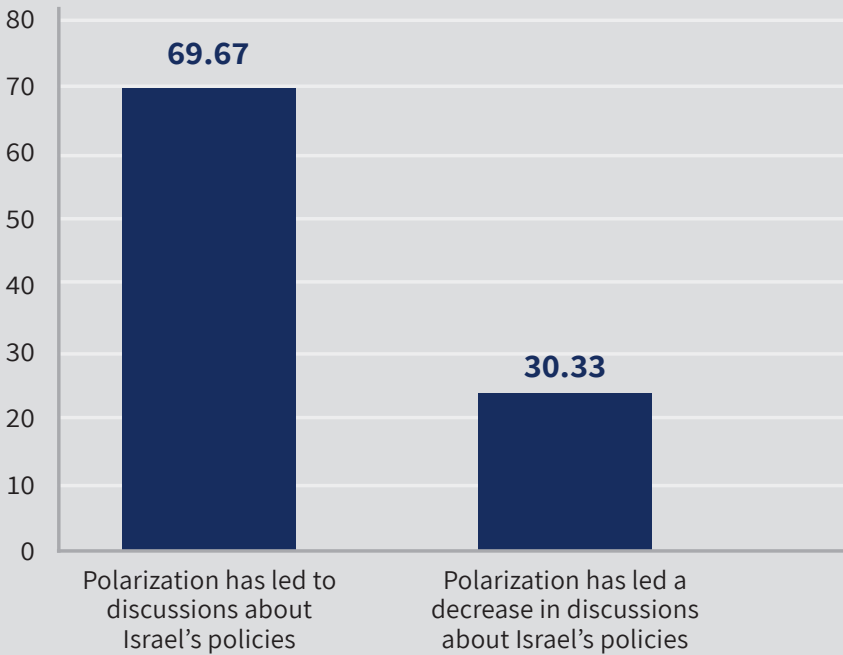
Question 8: Answered: 125 | Skipped: 1

Do you believe discussions in the Jewish community about Israel are more polarizing than discussions about other Jewish topics? | In percentages



Question 9: Answered: 122 | Skipped: 4

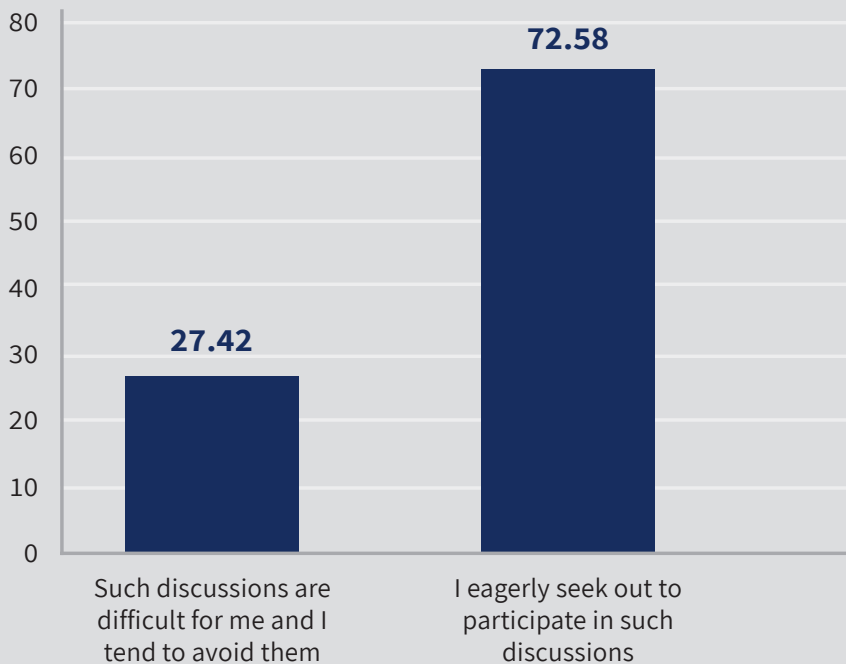
Has polarization led to an increase or a decrease in public/private discussion of Israel's policies regarding the West Bank and religious pluralism? | In percentages



Question 10: Answered: 124 | Skipped: 2

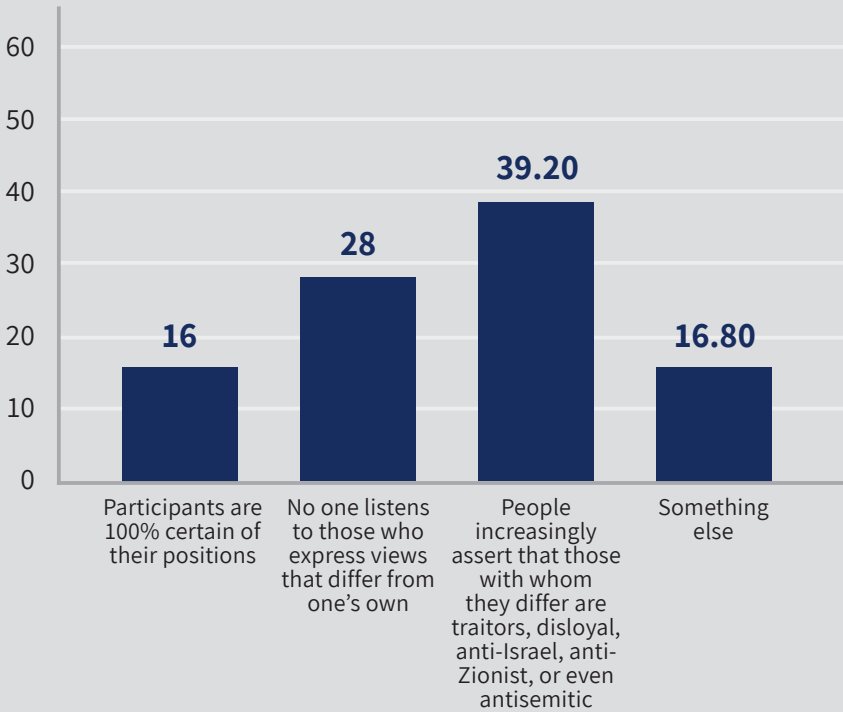
Which of the following statements is closest to how you feel about participating in discussions about Israel's policies?

In percentages



Question 11: Answered: 125 | Skipped: 1

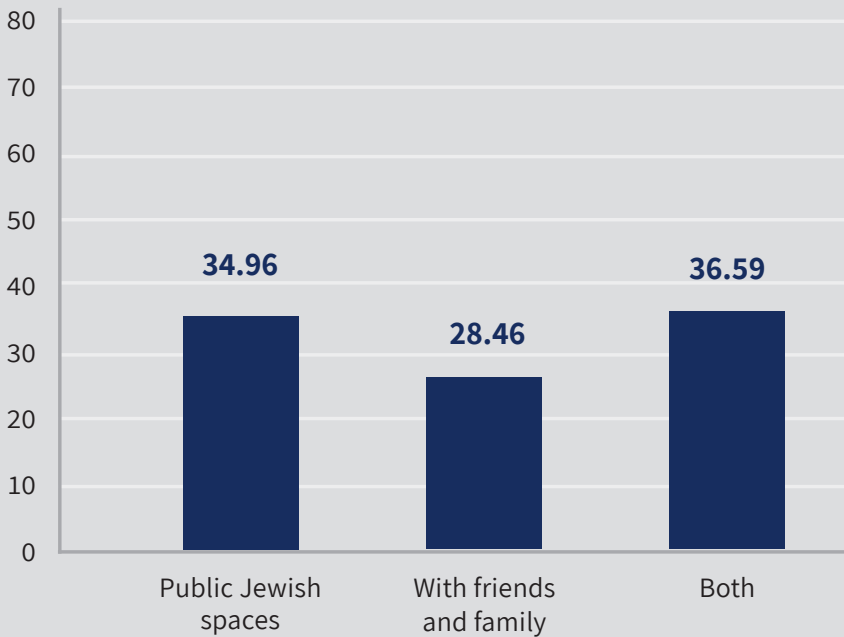
What do you find most difficult in discussions about Israel today? | In percentages



Question 12: Answered: 123 | Skipped: 3

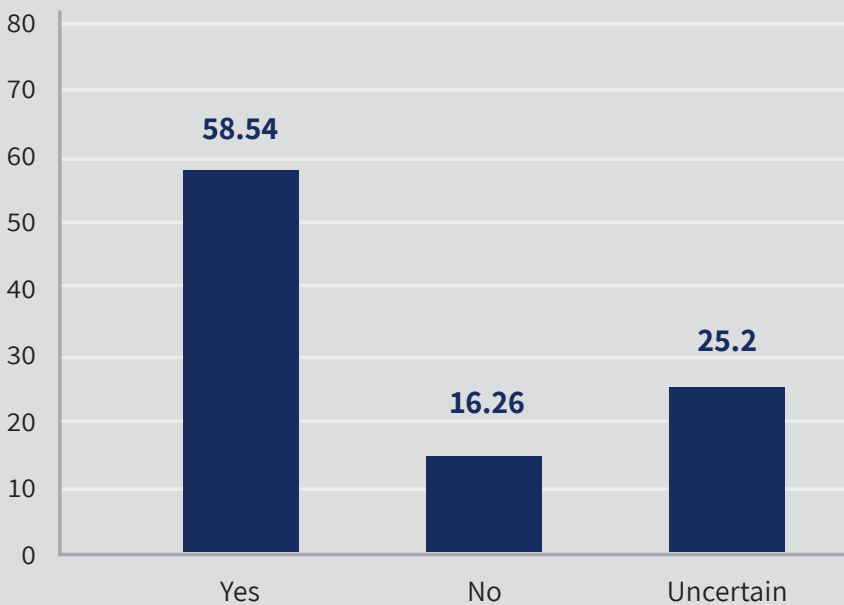
**Have the discussions that have been most difficult/
most intense/most heated/most polarized for
you – taken place in public Jewish spaces, such as
federation committees, synagogues, JCCs, or Hillels,
or in private settings with friends and/or family?**

In percentages



Question 13: Answered: 123 | Skipped: 3

Tradition relates that increased divisions within the Jewish community led to losing the Jewish Commonwealths of the First and Second Temple periods. Do you believe that the increasing divides within the Jewish people will impede the ability of the Jewish people to come together in an effective fashion when the State for Israel and/or Jewish communities are threatened? | In percentages



Question 14 (free response): **In a few brief sentences (fewer than 500 characters), please tell us why you do or do not believe that polarized disagreements can or will eventually lead to splits within the Jewish people (as happened before in Jewish history, for example the split with the early Christian church)?**

Answered: 109 | Skipped: 17

Responses

I fear that future generations of Jews may become disaffected and shed their Jewish identities. Apathy is almost a worst case.

We now have a history of resources, examples, and ideas for how to build resilience in difficult times in ways our predecessors did not. What's required is leadership.

The bedrock of Jewish community – *ki anashim achim anachnu* – is being overwhelmed by disagreements about principles.

It's already happened – recently when Israel was fighting a defensive operation and there was a surge of anti-Semitism in the US and American Jews distanced themselves from Israel and even blamed Israel for Jewish American anti-Semitism. And recently, the Jewish American philanthropic space attempting to create a separate PR for responding to crises in Israel to get out Jewish American messaging separate from Israeli PR.

Among the polarized disagreements is the question of “Who is a Jew” if we can't agree to allow people who identify as Jews even if they are not halachically Jewish to be part of the conversation, how will we not have splits? Denominations don't understand each other, Israeli and American Jews don't understand each other.

The inability to have constructive conversations on Israel has led us to a moment when Israel's fundamental democratic character is at risk. At a certain point, many are not going to be able to support an Israel that doesn't reflect the basic democratic norms and values that are central to our tradition and to many Jews' worldview.

We are just not as engaged in Israel or in the Jewish community – the splits will not grow as certainly as the amount of engagement will simply lessen.

Jews have long had internal divisions, but today we are facing increased divisions on the religious front that exacerbate the political differences. The Jewish community will likely look very different 50 years from now as these religious differences could lead to different groups viewing one another as being of different religions rather than belonging under a single umbrella.

Weakening of the center and inability to articulate a consensus on fundamental issues will cause the young generation to walk away rather than stay and fight for what they believe.

We need Jewish communities to not just come together in moments of crisis but rather all the time, so that we are working together on both the challenges and opportunities we face – external and internal. If we are split, we cannot address these and we will have a split Jewish people – in Israel and Diaspora and also religious/secular. We can be united but don't have to be uniform.

Polarization is a manifestation of political and social dynamics which tend to be varied in nature and duration. I believe that we will emerge from the current cycle of polarization and the greater needs, goals and interests of the Jewish community will enable us to overcome the inclination to focus on what divides us – above what we share in common.

Now when people disagree with others' thoughts and ideas they do not separate the person from the idea and demonize the person.

It is harder to find solutions. We are retreated into echo chambers, amplified by toxic social media, much of which relates to the blood sport that has become American politics. We have normalized using Israel as a wedge issue.

History has a tendency to repeat itself. And we have not learned the lessons of the past.

Very concerned about Israel becoming a wedge issue in politics – that we will get to a point where Democrats cannot comfortably support Israel.

If we can't see each other as brothers/sisters/compatriots, we aren't interested in standing together. You stick by family & friends no matter what. If we aren't family & friends, what then?

I believe that there will eventually be a schism like the one between early Christians or Samaritans where a current sect or group of Jews will eventually not be considered Jewish and get excommunicated by the rest. Likely determined by whatever Israel decides is the boundary between Jew and Non-Jew, and therefore who gets to have an opinion on Israeli policy from the “inside” will shift to the right and more Orthodox.

I believe is enabling (has already enabled) Israel to be a partisan issue in Congress and the long-term ramifications are worrying.

When we are divided, we become weak as a community, and allow others to further divide and weaken us.

Sometimes history forces us to make a choice between values. Jews need to choose their particular ‘tribe’ and state over other values today. Even if that means losing other friends and allies, maybe temporarily. Refusing to do so will make it more difficult for us to protect the only Jewish state.

It’s creating an environment that isn’t welcoming and isn’t kind.

Because of radically different views about the relationship between Israel and Jewish values and beliefs and because of the loss of support for Israel by young people and others due to Israel’s increasingly extreme, racist, and theocratic policies.

There is less tolerance of differing views and religion has played a bigger role.

More and more Jews (particularly on the left and even in the center) are checking out when it comes to Israel. “It’s too complicated”; “it will never change”; “No one listens”; “Israel government leaders (now) only care about Christian Evangelicals and have written off the American Jewish community!

We are a small people. Disunity is very damaging. As we lose the ability to talk to one another and understand what we have in common, we are less likely to come together when necessary.

The extreme right is increasingly dominant in Israel. It is alienating a large swath of Israelis, who will slowly not be able to withstand the changes the right is instituting. This will lead to civil strife and/or immigration. Meanwhile, most Jewish American organizations are reluctant to seriously confront the Israeli right - leading to division and alienation.

Because there would be too great a lack of trust to build consensus for the best path forward.

I don't think polarization will lead to those kinds of splits, but I do think that the Jewish Israeli and American communities are at risk of drifting apart and becoming two peoples, or at least not one strong unified people.

The demonization of people based on their stance on Israel has become out of control.

The Orthodox belief that non-Orthodox Jews should finance and defend them (in the IDF) while they decide whether non-Orthodox Jews can qualify as Jews and emigrate to or live in Israel as citizens. Some then carry their notions of Jewish supremacy into verbal, physical and political battle in violation of international law and often human decency.

If people cannot make way for shared conversations and difficult spaces, that will feed outshoots. It is not inevitable but feels more polarized. I do nothing this is just Israel, but the US, Turkey, Greece, Hungary, and others with a growing conservative bent that is based on fear and a narrow conception of self-interest.

Disagreements will undermine US Jewish support for Israel; specifically financial and political support as the state appears to be less and less secular, moving away from the vision of a homeland for all of its citizens. The reluctance to engage meaningfully with Palestinians exacerbates problems and leads away from security and long-term existence of the state as we know it.

As Israel becomes more theocratic and autocratic it becomes more and more difficult for us, as Americans, to defend its very existence – not just its policies. Many people I know have given up on Israel but would like to find other ways of being Jewish. I personally also fear that Israel's behavior is leading to an increase in antisemitisms and the efforts to muzzle discussion is reinforcing the false narrative that the Jews are more loyal to Israel than to the US. AIPACs recent endorsements of people who voted against certifying Biden's election does the same – in my opinion.

Self-evident. Look what's happening on the streets of Israel.

History has shown that polarization only increases until some major disaster changes the trajectory. This polarization is enhanced by the polarization taking place around the world.

Certainly, the historical precedent is compelling, as depicted so effectively in the movie Legend of Destruction/אגדת חורבן.

A racist government in Israel and the occupation leads to greater divisions and the inability to create a democratic Jewish state who welcomes all Jews.

A racist government in Israel and the occupation leads to greater divisions and the inability to create a democratic Jewish state who welcomes all Jews.

The current polarization seems to have aligned the right-wing Jewish religious with Christian nationalists in a strange messianic fever. This doesn't seem to me to be "good for the Jews."

The American Jewish community is already split over issues other than Israel. The current Israel debates exacerbate a trend that already existed. The comparison with Christianity shooting off from Judaism seems exaggerated.

People need to experience dialogue and authentic relationships in order to build a sense of community and collaboration for shared purposes.

As Israel becomes more Orthodox in policy it becomes more unwelcoming for many Jews. I know Jews who feel Israel no longer reflects Jewish values. Israel should not be an uncomfortable topic.

The splits have already happened. Many younger people explicitly avoid the issue of Israel and focus on tikkun olam. They do not want to be engaged in the issues related to Israel.

The divergence of views and the intense feelings on both sides create cleavages that make any discussion difficult and achieving a common moderate view almost impossible.

The Federation statement that We Are One no longer resonates with me. The Far Right and the ultra-Orthodox do not share what I consider to be my Jewish values. As a strong Reform Jew, I cannot feel a connection to those who deny my Jewishness. I think the split has already happened we are just in denial as a people.

People with power in Israel are leading it down a dangerous path, and those who criticize this path are marginalized even when their critiques are salient. Delusion and wishful thinking have taken the place of facts and reasoned debate.

Demographic changes inside Israel, young people they're much more religious and right-wing. If that continues, I see little hope for constructive work and dialogue.

Without coming together for dialogue, there is no progress going forward.

The splits have already happened because of right-wing policies and actions by the government of Israel.

The split developing is between people who are concerned about Israeli policies and people who don't want to hear any criticism of Israel. That split can get very emotional and personal, which makes it hard for those people to work together or commune on other topics and in other settings.

I am in Israel as I write this; feel the tensions among peoples and in conversations.

Because political powers that be, the Israeli government, the U.S. right and center, are shutting down discussion about key issues.

Arguments have become personal and accusations of disloyalty and being antisemitic are common.

People will not listen to those they disagree with, and the tensions are becoming very heated.

I think that Israel is close to losing its connection with diaspora Jews.

Because the aims of some communities directly contradict each other.

Because people tend to surround themselves with people that think alike and build new communities.

As we saw in the intense debate about the judicial reform in Israel, the Jewish people came together when we were attacked. I believe that – despite all differences – we will stand together when we need to.

There seems to be no unifying factor of Judaism or Jewry anymore. Is it religion? Is it ethnic? Is it a nation? The friction has become bigger.

As we argue a lot about Israeli politics it makes it much more difficult for us to come together and to work together when the Jewish community in Germany is threatened. As most discussions become personal instead of factual very fast, the interpersonal relationships (which matter if we have to fight antisemitism together) suffer a lot from the current wave of polarization around Israeli politics.

Polarized discussions lead at the end to antagonism and to split.

The polarization we now face is not that same thread as it was in biblical times. I believe that we can overcome this division and will get out stronger.

I do not expect a deep split, because I still hope that the Israeli right will come to its senses and realize that they do indeed need all the Jews in the diaspora. The sense of Kol Israel Arevim zeh lazeh is so deeply ingrained into the Jewish people that I am confident that it will resurface.

Solidarity with Israel as a safe place vs. criticism about Israel on a very fundamental level.

Difficult to unite again afterwards.

The main problem is the social bubble created by the lack of conversation, and this leads to a divide that has not been experienced before.

Polarization in Israel more dangerous.

Liberal Jews have moved away from supporting Israel yet in the event of war I believe Jews will come to Israel's aid.

Jews experience so much hatred from the rest of the world. When Jews are polarized the focus is blurred for the real threats, outside hatred.

I think it's possible given the depth of the differences between some Jews that minorities of Jews might splinter off, but thanks to our world being more interconnected than ever, I do not think that a large formal schism will take place.

I don't believe there will be a split within the Jewish community because while there are disagreements within the community, we all identify as Jewish first and will always keep that first and foremost.

NA

I believe that polarization only compounds and leads to further polarization within groups. This is crucial to some of the debates taking place in Israel today as it relates to the right of return, LGBTQIA rights, etc.

Defining the Jewish people is a difficult task. Some of the splits may be from groups that one side already does not consider to be Jewish. There are many varied opinions within the Jewish community however it is defined.

There is a lack of trying to understand the other (the other's viewpoint) which will lead to more polarized disagreements.

Right or left, there have always been certain things that could bring everyone together (such as pride in one's country). As that changes – and there is nothing that we can share with those that disagree with us politically – splits will rise.

Disagreements without being disagreement are good. Its only when one side I have to be right at the expense of you being wrong when communication and relationships break down.

I think when our backs are against the wall we still come together as a people.

They erode our ability to maintain US support for Israel and without it, we are at risk in the UN and on the world stage. The ultra-Orthodox rejection of reformed Jews in Israel will drive the younger generation away. The ultra-Orthodox can't run a modern state and are making it hard for Israel to survive.

Because the problem is internal, it's more likely. When there is an outside threat – people unite despite differences.

I think we are seeing it play out daily in Israel today and I am especially concerned about young people feeling a lack of shared destiny with Israel and Israelis.

These splits affect us both as Americans and as Jews. We differ on our views that we reflect to the US government regarding Israel, as some seek disengagement between the US and Israel and a decrease in US support for Israel. They also affect our own personal support for Israel, since many US Jews are being told that we are not considered to be Jews by the Israeli government or that the Judaism we practice is not acceptable as valid Jewish practice.

I think it will lead to apathy and lack of commitment to Israel. Not sure that it will lead to splits.

The younger generation isn't as connected, even though they have been on Birthright. While being Jewish has always been a heavy lift, it's heavier now with BDS, antisemitism, campus issues, ESG, Israel. The Israel I grew up with was aspirational. The Israel of today feels regressive. As someone who works with non-Jewish groups, it's hard to brag about Israel, even though there's a lot to brag about. Netanyahu's friendship with Trump and his family/cronies makes him a leader who is hard to admire. Plus, his actions seem all about him, even though the justification is that democracy is being upheld.

The question is will the current divides widen to the point of no return. There is much to keep us together that hopefully calmer clearer minds will hold on to.

If we cannot agree on basic values and principles nor listen to each other's opinions and respect them for their differences, then there will no longer be a reason to keep a unification of two different peoples and peoplehoods together.

I believe the splits are very dangerous, we can cause more harm to ourselves than any outside enemy. Those in the outside take advantage and we lose.

Polarization increases feelings of distance, non-connection with Israel among young, liberal American Jews, as well as on the left of our politics. This can lead to loss of support for Israel in a crisis.

I think that it's difficult to hear the other and to accept differences and compromises when there are such polarizing expressions from opposing leadership.

I believe polarization will decrease the next generations willingness to support Israel as they won't be willing to deal with the conflict and eventually, that will trickle into US policy. If the US doesn't support Israel, I am worried about the safety/security of the Jewish people.

Even Talmud and religion scholars only tell the good history stories /the morality of the historical needs to be taught and discussed. Also, all sides need to be told and heard.

Because I believe the people, I speak to generally have the Israeli people's welfare at heart.

There need to be agreements on basics such as we have in the US stemming from the Constitution. I know there are disagreements here but with the Constitution and structure of checks and balances I have faith in our ability to withstand challenges more so than Israel at this point.

I worry that our children do not have the same love and respect for Israel.

Our enemies may to want to exploit schisms within our community – “divide and conquer.”

A sense that the other side doesn't share the same values will lead to apathy and indifference. Both Jewish identity and a sense of peoplehood.

Because it has already happened in Chicago, the US and in Israel. The antisemites are using these cracks to divide us more and with social media it becomes “truth.”

I think it can affect how the Jewish people work together to address key issues of concern.

Politics.

People are generally intolerant of opposing viewpoints unfortunately and would rather shut down any meaningful conversation by labeling and insults.

The extent of the disagreements will be overcome by due process.

Ultimately the state of Israel is the ultimate unifier of the Jewish People. The minority of anti-Zionist Jews is so insignificant that it would not rip the country apart. On the other hand, the minority of ultra-right wing religious Zionists such as Smotrich and Ben-Gvir will never have the power to divide the Jewish people. This is because of the apolitical nature of the IDF and the democratic spirit of the Israeli people.

Polarization in SA has not increased, by my reckoning. We have always had a wide range of opinions within the Jewish community, from secular Marxists to ultra-Orthodox. With opinions on Israel similarly divided. Perhaps that qualifies us to comment usefully on what may lie ahead, perhaps not. Thus far the questionnaire has seemed very America centric. But I’ll push on.

It prevents unity.

Just looking at Israel today shows the dangers of the polarization between Jews. The issue of people not listening to the others point of view is massive because no solutions can be reached without proper discussion.

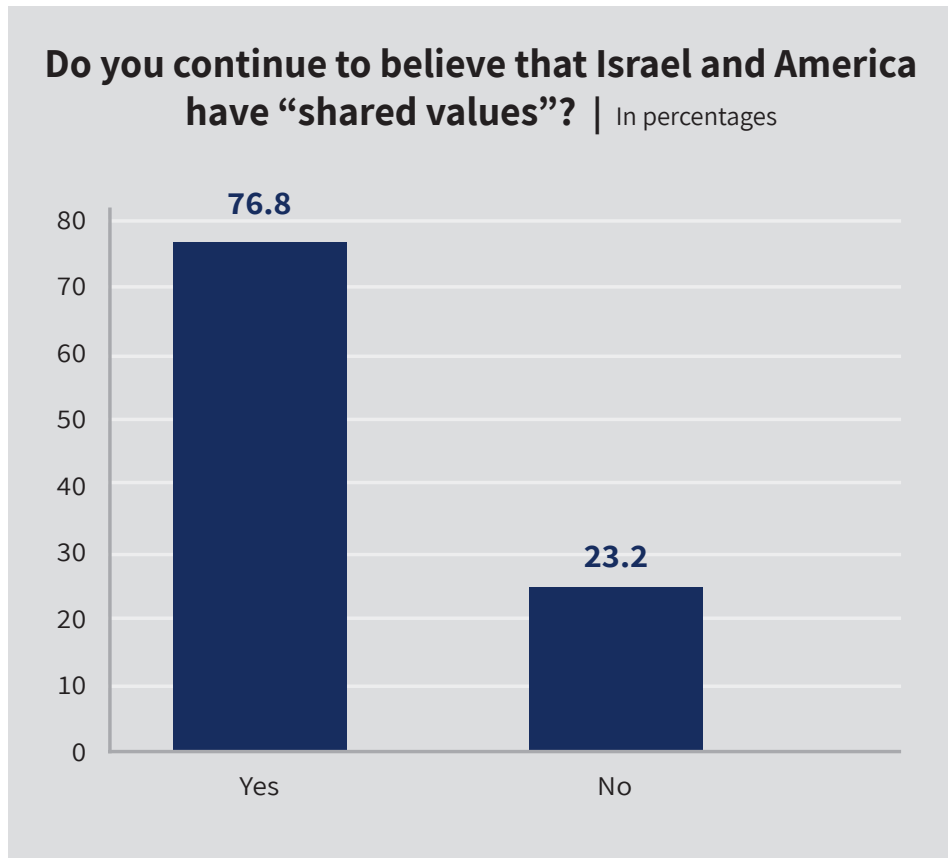
It remains to be seen as of this date.

Genuinely uncertain.

I believe that most Jews will know how to contain such polarization before it goes out of control.

Polarized discussions create imagined communities of sorts or denominations which fragment the community more living amongst one another with identical opinions and values. While this may not split the Jewish people beyond repair, it will further cement two dialectical sides that struggle to coexist. Maybe attending the same synagogue but praying at a separate minyan or simply avoiding saying “good Shabbos” to someone of the other side.

Question 15: Answered: 125 | Skipped: 1



Question 16: As you know, the proposed “Judicial Reform” has led to months of massive protests in Israel and enhanced understanding of the depth of the cultural and ethnic divides in Israel. Most North American Jewish leaders (but not all) have supported those opposing the proposed reforms. Have the events of the last few months...

Answered: 81 | Skipped: 45

	First Statement		Second Statement		Total	Weighted Average
Led you to feel more closely connected or more distant to Israel	57.50%	46	42.50%	34	80	1.43
Led you to appreciate the health of Israel’s democracy or deepened your concerns about Israel’s democracy	30.00%	24	70.00%	56	80	1.7
Reduced your perception of polarization in the North American Jewish community or increased your perception of polarization in North American Jewish community	36.49%	27	63.51%	47	74	1.64
Increased your desire to contribute to those in Israel with whom you agree or decreased your desire to contribute	75.32%	58	24.68%	19	77	1.25
Made it more likely you will travel to Israel within the next year or made it less likely you will travel to Israel within the next year	66.67%	48	33.33%	24	72	1.33

Question 17 (free response): **What do you think is responsible for this polarization (whether in regard to Israel or to other issues)?**

Answered: 115 | Skipped: 11

Responses

Lack of education about the history of modern Israel and the assimilation of American Jews.

It flows from the top but not exclusively.

The whole world is polarized it's not a Jewish issue.

Social media and poor Jewish education that doesn't include Israel (or only does cultural Israel education) such that people blame that which they don't know and understand as evil and dangerous.

Fear of changing demographic trends as they impact the political and religious makeup of the community.

Certain political figures trying to change the governmental policies for their own benefit, bringing in to their coalition terribly polarizing (criminal) figures who make Israel look terrible in the eyes of the world.

Political and communal leaders who have long equated support for Israel as a Jewish, democratic state with support for Israeli government policy.

Netanyahu and his supporters.

Inherent disagreements within the Jewish people.

Same as above.

lack of understanding of each other's positions and views.

Extremist Israeli government.

We are captive of the flow of information through social media and news sources that serve to affirm the kinds of things we wish to hear.

Speaking as a Republican, largely Bibi. His desire to maintain power (and possibly avoid jail), has led him to partner with more and more extreme partners.

Israeli dismissal of the diaspora.

People being political/partisan in their decisions & not being fair, objective. Would those opposing reforms not act the same way if the court's policies were reversed?

Media coverage of Israel is deeply polarizing and hate filled. It's often one-sided and depicts Israel as occupier and evil.

Influence of Trump and Netanyahu.

Erosion of trust in institutions at a societal level (i.e., not unique to the Jewish community).

Concern about the future of the Jewish state.

Totalizing nature of all discussions.

Global trends towards populism, extremism, divisiveness, polarization.

Netanyahu government and occupation

Leaders who do not listen frustration, hopelessness about the future, the occupation

I have become much less into the religious aspects of Judaism and much less tolerant of the religious

same as above

Social media. Desire by organizations to drive fundraising by taking absolutist positions. General political incivility.

An inability to listen to any voices outside of your own circle/bubble. This goes for all political polarization, which then builds and feeds off itself.

Different perceptions based on no shared set of facts.

the polarization that has occurred in the US stemming from Donald Trump's presidency has unleashed hatred and enmity and the permission to act on it.

The extreme government in Israel and the takeover of pro-Israel groups in the US by the Republican party and evangelical Christians – shutting down discussion. Thank goodness for J Street.

Haredi extremism.

Fear that leads to hate.

The rise of social media and concerted efforts to propagandize and use false information to influence opinions.

The racist, right-wing government in Israel

The racist, right-wing government in Israel

The Orthodox in particular have moved to the right both in the US and Israel and aligned themselves with Donald Trump and the Republican Party.

Right wing.

Occupation of territories and how they are treated

Netanyahu's hubris and fear of going to jail and the rise of the ultra-religious population and funding from Right wing donors and Christian Zionists

Fundamental differences in values. The differences should be bridgeable but need to be frankly acknowledged.

Christian Nationalism and right-wing Jewish messianism.

the rise of illiberal democracy and right-wing doctrine in Israel. This is complemented by a similar trend in the US with Trump. Finally, Bibi has exploited this tension for his purposes.

That shared values do not seem to exist anymore. To me, that defines my own Judaism.

That radical and hateful views have come to the center of the debate and are in leadership in Israel.

Religious zealots and a power-hungry PM.

Failure for either side to appreciate the perspectives and needs of the other.

Politics and racism.

The policies and actions of the government of Israel.

The American right, the Trumpists and the Israeli right.

Mainly the activities of the Israeli government – and, on a more foundational level, the occupation

I think it is very difficult for American Jews to grapple openly and honestly about the complexities of Israel's politics, much less their awareness of the realities on the ground in the West Bank.

Bibi and right-wing American Jewish fanatics.

The issues are very emotional and people are not rational.

The established Jewish community.

The mixing of religious faith and political aims certainly contributes.

Discussions within the Jewish community about Israel should stay inside the community – not on the streets or in media.

Benjamin Netanyahu and the right movement.

We need to learn how to disagree in a respectful way without burning bridges.

Ultra-Orthodoxy

People feel less willingness to listen to each other's arguments, everyone thinks he or she is 100% right, only black and white and no grey is seen, social media is a problem or the abuse of media in the one sense or the other.

Power games and striving for influence.

Orthodox and nationalistic positions.

The far right and Netanyahu who wants to stay in power just in order to avoid jail for himself personally.

Netanyahu, Smotrich, Ben-Gvir, Shas, UTJ.

Ugly face of right-wing extremism.

Current Israeli government.;

Too many personal interests too obviously at stake, which makes an objective discussion hardly possible.

Global trend.

Lack of communication.

In Israel– extreme positions.
In the US - ignorance about Israel

secular v religious jews

Wokeness. Liberalism

The general failure of Jewish education in America.

Society/cancel culture.

Those who seek power.

NA

Media drives a lot of misinformation that riles people up.

Lack of trying to understand the other. Echo chambers of thought, politics, media, etc.

Extremes on the left and right.

Politics in general, which includes the ever-growing belief that everything has to be “politically correct.” First, I think the relatively recent deep divide in American politics has spread to other democratic nations such as Israel. In recent years, the American parties (both) have allowed the far extremes to have a louder voice and more visible platform and I believe that has given them and others (such as we are seeing in Israel) more confidence to be seen and heard. Secondly, which stems somewhat from the that first comment, is a growing group of “self-loathing Jews” who desperately want to fit in with the thinking of the political correctness and feel Israel is causing more trouble than it is worth to have a Jewish homeland.

Israel is different than America in their political system and Americans compare Israel to America solely which is not a fair comparison. For example, it is hard to wrap a Jewish American's head around the fact that a prime minister can serve years without term limits. People also do not understand how the coalition and political parties work as it is so different than America. I think there is lack of education around this and so many people choose to avoid the topic to be politically correct that many Jewish Americans do not understand what is happening in Israel. I think young college students do not know the nuances of Israel and are simply taught it is "amazing." Then when approached with challenges in Israel on college campuses, they feel like they have been lied to their whole life and can lean more towards a pro-Palestine point of view. When it comes to West Bank, this is a hot topic that is avoided. It is complicated and if people look at it black and white, they will not understand all the areas of gray there and why Israel makes the decisions it does.

The progressive movement has chosen to make Israel a human rights outcast and conflated black brown people's issues in America and elsewhere and the Palestinian issues. Israel is targeted as racist when in fact it is more inclusive than most countries.

American politics... namely the conservative right.

Political polarization; The inability of achieving peace with the Palestinians; lack of knowledge among American/Diaspora Jewry.

Views of the Rabbanut, not only Haredim. The nature of the Israeli governmental system that requires governmental leadership to be based on a coalition, which has always included the ultra-Orthodox except for the most recent government under Bennett and Lapid. The views of the most extreme settlers, which are not Jewish values.

Rise of fundamentalism in Israel and in the United States.

The trend is that we live in echo chambers, and we do not appreciate other views different than ours

Not listening. Thinking one is always right.

Lots of reasons, but two that I think are important: 1) Growing secularism amongst people leading to a lack of any real reason to value Judaism 2) There is too much information (i.e., social media, press) at the click of a button. As a result, no real discussion takes place and people decide quickly the echochambers they want to participate in.

Ego centric, power-hungry leaders.

Too complicated to determine – seeing common trends in many parts of the world.

Similar to general political polarization in US; lack of shared facts, or even agreement on what the facts are; hardening of positions.

Not enough focusing on shared goals and values and what binds up together.

The segmentation of our media and the loss of a shared narrative that used to bind the country together. Within Israel I fear that the demographic time bombs from the Haredi community and the Arab/Palestinian communities will put pressures on the system that may cause it to break.

The politics in Israel.

Israel no separation of church and state. Religion in Israel controls personal space and choice.

I think certain people feel as if their way is the ONLY way.

Partly Donald Trump, and partly the lack of a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Both sides share responsibility.

The polarization of the US led, and Israel and other countries followed.

No one person or entity is responsible.

Change in Diaspora Jewry focus and change in the nature of Israel.

Politics, antisemitism.

The failure to abide with the separation of powers.

See above.

Netanyahu is far too polarizing and his willingness to work with the ultra-right has led to division. Social media is also a factor and its effects have been noted.

Difference in opinion.

People's personal political leanings.

Politics.

Remains to be seen during these times.

Multiple factors: polarization in broad culture; growing economic inequality; money in politics which makes it difficult for the liberal parties to do what is needed (tax and regulatory reform) to stem the economic inequality; bifurcation of the media (weakening of media that seek to aggregate views from multiple perspectives).

Different interpretations of Jewish identity and the meaning of the Jewish state.

A strong sense of ethics combined with tradition and fear. It is a multi-varied equation. 1) There is an innate defense to Israel due to tribal heritage. 2) Israel is the only secure home for Jews, just look at history. 3) Still, Israel is not perfect, and the Palestinian problem is real. Weighing the odds places people on either end prioritizing one or the other. Is ethics and justice more important or is a secure traditional homeland the necessity.

Question 18: Briefly, what, if anything, can be done to ameliorate this polarization in Jewish communities concerning Israel?

Answered: 114 | Skipped: 12

Responses

A slower, more thoughtful discussion and convening within Israel, within the diaspora and the willingness of both Israelis and diaspora Jews to HEAR each other.

There are push and pull components. On one side, a reconsideration of certain policies in Israel. On the other side, a requirement that American Jewry need to develop stronger attachment to their heritage.

Reverse mifgash – Jews with different views need to understand each other more.

More dialogue and shared experiences with Israelis so Americans have personal experience. Use the research for reducing racism and homophobia/transphobia and apply it to reducing prejudice against Israel and Israelis and breaking down barriers and building trust and personal relationships – changing hearts and minds. The personal is political.

Looking forward to hearing others' thoughts about this. I'm not sure

Connecting and listening more.

Make a concerted effort to build a broader tent that includes younger and other progressive Jews. Don't automatically walk away from a table just because there's someone – Jewish or not – with whom we disagree on Israel.

I do not know.

Highlight our commonalities and the need to work together in the face of external and internal threats.

return to major investment in community relations infrastructure – support for the rare groups that are not partisan.

More dialogue.

Confront the two elephants-attacks on Israel's democracy and ending hope for two states.

More effective leadership.

Increased communication.

Bibi needs to go.

Re-elect leadership in Israel.

People need to be more educated around Israel, go there and see it, and also learn more about other kinds of democracy around the world.

Meet, speak, provide credence to concerns – and opinions – of both sides.

Greater focus on relationships in the real world.

Hold up diverse voices and model healthy disagreement.
Center those most impacted by what's taking place.
Not be scared to feature Palestinians in our conversations

Honestly, groups like this help. People should go to Israel. Meet Israelis. Be in the conversation.

Better communication by GOI officials – using language that resonates in the diaspora.

Truth telling.

more discussions – more dialogue; town meetings – Israel/diaspora exchanges.

I do not have many good ideas.

That's what I hope to learn from this dialogue!

Building a greater understanding of what we have in common. Focus on what is important to have fundamental unity even when we disagree on particular issues. Learning the partial truth in the arguments with which we disagree.

A general recognition by communal leaders across the religious and political spectrums that there is more than one way to be pro-Israel, and that all opinions are valid.

Creating more spaces for discussion and promoting shared facts.

Not sure.

Open dialogue and increased participation with Palestinians.

Discussions among the people who disagree with each other.

Space to have respectful conversations and recognition of each other's feelings.

Open our minds. Let Jewish Leaders – particularly NA communal leaders – emphasize debate is good and Jewish. As you did at the start of this discussion.

I think more discussion is critical. My experience as a longtime pro-Israel/pro-peace/pro-democracy activist has been that recent months have brought more American Jews to understand better my concerns and made them more open to supporting my work.

Getting rid of Netanyahu.

We need to be able to hold as true two conflicting visions/versions of history at the same time. The establishment of the State of Israel and the Palestinian Nakba are both true.

Stop equating criticism of the creeping (or now, galloping) authoritarian trends in Israel with anti-Zionism or antisemitism.

Some solution to occupation. Lessening power of Orthodox.

Convene communal dialogues.

Reducing the marginalization of critical voices.

People start recognizing the truth and full reality of what Israel has been in the past and is becoming.

More curated discussion. Better information dissemination.

J Street is the organization for these times. As a Chapter Chair, I see that the majority of American Jews share our vision.

I have no idea. Perhaps an existential crisis.

Vote out the present government.

Organized Jewry must make Jewish spaces hospitable to the left and liberal strand of our people. They are consciously pushing us out of spaces and conversations and are working to demonize us.

Israel needs to lead the way, but leadership in the American Jewish community amongst all the religious and political streams need to come together and agree to disagree with civility.

Facilitated dialogues.

End the occupation.

Educate Jewish people to a greater extent about what is really going on in Israel, so they participate in discussions about those topics with a more complete base of information, instead of primarily on emotion

The current coalition falls and there is some kind of reckoning about the occupation.

More not less open discussion.

We have to continue to have a strong bond to Israel and its people. More trips to Israel, more education about Israel and more positive events, discussions and connections about/with Israel.

Concentrate more on Jewish Values and threats that we face from the outside.

Be open and transparent about which communities have which goals – to the thinking through the consequences of said goals for the Jewish communities as a whole.

Mediate. Listen to all the arguments, bring in people with deep love of Israel who can explain the arguments on all sides of the spectrum.

We need more spaces to respectfully discuss the current situation and its consequences for Jews in the diaspora.

Strengthening liberal and democratic forces; Campaigns against right-wing extremist;

Mediations between the groups.

A new government in Israel as a first step.

A change in Israeli politics, especially by recognizing the diversity of Judaism in and outside the state of Israel, by respecting minorities in Israel and by working seriously towards peace. As long as this does not change, I welcome the polarization, because it makes it clear that there is a huge issue that needs to be solved.

A written constitution for Israel.

More discussions that might hurt.

Stronger concern by the Israeli government on impact of factions on diaspora communities.

Trying to create a framework for discussion.

Israeli government needs to act on universal human values and not adapt to the autocratic, non-democratic attitude of some of its neighbors.

Communication.

More education and connection to Israel.

Rabbis need to support Israel unconditionally. People in America need to stop meddling in Israel's internal affairs.

I'm not sure what you mean by polarization concerning Israel. I think that in general this fear of polarization is overblown. That being said, to the extent that it exists, Jewish communities must be clear to draw a distinction between healthy criticism of Israeli governments or social policies and antizionism, which like Messianic Judaism ought to be beyond the pale.

Emphasize importance of Judaism first.

Civil discourse.

NA

Discourage power for power's sake.

Truth and education.

Education.

More dialogue, understanding and efforts at compromise and mediation by professional, political and lay leaders.

Great question! But the answer is open and honest dialogue with open and honest minds willing to actually LISTEN!

Education of Jews on issues in Israel and their nuances. Each organization encourages dialogue about Israeli politics and policies.

Meeting in non-political social settings.

Groups that claim to be pro-Israel should never have language or speakers that don't believe Israel is a legitimate state.

Education; more direct people to people experiences.

More education, more Americans visiting Israel to learn.

I wish I knew! There needs to be a genuine commitment of all parties to develop a constitution or additional basic laws. This will take compromise.

Education – more trips to Israel

We need to get leaders amongst different denominations across the aisle to try and unify on a new set of rules and principles on how we want to engage with each other that is healthy and productive.

Moderated dialogue with key figures that are respected and followed from the various camps. Maybe there's a way to go back to understanding and respecting "the other."

I wish I knew. I'm disheartened.

Don't you think we've been working on this for ages already?

Seeing what makes similar instead of what is different.

Less polarization between Israel and American Jewish community could help. Israeli right wing doesn't seem to care about diaspora opinions or concerns.

I hope focusing on core values will be a good start – but there are many policy issues in Israel that continue to drive the wedge. I don't want to have the US drive Israeli policy – but there are consequences.

More open dialogue.

Getting to know each other better to gain an understanding of those that believe differently and having an open mind.

More discussion between sides.

Dialogue and not legalization of behavior.

Education around peoplehood, tolerance, civics in Israel.

Developing a cohesive framework to move forward with defending Israel while simultaneously criticizing its faults.

Dialogues; continued support of the people of Israel. Decreasing financial support, whether through Federations or specific programs and projects will not help the people of Israel. Too many donors do not understand that charitable gifts do NOT go to the government of Israel.

Conversation where people listen and talk.

Need more engagement and ways of finding similarities.

Listening to others.

Sharing ideas and healthy debates.

Tolerance.

Netanyahu has to leave politics. Besides that, the same issues regarding the W/B and Gaza and Palestinians. Will be an issue until there is some major change. Beyond this as with any political issue there will be some division.

Encourage open articulation of difference. Respectful articulation.

Engage in educational discussions to create awareness.

People making the effort to actively listen to one another with the purpose of finding solutions that work for all sides.

Open, frank discussions in which we hear one another's views and take them into account rather than "listening to respond/disagree"

In the Jewish community: believe intensive Israel education (as distinct from preparing diaspora Jews to effectively advocate for Israel) will enable Jews to understand there have been and continue multiple Zionist perspectives: views of what Israel can and should be.

As an exercise people should try and make arguments for the side that they disagree with.

Dignity and discussion. Polarization brews not because of disagreement but because of unacceptable diversity. It is my way or the highway. In order to properly solve this issue, honest debate and steel manning opponents finding their core point and recognizing its merit. Neither side is foolish. Elu v'elu only works because Beit Hillel recited Beit Shammai's opinions before their own. They carefully analyzed their rivals and concluded with their own divergent opinion. Yet done with absolute ingenuity.

Appendix 2: Participant List (organizations)

Central Council of Jews in Germany (Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland)

Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations

Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta

The Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago (JUF)

Jewish Federation of Cleveland

Jewish Federation of Greater Portland

Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County

Jewish Federation of St. Louis

UJA Federation of Greater Toronto

J Street

Nexus Task Force

The Ruskay Institute for Jewish Professional Leadership (UJA Federation of New York)

The South African Zionist Federation (SAZF)