

This research presents an intersectional account of American Jewish life by exploring the ways in which the ethnic, racial, and cultural identities of Jews of Color (JoC) influence and infuse their Jewish experiences. *Beyond the Count* was commissioned to inform the work of the Jews of Color Initiative (JoCI), a national effort focused on building and advancing the professional, organizational, and communal field for JoC. This study provides valuable insights to help Jewish communities and organizations reckon more directly and effectively with the racial diversity of American Jewry.

In this research, “Jews of Color” is understood as an imperfect, but useful umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of identities and meanings. Those who self-identified as JoC in this study used the term in a multiplicity of ways: as a racial grouping (e.g. Black, Asian, and multiracial Jews); to indicate national heritage (e.g. Egyptian, Iranian, and Ethiopian Jews); to describe regional and geographic connections (e.g. Latina/o/x, Mizrahi, Sephardic Jews); and to specify sub-categories (e.g. transracially adopted Jews and Jewish Women of Color).

This study, which was housed at Stanford University, collected the largest ever dataset of self-identified JoC to date. Survey data from 1,118 respondents present a broad portrait of respondents’ demographic characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences. Sixty-one in-depth interviews provide texture and bring respondents’ own words to the forefront.

This report integrates survey and interview data as interwoven threads of a complex fabric of JoC identities, lived experiences, and perspectives. Taken together, these parallel indicators work in conversation to tell a story of joy, persistence, isolation, and self-discovery.

In the context of the national conversation about race in the United States, this study seeks to enhance American Jews’ understanding of their own racial and ethnic diversity and provides an opportunity to reflect on how systems of inequality are perpetuated in our own community. By raising awareness about the lived experiences of JoC, the research findings are shared in the service of building a more just, equitable, and inclusive American Jewish community.

Survey Participant Characteristics

- Almost half of respondents (45%) selected two or more racial categories. A majority (66%) identify as “biracial, mixed, multi-racial” or some combination of those identities.
- Most survey respondents (64%) have at least one Jewish parent: 42% have one and 22% have two Jewish parents.
- More than one-third of respondents (40%) indicated they converted or were converted to Judaism.
- The majority of respondents (65%) were raised Jewish (49%) or raised Jewish and something else (16%).
- Respondents were asked if they identify with any of the following religious traditions. Most respondents (77%) said they identify as Jewish exclusively. Another 21% said they identify as Jewish and with one or more other religions.
- More than one-third of respondents (42%) identify as Ashkenazi.

Jewish Experiences and Expressions

Respondents have actively expressed their Jewishness in numerous ways. Working for justice and equality is the most common expression of Jewish identity. They described their connections with a wide variety of social justice, environmental, spiritual, and educational Jewish organizations and communities. More than half of respondents (60%) said they are currently (29%) or have previously (31%) been a regular volunteer at a Jewish organization or synagogue. Respondents' most common expressions of Jewish identity were focused on preserving collective memory and Jewish values across generations.

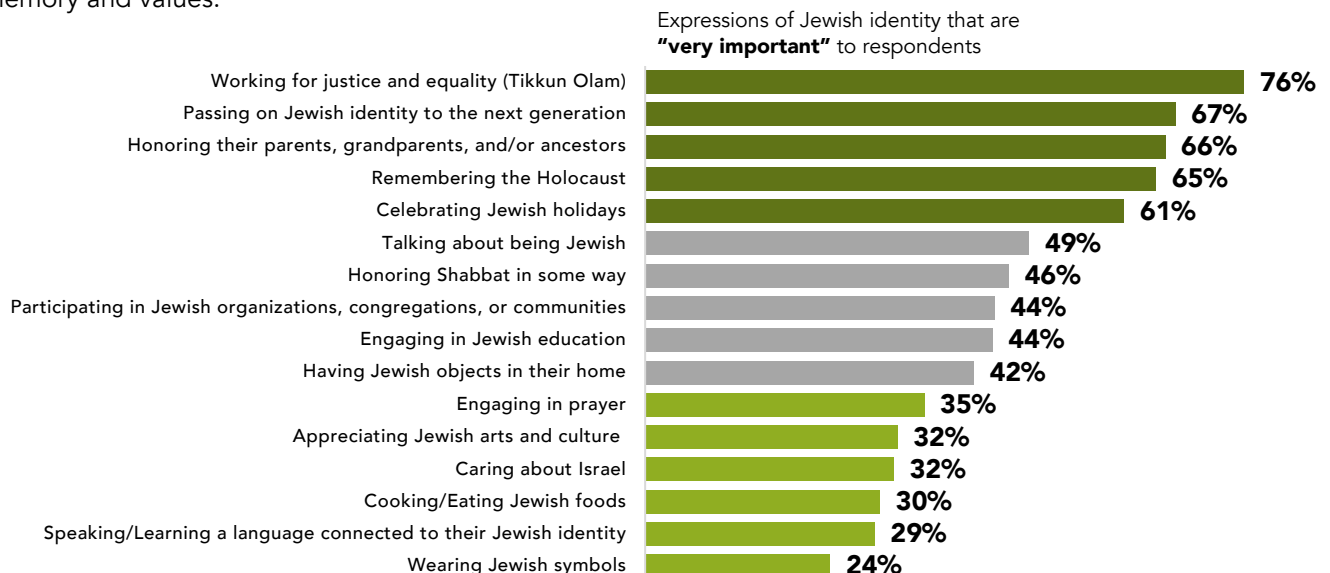
Respondents' thinking about what being Jewish means is informed by their various identities. They widely acknowledged a deep sense of themselves as Jews and spoke of their powerful connections to ritual, family, values, and tradition. Most respondents think of being Jewish as belonging to a culture or a people.

When asked about significant influences, respondents mentioned how both Jewish and non-Jewish friends, family, and mentors have contributed to the development of their Jewish identities.

Respondents' observance of Jewish rituals and traditions varies. Some are carrying on family traditions and other are inventing new ways to connect Jewishly. Some strictly follow Jewish law, some are more flexibly and creatively observant, and some engage in Jewish traditions with no connection to Jewish law. Their relationships with God are similarly varied.

Many respondents described how they actively embrace the complexities of their identities. More than half (61%) agreed they have been able to find ways to connect to their Jewish identity that also honor their racial/ethnic identities. They integrate customs and traditions from various aspects of their racial, ethnic, and religious heritages. In addition to their Jewish identities, respondents have deeply-rooted connections with Black, African, African American, Indigenous, Japanese, Chinese, Chicano, Latinx, Filipino, Christian, Catholic, and Muslim identities, among others. Some have been deeply connected to the identities inherited from their families throughout their lives and others are exploring formerly unexamined aspects of their identities for the first time. Still others have little connection with one or more parts of their background.

Respondents' expressions of Jewishness are most frequently connected to a sense of justice and connection with the past and the future. The five most popular expressions are focused on collective memory and values.



Social Perspectives

In both interviews and in responses to open-ended survey questions, people offered nuanced perspectives about how the intersection of race, ethnicity, and class shapes their sense of self as Jews. They shared social analyses developed through their formal and informal education, their socialization as BIPOC, and their lived experiences as Jews. For many respondents, this process was intertwined with a growing awareness of the political dimensions of identity.

Double Consciousness

Respondents described a heightened sense of awareness about how they are seen by others. They mentioned feeling scrutinized because of their race in some settings and because of their Jewishness in others. This can be usefully understood through W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness." The term describes the way that marginalized people, specifically Black/African American people, navigate the hazards of American racism by "looking at one's self through the eyes of others."

Many respondents shared how they consciously compartmentalize parts of themselves in order to reduce the stress of double consciousness. They recounted stories in which mentioning they are Jewish in non-Jewish BIPOC spaces evoked unwelcome provocations about Israel-Palestine, micro-aggressions, overt anti-Semitism, and pronouncements about the consequences of not accepting Jesus.

Respondents find it more difficult for their identities to co-exist in predominantly white Jewish spaces than in BIPOC spaces. They feel more comfortable expressing their full selves with Jewish family members than with non-Jewish family members.

Colorism

Many interview respondents also mentioned their experiences of colorism: how social hierarchy is assigned to people of different skin tones, with greater privilege and access to social capital afforded to those who have lighter skin compared to those who are darker. They described how the nuances of racial identity politics and light skin

privilege have played out within Jewish and non-Jewish communities of color. Encounters with colorism reinforce the dualities that characterize JoC lived experiences.

Terminology

Respondents had nuanced perspectives about their identities as JoC. Some respondents described how the label can be a barrier to belonging. Many others recognized it as a flawed, but nevertheless useful shorthand for identifying and describing people whose experiences have been largely overlooked and unacknowledged in discourse on American Jewish identity. Some expressed concerns about how the term JoC obscures the wide array of distinctions among people in the population it aims to describe.

Israel-Palestine

Study participants represented a range of perspectives about how their relationships with Israel factor into their identities as Jews of Color. Some said they felt more at home in Israel, given its relative distance from American racial politics. Others described how living in Israel helped them better understand their experience as JoC in the United States. Still others shared painful personal stories of racism they endured while visiting or living in Israel.

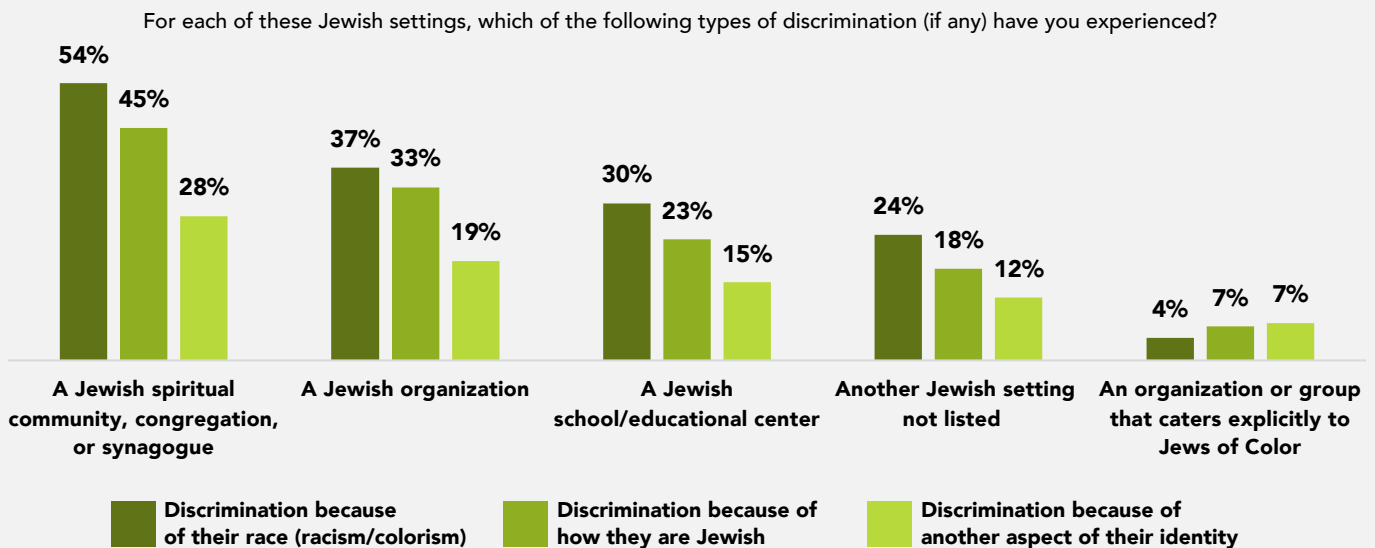
Respondents' perspectives on Israel-Palestine have also resulted in their feeling marginalized by both their non-Jewish BIPOC communities and their Jewish communities. For many JoC, regardless of their political perspectives or the tenor of their relationships with Israel, the racialized politics of Israel-Palestine force them to make choices about when or how to speak out.

Racism and Discrimination

In data gathered from both the survey and interviews, JoC reported being personally subjected or witnesses to racist and discriminatory treatment in Jewish organizations, from synagogues and schools to professional settings. Their experiences took the form of both microaggressions and overt challenges to the validity of their Jewish identities. In Jewish communal settings, JoC have been ignored and also showered with unwanted attention.

Respondents described the variety of assumptions made about them. They have been repeatedly mistaken for security guards or nannies and presumed to be the non-Jewish partner or guest of a white Jewish person. In misguided efforts to make their community more accessible and welcoming, JoC have been offered unsolicited explanations about Jewish rituals and practices. Many have been asked intrusive questions about how they became Jewish.

A vast majority of survey respondents (80%) agreed they have experienced discrimination in Jewish settings. More than half reported experiencing discrimination in a Jewish spiritual community, congregation, or synagogue. Just 20% have not experienced discrimination in Jewish settings.



Overall, respondents do not feel that American Jewish leaders are adequately addressing racism and white supremacy in the American Jewish community. Almost two thirds (65%) of survey respondents indicated that American Jewish leaders were either “poorly” (41%) or “very poorly” (24%) addressing racism in the American Jewish community. A comparable 66% provided a similar assessment of efforts to address the need for greater racial/ethnic diversity in Jewish organizational leadership. Respondents recognized real change will require greater awareness of the intersection of race and socioeconomic status in the wider Jewish community.

Interview participants mentioned how some predominantly white Jewish organizations and communities have begun awakening to aspects of institutional racism and prejudice, but more significant efforts are required to effect lasting change. Many were skeptical of what they perceived as Jewish leaders’ focus on superficial change efforts. Sometimes, highlighting problems of racism in Jewish communities is even seen as an act of betrayal. All of these experiences threaten the ability and willingness of Jews of Color to engage fully in Jewish communal life.

Belonging

Experiences of racism and discrimination have not precluded respondents' sense of belonging in predominantly white Jewish communities. Many interview respondents mentioned that they are actively involved in Jewish communities where they are in the minority or where they are the only BIPOC. More than half of respondents (54%) indicated there is not a lot of racial/ethnic diversity in their Jewish communities.

The lack of diversity in their Jewish communities was not a barrier for some JoC. Fifty-one percent agreed

they have felt a sense of belonging among white Jews and 41% agree they have been able to find opportunities to express all sides of themselves in predominantly white Jewish spaces. Even as they described positive experiences of belonging in predominantly white Jewish communities, respondents also expressed their awareness of the pervasive dynamics of racialization.

51%
agree:

They have felt a sense of belonging among white Jews.

11% strongly agree and 40% agree

Seeking Community

Experiences of intersectionality and marginalization have become a galvanizing force for some respondents. In many cases, such experiences have inspired respondents to lean further into their own anti-racist and anti-bias values. They are actively contributing to the work of transforming predominantly white Jewish communities into places where they and others from typically-marginalized populations can feel a sense of belonging. Some respondents mentioned that they have proactively sought out predominantly white Jewish communities that have shown an established commitment to racial equity and social justice.

Many articulated their vision for a vibrant American Jewish community that authentically celebrates the full diversity of ways to be Jewish. They are seeking

and creating opportunities to participate that do not require them to compartmentalize.

Respondents expressed a strong desire for opportunities to come together with other JoC along with the importance of achieving greater equity in predominantly white Jewish organizations. Despite the connective potency of creating and sustaining space with other JoC, this opportunity remains largely out of reach for many.

46% of respondents said talking about the experience of being a JoC with other JoC is very important to them.

36% of respondents said they have no close friends who are JoC.

JoC Spaces

While acknowledging the challenges of fostering a sense of belonging among members of this multifaceted population, respondents emphasized the importance of opportunities that validate, support, and connect Jews of Color.

Participation in events and communities exclusively for and by JoC has been transformative for many. Respondents have developed influential relationships with peers and mentors as participants in JoC-centered fellowships, conferences, and educational

programs. Further, their involvement in gatherings for JoC has prompted respondents to reflect on and enrich their identities. Some respondents highlighted the value of creating smaller affinity spaces where they can commune with others who share more specific identity markers.

Gatherings of JoC provide a sense of belonging and solidarity that is unavailable in other areas of Jewish communal life. Many described these experiences and relationships as profoundly healing.

Concluding Thoughts

Beyond the Count illustrates many of the beautiful and challenging ways that race and Jewish identity intersect for the Jews of Color whose voices are gathered in this research. With equal passion, they described their love of Jewish ritual, family, values, and tradition, along with the experience of being asked to defend and explain their Jewishness. Respondents spoke powerfully about their desire for Jewish communities that could honor their whole selves and shared the pain of encounters with racism and prejudice in Jewish contexts. They revealed common strategies for managing friction, avoiding conflict, and maintaining the integrity of their selfhood both in and outside of Jewish communities.

The findings reported from both interviews and survey data focus on broad themes. These create a dynamic narrative, unearthing many questions that were beyond the scope of this preliminary research. There is still much to learn about the nuances, parallels, and distinctions that exist among and between Jews of Color. Future research could focus on the specific experiences of various sub-populations of JoC, such as biracial JoC, those who are unaffiliated, have converted, have a disability, are Orthodox, and/or are queer and trans, among many other possibilities. A stratified sampling method could be employed to include a greater number of respondents who are not women (men and nonbinary people). In addition, to better understand the generalizability of the findings presented in *Beyond the Count*, follow-up analyses of the data could explore differences in perspectives and experiences between and among JoC.

Responses could be compared across variables such as socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, gender, Jewish parentage, religiosity, and geographic location.

While accentuating numerous areas of inquiry still in need of attention, *Beyond the Count* presents a rich and complex portrait of a vital and vibrant segment of American Jewry that has been previously overlooked and excluded. In doing so, this research offers a corrective to the problematic social norms that have long minimized the experiences of JoC and marginalized their very existence. By amplifying the voices of JoC and acknowledging their variety, *Beyond the Count* can be used to move the Jewish communal discourse toward a more accurate understanding and portrayal of American Jewish life in all of its complexity.

Looking beyond the count means recognizing the inherent and perennial diversity, intersectionality, and multiplicity of Jewish people. This acknowledgement presents an opportunity for American Jews to reckon with traumas faced by JoC and pursue a much needed process of healing and repair. *Beyond the Count* can serve as a catalyst for pushing American Jews to confront their individual and collective role in American racial structures and empower Jewish leaders to create just, enriching, accessible, and welcoming experiences for all. Done with care, this will contribute to a more equitable alignment of individual and communal values, needs, and actions.

Recommendations

Creating an American Jewish community that honors all American Jews requires introspection and change at every level—individual, organizational, and structural. Drawn from interview and survey data, the following recommendations highlight four strategies for intervention:

- 1. Support organizations and initiatives led by and serving Jews of Color.** The research strongly illustrates the value and power of JoC-centered communities. Participating in retreats, study groups, holiday celebrations, social justice circles, and leadership training cohorts has had a profound impact on JoC, who found in them support, validation, and ease that had eluded them elsewhere. Increased capacity building, leadership development, and funding for current initiatives and efforts is needed, along with support for the expansion and development of additional opportunities for JoC to enrich their Jewish lives and communities.
- 2. Shift organizational leadership to more accurately reflect the diversity of American Jews.** Professional and lay leadership in most American Jewish organizations remains largely, and in many cases exclusively, white. Organizations need to evaluate and change their hiring and recruitment processes to increase racial equity so they can better serve all American Jews. The effort to diversify leadership must come with appropriate support and mentorship for Jewish leaders of color. Elevating JoC to positions of communal leadership is not only a question of representation, but of making room for a broader array of influence and adapting organizational aims and cultures around a more expansive understanding of American Jewry.
- 3. Prioritize creating spaces and places for discourse and dialog with and among JoC.** Productively reckoning with the impact of racism in American Jewish life requires organization- and community-wide reflection and action. This communal priority must be supported at all levels: funders need to invest in racial justice within and beyond the Jewish community; leaders need to encourage difficult conversations and be prepared to adapt to emerging narratives of American Jewry; and individuals need to be equipped to be effective allies. These conversations must be guided by the experiences and needs that JoC themselves articulate.
- 4. Promote further research by and about JoC.** The findings from this report contribute to a nascent body of research that requires further attention. Additional research conducted by and about JoC is needed to advance our understanding of a more holistic and diverse American Jewish community. Moving forward, including questions about racial and ethnic identities and experiences must become standard in research and evaluations of all kinds. The ability of Jewish communal organizations to serve the full range of American Jews requires the intentional incorporation of a broader range of voices in the production and content of future research.