

Atlantic57

UNLOCKING THE FUTURE OF JEWISH ENGAGEMENT

MARCH 2020

03a.

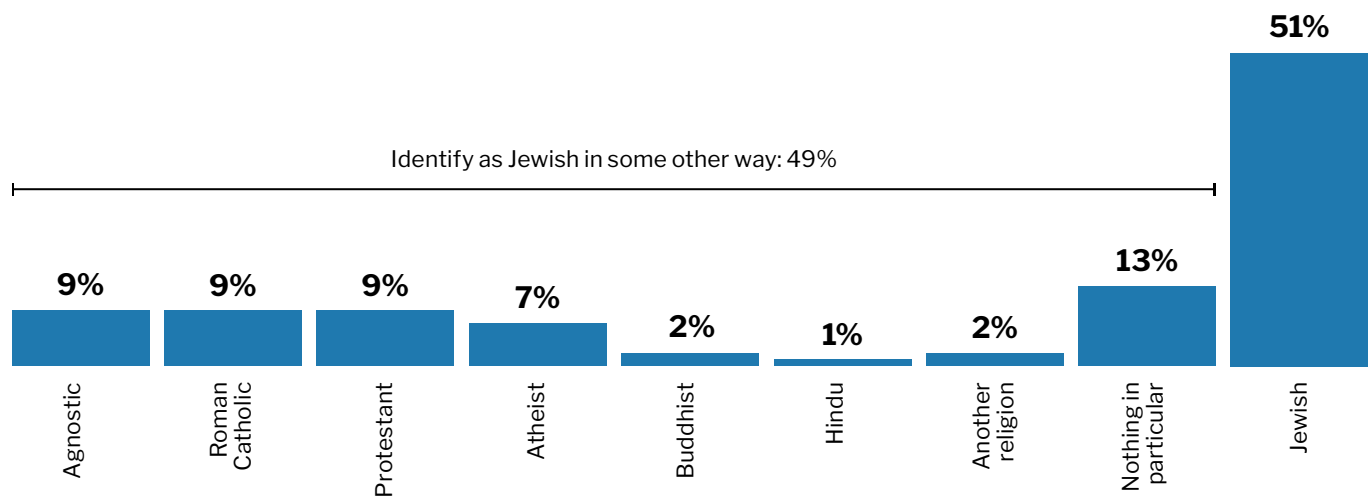
Profile of Today's Jewish Young Adults

JEWISH YOUNG ADULTS in this study are roughly split between 22-29 years old and 30-40 years old, and they skew female. The vast majority are highly educated and born in the U.S. Currently, 41 percent live in the Northeast, 17 percent live in the Midwest, 19 percent live in the South, and 23 percent live in the West. One in 7 identifies as a race other than white or as more than one race. Six percent are Russian-speaking Jews, and about 1 in 7 identifies as LGBT.

The group in this study mirrors a broader trend: More and more Americans have shied away from organized religion in

recent decades, opting instead for finding new forms of community and meaning.¹⁰ In general, *spirituality* means more to survey respondents than religion does: 27 percent say that spirituality is very important to them, compared to 19 percent who say the same about religion. Four in 10 report finding both religion and spirituality important; the same ratio reports finding both of them *unimportant*. As one focus group participant put it: "I feel like I get that much more from yoga than I do from my Jewish religion right now."

What, if any, is your present religion?



¹⁰ "Research Landscape Study," Pew Research Center, 2020.

How important is spirituality in your life?



How important is religion in your life?



Reflecting this trend, survey respondents are about evenly split between those who identify as Jewish by religion and those who identify as Jewish in another way. The term “another way” was left purposefully vague to include other facets of Jewish identity including culture, ethnicity, and heritage. Just over a third are married or living with a partner, and of those, about half are in a relationship with someone who does not identify as Jewish. Those who have a Jewish partner are more likely to identify as Jewish by religion, while those with a non-Jewish partner are more likely to identify as Jewish in another way.

Most Jewish young adults who participated in the focus groups say they find meaning through the relationships they have with family and friends. Yet, some tend to feel an absence of community and lament the geographic distance from their loved ones. “I think that as adults, you value the time

you have together with friends and family more than you do as a child,” one online focus group participant said. Many also mention competing responsibilities, such as work, as standing in the way of social engagement, as well as no longer being part of a school environment.

“When you meet somebody that finds out you’re Jewish and ‘Oh, so you know so and so.’ ‘That’s this guy’s cousin.’”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“My most vivid memories growing up are family gatherings for the holidays and us all gathering around the table laughing and enjoying a delicious meal.”

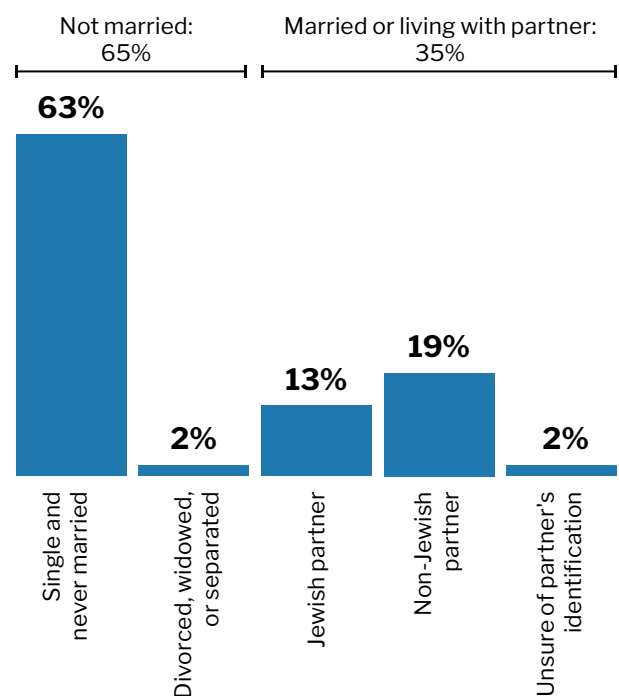
FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

In focus groups, participants indicate they value informal gatherings—ones that are often based on shared interests—but tend not to associate Jewish engagement with such casual get-togethers. Rather, when asked about Jewish activities, many bring up formal and ritually-oriented activities such as attending a synagogue service. What they are looking for, as one focus group participant said, is “just getting together to do something... Food, bowling, just going [to friends] to hang out and watch some TV together.” Some enjoy Jewish-themed events in which Jews and non-Jews alike gather over homemade food.

When asked what a Jewish community means to them, many of the young adults conjure terms, such as “synagogue,” “temple,” or “Torah,” from which they sometimes feel an emotional detachment. For many, connectedness to Jewish life does not arise from formal institutions, such as synagogues. Their connectedness is tied to cultural customs and with

relationships they have with others, most often family members. Others cite looser connections to a Jewish community—a sense that there is such a thing as “Jewish geography” whereby many Jews are bound together through invisible links. As one focus group participant said: “When you meet somebody that finds out you’re Jewish and ‘Oh, so you know so and so.’ ‘That’s this guy’s cousin.’” Relatedly, 39 percent of survey respondents say that experiencing a connection when meeting fellow Jews makes them feel Jewish.

Which of the following best describes your marital status?



03b.

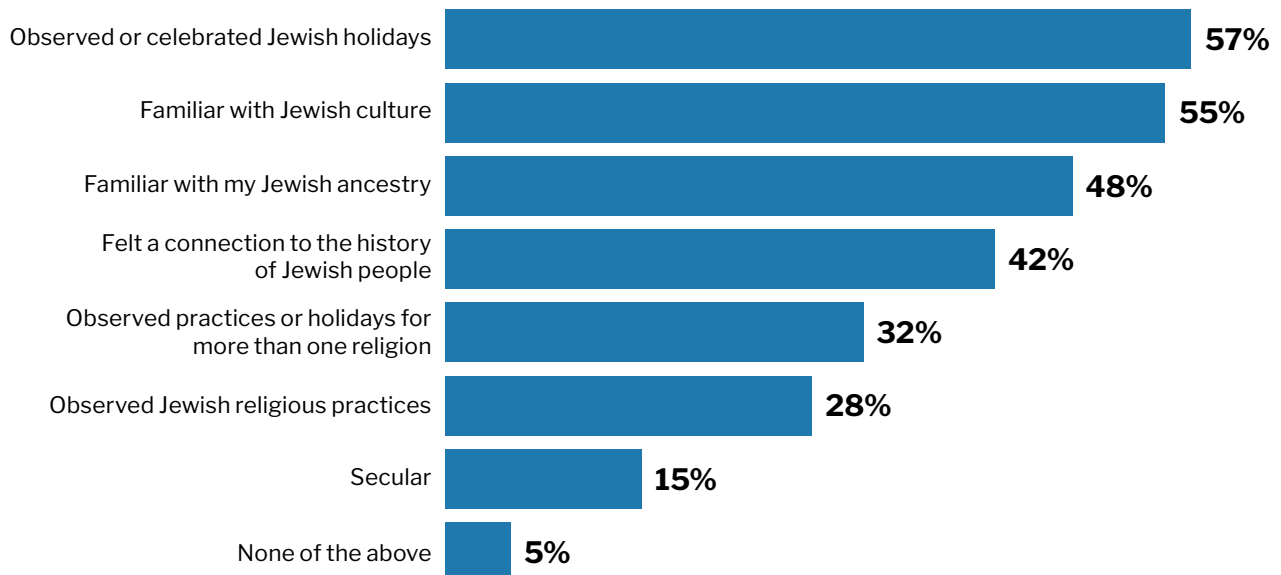
Past Jewish Experiences

I **N THIS SURVEY**, Jewish young adults are roughly evenly split between being raised by one person who is Jewish and by two Jewish people. Most look back favorably on their past Jewish experiences, and their memories are often strongly tied to interactive, relationship-oriented, and experiential Jewish activities: holidays, food, family gathering, and reuniting. As one online focus group participant described, “My most vivid memories growing up are family gatherings for the holidays and us all gathering around the table laughing and enjoying a delicious meal.”

Experiences in their youth also helped many respondents understand how they perceive what it means to be Jewish, with 30 percent saying these experiences helped a lot. Relatedly, survey respondents report relatively high rates of holiday observance (57 percent) and familiarity with Jewish culture (55 percent) when growing up. Many Jewish young adults also participated in more traditional activities such as attending services on Shabbat and holidays (48 percent) or having a bar or bat mitzvah (47 percent). As one online focus group participant summed up, “bar and bat mitzvahs were a huge part of growing up Jewish.”

Which of the following describes the household you were raised in?

Select all that apply

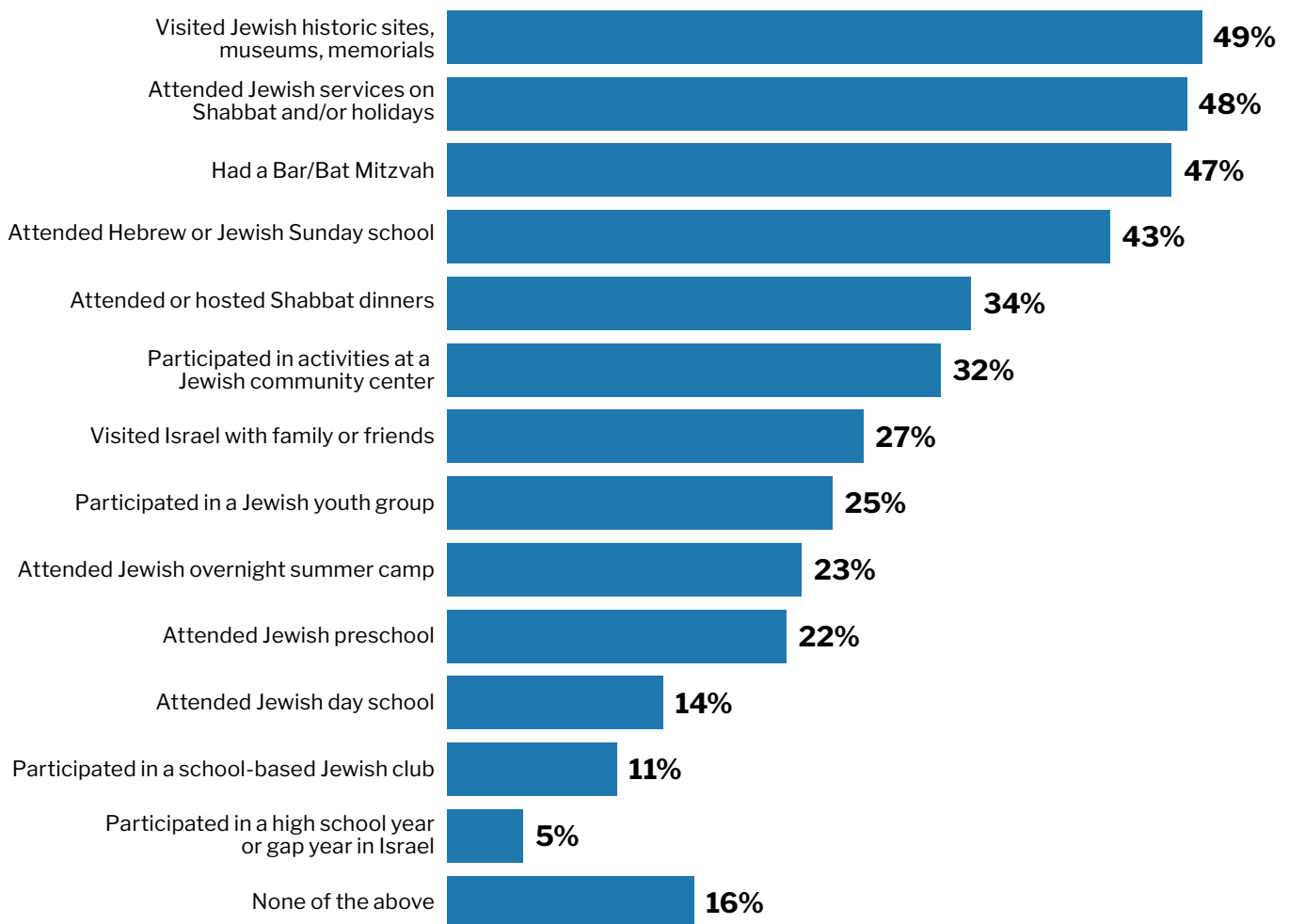


7/10

JEWISH YOUNG ADULTS PARTICIPATED IN AT LEAST TWO QUERIED JEWISH YOUTH ACTIVITIES WHEN GROWING UP

Which of the following did you do growing up?

Select all that apply



n = 1,012 (excludes those who converted or learned they were Jewish as an adult)

03c.

Being Jewish

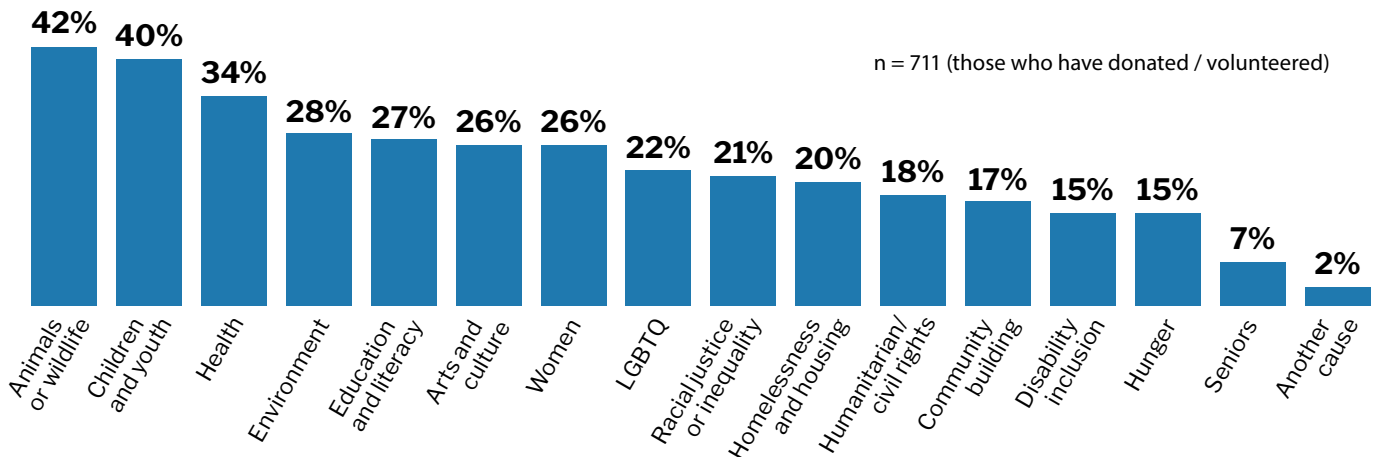
ASKED TO DESCRIBE what being Jewish means to them, focus group participants often made a distinction between being culturally and religiously Jewish. Those growing up in the Former Soviet Union particularly note feeling culturally rather than religiously Jewish. Some also find Judaism’s lack of religious expectations to be compelling: “It’s one of the few religions that you can just ‘be.’ You can be Jewish and not be religious,” an online focus group participant said. For others, however, being Jewish is a matter of religiosity. “I like being part of a religious community. I like attending services and having Shabbat

meals every week ... I just like the sense of community about it, and I also like the religious observance,” another focus group participant said.

“It’s one of the few religions that you can just ‘be.’ You can be Jewish and not be religious.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

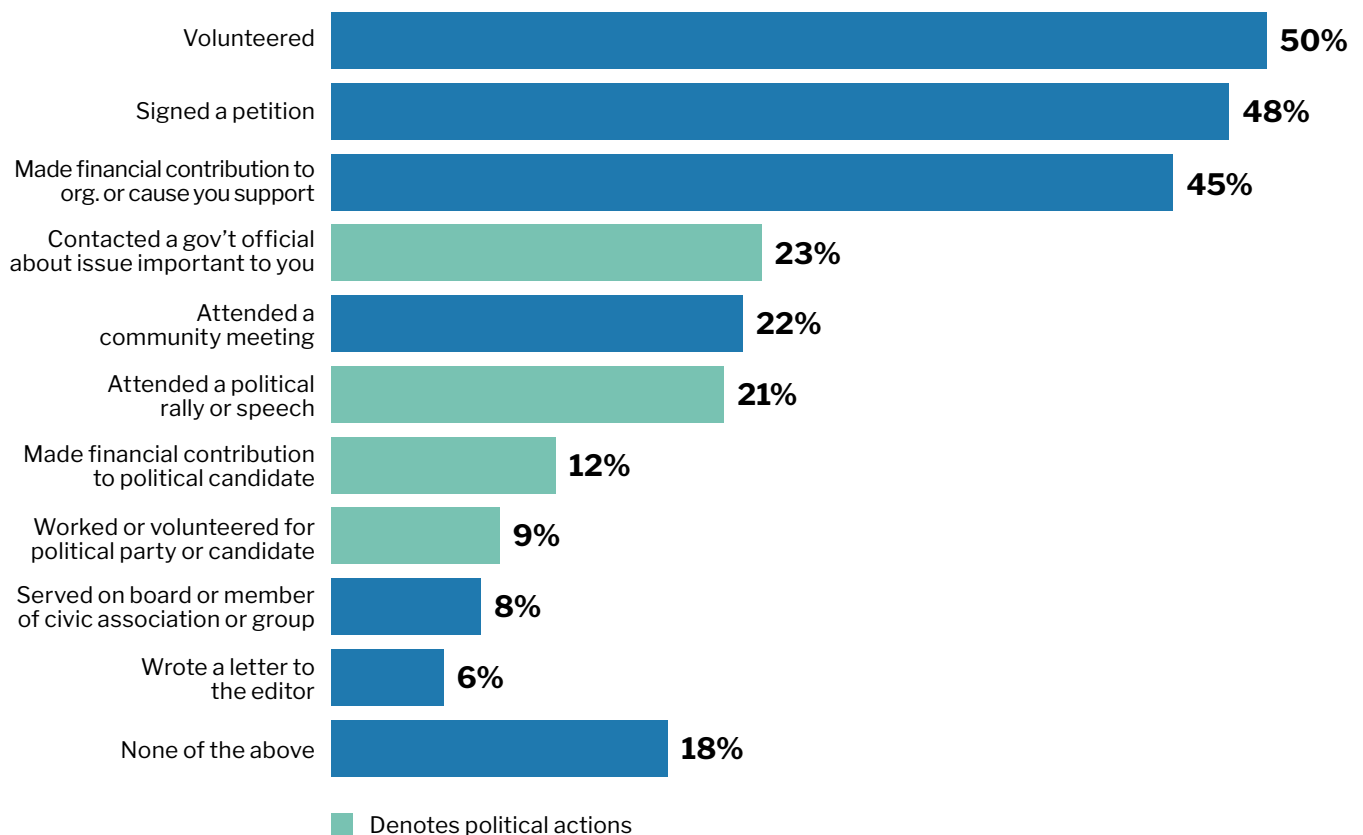
Which of the following types of causes have you supported through financial contributions / volunteering in the past year?



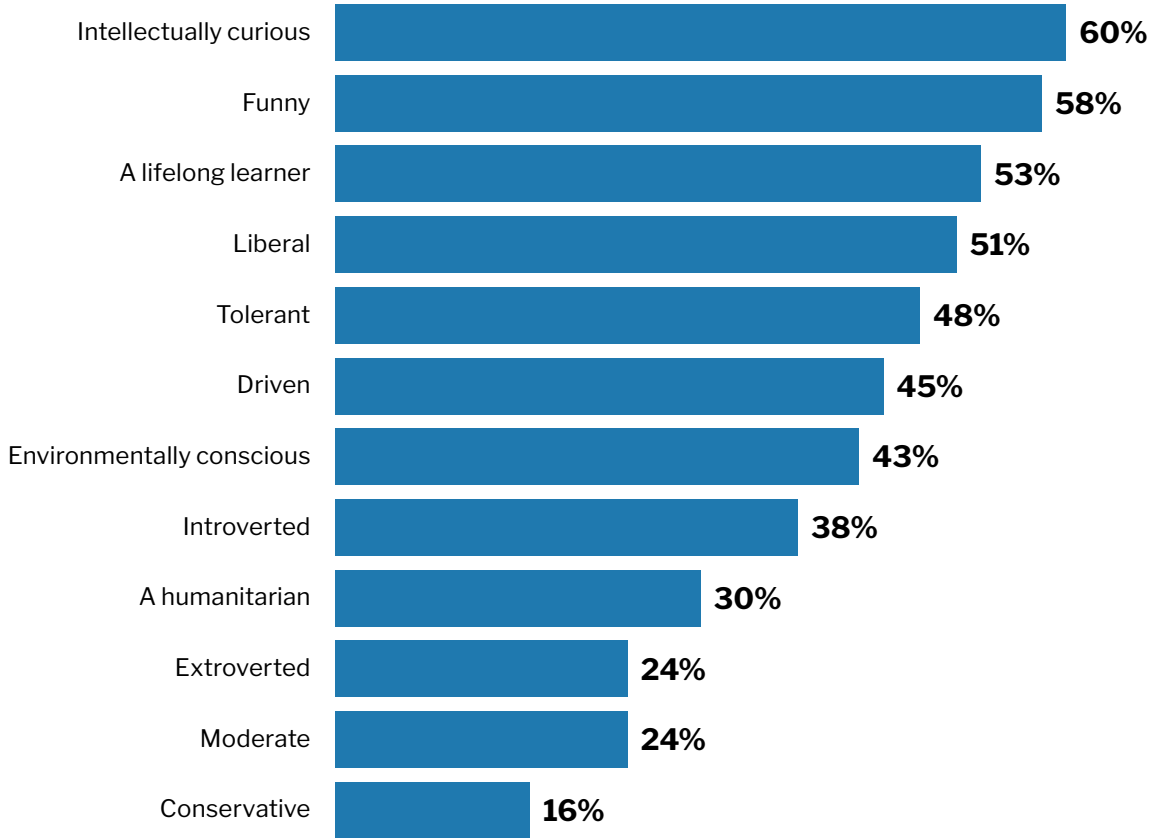
Jewish young adults in this study are, on average, highly driven with varied interests and curiosity. They seek meaning in their lives, and many of them find it through helping others. For some, this might mean working in fields where they can make a difference. For others, this entails volunteering or various means of charity: “Whether it’s giving them a place to sleep at night, a job, or a ride to work or school—when I help someone and feel needed, I know I’m doing the right thing,” another online focus group participant said.

In line with their desire to help others, survey respondents are highly engaged in their communities. Nearly nine in 10 report some type of civic engagement in the past year, and those who say that being Jewish influences their worldview engage at even higher rates. When asked to select how they engage, a majority of survey respondents note volunteering, signing a petition, or making a financial contribution to an organization or a cause. Those who feel connected to a Jewish community volunteer at higher rates than those who feel disconnected.

Thinking about the past year, which of the following have you done?



Which of the following words or phrases would you use to describe yourself?



Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

My worldview is influenced by being Jewish.



Family, family history, culture, or a shared history are some of the major reasons Jewish young adults feel Jewish. “Knowing what my relatives had to go through and knowing that history really puts things in perspective for me and makes me want to continue their story,” one focus group participant said. Another described seeing the number tattooed on their grandmother’s arm as a visceral reminder of their heritage. Some similarly drew connections between the history of the Holocaust and their own sense of perseverance and overcoming adversity. “I feel like they instilled something into our parents that still goes into us...That sense of adversity for sure is tied to religion and being better as a result of it,” one focus group participant said. Another summed up the legacy of Jewish history: “You never quit; you just keep fighting.”

Many also connect being Jewish to the values associated with it and sense that being Jewish influences their worldview. As one online focus group participant put it: “I see it as a value system, really about doing good for yourself and others, not so much about praying for this and that.” Relatedly, Jewish young adults often describe themselves as “intellectually curious,” a “lifelong learner,” and “funny.” These definitions align with their general view of Jewish culture, which they say places an emphasis on such values as education, curiosity, and humor.

“I see it as a value system,
really about doing good for
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and that.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

03d.

Current Jewish Connections and Engagement

ON THE whole, survey respondents are roughly evenly split between feeling connected and disconnected from a Jewish community. Interestingly, on the question of Jewish connectedness, a switch seems to happen between past and present, childhood and adulthood. While many report feeling nostalgic for certain aspects of their Jewish upbringing, they also report being currently removed from it. One focus group participant explained: “I think growing up it was very important—it essentially informed everything I did and how I saw myself. Now as an adult I feel like it is one hat that I wear, but it doesn’t necessarily inform all aspects of my life.”

There is no single reason respondents feel connected or disconnected from their Jewish communities—responses are diverse and multifaceted on both sides. Illustrating this point, half of survey respondents who feel connected to a Jewish community cite at least three reasons for feeling that way, while just under two-thirds of those who feel disconnected from a Jewish community cite at least two reasons or barriers.

Among those who report feeling connected, factors leading to the highest levels of current connectedness include

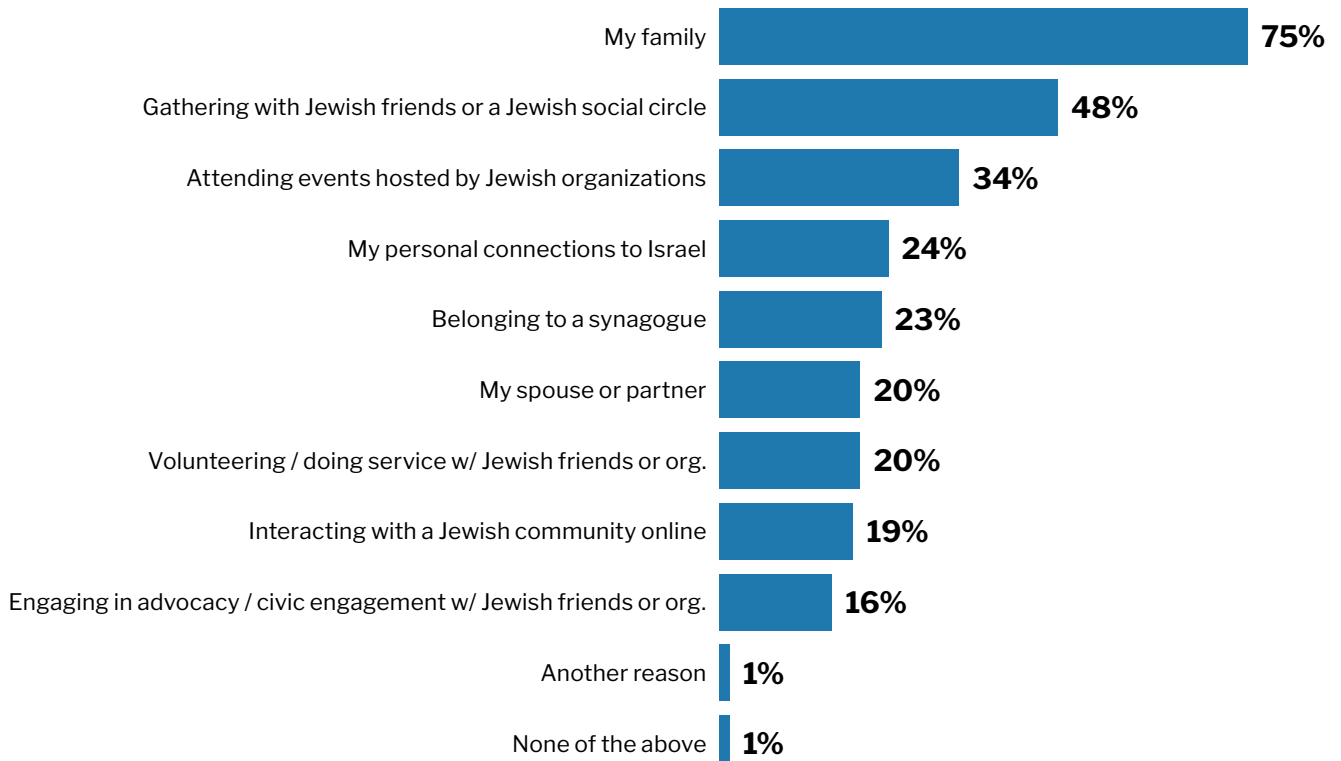
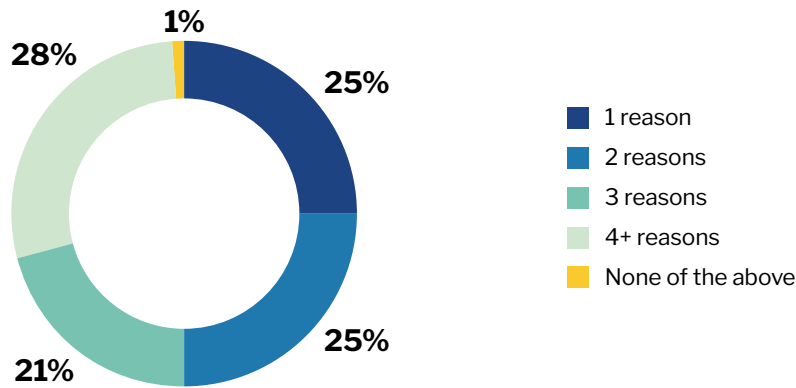
“my family” (75 percent) and “gathering with Jewish friends or a Jewish social circle” (48 percent). A third of survey respondents indicate that attending events hosted by Jewish organizations is a reason they feel connected. “I’m actually going to Shabbat services for the first time in my life on Friday, and they’re at a farm in Berkeley. ... It doesn’t even sound like it’s Jewish, it just sounds like it’s going to be like a fun night that’s themed by Judaism,” one online focus group participant said.

“I think growing up it was very important—it essentially informed everything I did and how I saw myself. Now as an adult I feel like it is one hat that I wear, but it doesn’t necessarily inform all aspects of my life.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Which of the following explains why you feel connected to some type of Jewish community right now?

Select all that apply



n = 492 (those who feel connected to a Jewish community)

For those who feel disconnected, the most commonly cited barriers to feeling connected among survey respondents include that being part of a Jewish community is not relevant to their life right now as well as competing demands on time and geographic distance from a Jewish community. “Work, school, life,” one online focus group participant summed up their overriding priorities. Another online focus group participant described the role of “organized religion and their huge financial piece” as being alienating factors. In some locations, especially, Jewish young adults seem to sense an atmosphere of exclusivity to the Jewish community that drives many of them away. “It’s a very cliquey community,” one focus group participant said. “You can’t get in. You can’t penetrate that Jewish clique.”

Some who report feeling disconnected from a Jewish community voice a degree of curiosity about having more Jewish experiences and enjoying activities that tie back to being Jewish: “I can’t verbalize it, but it is important in a way that I can’t describe—just having that availability,” one focus group participant said. Another said that being more connected to a Jewish community “would be nice, but I don’t sweat it.” Similarly, some young adults have come to terms with their lack of engagement: “I’m not very connected. I’m also okay with that,” another said. “I don’t go to synagogue, but maintain some traditions and enjoy cooking authentic cultural dishes every once in a while. I’m content with the status quo.”

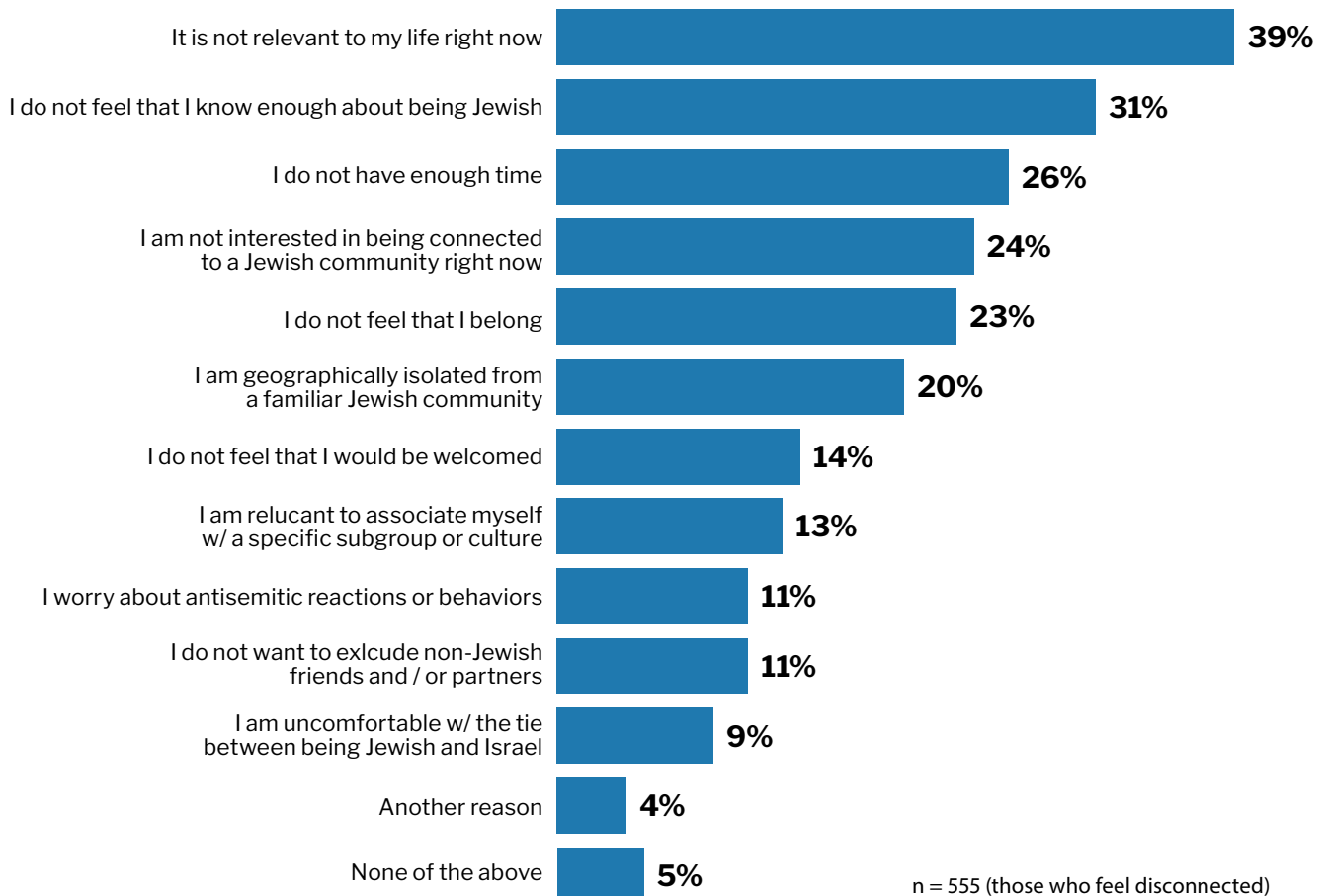
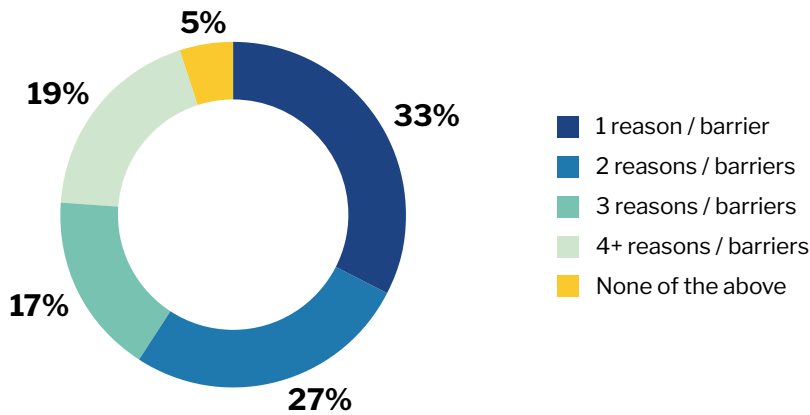
On average, survey respondents observe three to four Jewish holidays each year, excluding Shabbat. Among those who report observing or celebrating Jewish holidays, three in four attended a Passover seder in the past year, and half fasted on Yom Kippur. Russian-speaking Jews are less religious and denominationally-affiliated than other cohorts, yet they observe more holidays. Many Jewish young adults report opting for other forms of engagement with their community. Almost half observe Shabbat on special occasions, with about one in five attending a Shabbat meal or lighting candles at least monthly. People who are under 30 and those married or living with a Jewish partner are more likely to observe Shabbat in some manner than their counterparts.

“I’m actually going to Shabbat services for the first time in my life on Friday, and they’re at a farm in Berkeley. . . . It doesn’t even sound like it’s Jewish, it just sounds like it’s going to be like a fun night that’s like themed by Judaism.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Which of the following explains why you feel disconnected from some type of Jewish community right now?

Select all that apply



n = 555 (those who feel disconnected)

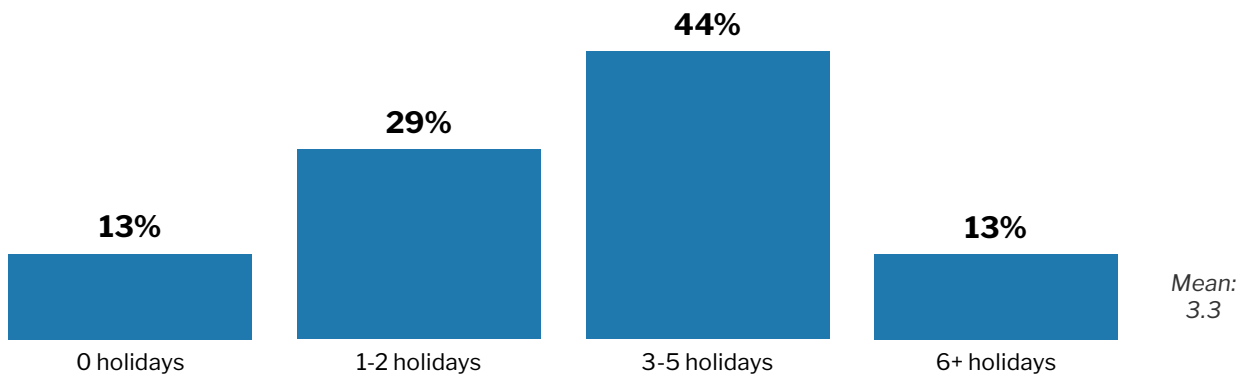
Half of survey respondents attend services at a synagogue or elsewhere, though for the most part they do so only on holidays or special occasions. Those married or living with a Jewish partner are more likely to attend. In addition, males attend services at a synagogue or elsewhere at least monthly at a higher rate than their female counterparts.

In contrast, some feel that synagogues or other institutions are not relevant or inviting. For instance, those who identify as LGBT report never attending services at a higher rate than those who do not identify as LGBT. Others feel that institutions

do not meet their age group’s needs. One focus group participant noted that, “most congregations seem more family-oriented” and that, “it would be cool to be around people my own age.” Some also have specific ideas for connecting outside of these religious institutions. “There’s so many bakeries around here that are doing bread-baking classes,” a young adult said. “Why not just theme it around a Jewish holiday, and just say, ‘Come together for your traditional Jewish rye bread-baking class?’”

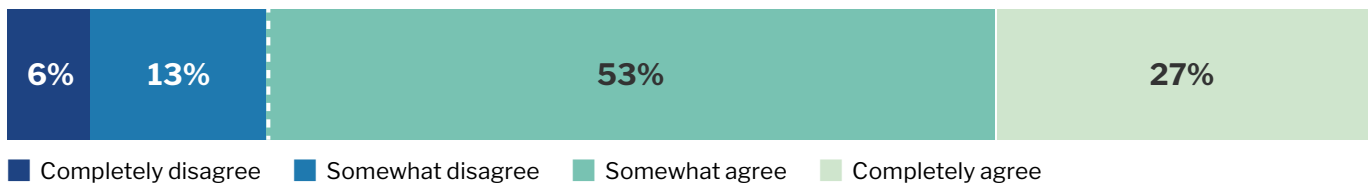
Some Jewish young adults with racially diverse backgrounds also note feeling that

On average, how many Jewish holidays do you observe or celebrate each year excluding Shabbat?



Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

I enjoy participating in activities that tie back to my being Jewish.



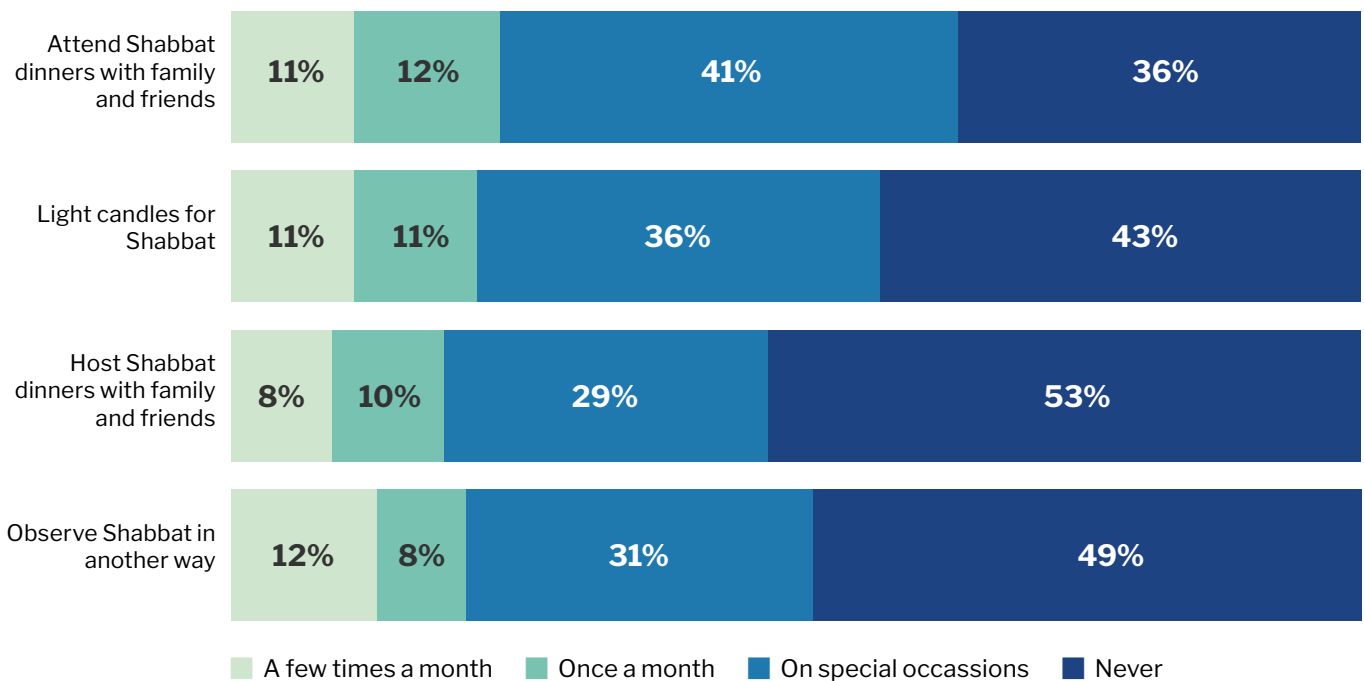
they do not belong to a Jewish community because they do not “look Jewish.” “I feel exclusion at times because of my race,” an online focus group participant who identifies as African-American said. “I feel at times I am seen as an outsider who, I guess, ‘can’t be seen’ as Jewish.” Another online focus group participant of mixed race, said: “I don’t feel I really fit into the ‘community’ since I don’t look Jewish, so it’s tough for me to identify with any type of ‘Jewish community’ besides my family.”

Indeed, for many Jewish young adults, feeling connected to a community is relational and interactive, often taking

“I don’t go to synagogue, but maintain some traditions and enjoy cooking authentic cultural dishes every once in a while. I’m content with the status quo.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

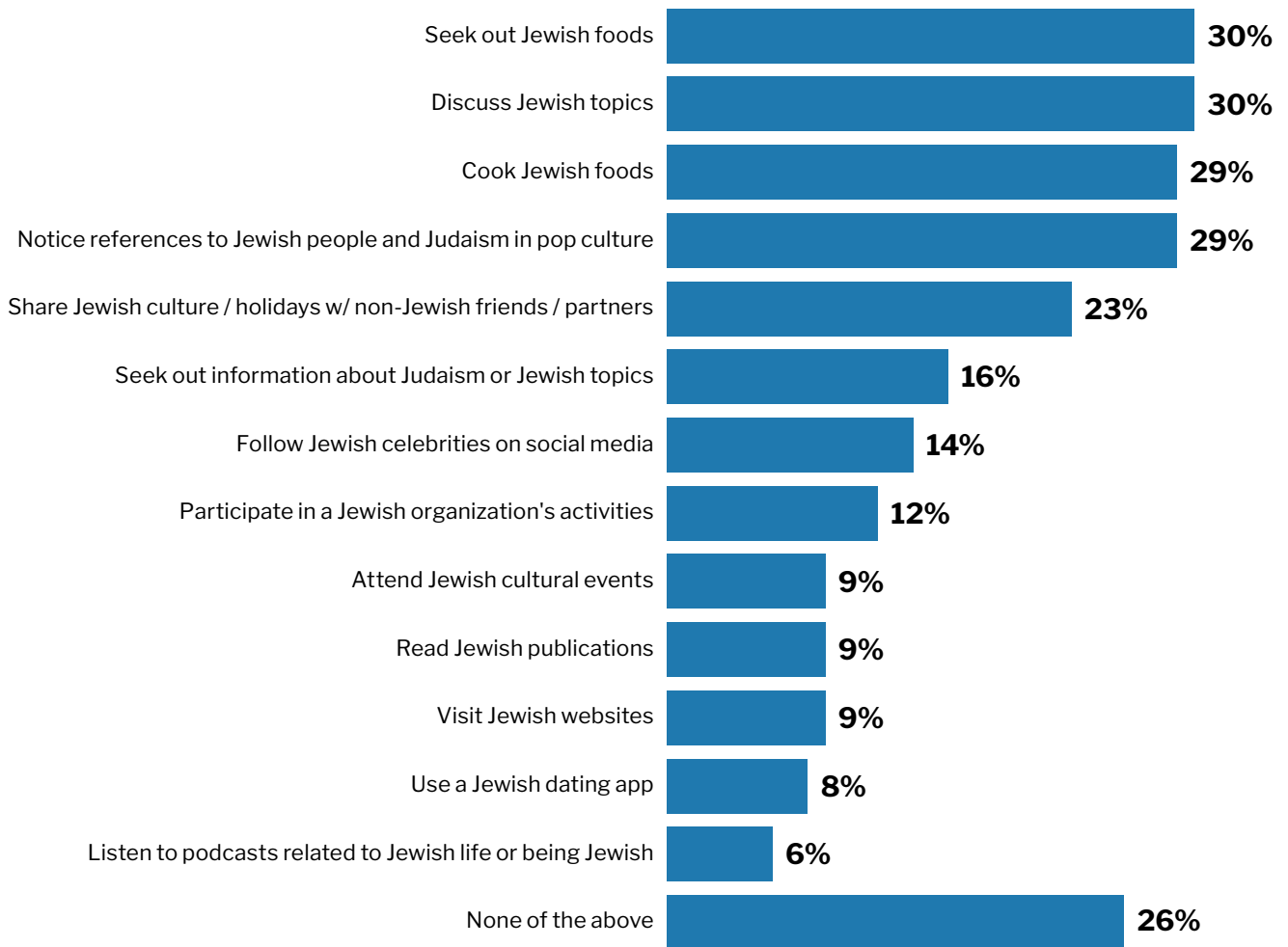
How frequently do you do each of the following?



the form of cooking Jewish staples or striking up conversation with others—or both. “I think the conversations around a meal are some of the best ways to bond people and open them up to one another,” one online focus group participant said. Fifty-five percent of Jewish young adults participating in the survey say eating Jewish foods makes them feel Jewish.

Some note that gathering over food is less intimidating than observing the religious customs. “‘Do you want to come over for Shabbat dinner?’ seems way more serious or structured than ‘Do you want to grab dinner?’” a young adult said. “Something about labeling it, like, ‘Let’s do Shabbat.’ It just sounds kind of old-fashioned.”

Which of the following do you do at least two to three times a month?



03e.

The Role of Knowledge and Guilt

THERE IS A SENSE of unease around “not knowing enough” about being Jewish among some Jewish young adults. This sentiment is particularly prominent among women, those raised by at least one person who does not identify as Jewish, and those who are racially diverse. “I thought about [going to a Jewish event] before but I’ve never done it because I’ve always felt like I would probably be the least religious person in the room and I wouldn’t know anything,” one young adult said. “Going to some events, and just not really knowing what’s going on—it’s kind of a little intimidating,” another young adult likewise reported. Another put it bluntly: “You just feel like a dolt sometimes because you don’t know half of what they’re saying.”

This unease about their professed lack of knowledge often translates to a sense of guilt. One in five Jewish young adults completely agrees that they sometimes feel guilty that they are not more knowledgeable about what it means to be Jewish. Those who say that being Jewish impacts their worldview are *more* likely to feel guilty, suggesting that the more young adults feel influenced by being Jewish the more they express misgivings about not knowing *enough*.

When it comes to engagement with a Jewish community, just under half agree (completely or somewhat) that they feel guilty about not spending more time expressing Jewishness. Those who completely agree with this sentiment are more likely to feel very connected to a Jewish community, while those who completely disagree are more likely to feel very disconnected, likely reflecting the relative importance these cohorts place on being Jewish. “I’m always like, ‘I would love to’ [be more engaged], but I don’t really have time, and I feel bad about that,” one

“I thought about [going to a Jewish event] before but I’ve never done it because I’ve always felt like I would probably be the least religious person in the room and I wouldn’t know anything.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

focus group participant said. Expounding on this sense of guilt, the participant added: “You were born into this religion that not many people are, that not many people convert to. It’s like, ‘Shouldn’t I be more proactive?’”

Racially diverse Jews report feeling more nostalgia for how being Jewish brought people together when they were younger and guilt over their lack of knowledge and absence of a Jewish community. Yet, on average, they also say they feel more connected than their white Jewish peers: 22 percent of racially diverse Jews feel very connected to a Jewish community, compared to 10 percent among white Jews.

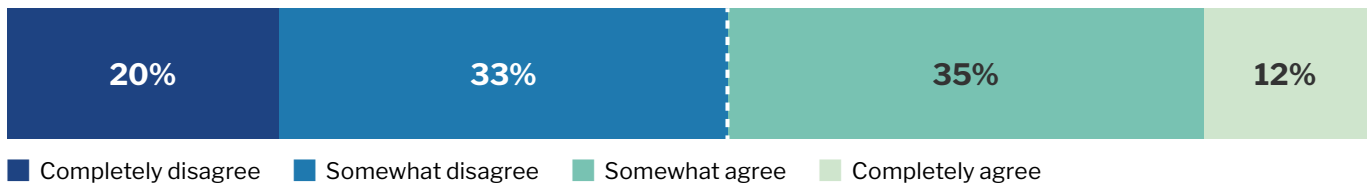
Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

I sometimes feel guilty that I am not more knowledgeable about what it means to be Jewish.



Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

I sometimes feel guilty that I do not spend more time expressing my Jewishness.



03f.

Connections to and Perspectives on Israel

UNDERSTANDING Jewish young adults' connections to and perspectives on Israel was not the main purpose of this study. More research is needed to understand the relationship Jewish young adults have to Israel beyond what we have learned, which is that Israel for them is a complex subject. As one focus group participant put it: "I honestly have very mixed emotions when it comes to Israel, both very good and not always great, so not like a clean emotion." Another described: "It's very complicated—like a relationship with a distant family member," adding, "You love them, but you know there are a lot of things they can do better." Fifty-seven percent of survey respondents express appreciation for Israel's contributions to the world, and 41 percent feel at least some emotional attachment to Israel. One in 10 says that being uncomfortable with the tie between

being Jewish and Israel is a barrier to connecting with a Jewish community.

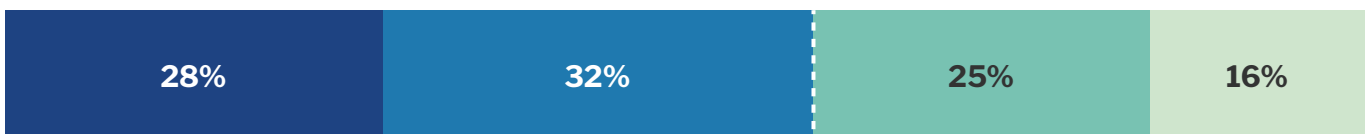
About one in five survey respondents have family in Israel, and two in five have visited the country with family and friends or through some Jewish programming. Those who have visited describe the experience favorably. "I felt so much more connected

"I honestly have very mixed emotions when it comes to Israel, both very good and not always great, so not like a clean emotion."

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

How well does the following statement describe you?

I feel an emotional attachment to Israel.



■ Does not describe at all ■ Describes a little ■ Somewhat describes ■ Completely describes

to Judaism once I was there,” said a focus group participant. For many, though, that sense of connection was not long-lasting. “I felt connected when I came back.... When I came off the plane I was like, ‘I’m going to learn all about Judaism, I want to go back to Israel and learn everything.’ That lasted like a week,” another focus group participant said.

Beyond firsthand experience, news coverage is a primary factor that influences views. The most commonly cited news outlets for information on Israel include BBC, CNN, Fox News, and NPR. Many Jewish young adults note that coverage is centered mostly around conflict and tends to skew negative, which in turn serves to drive them away. “Honestly, I try not to follow it closely because it’s so depressing,” according to an online focus group participant.

While news coverage influences views, only 14 percent of survey respondents say that the statement “I regularly follow news about Israel” completely describes them. This finding suggests that a knowledge gap exists when it comes to current affairs in the country. There is also consistently a desire among focus group participants for coverage beyond conflict, such as through content that highlights Israel’s culture, society, and contributions to the world. “I think it would have a very different meaning to me if it wasn’t for all the constant broadcast of the conflicts and bombings and death,” one online focus group participant said. Another concurred: “It’s slanted to look like a lot of war. ... Not the beautiful country that it is.”

Some struggle with the idea of Israel as a Jewish homeland because it invokes a feeling of exclusivity. “Why do we need a place all to ourselves?” One focus group participant asked. “Instead of trying to create a sense of togetherness, it seems like a ‘separate but equal’ situation,” said another. This unease with the Jewish state is especially true for some focus group participants. “History has just proven that a homogenous culture or a homogenous state just doesn’t work,” one said. Another reported feeling “frustration, that there has not been peace resolved and that I think Israel’s being treated like a favored child.”

Russian-speaking Jewish survey respondents differ from their counterparts related to Israel. They are more likely to have family living in Israel, more likely to say a connection to Israel makes them feel Jewish, and also more likely to say appreciating Israel’s contributions to the world describes them.

“I think it would have a very different meaning to me if it wasn’t for all the constant broadcast of the conflicts and bombings and death.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT