



## **Convergent and Divergent Dimensions of Jewish Peoplehood**

### **A Paper for the 2007 WCJCS Quadrennial**

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Recent studies sponsored by the American Jewish Committee (Ukeles et al., 2006 and Shimoni et al., 2006), indicate that the next generation of American and Israeli youth are increasingly ignorant of and uneducated about each other and unaffected by each other, suggesting that the global solidarity of the Jewish people is being steadily undermined. Indeed, both in America and in Israel, many questions are being asked, conferences convened, concerning the question what exactly is this Jewish peoplehood, what needs does it meet, what respect does it command and what commitment does it inspire and compel?

Institutionalized Jewish religion increasingly appears to serve as a force of division between different groups of Jews within Israel and America and between Israel and American Jewry. The question to be reviewed here, therefore, is whether there may in fact be a common basis of Jewish belonging that transcends these differences. Finally, can this purported Jewish peoplehood be grounded in contemporary developments of the late modern, global world that young Israeli and American Jews share with their Jewish and non-Jewish peers everywhere.

Jewishness has historically been more complex than either religion, culture or ethnicity alone. Following Schermerhorn, Fishman (2004) views Jews as most similar to an ethnic group understood as "a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood" (Fishman 2004;163, Schermerhorn cited by Sollors:1996;xii). Recently Fishman succinctly defines "*peoplehood* as an ethnic group sharing a common descent,

language, culture and homeland" Fishman (2007:44). Indeed it is the range of combinations of ethnicity, culture and religion which constitute the symbolic framework of Jewish peoplehood. They become compelling constructs of individual life however, through the engagement of Jews with each other, through value-driven reciprocal social networks, generating the individual and group resource of ethnic social capital.

Fishman acknowledges that the retention of a sense of Jewish peoplehood in contemporary America is complex due to the well documented and understandably widespread acceptance and allegiance to the "American homeland". However, Fishman goes on to say that..."even in America Jews across the spectrum have a lingering sense that their destiny is linked,....to the destiny of Jewish people around the world."(ibid:164). Indeed data to be presented below based on analysis of the NJPS2000 study, support precisely this contention.

Modernity has pluralized social life and made group allegiance and ethnic membership a matter of individual choice. This includes of course the choice to belong to the Jewish people. Fishman indicates that the contexts and dimensions on which that choice is conceived and made varies across the religious- secular and Israel-diaspora divides that express the diversity of global Jewish life. What we can understand from this analysis, is the dynamic nature of cultural reinterpretation that each generation makes of its heritage and its cultural horizons. In regard to these horizons, Fishman suggests an agenda for those seeking to sustain American Jewishness. The renaissance of Jewish life so vibrant in an important minority of American Jews, needs to be linked to the less affected vast majority of American Jews. This may be attained by developing enhanced social networks, opportunities for informal and experiential youth and adult education as well as the structured experience of Jewish Peoplehood through engagement with other Jewish communities in Israel and worldwide.

It will be argued here that Jewish Peoplehood may be conceived as that dimension of Jewishness that 'thickens' the lines of engagement between Jews that *cross* the

religious- secular and Israel- Diaspora divides. In this regard Jewish peoplehood can not be reduced to any of the four constituents of these two antinomies.

A quite different view has recently been espoused by one eloquent voice of the literati of Generation Y. Tahl Raz the editor of *Jewcy*, who in a fascinating interview with Shmuel Rosner in *Haaretz* declared on April 10 2007 that the term Jewish Peoplehood (has)

"No significance, and too muddled a term to say that it has any concrete meaning. When the Jews of pre-WWI Poland didn't speak the language of their own country, occupied a distinctive economic and social niche, and had virtually no social interaction with non-Jews, it made sense to talk of them as a people. But **American life has annihilated Jewish Peoplehood.**" (*Haaretz* on line, Rosner's Domain, April 10, my emphasis). Here, Jewish peoplehood is conceived as everything that makes Jews different and separate from the rest of humankind. I cannot think of a more innapropriate use of this term than the one given here. Strangely it is the least avante garde aspect of an otherwise radical presentation. In his later rejoinder Tahl Raz makes it quite clear that he and his peers oppose Jewish particularism when it is predicated on a rejection of universalism and universalistic values. The point of course is, that we are required to do neither and obliged to affirm both. This requirement I speak of here is not reliant on a normative moral code but on the exigencies of contemporary globalization and cultural humankind interdependence. This of course includes first and foremost, the Jews. Why is this so?

### **Globalization and Ethnicity**

Giddens (1991) points to a mode of social organization that separates time and space without the "situatedness of place". Put another way, this refers to the integration of people in "lived time"—not only in their presence but often, typically, in their absence (Featherstone 1995). More specifically, Featherstone views globalization as:

producing a unified and integrated common culture...(where) ...we find the most striking examples of the effects of time-space compression, as new means of

communication effectively make possible simultaneous transactions which sustain ‘deterritorialized cultures’. (Featherstone 1995, p. 114–115).

If the genesis and persistence of ethnicity has been traditionally understood as a residual outcome of migrant national ancestry and religious affiliation, the *dissipation of ethnicity* was then anticipated as a function of both generation-time and modernizing secularization. In contrast to this thesis of linear attrition, globalization presents an unanticipated contemporary macro genetic force which generates the invention or reinvention of ethnicity as a response to those very same global forces of cultural homogenization, social meaning, deconstruction and the atomization of social relationships (Mittelberg 1999).

In this world, identity is privatized—an outcome of personal choice. Indeed, the preservation of this personal choice has itself become the metavalue of postmodern society. That is to say, in the emerging postmodern North America, what matters most is the fact that you can choose which ethnicity to assume as well as the timing, intensity and salience at any given time throughout the life cycle. Hence, the contemporary world becomes one in which the ethnic is not disappearing, rather one where postmoderns typically live through personal multiple identities in a pluralized world (Mittelberg 1999).

Thomas Friedman (2000, 2006) has translated this process into common English and provided us with a powerful metaphor of a *Flat World* through which to view the process of globalization and the world within which we live. Thus, Globalization is the “integration of markets, nation-states and technologies... enabling individuals, corporations, and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before.” (Friedman,2000:9). Friedman goes on to argue, that this process “flattens” the world so that anyone worldwide can collaborate and compete. There are ten major flatteners:

- (1)Fall of the Berlin Wall;
- (2)Ability of the general public to access and browse the internet;
- (3)Software that is globally compatible;
- (4)Open sourcing – programs that anyone can use or alter for free;
- (5)Outsourcing – hiring another company to do a specific operational task ;
- (6)Offshoring – moving an entire operation to a country with cheaper costs;
- (7)Cross-company collaboration to create the most

efficient supply chains; (8) Insourcing – hiring third parties to manage some specific in-house task; (9) In-forming – Searching the internet; (10) New technologies supercharging the other flatteners (wireless, VoIP, etc.) Friedman 2006:50-200)

This new, “flattened” world emphasizes horizontal interactions, non-hierarchical relationships and networks. Yet in current Jewish institutions, particularly those with national or global responsibilities that could perhaps serve as the scaffold of Jewish Peoplehood, we find quite the opposite.

### **The Flat World and the Question of Jewish Institutions**

Jews are on the “have” side of the digital divide (Dror, Y. et al. JPPPI, 2006) and are therefore in a uniquely positioned to make use of the advantages presented by these "flatteners". The current online presence of the Jewish community conforms to the non-hierarchical, bottom-up structure described by Friedman: there is no official website for the Jewish people, rather, there are many websites for different organizations (and the majority of organizations do have an online presence.) (Dror, Y. et al. JPPPI, 2006)

Thus global economy and society is restructuring neither uni dimensionally nor uni-directionally, rather through multiple contradictions and towards multiple modernities. *What is clear is that yesterday's institutions cannot continue to serve tomorrow's collectivities.* This is true in the business world and it is no less true in the world of community and society. The future of the Jewish people is not to be measured only retrospectively by yesterday's opportunities and challenges but rather it must also address current challenges amid new and hitherto unseen opportunities that the old institutions may unwittingly disguise.

In order to explore the potential for a subjective appreciation of Jewish peoplehood among American and Israeli Jews, I report below briefly part of my own analysis of the NJPS2001 data, matching it as best as possible by some comparative data from Israeli society. This methodology is not neutral. It calls for an end to Jewish social research that is provincial by demand and by habit and instead calls for a restatement

of the Jewish question so that it be referenced by a- priori world wide Jewish inclusiveness and reciprocity.

### **Collective Definition of American Jews, NJPS 2001-2**

The 2001-2 National Jewish Population Study explored several different definitions of what Jews in America consider themselves to be, i.e.: a religious group, an ethnic group, a cultural group, a nationality, a part of a worldwide people (see graphs one through five). Although there is variation across denominations and depending on whether or not the respondent has visited Israel, 70-80% of Jews in America, see themselves as a religious, cultural, and ethnic group. However, the percent of Jews in America who agree that Jews are a nationality drops significantly. Orthodox Jews are the only denomination with a majority (around 60%) agreeing with this statement. Despite the former widespread rejection of the collective identity of Nationality, we find across the board acceptance (again, 70-80+%) of the collective identity of American Jews as part of a world wide Jewish People.

### **How American Jews Define Themselves As Jews, NJPS 2001-2**

The 2001-2 NJPS asked respondents to rank their agreement with various statements regarding their experience of Judaism including if they (see graphs 6-11):

- 1) have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish People
- 2) feel a special responsibility to take care of Jews in need
- 3) feel that being Jewish is important in life
- 4) believe that it is important to have friends share their Jewish ways
- 5) feel an emotional attachment to Israel
- 6) feel that being Jewish has much to do with how they see themselves

Generally, agreement with any of these statements decreases according to denomination hierarchy of religious practice, whether or not the respondent has visited Israel (non-visitors being less-likely to agree), and the age of respondent (younger respondents being less-likely to agree). Interestingly, having visited Israel sometimes seems to have the power to bridge the gap between adults and the under 30

age group; and in the case of how much being Jewish has to do with how a respondent sees him or herself, having visited Israel boosts younger respondents scores above those of their older counterparts.

### **How Israeli Jews Define Themselves, Levy et al.(2002) & Smooha (2004 )**

- The Jewish values that most Israeli Jews perceive as very important are “living in Israel” (65%) and “feeling part of the Jewish people” (62%).
- Ninety-five percent of Israeli Jews consider themselves part of world Jewry: 68% feel this with certainty, and two-thirds say this feeling is very important to them.
- Despite their strong personal identification with the Jewish people, 69% of Israeli Jews feel that Israeli Jewry and Diaspora Jewry are different peoples (a considerable increase from the 57% of 1991). Similarly, the percentage of those who believe that Israeli and Diaspora Jews have a common fate has declined from 76% in 1991 to 70% today. Even so, this feeling is still very strong. (Levy et al. 2002: p 11-12)

Smooha (2004) explored the personal identity of Israeli Jews through asking respondents to identify which of three identities: “Jewish People,” “Israeli Citizenship,” or “Religion” was most important to them (see graphs 12 & 13). When looking at respondents divided by self-defined political stream, Jewish Peoplehood is dominant for more right-wing and centrist individuals whereas Israeli Citizenship is dominant for those further to the left. Patterns of personal identification differ much more clearly when comparing respondents divided by self-defined religious observance. The population groups that select religion as their most important identity are the ultra-Orthodox and the Orthodox (although Jewish Peoplehood is a close second for this group). The Jewish Peoplehood definition predominates for the traditional while for secular, citizenship predominates,

### **Jewish Belonging and Jewish Community for Generation Y**

According to a report by Greenberg (2006) of a study conducted by Reboot on Generation Y Jews in the United States:

- ❖ “If connected to any Jewish community, young Jews ... see themselves as tied to a global Jewish community, where they feel broadly connected to an abstract feeling of a people more than a localized community or institution.” (Greenberg 2006)
- ❖ Answers in response to “how much does being Jewish involve each of the following?”
 

Feeling part of the Jewish people...a lot: 54%	a lot + some: 76%
Caring about Israel.....a lot: 54%	a lot + some: 80%

 (Greenberg 2006)

It would seem then, that the *global* is an important dimension of personal social life, while Jewish peoplehood is an important component of this identity for a majority of this generation of American Jews.

Global as a Pathway for Personal Jewish Identity of Israelis

The dilemma between global and local and its implications for Jewish identity for contemporary Israelis was also recently explored as witness the conclusions from the Alumot Conference held at Oranim College, Israel (2006)

- ❖ It is time for “a new platform for Jewish peoplehood” created through “an international network of communities that will maintain between themselves different systems of connectivity apart from the political institutions of the state” (Drori-Binder and Tsfofi 2006)
- ❖ Jewish peoplehood based upon the perspective that “the most relevant contemporary Jewish identity is the global Jewish identity” and “it is an encounter with the Jewish people that will motivate one to engage in in-depth study of the Jewish world” (Schmidt and Tsofni 2006)

Clearly Jewish statehood no longer exhausts the full range of options for Jewish collective life for young Israelis, particularly since the Jewish communities of Israel are seen to be enriched Jewishly by engagement with the Jewish communities of the Diaspora.

Implications

1. North American connected Jews have a far higher sense of collective identity than the literature of the solipsistic spiritual individualistic Jew within, might imply.

2. North American Jews clearly differentiate between Nationhood and Peoplehood. Not belonging to the Nation of Israel as citizens does not mean a decline of connection to the Jewish people.

Moreover, agreement with this collective identity largely parallels the universal agreement with Jews as a religious group. All this, it must be recalled, within the *most connected* segment of American Jewry and outside the parameters of the controversy of who is and who is not to be counted as a Jew.

3. The widespread recognition by American Jews of the Jewish collective or public being, does not in itself guarantee personal commitment and solidarity to that collectivity. In this regard, visiting Israel serves for Jews of all denominations or Jewish backgrounds both as an agency and a dimension of public identity and collective commitment.

#### **4. Visit to Israel and Jewish Belonging (NJPS 2000-1)**

Visiting Israel under the age of 30 is associated with diminished inter-generational differences countering the trend of ethnic decline and contributing to a stronger sense of belonging to the Jewish People on the following dimensions.

- ❖ The mitzvah to care for other Jews.
- ❖ Inter-generational stability on the measure of the importance of being Jewish and of the importance of Jewish Networks; Orthodox and Reform young adults rate higher on this measure than the adults of their Denomination.
- ❖ In addition ALL young visitors to Israel have a stronger affirmation of their inner self as Jews.
- ❖ Finally, the visit to Israel for young Jews is powerfully correlated with a higher emotional attachment to Israel.

#### **Questions to be asked...**

- ❖ Can we see Jewish Peoplehood as a deterritorialized culture in the existential sense? Can it be not limited to only one territory?

- ❖ Can we discuss this possibility without being accused of denying the centrality of Israel in Jewish history and contemporary Jewish Peoplehood?
- ❖ Can we discuss being Jewish without having to see the Diaspora as a liminal event, liminal to primordial Jewishness which can only be found in Israel?
- ❖ Are we obliged by the recognition of multilateral Jewish Peoplehood to deny the messianic vision and the Zionist program of the ingathering of the Jewish people in its own land?
- ❖ Can there be perhaps an affirmation of the role of Israel in the structure of global Jewish Peoplehood, as well as it being an agent for and dimension of personal Diaspora Jewish identity?
- ❖ Can Israeli Jews include Diaspora Jewish life worlds into their collective vision without making the demands of immediate physical residence in the land?
- ❖ Finally, can we leave the issue of personal permanent migration to the forces of biography, marriage and money markets and concentrate on the global platform on which Jewish identity and social structure needs to be firmly placed in the twenty first century?

#### On the Absence of Presence of Jewish Peoplehood.

What can be detected in these data and what is absent? On the one hand a large cross-section of American Jews and Israelis recognize their subjective belonging to a collectivity beyond their local and national domicile. This belonging is not exhausted by religion or political allegiance but is waning with generation. Only EXTRAORDINARY INTERVENTIONS SUCCESSFULLY SUSTAIN THIS ALLEGIANCE ACROSS GENERATION AND AGE BARRIERS. It is primarily the Israel experience of diaspora Jews and also I believe, increasingly the positive encounter of Israeli Jewry with diaspora Jewry and its pluralistic Judaism.

When I say extraordinary interventions, I stress *extraordinary*, since the ordinary institutions of everyday Jewish life have a hard enough task mobilizing young American Jews to local affiliation with Jewish life. Is it then reasonable or conceivable to expect that these same institutions can generate and then sustain

affiliation with transnational expressions of Jewish education? The answer is clearly NO. Contemporary Jewish institutions need to be restructured both to engage deeply the constituency it is supposed to serve and not just the elites who do the serving, but also to engage these constituencies with their transnational peers. Clearly the forest of vertical hierarchical Jewish institutions that have been termed by Jack Wertheimer (2005), insightfully as *silos*, have perhaps strong foundations but they do not cast a giant shadow.

### The Challenge for Global Jewish Leadership

In a spirit of self criticism I would invite the participants in this world conference of Jewish community professionals to put the cart before the horse and call for the establishment of a **World Council of Jewish Communities** which it would be their duty to serve. Not one instead of the other, not the global without the local but rather each with the other, a transnational glocal conception of Jewish peoplehood, inclusive of all Jews, beholden to none.

What this requires of all of us is to build bottom up, institutions of governance and leadership for the entire Jewish People that reflect the everyday reality of Jewish communities everywhere and their emergent glocal relationships, with Israel and other peer Jewish communities.

### What is to be done?

(I). Change the existential basis of Jewish Peoplehood:

- ❖ Enrich individual Jewish identity within the multiple identities of modernity.
- ❖ Enhance Jewish social capital within local community networks.
- ❖ Develop transnational Jewish glocal community networks, generating lateral Jewish Solidarity and Peoplehood.

**(II) Change the *paradigm* of Global Jewish Peoplehood:**

- ❖ Affirm both the Homeland, the core Jewish State and the Diasporas at the expense of neither.
- ❖ Recognize the multiple creative sources of Jewish culture irrespective of their links to territory.
- ❖ Promote multiple opportunities for travel, encounter and socio cultural engagement between Jewish communities in Israel and the Diaspora, based on principle of reciprocal hospitality and mutual responsibility.
- ❖ Promote demographic stamina through social mobility and migration driven by models of Jewish collective survival.

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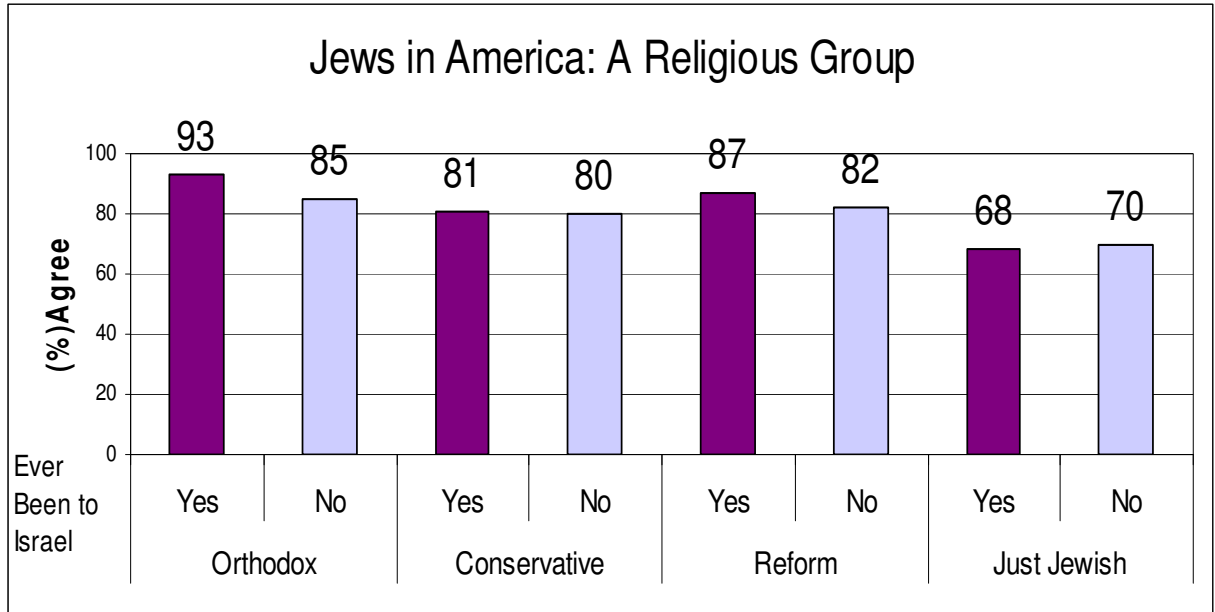
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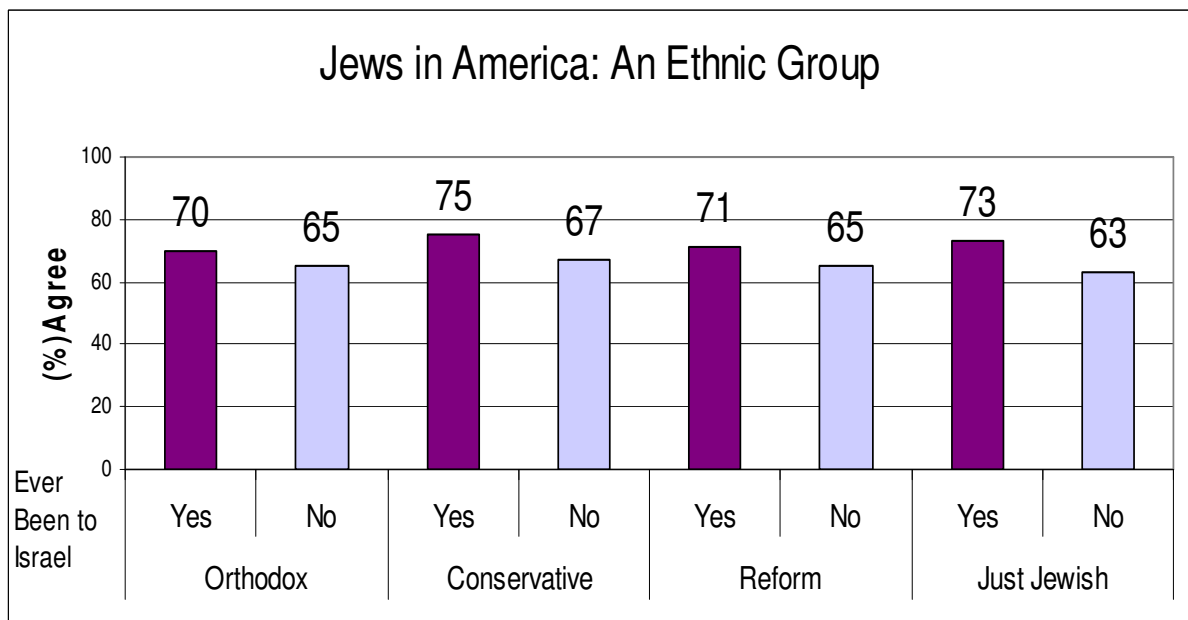
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Appendix

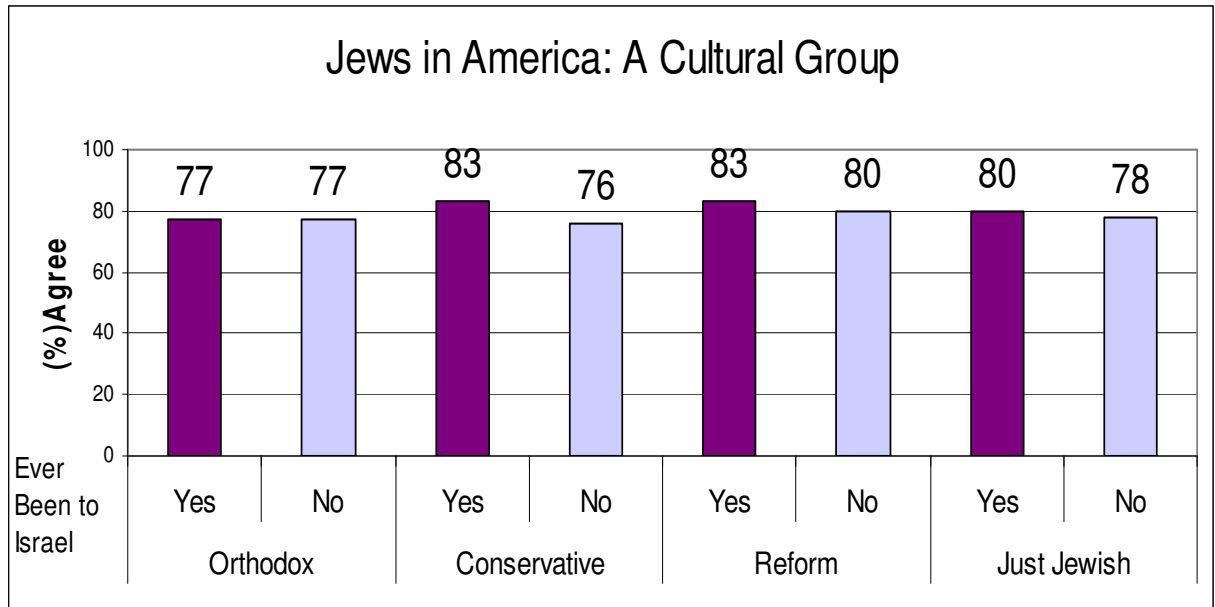
Graph 1: Jews in America: A Religious Group



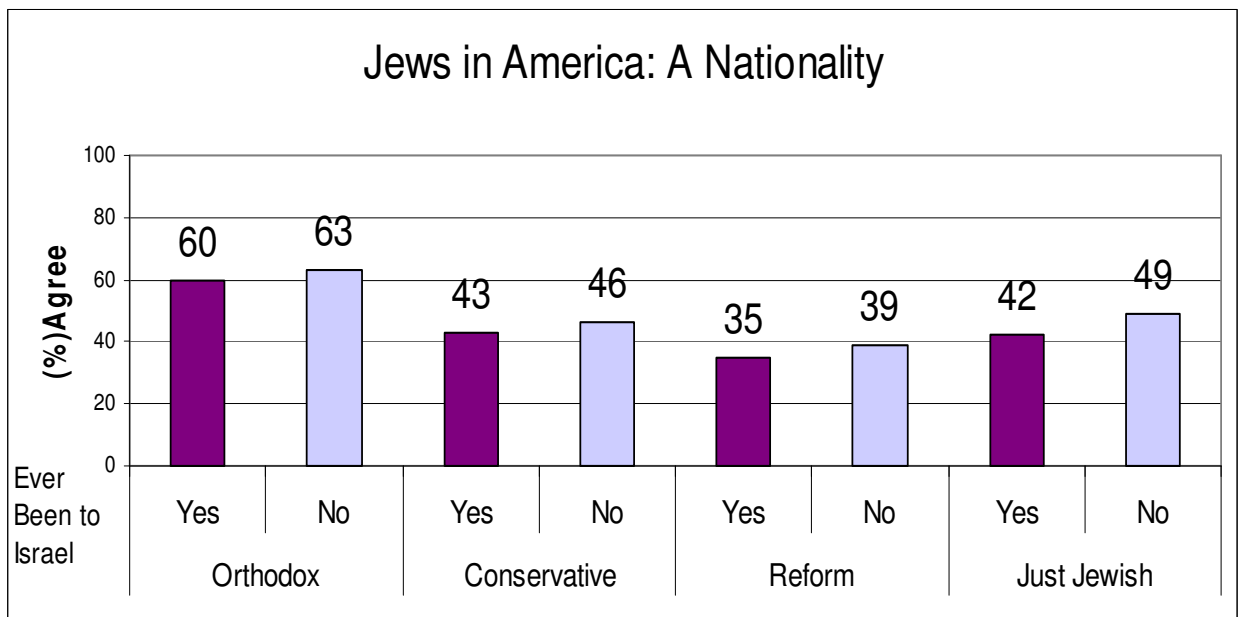
Graph 2: Jews in America:



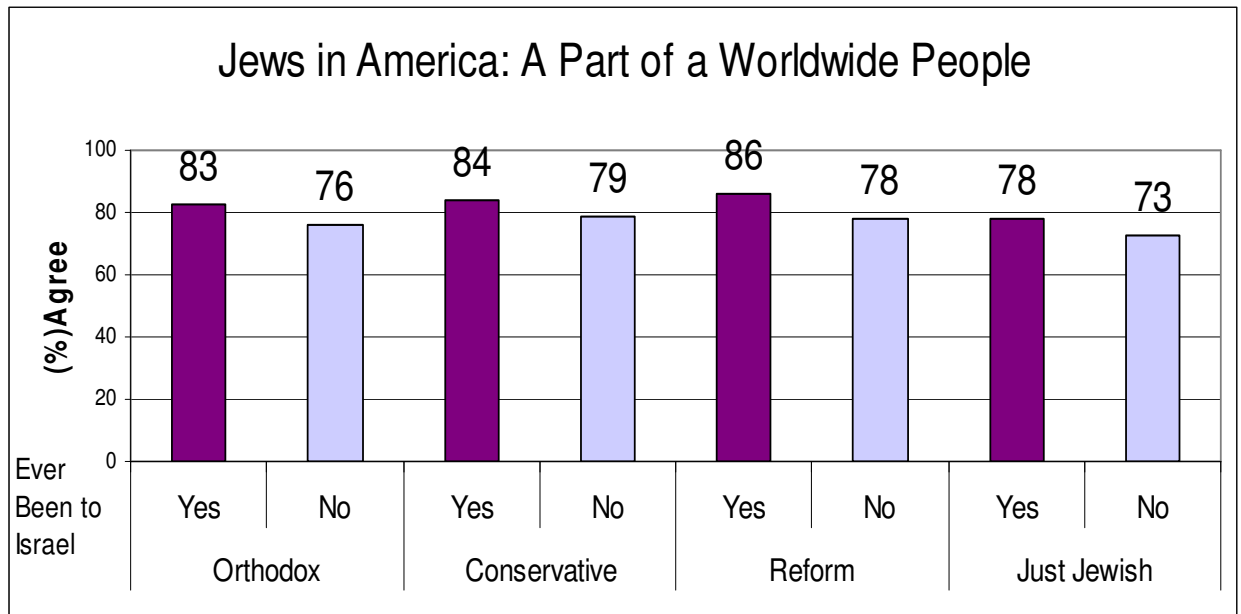
Graph 3: Jews in America: A Cultural Group



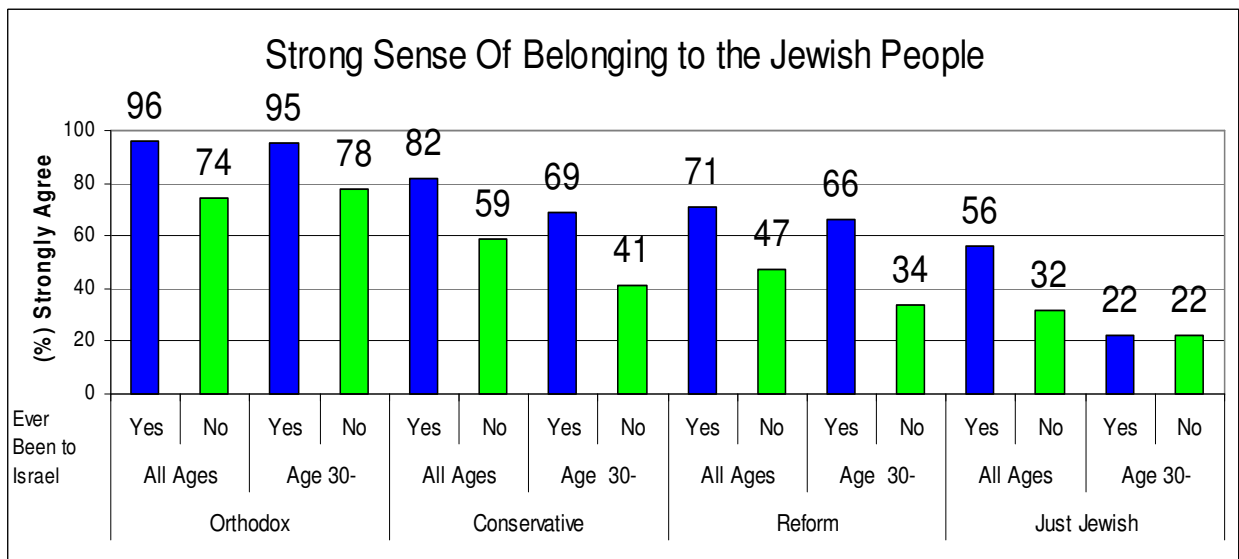
Graph 4: Jews in America: A Nationality



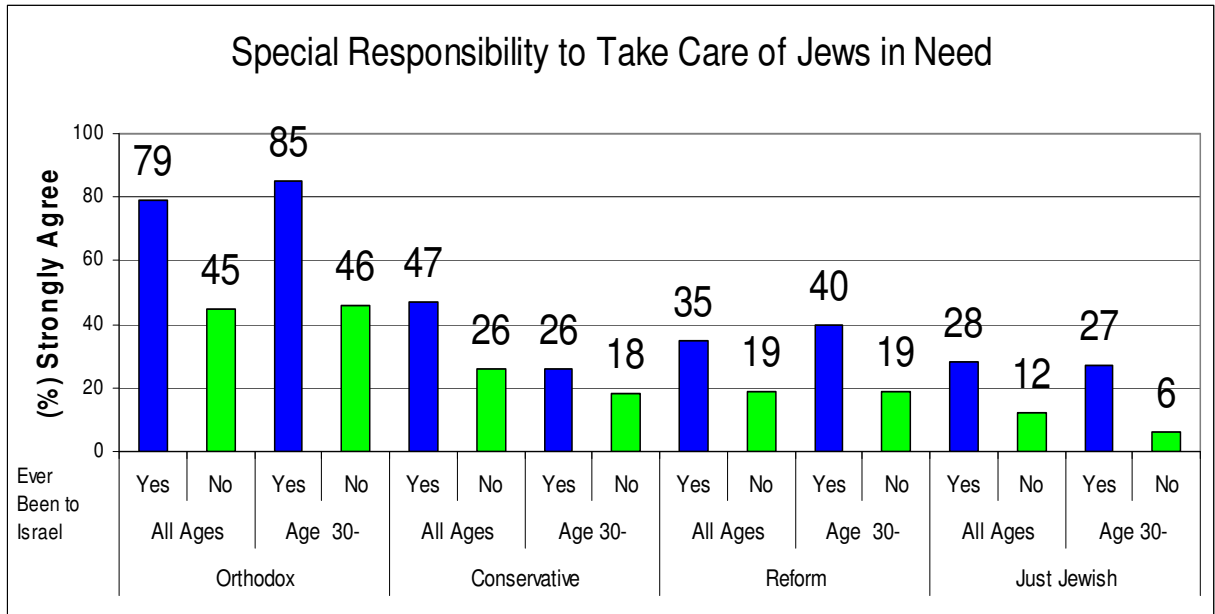
Graph 5: Jews in America: A Part of a Worldwide of Jewish People



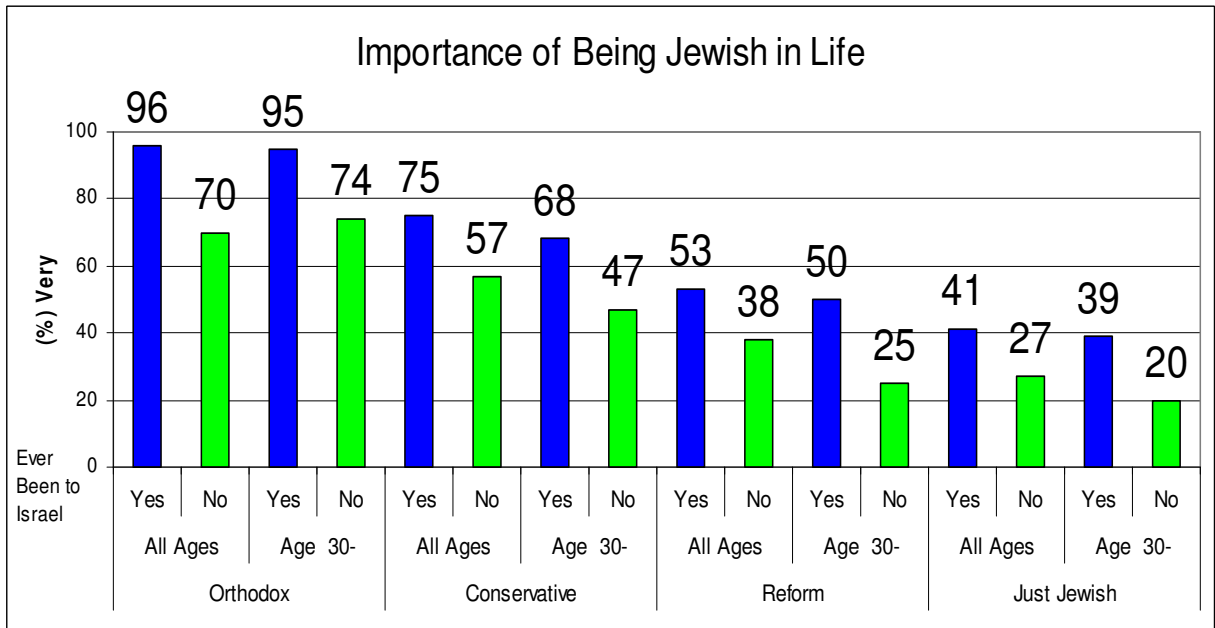
Graph 6: Strong Sense of Belonging to the Jewish People



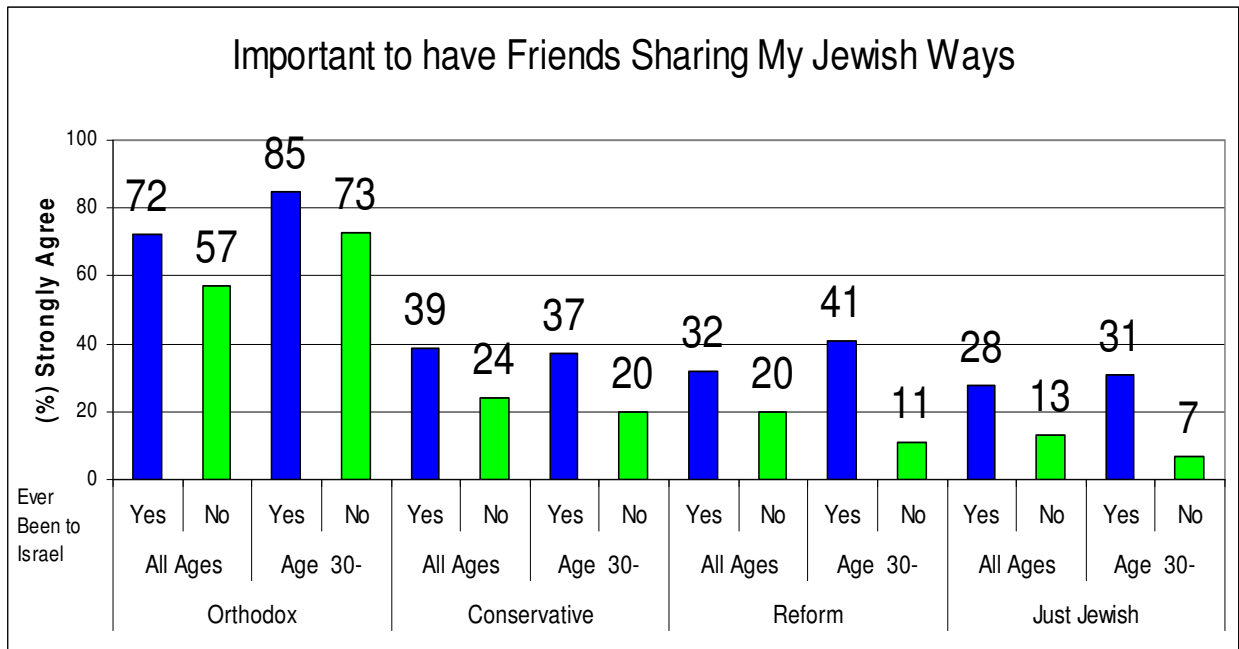
Graph 7: Special Responsibility to Take Care of Jews in Need



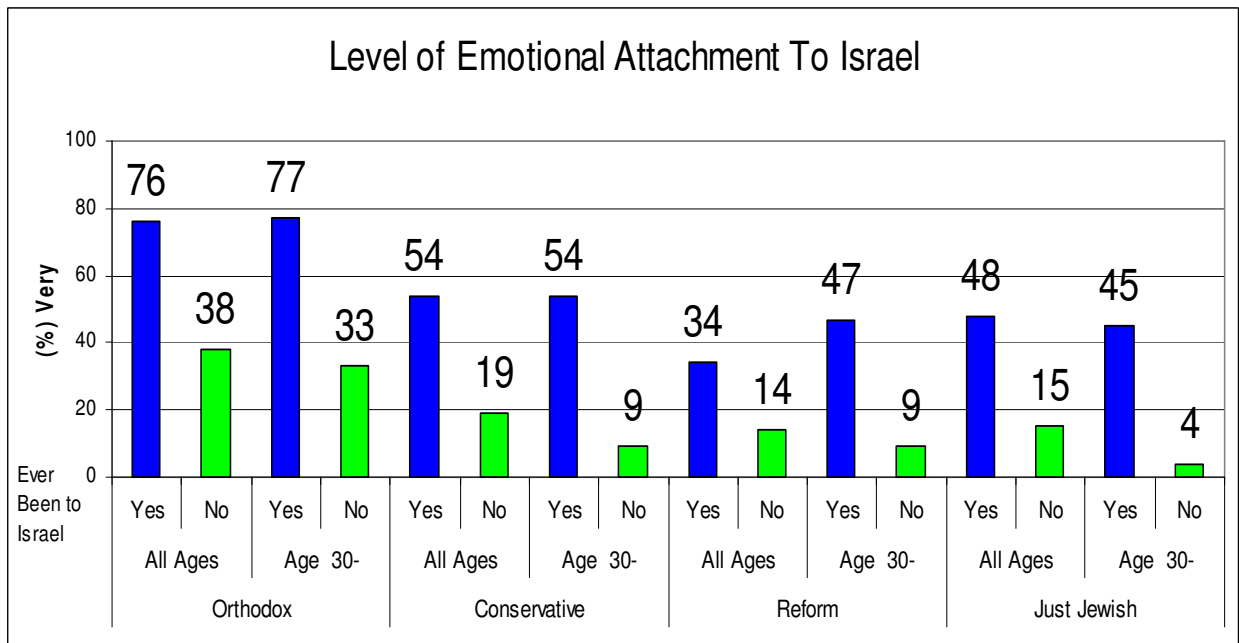
Graph 8: Importance of Being Jewish in Life



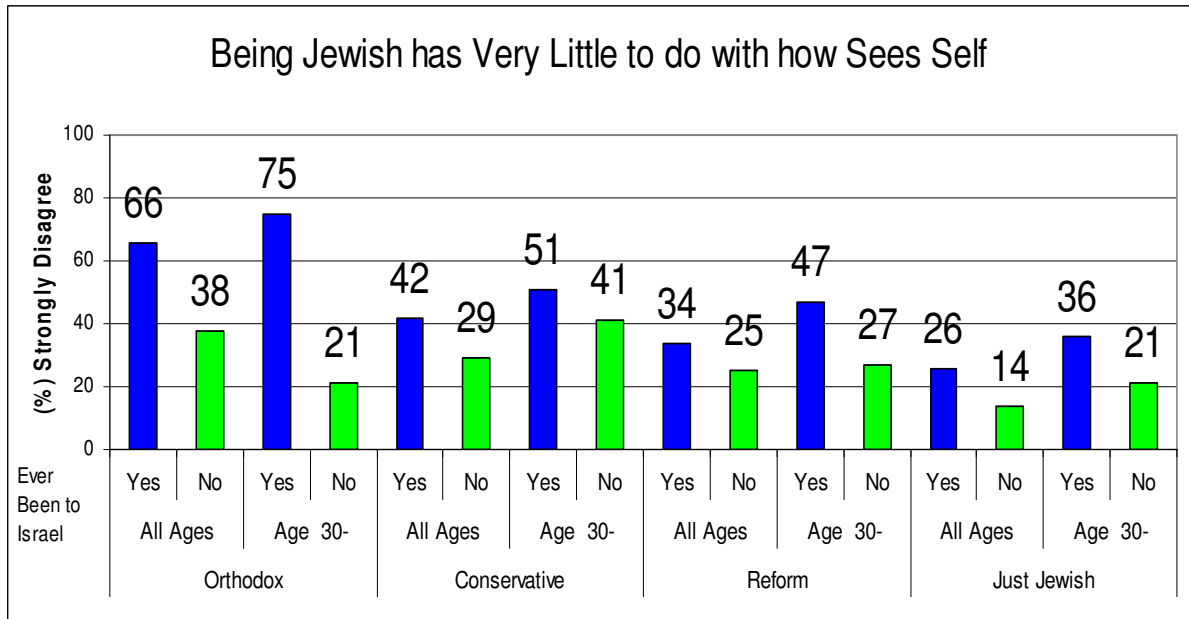
Graph 9: Important to have Friends Sharing My Jewish Ways



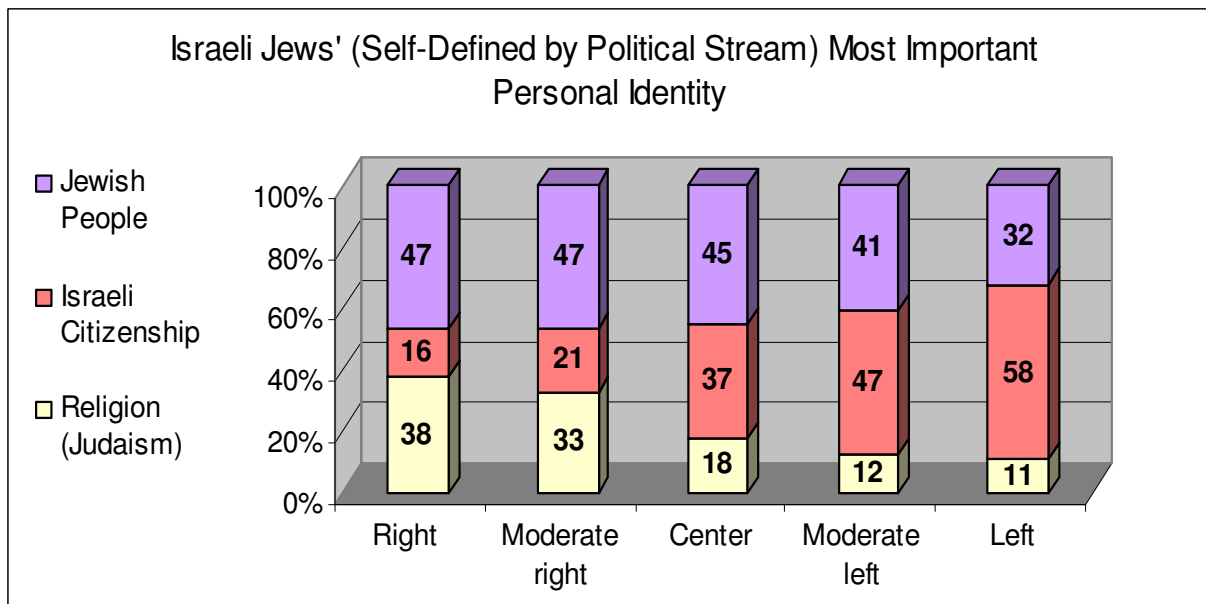
Graph 10: Level of Emotional Attachment to Israel



Graph 11: Being Jewish has Very Little to do with how Sees Self



Graph 12: Israeli Jews' (Self Defined by Political Stream) Most Important Personal Identity



Graph 13: Israeli Jews' (Self-Defined by Religious Observance) Most Important Personal Identity

