

Six takeaways about Jewish life under lockdown

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JPR's UK Jewish population panel is designed to gather data on Jewish people's attitudes on a wide range of social and political issues, as well as aspects of their beliefs, behaviours and preferences, to help support planning across the community. In this paper, we draw on data from our summer 2021 panel survey to identify six ways in which the pandemic, and specifically lockdown, has impacted Jewish life in the UK.

/ Introduction

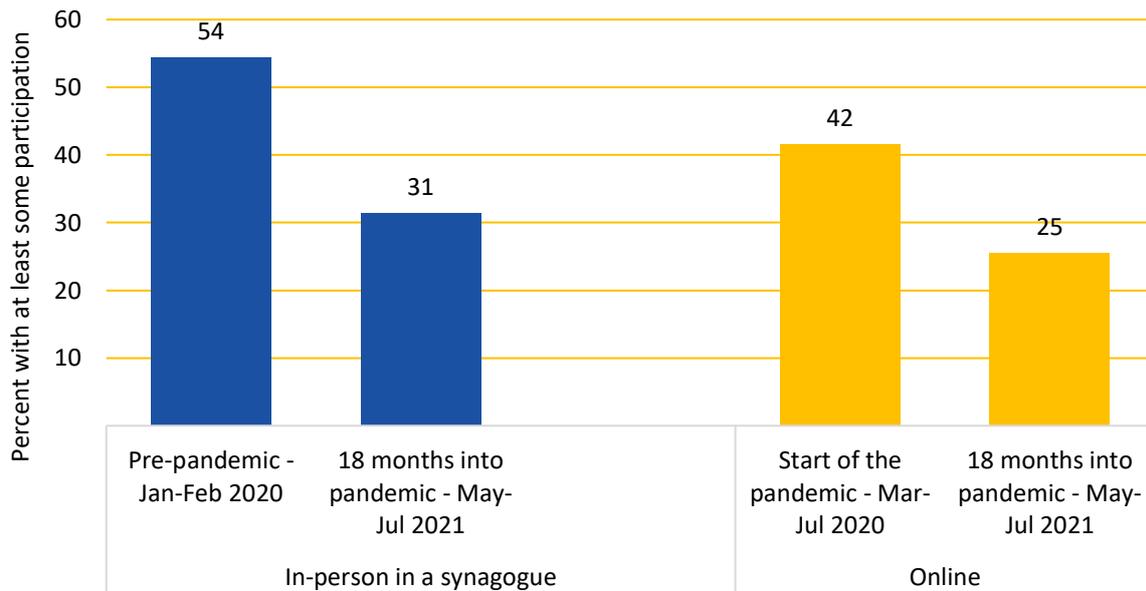
Like populations everywhere, Jews in the UK experienced tumultuous change with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. But what effect did the pandemic and the accompanying lockdowns have on Jewish life, which has always been heavily reliant on in-person social interaction? The following six charts show how Jewish families and the community grappled with this unforeseen and dramatic societal change. They chart the sudden proliferation of online Jewish content catering for everything from prayer services to educational activities, the challenges this posed particularly to more halachically-observant Jews, how feelings of attachment to the community were affected by these changes and how confident different groups have felt about the gradual return to a new type of Jewish normal. Yet even now, almost three years since the pandemic started, it is still too early to see what the lasting impact of the pandemic on Jewish life will ultimately look like.

1 / Pandemic causes shake-up in participation in Jewish prayer services

The aspect of Jewish life that was perhaps most directly and severely impacted in the early stages of the pandemic was prayer services. Prior to COVID-19, participation in such services took place, for the vast majority, in person, in a synagogue. In the two months immediately prior to the first lockdown (January to February 2020), just over half (54%) of respondents reported attending at least one synagogue prayer service in person. However, once the first lockdown began, synagogues were forced to close, pushing many communities to reimagine how to bring people together for services. The result, in the early months of the pandemic when in-person gatherings were proscribed (March to July 2020), was that 42% of respondents participated in prayer services *online*. In any other context such a sudden change in participation behaviour would seem astonishing.

A year later, while things were still very different to pre-pandemic times, evidence of a gradual movement back to 'normal' could already be seen, with 31% attending in person and 25% participating online in the May to July 2021 period. Therefore, eighteen months into the pandemic, the overarching picture of how people were experiencing prayer services remained fundamentally changed, with a substantial proportion taking place online, and synagogues far emptier than before.

Figure 1. Participation in Jewish prayer services (at least once), by mode and time-point (N=6,984 July 2020; N=4,323 July 2021)*



* Since it was possible for people to attend prayer services in person and participate online, the May-July 2021 figures are not mutually exclusive and should not be summed.

Questions: “In January/February 2020, just prior to the coronavirus outbreak, how frequently did you participate in any type of synagogue or communal prayer service?”

“You said that you have participated in Jewish prayer services in the last 3 months. Was this: In person in a private home or garden; In person in a synagogue or hall; Online (e.g. Zoom, Facebook, livestream); By dialling into a telephone service; Something else (write in how you participated)”

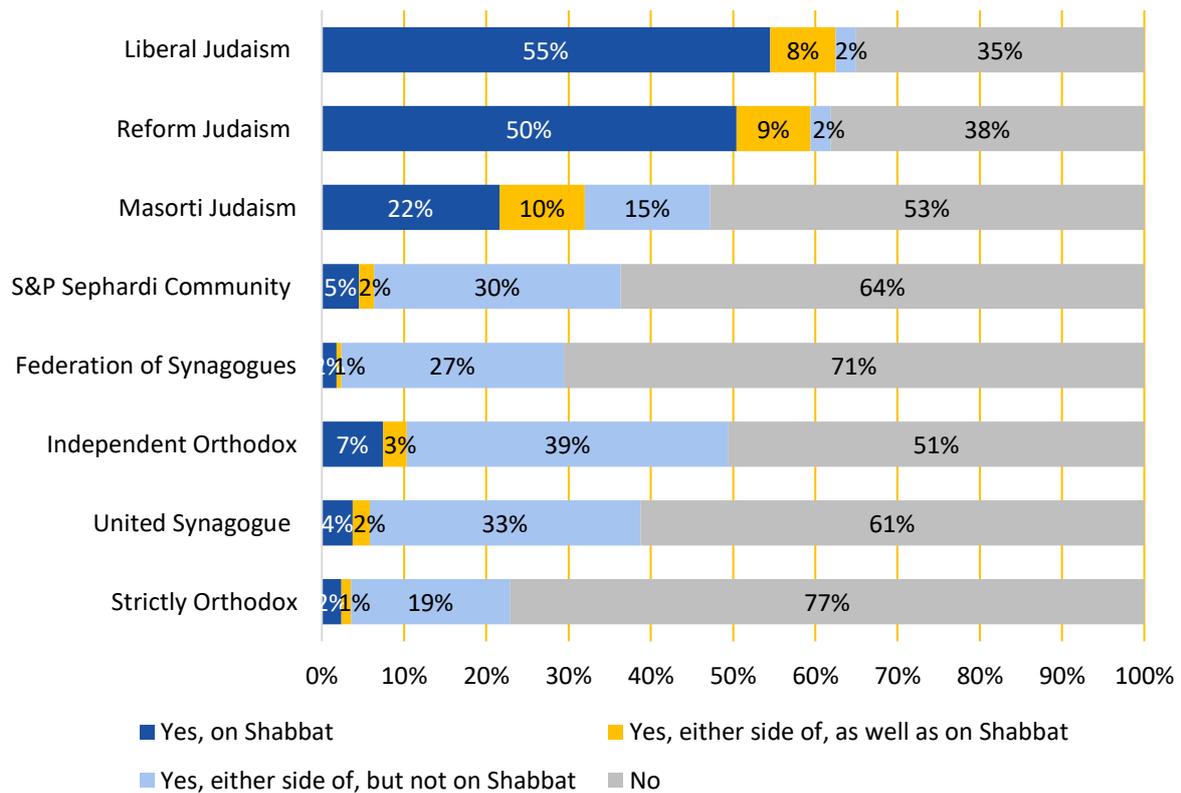
“Since the coronavirus outbreak, communal gatherings have been restricted. Some communities have provided online prayer services instead. How frequently, if at all, have you participated in online prayer services since the coronavirus outbreak in March 2020?”

2 / Orthodox Jews impacted more than others by the switch to online prayer services

In its favour, the online delivery of Jewish prayer services democratised access, enabling the participation of those who might not have ordinarily been willing or able to physically attend, including older people, those with mobility and/or health conditions, or those in different communities or countries. On the other hand, it presented a particular challenge to Orthodox Jews and their communities since the use of electronic devices is prohibited on Shabbat (the Sabbath) and Jewish religious festivals. To manage this, some communities provided online prayer services close to, but not during, these prohibited periods. Yet overall, the participation experience of Orthodox and non-Orthodox respondents was very different.

At the beginning of the pandemic (March to July 2020), half or more of those belonging to Liberal (55%) and Reform (50%) communities accessed live-streamed services on Shabbat, with about a third (32%) of Masorti respondents also doing so. By contrast, this was the case for just 10% or less of respondents belonging to Orthodox communities, although many of these people—between 19% and 39%—participated instead in live-streamed services *either side* of Shabbat. Therefore, compared with those belonging to non-Orthodox communities at this stage of the pandemic, those belonging to Orthodox communities were disproportionately impacted by this change in Shabbat prayer service provision.

Figure 2. Participation in real-time Shabbat prayer services by Jewish denomination, March to July 2020 (N=6,984)



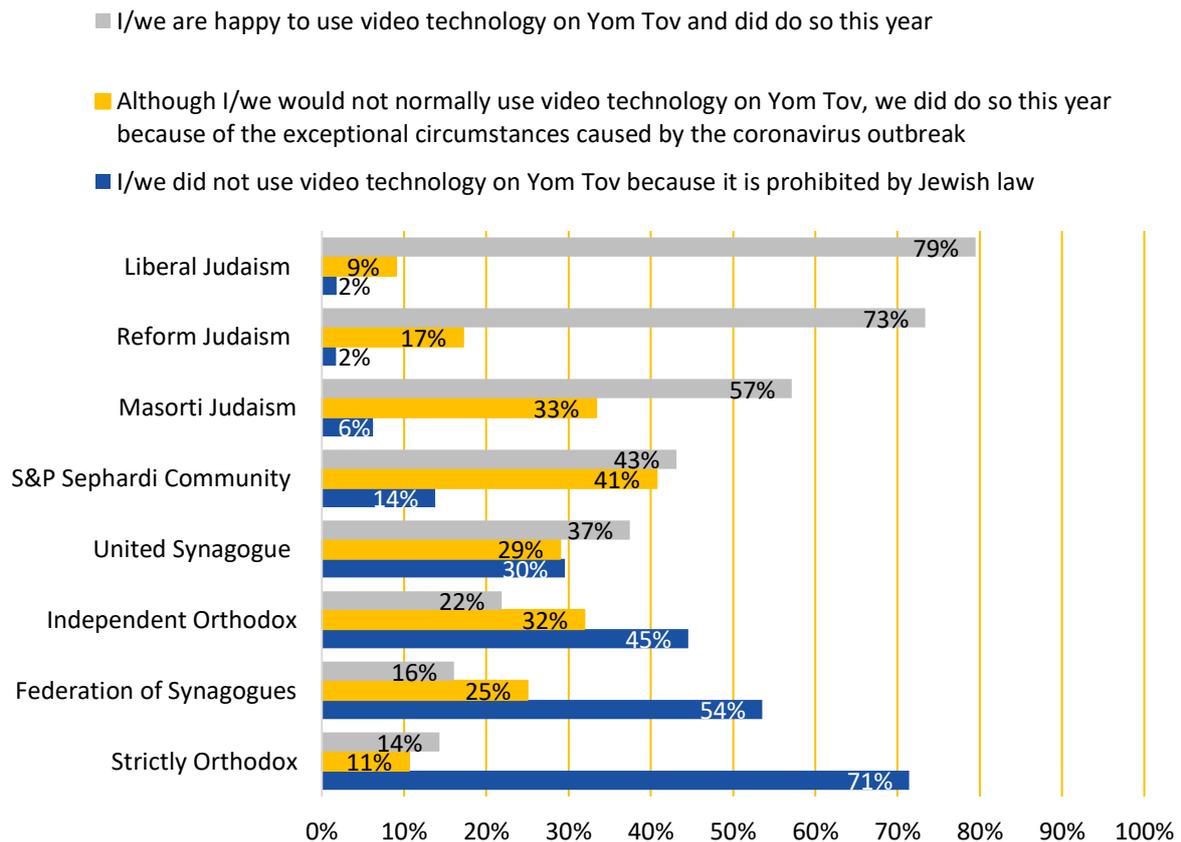
Questions: “Which, if any, of the following types of synagogue are you currently a member of? If you belong to more than one synagogue, please select the one you typically attend most frequently.”
 “Since the coronavirus outbreak started in March 2020, have you participated in any real-time Shabbat (Sabbath) prayer services using online video technology?”

3 / Strict rules on video technology usage set aside due to ‘exceptional circumstances’

The Passover *seder* (family meal and rituals) is traditionally one of the most observed practices in the Jewish calendar. But in April 2020, Passover coincided with lockdown, thereby preventing people from celebrating together with their friends and wider family. Again, video technology offered the possibility of joining together virtually, but as with Shabbat, its use was also prohibited under Jewish law. However, unlike prayer services, the decision to use or not use video now fell on families rather than synagogues.

On this exceptional Passover, the majority of Liberal, Reform and Masorti families embraced video technology at their seders. But among the Orthodox, the picture was rather mixed. While several groups were more likely to eschew than embrace it, many were prepared to bend the rules given the exceptional circumstances of the time. Indeed, a majority of Sephardi member households embraced video technology at their seders and most of the remainder made an exception and used it. Among those aligned with the United Synagogue, there was a roughly even split between embracing it, permitting it as a ‘one-off’, and proscribing it. However, it is again clear that in general, the Orthodox were disproportionately affected.

Figure 3. Attitudes towards using video technology at Passover 2020 by Jewish denomination (N=2,779 families)

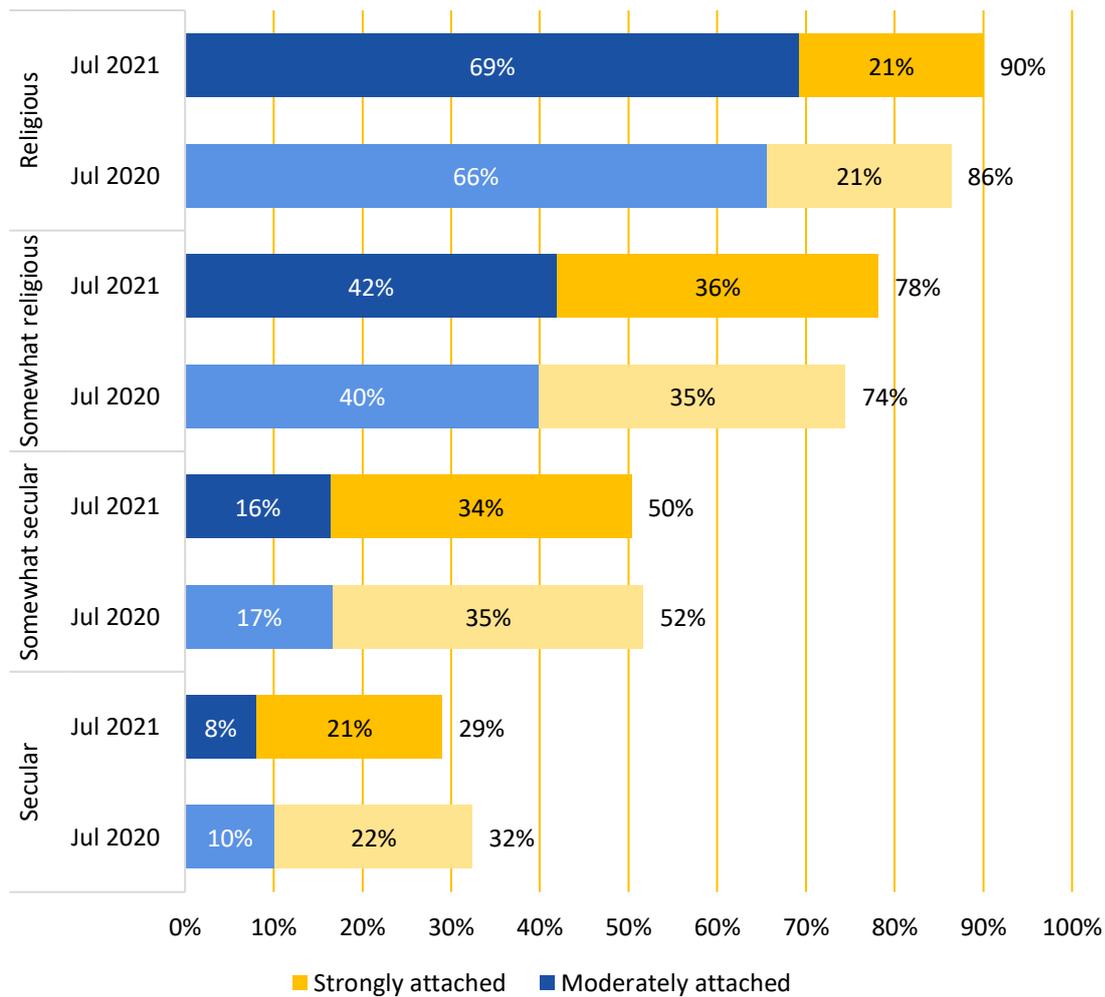


* Categories are not exclusive, so each grouping does not necessarily sum to 100%
 Question: “Some Passover seders that took place this year incorporated live video technology (e.g. Zoom or Skype) while others did not. Specifically, regarding the use of video technology on Yom Tov (i.e. during the festival itself), which of the following apply to you?” Responses: I/we did not use video technology on Yom Tov because it is prohibited by Jewish law (25%); Although I/we would not normally use video technology on Yom Tov, we did do so this year because of the exceptional circumstances caused by the coronavirus outbreak (20%); I/we are happy to use video technology on Yom Tov and did do so this year (46%); I/we are happy to use video technology on Yom Tov but did not do so this year (11%); I/we find it difficult to use video technology for technical reasons (limited skills, lack of equipment, etc.) (1%)

4 / Attachment to community increased among religious, decreased among secular

Research shows that in general, the more religious people are, the more strongly attached they say they feel to their local Jewish community. Yet, while lockdowns affected everybody’s capacity to connect to their community to some extent, one might hypothesise that levels of attachment among Orthodox Jews would have fallen, not least because of the halachic rules forbidding them from using video technology for prayer services on Shabbat and festivals. However, we do not find this. On the contrary, our data suggest that over the course of the pandemic (specifically the period from July 2020 to July 2021), communal attachment *increased* among the self-identifying ‘religious’ and *decreased* among the self-identifying ‘secular’, albeit to a modest extent. This partly reflects the greater Jewish resilience of the religious, and, more generally, may also be an indication that the pandemic widened the pre-existing gap between the more religious and the more secular sections of the Jewish community, if only temporarily.

Figure 4. Proportion of respondents feeling strongly or moderately attached to their local Jewish community, by Jewish outlook, July 2020 and July 2021

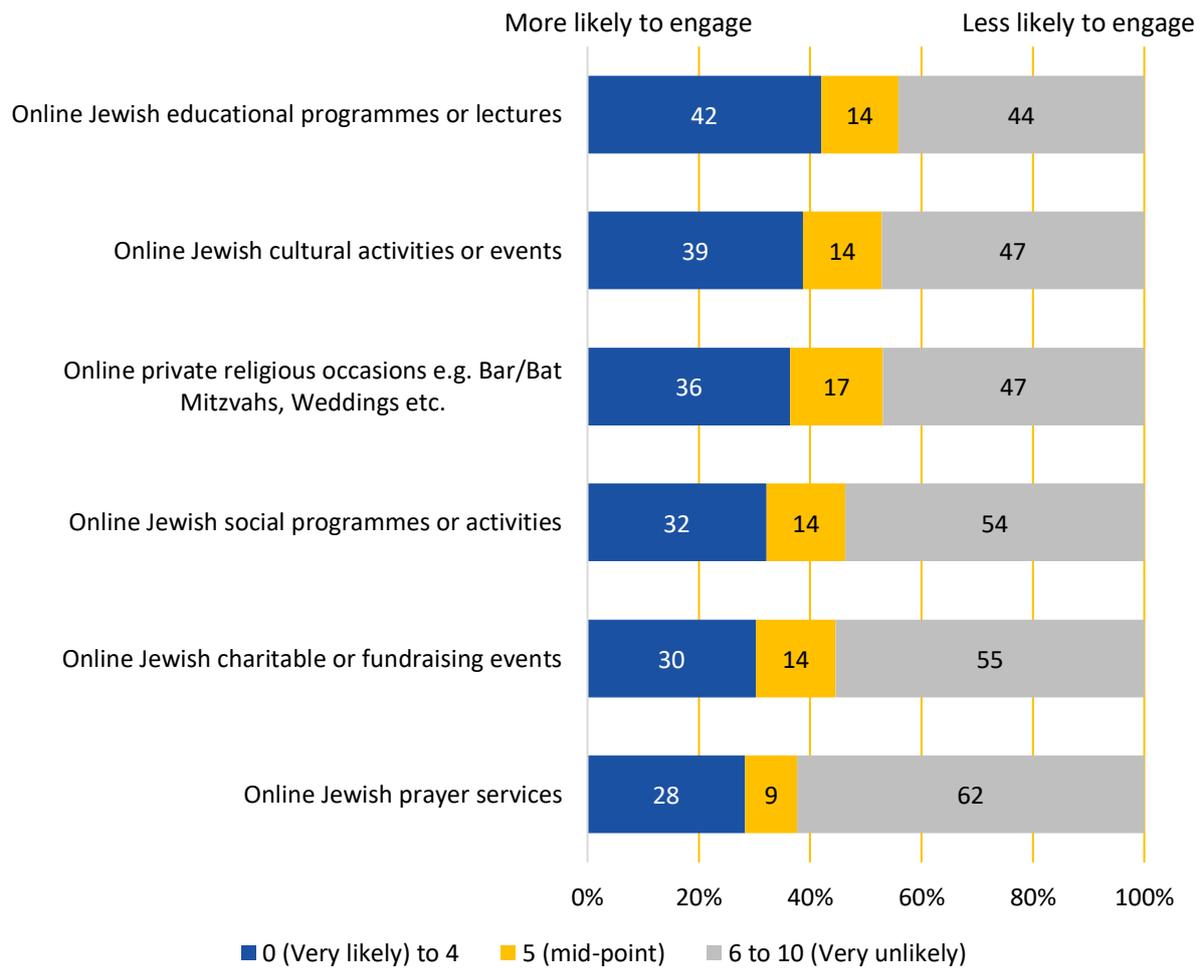


Question: “How attached (or otherwise) do you currently feel to your local Jewish community? Strongly attached; Moderately attached; Weakly attached; Not at all attached; There is no local Jewish community where I live”

5 / Online educational programmes favoured over online prayer services

Prayer services and festivals were far from the only Jewish activities to move online in the early days of the pandemic. A host of Jewish content soon became available as organisations scrambled to adjust to the new reality of lockdowns and social distancing. But once in-person options became available again, enthusiasm for this online content started to wane. Yet certain online content is preferred over other types. Online Jewish educational and cultural content were favoured much more than Jewish social activities and particularly prayer services. This not only reflects the challenges of delivering certain types of content online, particularly when it is of a primarily social (rather than educational) nature, but also highlights the fundamentally social dimension of Jewish prayer services which does not appear to translate to the online environment as easily.

Figure 5. Enthusiasm for participating in online communal activities in the future (July 2021)

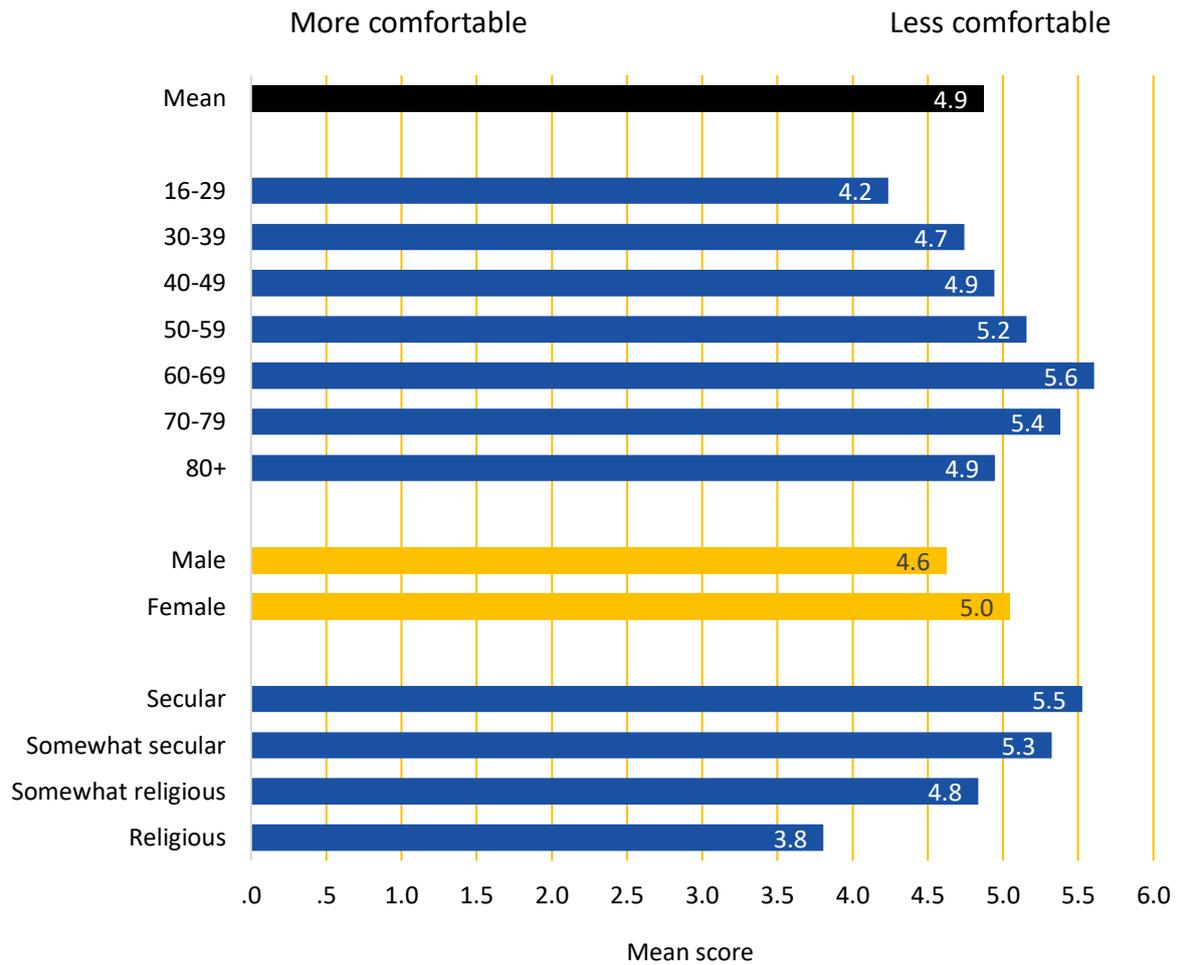


Question: “Now that COVID-19 restrictions are being lifted and in-person events are becoming more common, how likely are you to engage with the following online activities (whether or not you have taken part online up until now), where 0 is Very likely and 10 is Very unlikely?” (options as per chart)

6 / Confidence in returning to in-person communal activities

As the pandemic progressed, vaccines became available and restrictions were gradually lifted, so levels of confidence among respondents about returning to in-person Jewish community life also increased. In this final chart, we see how different subgroups responded to this ‘opening up’. For example, Jewish women were less comfortable about returning than Jewish men, and while, in general, older people were less comfortable than younger people, it was those aged in their 60s who were least comfortable. There was also a clear relationship in terms of self-defined secular/religious outlook, with religious respondents being much more comfortable about returning than secular respondents. This may also be a reflection of their eagerness to return, especially given that more Orthodox groups had been more restricted in their communal life than less Orthodox groups.

Figure 6. How comfortable people feel about returning to Jewish community activities, July 2021, for various groups (values are mean scores)



Question: “Overall, how comfortable do you feel about attending in-person Jewish community activities and events as the restrictions put in place due to the coronavirus pandemic are lifted, where 0 is ‘Very comfortable’ and 10 is ‘Very uncomfortable’? 0 - Very comfortable, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 - Very uncomfortable”

/ Conclusion

The pandemic imposed numerous challenges and unprecedented disruption to people worldwide. For Jewish communities, the restrictions on being able to convene in person were particularly difficult, as so much of Jewish life – and particularly Jewish religious life – depends on social interaction and assembly. The charts in this paper capture some of the disruption that Jews in the UK experienced, but also contain some strong indicators of community creativity, adaptability and resilience, all of which suggest that Jewish communities managed their way through the turbulence rather well. Nevertheless, it will still take some time before a full assessment can be made, and JPR will continue to monitor changes in communal attitudes and behaviours to ensure that organisations working to support Jewish life have the data they need to help inform their work.

/ Methodological note

These data have been drawn from JPR's Jewish research panel and were collected in summer 2021. The panel is designed to explore the attitudes and experiences of Jews in the UK on a variety of issues. The sample size is 4,152, and all are UK residents aged 16 or above who self-identify as being Jewish 'in any way at all.' All respondents were members of the JPR panel, and either responded to emails requesting their participation sent out from JPR and a small number of support organisations aimed at encouraging participation among hard-to-reach subgroups, or to referrals from other survey participants. Respondents were offered an opportunity to win one of five £100 shopping vouchers as an incentive to complete the survey.

The questionnaire was developed by JPR, drawing on a range of existing surveys. It was programmed in-house using Conformat software and formed part of a wider panel recruitment process. The survey was completed online, by computer, smartphone or tablet, from 23 July to 1 September 2021.

The survey data were cleaned and weighted to adjust for the age, sex and Jewish identity of the Jewish population of the UK based on 2011 Census data and synagogue membership data. Details of the methodology used in the first round of this survey (summer 2020), which is applicable to the 2021 round, can be found [here](#).

/ Acknowledgments

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/ About the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR)

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) is a London-based research organisation, consultancy and think-tank. It aims to advance the prospects of Jewish communities in the United Kingdom and across Europe by conducting research and informing policy development in dialogue with those best placed to positively influence Jewish life. Web: www.jpr.org.uk.

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