

# On the seventh day: Shabbat observance and practices among British Jews

Factsheet

Dr David Graham

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*(ha-mavdil bein kodesh l'chol)* המבדיל בין קדש לחול  
"Who distinguishes between the sacred and the profane"

# On the seventh day: Shabbat observance and practices among British Jews

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This paper draws on data from the JPR UK Jewish population research panel, which is designed to gather data on Jewish people's attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and preferences to help support community planning. Most findings come from our 2022 UK National Jewish Identity Survey, in which close to 5,000 research panelists participated – all self-identifying Jews aged 16 or above, currently living in the UK.

## / Introduction

Ahad Ha'am, the founder of cultural Zionism, encapsulated Shabbat's significance to Jews with his pithy observation: "More than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews." This weekly day of rest, he argued, compelled Jews to disengage from mundane routines, thereby preserving their core Jewish identity.<sup>1</sup>

The origin and centrality of Shabbat in Jewish religious life is, of course, biblical. *Bereishit* (the Book of Genesis), explains that on the seventh day, God rested from His work:<sup>2</sup>

"The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array. On the seventh day God finished the work that He had been doing, and He ceased [rested] on the seventh day from all the work that He had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that He had done." (Genesis 1:2-3, JPS translation)

While this is the origin of Shabbat—and indeed the origin of a seven-day week—the explicit requirement to observe it appears later in the 4th Commandment, which states:

"Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not do any work... For in six days, the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and he rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it." (Exodus 20:8-11, JPS translation)

Drawing on this biblical account, in contemporary times, Shabbat is observed as a day of rest from usual activities. According to Jewish tradition, Shabbat starts on Friday evening at sundown and lasts until sundown on Saturday. It can be observed in a variety of ways through various home rituals including lighting candles, eating a meal(s) with family, friends and others, eating challah (plaited bread), visiting the synagogue, as well as observing prohibitions like refraining from driving.

The social and religious significance of Shabbat cannot be overstated, so when studying Jewish identity, JPR is particularly interested in understanding how and the extent to which Jews in the UK mark the day. To this end, several questions in the [2022 National Jewish Identity Survey \(NJIS\)](#)<sup>3</sup> addressed the topic. NJIS was carried out between 16 November and 23 December 2022. The final sample size was 4,891 self-identifying Jewish people, aged 16 and above, and living in the UK.

<sup>1</sup> Ahad Ha'Am (1856-1927) was a renowned Hebrew writer and journalist, and a leading pre-state Zionist thinker.

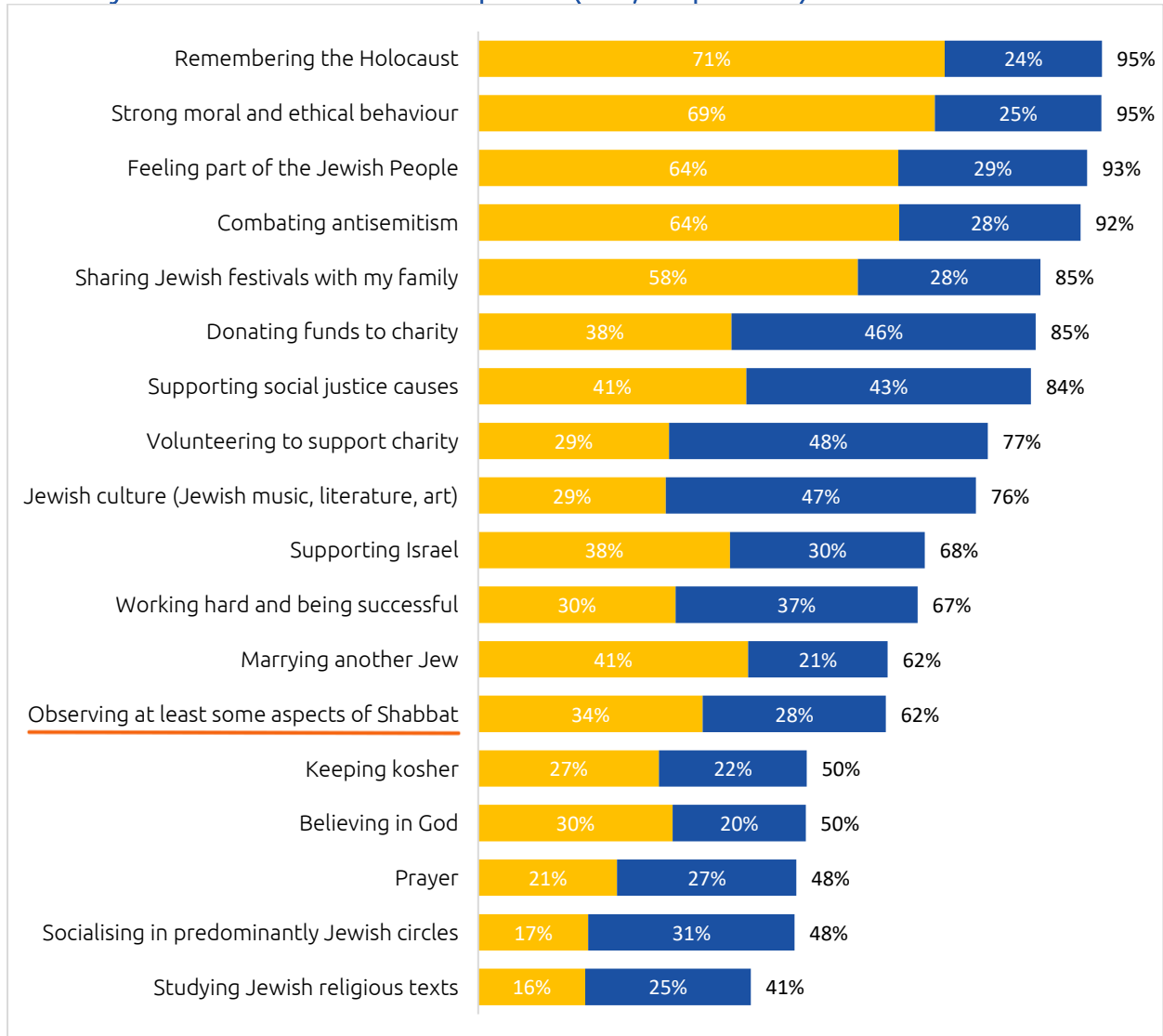
<sup>2</sup> The word 'Shabbat' is derived from the Hebrew word וַיִּשְׁבּוֹת *vayishbot* (and He rested).

<sup>3</sup> Graham, D. and Boyd, J. (2024). *Jews in the UK today: Key findings from the JPR National Jewish Identity Survey*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

## / Attitudes toward Shabbat

When asked about the level of importance they attach to ‘Observing at least some aspects of Shabbat’, respondents ranked it relatively low, just 13th out of 18 items covering a range of Jewish identity markers. About one in three Jews (34%) said it was ‘very important’, and a further 28% said it was ‘fairly important’ (Figure 1).

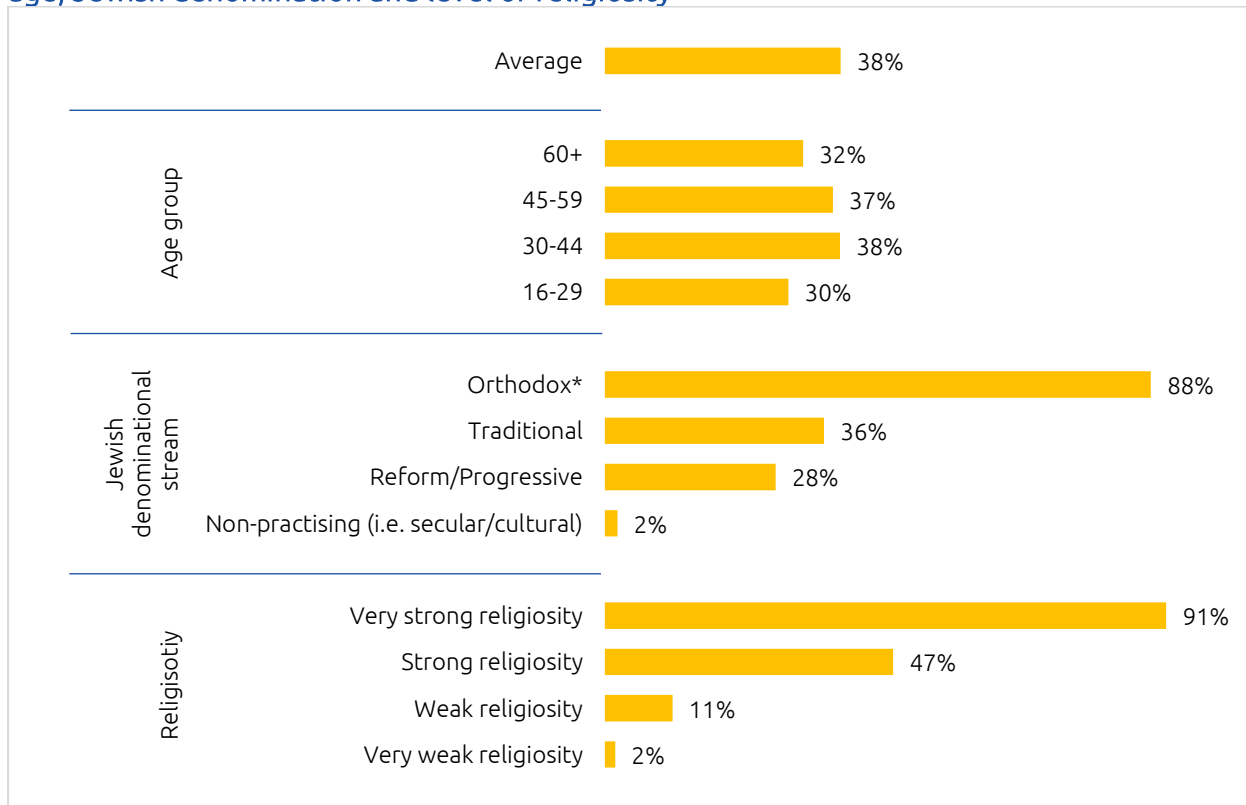
**Figure 1. Proportion of Jews saying different identity markers are Very or Fairly important to how they see themselves as a Jewish person (N=4,891 per item)**



Question: How important or unimportant are each of the following to how you see yourself as a Jewish person?

The likelihood of Jews saying that observing at least some aspects of Shabbat is ‘very important’ varies, particularly in terms of their denomination and religiosity. For example, 88% of those who self-identify as Orthodox say Shabbat is very important to how they see themselves as Jews, compared to just 36% of those who self-identify as Traditional (Figure 2). Similarly, most (91%) of those with ‘very strong’ religiosity say observing Shabbat is very important, compared with less than half (47%) of those with ‘strong’ religiosity. On the other hand, age is not a significant factor in determining attitudes towards the importance of Shabbat, with minimal variation between the age groups.

Figure 2. Proportion saying 'Observing at least some aspects of Shabbat' is Very important by age, Jewish denomination and level of religiosity

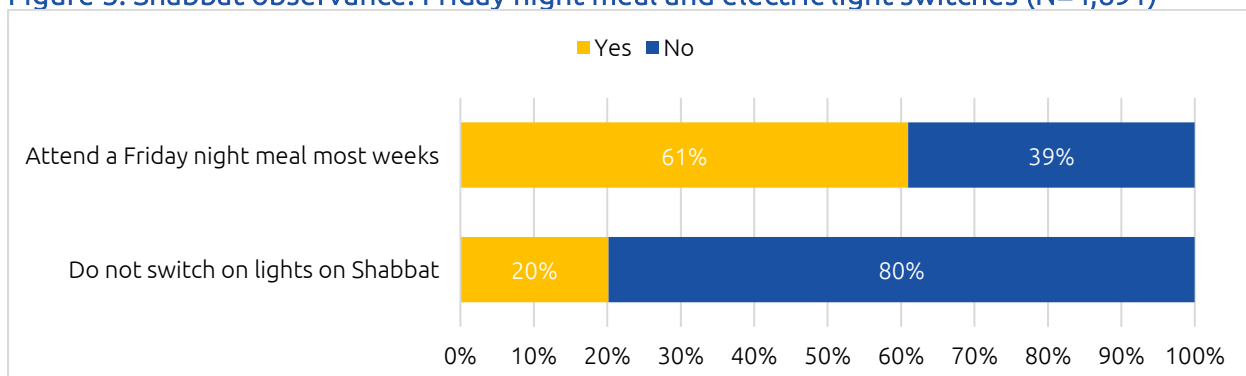


\* Orthodox (e.g. would not turn on light on Shabbat)

### / Shabbat observance

The survey found that six out of ten Jews (61%) attended a Friday night (Shabbat) meal most weeks (Figure 3). While attending a Friday night family meal may be considered little different from any other night (albeit at the expense of participating in other social activities on a Friday night), other practices, especially those related to prohibitions, are more restrictive. One example relates to the biblical ban on igniting a fire on Shabbat, which rabbinical Judaism extends to not operating anything electrical (e.g. turning lights or ovens on or off). Far fewer respondents (20%) observe this more restrictive practice.

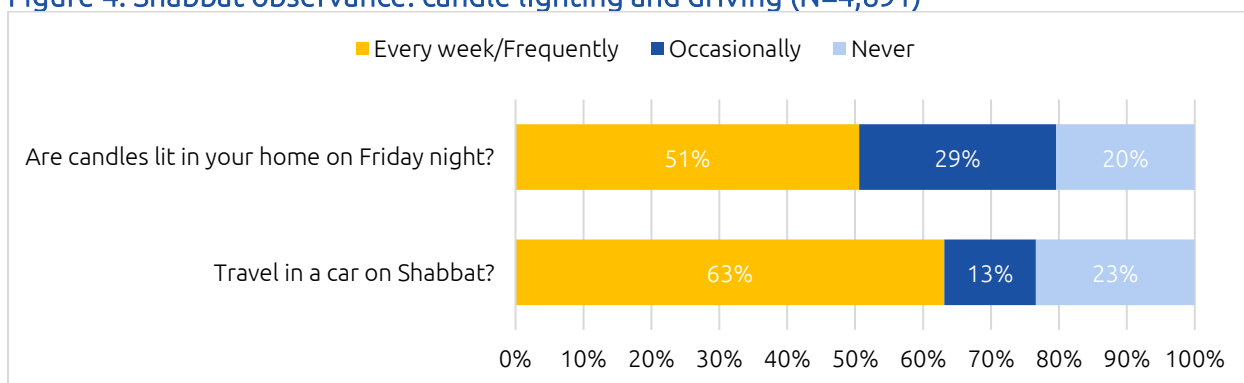
Figure 3. Shabbat observance: Friday night meal and electric light switches (N=4,891)



Question: Which of the following Shabbat practices do you currently observe?

In addition to a Friday night meal, it is traditional for Jewish families to light candles on Shabbat and eat challah—a traditional plaited loaf of bread. Most respondents (79%) said they had purchased a challah in the previous twelve months. Moreover, half (51%) of respondents said a pair of candles are lit in their homes on Friday night ‘every week/frequently’ to welcome Shabbat, with 80% saying this happens at least occasionally (Figure 4). By contrast, the more restrictive practice of not driving on Shabbat—Orthodox Jewish law prohibits travelling in motor vehicles on Shabbat—is only observed by less than a quarter (23%) of respondents, similar to the 20% who refrain from using electric light switches (Figure 3)

**Figure 4. Shabbat observance: candle lighting and driving (N=4,891)**

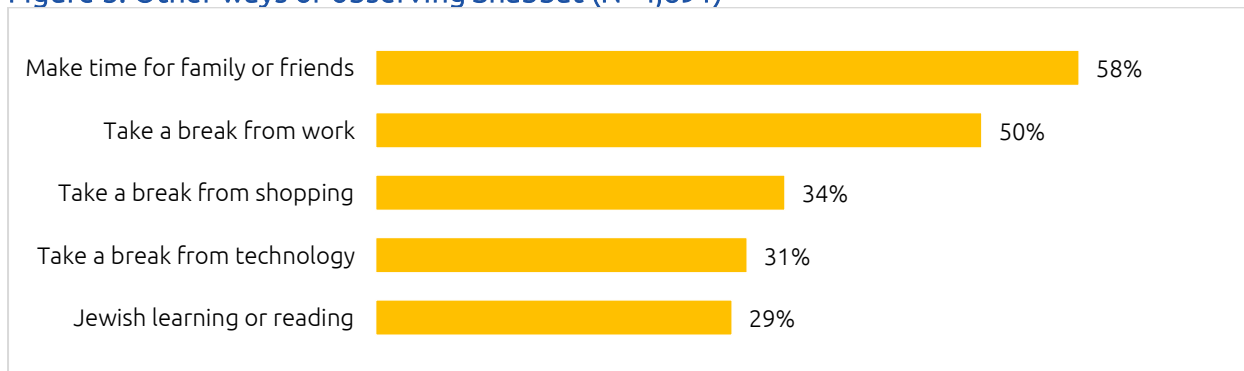


Question: Some Jews do not travel in cars or use public transport on Shabbat due to the prohibitions of Jewish law. Do you travel on Shabbat?

Synagogue attendance is a significant aspect of Shabbat observance among Jews, and 27% attend services on ‘most Sabbaths or more often’ (although it is much higher among men (36%) than among women (19%)). This overall attendance rate slightly exceeds the proportion who adhere to stricter practises such as not using electric lights or motor vehicles, but it falls short of those who participate in Friday night rituals. However, JPR data also show that the more frequently respondents attend synagogue services, the greater their feelings of communal attachment and connectedness. And, interestingly, the data show that communal attachment is associated with greater levels of happiness and life satisfaction.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to religious rituals and traditions, it is common for Jewish people to mark Shabbat in less ritualistic yet, nevertheless, distinctive ways too. More than half of respondents (58%) ‘make time for family or friends’, and half (50%) ‘take a break from work’ (Figure 5). About one in three British Jews refrains from shopping and using technology.

**Figure 5. Other ways of observing Shabbat (N=4,891)**



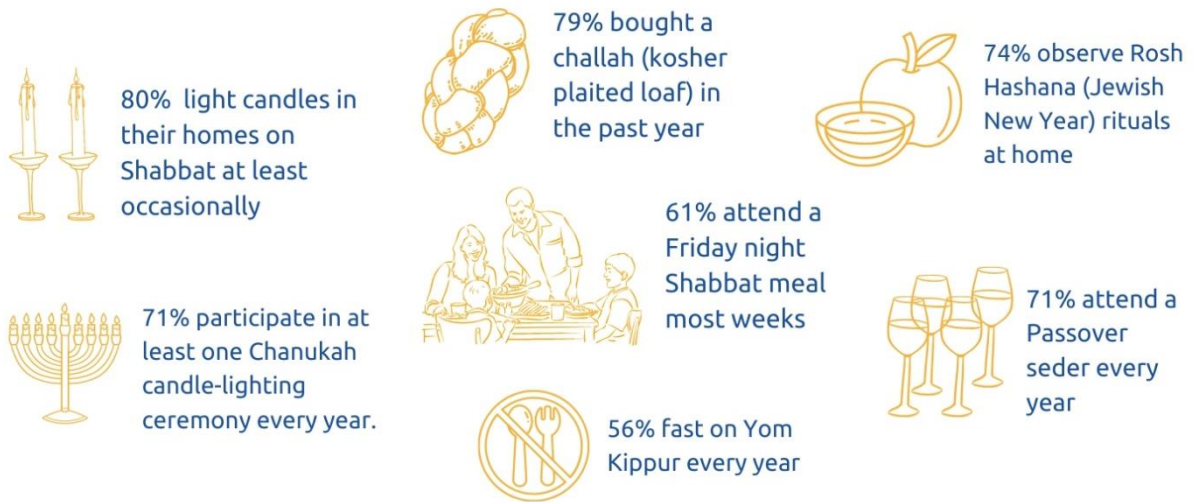
Question: And considering other ways people may observe Shabbat, do you regularly do any of the following because it is Shabbat?

<sup>4</sup> Graham and Boyd (2024), op. cit., p.43, pp.107-8.

## / Shabbat in context

However one measures it, Shabbat is the most observed repetitive Jewish ritual practice. Shabbat is more commonly observed over any given year than Rosh Hashana, Chanukah and Passover—three of the most widely marked Jewish festivals (Figure 6).

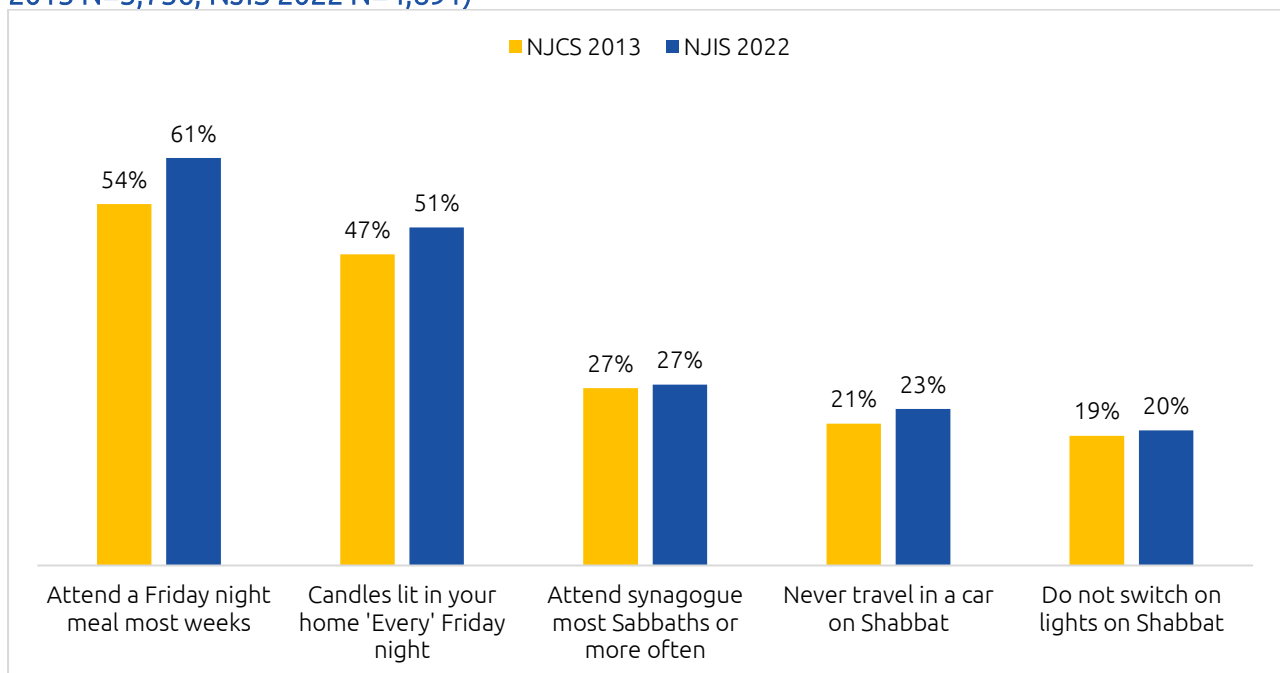
Figure 6. The most common Jewish ritual practices among British Jews



Source: Graham and Boyd (2024) op. cit.

JPR's National Jewish Community Survey (NJCS), which was carried out in 2013, also gathered data on Shabbat, providing us with an opportunity to measure change over time. It shows that little has changed in the decade or so between these two surveys, although there has been a modest increase in the observance of Shabbat rituals over the period (Figure 7).

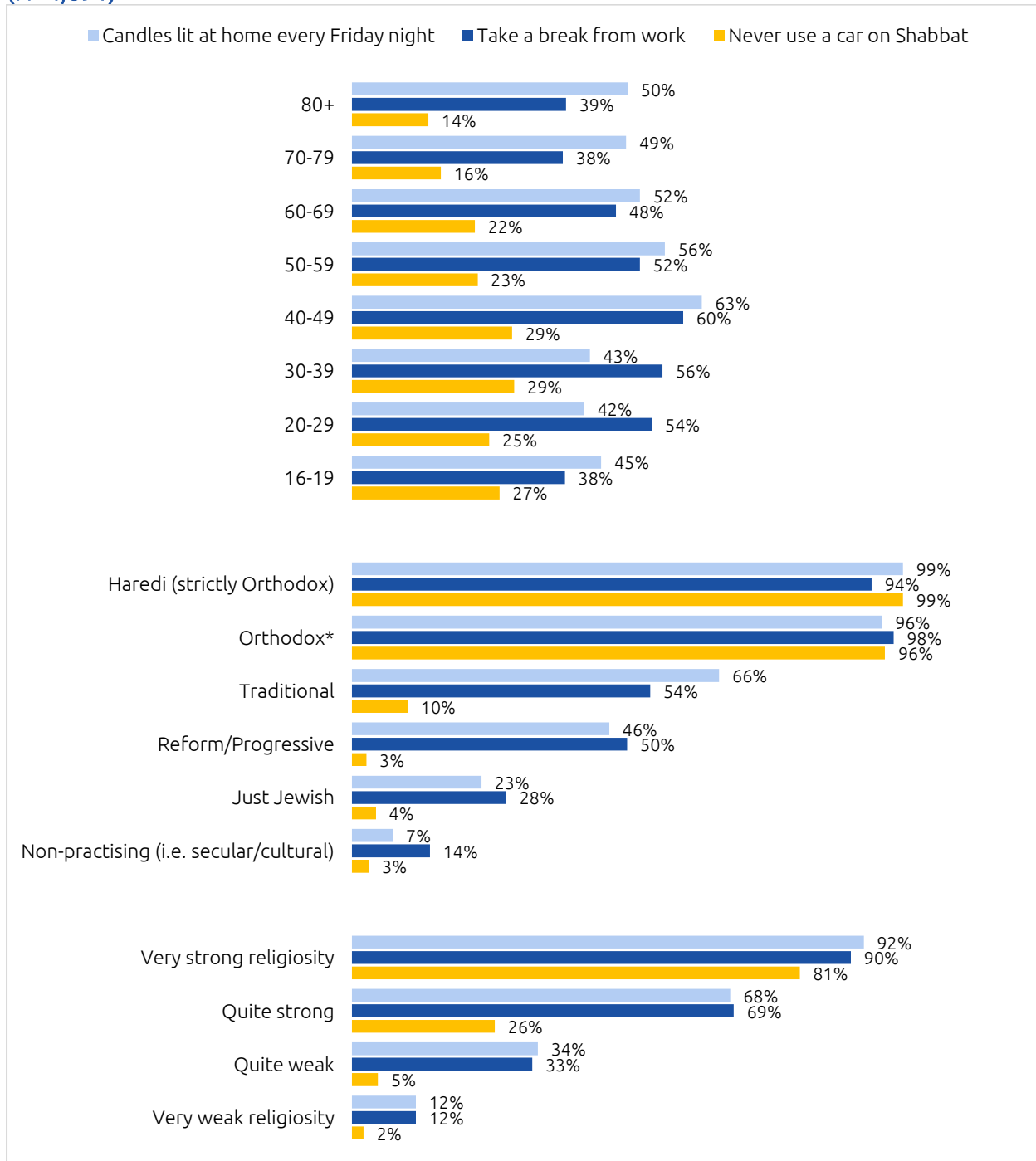
Figure 7. Shabbat observance, NJCS (2013) compared with NJIS (2022) – various practices (NJCS 2013 N=3,736, NJIS 2022 N=4,891)



## / Who does what on Shabbat

We can examine who does and does not observe Shabbat practices by selecting three of these Shabbat markers: candle lighting, abstaining from work, and not using a car. In terms of age, and unlike the pattern noted in Figure 2 regarding attitudes, there is a clear pattern showing that observance peaks in the forties and declines thereafter (Figure 8). Resting from work is markedly more common than candle lighting among those in their 20s and 30s, whereas the reverse is true for all other age groups. This is likely a reflection of life stage, as people in these age groups are less likely to have formed families with whom to share Shabbat rituals.

**Figure 8. Observance of Shabbat by age, current Jewish denomination, and level of religiosity (N=4,891)**



\* Orthodox (e.g. would not turn on light on Shabbat)



There is little to differentiate Orthodox and Haredi Jews regarding Shabbat observance, which is more or less universal across all three markers. We also see that the behaviour of Traditional Jews is more similar to Reform/Progressive than to Orthodox Jews.

There is a close relationship between respondents' level of religiosity and the likelihood of observing each marker. Among the very strongly religious, the vast majority observe all three Shabbat markers, including over eight out of ten (81%) abstaining from using a car on Shabbat. Abstaining from motor vehicle usage is far less common elsewhere, even among the 'quite strongly' religious.

## / Conclusion

At the end of Shabbat there is a tradition to observe a short ceremony called *Havdalah*. This ritual culminates in the dousing of a burning plaited candle in some wine after saying the words: "[God] distinguishes between the sacred and the profane, between light and darkness, between Israel and other people of the world, between the seventh day and the six days of the week." It marks a moment in time, a movement from rest back to the hustle and bustle of daily life.

Yet the *idea* of Shabbat remains timeless and very much present in modern life: a recurring break or rest from the everyday, marked by ritual or by simply doing things differently. For the religiously inclined, it presents an opportunity to focus on spiritual wellbeing and growth. For Jews who are less observant, it may be more akin to the reboot button on a computer, an opportunity for a pause before getting things going again. Either way, as Ahad Ha'am maintained, this weekly pause for Shabbat is an important part of the cement that glues the Jewish people to their identity.

In this paper, we have been able to examine the idea empirically. We find that in the UK, Jews are indeed more likely to observe Shabbat than any other recurring Jewish ritual or festival.

We have also seen how Shabbat is observed in multiple ways by all types of Jews, some incorporating home rituals, others observing more restrictive prohibitions on everyday activities. And, as we find with most aspects of Jewish practice, the more religious a person is, the more rituals they tend to observe. Nevertheless, for most Jews, Shabbat represents a key recurring opportunity to separate sacred time (for the religious) or restful time (for the secular) from regular time, and offers a plethora of ways for doing so. Perhaps that is the secret of Shabbat's enduring and pervasive nature, a central marker not only of Jewish identity but also of Jewish life and continuity.

## / Methodological note

The data in this report are drawn from the JPR National Jewish Identity Survey, which took place as part of the third wave of JPR's Research Panel. The panel is designed to explore the attitudes and experiences of Jews in the UK on a range of issues in order to generate data to support planning both within and for the Jewish community. The questions included in the study were developed in-house by JPR, but drew heavily on JPR's 2013 National Jewish Community Survey to help assess change over time.

Fieldwork was carried out in November and December 2022. The survey was completed online, by computer, smartphone or tablet, with a handful of individuals requesting and being interviewed by telephone. A total of 4,907 took part; the final analysable sample contained 4,891 observations after ineligible respondents were removed. All respondents were UK residents aged 16 or above who self-identified as being Jewish in some way. Over two-thirds of respondents (69% or n=3,366) were existing panellists, having been recruited in the first or second waves, while the remaining 31% (n=1,541) were newly recruited at this third survey wave. 58.5% of existing panellists who were invited to take part did so. A total of 2,070 individuals who had not previously joined the panel completed the registration survey during the survey fieldwork period. Of these, 69.3% completed the survey. Five £100 shopping vouchers were offered as an incentive to complete the survey.

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 other administrative sources. All aspects of the panel and its constituent surveys are developed, implemented, analysed and reported in-house at JPR. The panel and its component surveys are delivered using specialist, secure software provided by Forsta, and ZK Analytics provides additional support for data management and weighting. The panel and survey data were analysed using SPSS, while weighting was carried out using R.

## / Acknowledgements

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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](http://www.jpr.org.uk).

## / About the author

**Dr David Graham** is a Senior Research Fellow at JPR, an Honorary Associate at the Department of Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish Studies at the University of Sydney, and an Honorary Research Associate at the University of Cape Town. He holds a DPhil from the University of Oxford and has published widely for academic and general interest audiences. A geographer by training and expert in the sociodemographic study of Jews in the UK, Australia and South Africa, his skills encompass statistical analysis, survey and questionnaire design, census data analysis and geographic information system mapping. Since joining the JPR team in 2009, Dr Graham has been involved in numerous studies of Jewish life and has undertaken work for several organisations, including the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Kaplan Centre at the University of Cape Town, Jewish Care, the Jewish Chronicle, UJIA, Pears Foundation, the Union of Jewish Students and JCA Australia.