

Celebrating the Festival of Lights: The popularity of Chanukah among Jews in the UK

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/ Introduction

Chanukah (or Hanukkah) (lit. 'dedication' in Hebrew) is the Jewish Festival of the Rededication of the Temple, or more popularly, the Jewish Festival of Lights. As we report here, Chanukah is one of, if not the, most widely observed Jewish festivals, and is among the most well-known outside the Jewish community.

Chanukah commemorates the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem following its religious defilement during the reign of the Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes who forcibly imposed Greek cultural norms and practices – Hellenism – on the Jews of Judea. In 167 BCE, Judah Maccabee, or Judah the Hammer, rose up against the King's oppressive rule following the initiation of a revolt by his priestly father, Mattathias, in the village of Modi'in near Jerusalem. Judah and his father were key figures in the '*Hashmonai*' (or Hasmonean) dynasty, and their fight consisted not only of a revolt against Seleucid rule but also an internal struggle against Jews who had adopted Greek norms and culture. Ultimately, in 164 BCE, the Hasmoneans, led by Judah Maccabee, secured control of the Temple and then cleansed and rededicated it.¹

Later rabbinic tradition has it that the holy oil used to rededicate the Temple's seven-branched lampstand, or '*menorah*,' was sufficient to last for only one day but miraculously lasted for eight days, which became the length of the festival.² Today, Jews light an eight-branched menorah, or '*Chanukiah*,' to celebrate Chanukah, and commonly sing *Ma'oz Tzur*, a poem written in the 12th or 13th century celebrating Jewish deliverance from ancient foes.

While Chanukah is well known outside of Jewish circles and, as we show, widely observed among Jews of all backgrounds, it is nevertheless a minor Jewish festival lacking any biblical basis. Arguably, its modern popularity and many of its customs are as much due to its close temporal proximity to Christmas as anything else, and indeed, the widespread practice of giving gifts at Chanukah is likely derived from this tradition.

In summer 2025, in our 'Jews in Uncertain Times Survey', JPR asked a representative sample of Jews aged 16 and above living in the UK (n=4,822) a series of questions to explore the breadth and depth of their Jewish practice over the previous twelve months, including in relation to Chanukah. This brief paper examines the data generated from that study, as well as several previous JPR surveys, focusing specifically on the commonality of lighting Chanukah candles or participating in Chanukah candle-lighting ceremonies.

¹ An discussion of the historical background of Chanukah can be found on the following episode of *The Ancients* podcast with Professor Jodi Magness (2024): 'Hanukkah & the Maccabees'

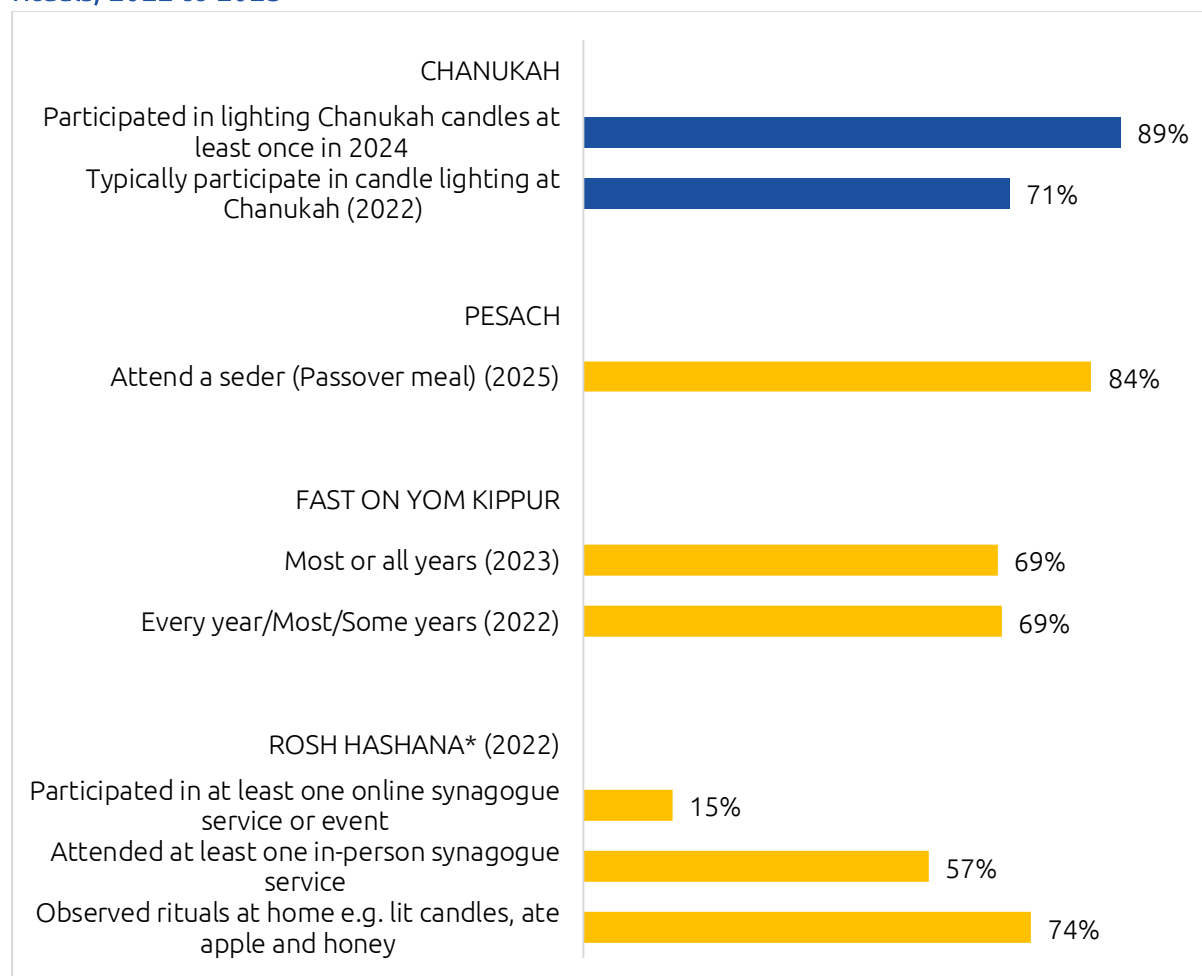
<https://open.spotify.com/episode/5eEl5RKQ5H2GG3JPoWaDUZ?si=ce9f668efd0f4c18>

² See: Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b.

/ Most Jews celebrate Chanukah

Our survey found that the vast majority (89%) of respondents said they had lit or participated in the lighting of Chanukah candles at least once in the previous twelve months – i.e. during the holiday in 2024 (technically, 25 December 2024 to 2 January 2025). Chanukah is therefore the most commonly observed Jewish festival in the UK in recent years (Figure 1). By comparison, 84% of respondents attended a seder meal at Pesach (Passover), 74% observed Rosh Hashana rituals at home and 69% reported fasting on Yom Kippur (see note under chart).

Figure 1. Participation in Chanukah candle lighting, compared to other Jewish festivals and rituals, 2022 to 2025



* Note. Only data on Pesach and “participated in lighting Chanukah candles and least once in 2024” are from the 2025 survey; other data were gathered in the years indicated. Data on Rosh Hashana were gathered in 2022 when there was still concern about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and online services and events were being held, especially by non-Orthodox Jewish communities. Therefore, the data may not be typical.

Question (2025): *Thinking about your Jewish practice over the last twelve months, did you:* [Response options: Light or observe Shabbat candles being lit in your home every or most Friday nights; Attend a seder (Passover meal); Light, or participate in the lighting of, Chanukah candles at least once; Celebrate Succot in some way (e.g. attending synagogue, spending some time in a ‘Sukkah’ etc.?).]

Question (2023): *Which of the following Jewish practices do you personally observe?* [Response option: Fast on Yom Kippur most or all years].

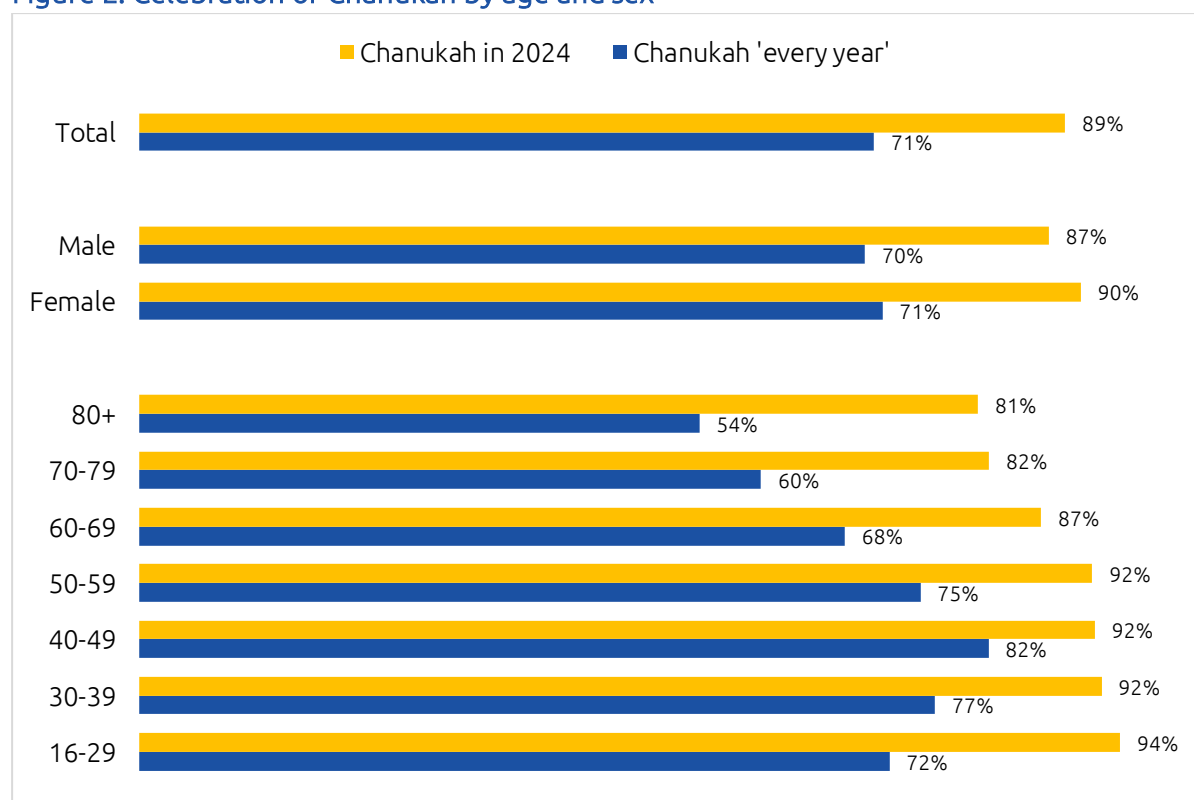
Questions (2022): *Thinking back to Rosh Hashanah in September (2022), did you do any of the following?* [Response options: Attended at least one in-person synagogue service; Participated in at least one online synagogue service or event; Observed rituals at home e.g. lit candles, ate apple and honey]; *Do you fast on Yom Kippur?* [Response options: Every year; Most years; Some years; Never; No - due to health reasons].

Importantly, Figure 1 offers two different measures for the proportion of British Jews who celebrate Chanukah. The distinction between them is due to the fact that they are measuring slightly different things: the first one (89%), drawing on data from our 2025 survey, refers to those who said they participated in at least one candle-lighting ceremony in the previous year (i.e. the specific Chanukah holiday that ran from 25 December 2024 to 2 January 2025 – referred to throughout this paper as ‘Chanukah in 2024’); the second, drawing on data from our 2022 National Jewish Identity Survey, refers to the proportion who say they participate in at least one candle-lighting ceremony *every year*, a more demanding measure. We consider these differences in parts of the remainder of this paper.

/ Which Jews are most likely to celebrate Chanukah?

While little distinguishes male from female respondents in terms of celebrating Chanukah, the festival is more likely to be celebrated by younger than older respondents (Figure 2). Those who are most likely to celebrate it ‘every year’ are aged in their forties, presumably reflecting the fact that this age group is most likely to have young children at home.

Figure 2. Celebration of Chanukah by age and sex



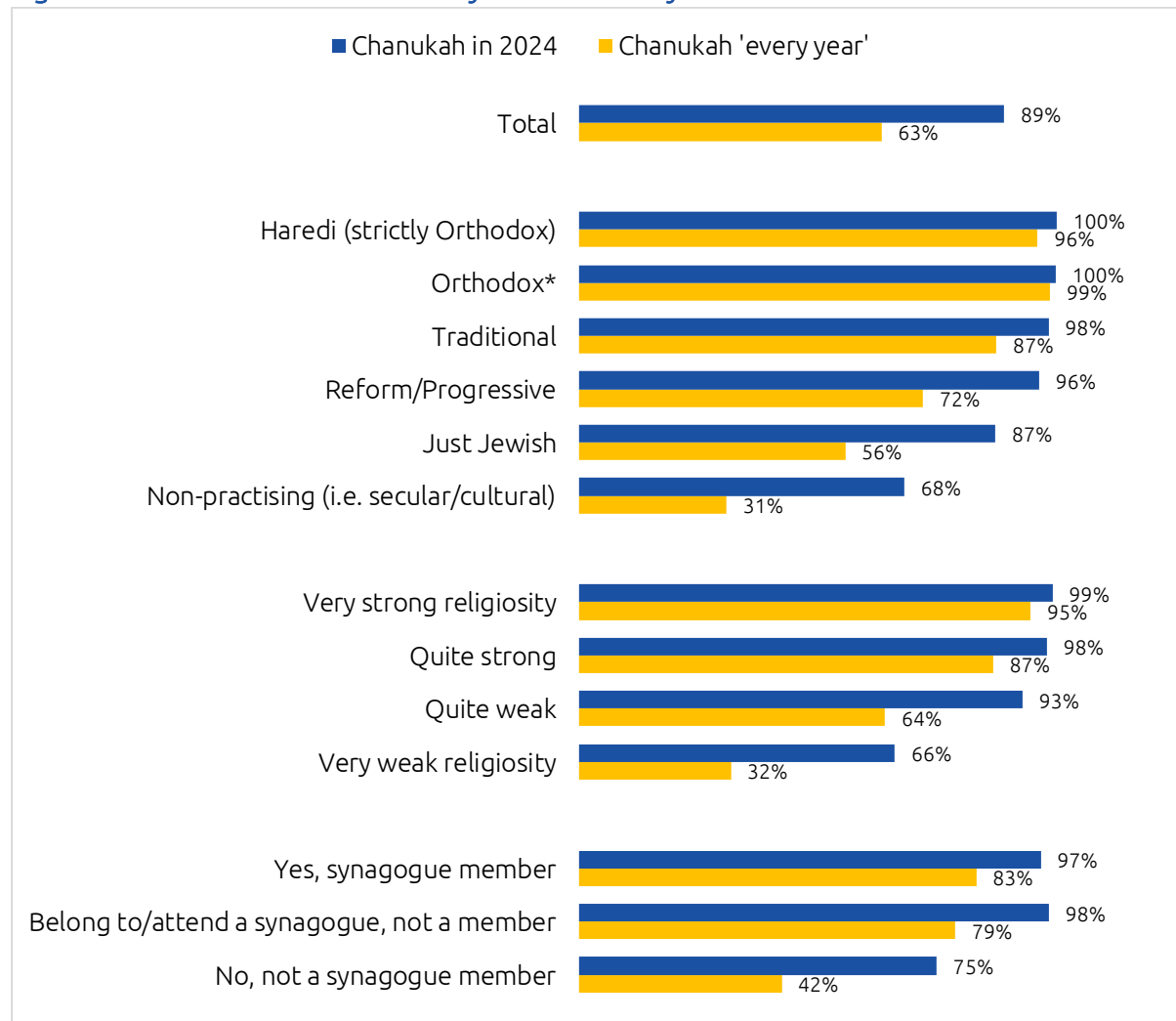
Question (2022): *During Chanukah, do you typically participate in one or more candle-lighting ceremonies, either at home or elsewhere?* [Response options: Never; Some years; Most years; Every year].

Similarly, those living in larger households were more likely to celebrate Chanukah in 2024 than those living in smaller households (Figure 3). Even so, the majority (83%) of even those who live alone celebrated Chanukah, albeit presumably with other family members or friends in many cases. Marital status, on the other hand, makes little difference to the likelihood of celebrating Chanukah.

Figure 3. Celebration of Chanukah in 2024 by household size and marital status



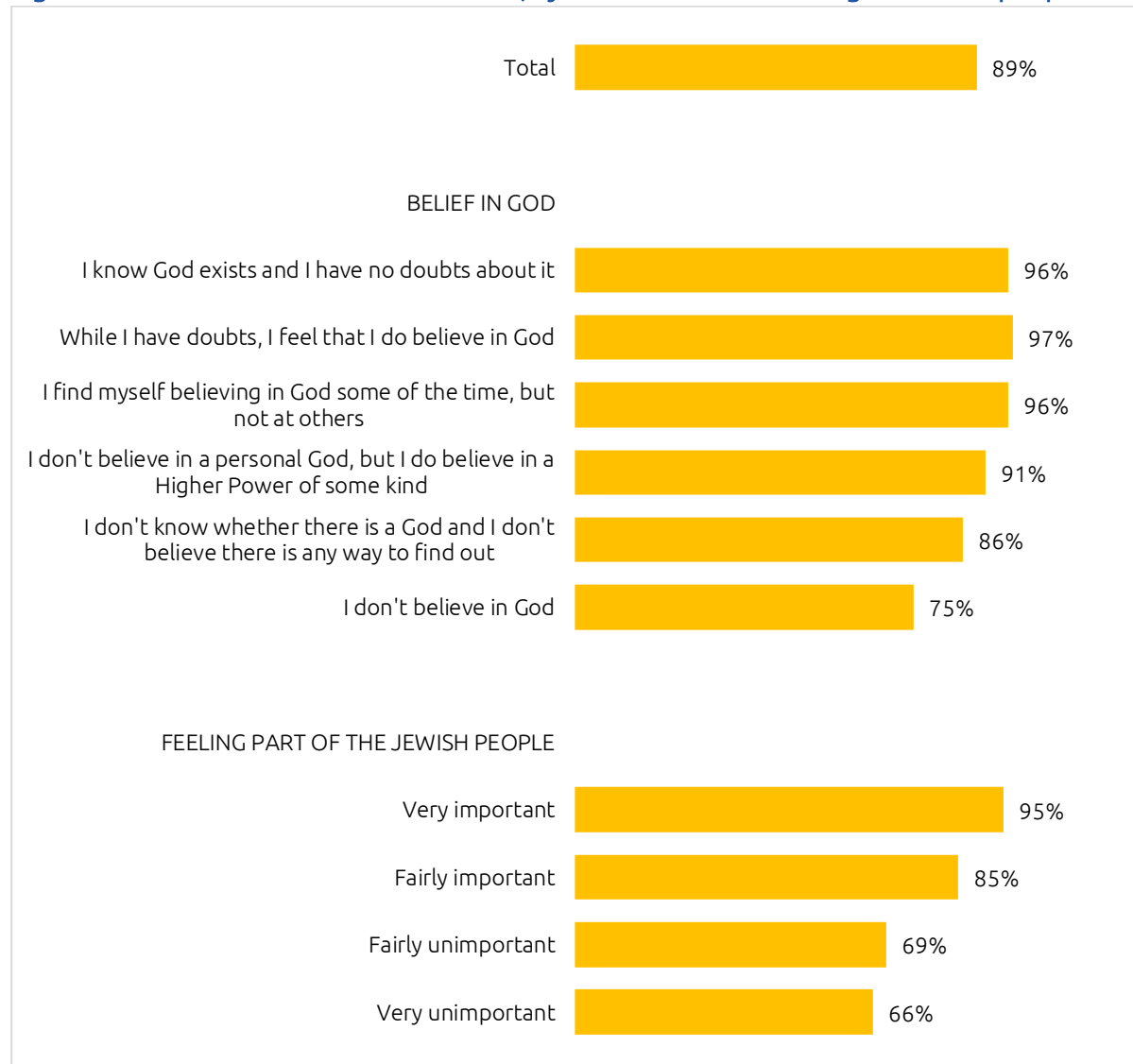
Figure 4. Celebration of Chanukah by Jewish identity and affiliation



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

As with most aspects of Jewish identity, engagement is closely related to religious background. In Figure 4 we see that more Orthodox denominations are more likely to celebrate Chanukah than less Orthodox denominations. Similarly, the less religious respondents said they were, the less likely they were to celebrate Chanukah in 2024 or to do so 'every year.' And while most (83%) synagogue members celebrate Chanukah every year, this is the case for just 42% of those who do not belong to or attend a synagogue.

Figure 5. Celebration of Chanukah in 2024, by belief in God and feelings of Jewish peoplehood



Note. The 'belief in God' question was borrowed from the British Social Attitudes Survey, and was asked in wave 7 (2025) of the JPR Research Panel. Between about 10% and 20% of British Jews chose each of the six response options: 19% selected "I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it" and 22% selected "I don't believe in God." The Jewish peoplehood question asked respondents to assess the importance of 'feeling part of the Jewish People' to how they see themselves as a Jew: most said 'very important' (62%) or 'fairly important' (26%); small proportions (between 3% and 7%) gave either of the other answers.

While it is not biblical, the mythic story of Chanukah includes a miraculous episode in which the oil for the rededication of the Temple lasted for eight days rather than just one. The story also highlights Jewish triumph and survival and, as such, touches on the theme of Jewish peoplehood. As with all Jewish festivals, the more religious respondents are, the more likely

they are to celebrate Chanukah – Figure 5 shows that almost all Jews who believe in God or a ‘Higher Power of some kind’ celebrate Chanukah (in the range of 91% to 96% for each of the four most believing groups) – but it is noteworthy that three in four (75%) completely atheist Jews (i.e. those who say “I don’t believe in God”) also do, demonstrating the festival’s secular appeal. Chanukah’s significance in terms of Jewish peoplehood is perhaps even more pronounced, with Jews who regard this dimension of Jewishness as particularly important to them notably more likely to light Chanukah candles than those who see peoplehood as unimportant to them.

/ Final thoughts

Despite its relatively late addition to the Jewish calendar, Chanukah is today the most universal of the annual panoply of Jewish festivals, providing joy and light in the middle of the northern hemisphere’s winter. Perhaps its broad appeal lies in the fact that it isn’t an especially religious festival but is rather associated with a story of heroism and victory in the face of tyranny. The additional fact that it occurs at a similar time to Christmas likely also affects its popularity in many Diaspora communities, offering Jews their own holiday at a time when others are celebrating theirs. To many Jews, this timing and quite secular cultural interpretation is perhaps the key to Chanukah’s enduring and widespread appeal.

/ Methodological note

The data in this paper are drawn from the JPR Research Panel – mainly from its seventh wave in the 'Jews in Uncertain Times Survey' which took place between 8 June and 20 July 2025 (n=4,822) – as well as some of the previous waves: in 2022 (wave 3, 16 November to 23 December, n=4,891) and 2023 (wave 4, 16 April to 31 May n=3,767). 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.

All panel surveys were completed online, on computers, smartphones or tablets, with a handful of individuals being interviewed by telephone. Respondents to all the surveys discussed here are UK residents aged 16 or above who self-identify as being Jewish in some way.

Survey data have been cleaned and weighted by age, sex, geography and synagogue membership drawing on 2021 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 have been analysed using SPSS, while weighting was carried out using R.

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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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