

## Searching for community

A portrait of undergraduate Jewish students in five UK cities

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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.

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# 1 Introduction and methodology

## Background

This study was originally commissioned by the Union of Jewish Students (UJS) following a campaign pledge made by the 2014-15 UJS President, Ella Rose. Her vision at that time was to commission a piece of research that would both capture the nature of the identities of Jewish students today, and provide some insights into the types of Jewish activities that are most likely to appeal to them. The initial hope was that it would be possible to conduct a repeat study of JPR's 2011 National Jewish Student Survey (NJSS), a major quantitative project commissioned by UJS and Pears Foundation, and funded predominantly by Pears Foundation, with additional contributions from the United Jewish Israel Appeal (UJIA), the Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe and the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, however, the costs of repeating that exercise proved to be too high, so UJS opted to proceed with a smaller, qualitative exercise instead. Nevertheless, the goals remained the same, and the different methodological approach employed in this instance provides a rather different view to NJSS – a more intimate and personal portrait of Jewish students in 2016 that captures their voices rather than their numbers, and brings to life their opinions and attitudes in a way that quantitative data can sometimes fail to do.

The findings are based on data gathered in eight focus groups with students located in five different cities – London, Nottingham, Birmingham, Bristol and Coventry (Warwick) – and studying at ten different universities. The cities selected were chosen based on existing knowledge about where Jewish students tend to study. NJSS demonstrated that one quarter of all Jewish students are based in just three universities – Leeds, Birmingham and Nottingham – so it was important to include at least some of these, as they have the largest and most active Jewish Societies (JSocs). In the end, four focus groups were conducted in two of these places – two in Birmingham and two in Nottingham. Another quarter of all Jewish students are based in a further five universities – Manchester, Oxford, Cambridge, University College London and King's College London. Out of these five, it was decided to focus on students based in London alone, partly due to financial constraints, but also because the London Jewish student population includes a sizeable number of Jews who grew up outside of London, as well as many who choose to remain in their London parental homes whilst at university, so London students offer something of a contrast to Jewish students elsewhere. Two focus groups were conducted in London, involving students from UCL, King's and Imperial College.

The decision to leave out students from Oxford and Cambridge, in particular, as well as Leeds, was taken with a heavy heart – these are all important centres, and had finances allowed, they would have been included. However, we were also keen to include students from some of the fourteen universities identified in NJSS with slightly smaller Jewish populations that have a Jewish infrastructure,<sup>2</sup> and Warwick and Bristol were included with this in mind. Warwick was selected because it has had a fairly consistent number of Jewish students and level of Jewish activity for some time; by contrast, Bristol is one of the universities, alongside Manchester, that

1 Graham, D. and Boyd, J. (2011). *Home and away: Jewish journeys towards independence. Key findings from the 2011 National Jewish Student Survey*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

2 *Ibid.*, p.26.

has seen the greatest amount of change in the numbers of Jewish students studying there since 2011. By working in this way, the research goal was not to maximise the number of students included, nor was it to accurately represent the entire Jewish student population, but rather to identify and explore some of the dynamics that exist for Jews in some of the most commonly-experienced university environments.

Each focus group involved eight students, with one exception, which had nine. They were recruited by student representatives, employed for this purpose by JPR, who were given clear instructions about the profiles of students we were looking for. In each case, we sought to find a cross-section of different kinds of students, with diversity across several variables, including year of study, Jewish denominational background, and level of engagement in Jewish activities both on campus and during their upbringing. We were particularly keen to include at least some participants on the periphery of Jewish student and communal life – that is, those with little or no involvement in Jewish activities on campus – although it is never easy to attract people with this type of profile. To mitigate against this challenge, as well as to achieve the desired participation rates, all students involved were paid an incentive of £25 for taking part in a focus group discussion.

The content of the discussion guide was developed by JPR, represented by Dr Jonathan Boyd (Executive Director) and Richard Goldstein (Director of Operations), in close consultation with the other members of the project team – David Brown (Chief Executive, Union of Jewish Students), Dr Helena Miller (Director of Research and Development, United Jewish Israel Appeal), Ben Carr (at the time, a student at the University of Nottingham), and Ella Rose (former President, UJS). The discussion guide began by looking at questions of identity, both in general and in Jewish terms, before exploring the types of activities students are involved in and those they find particularly appealing or, conversely, unattractive. This approach allowed for time to discuss a wide range of topics, organisations and events, ensuring that all major elements of the contemporary Jewish student experience were included. To help counter any reluctance to express their opinions verbally, each focus group session also included an activity in which the students were encouraged to write a few sentences about some of the thirty-two different Jewish student events and activities that were presented to them, and indicate whether their instinctive attitude to each one was positive, negative or neutral – i.e. whether they would attend, might attend, or would not attend. Some of the results of this exercise have been incorporated into the report, and are summarised in the Appendix.

In addition, each participating student completed a short questionnaire which investigated some of their basic demographic characteristics, as well as their involvement in Jewish life. This information was analysed to develop an assessment of who was involved in this study, and the detailed results can be found in the Appendix. However, to briefly summarise the sample as a whole, it can be considered broadly representative of undergraduate Jewish students based in the five cities in terms of gender and age; however, whilst it includes students from a cross-section of denominations found within the Jewish community, it is likely that it includes a disproportionately high number of students who come from traditional, United Synagogue-type homes and who have had slightly higher than

average levels of involvement in Jewish communal life. Some of the data from the questionnaire have also been used to provide information about the students where appropriate when quoting them throughout the report – notably, their gender, at which university they are studying, and the Jewish denomination(s) with which they identify.

All eight focus group sessions took place in February 2016, and each one took just under two hours to complete. The time of year was chosen at JPR's recommendation – it is late enough in the academic year to ensure that first-year students have had at least some experience of student life, whilst also being at a time that is unaffected by university holidays or exams. The fieldwork for NJSS was conducted at a similar point in the year for the same reasons. All focus group sessions took place in a university setting, selected by the student representatives in each city. Participants began by completing a written survey designed to investigate some of their demographic characteristics and Jewish upbringing, before beginning the group discussion itself. Each participant was given a personal identification number at the beginning of the focus group session to aid analysis and to highlight the fact that any comments they made would be treated in the strictest confidence. Throughout this report, there are no references to any of the participants by name, and every effort has been made to protect their anonymity.

Each focus group discussion was recorded and subsequently transcribed, after which the transcriptions were cleaned and labelled. An inductive approach was used to analyse the qualitative data. First, we developed a framework based on two central research questions: (i) how do the students understand and articulate their general and Jewish identities; and (ii) what is their involvement in, and attitude to, a range of general and Jewish activities on campus? Second, the framework was used to structure and label the data, to categorise responses and identify recurring themes. Third, further analysis of these themes looked for patterns in the data, identified response clusters, and sought out answers to the key research questions. Finally, these answers were arranged to present the findings in a coherent manner, and written up.

### Larger context

In understanding the findings, it may be important to bear in mind some of the issues about Jewish student life that were circulating in the media at the same time. In particular, on January 19, immediately prior to the fieldwork phase, an event organised by the Israel Societies of King's College London and the London School of Economics, in partnership with Yachad,<sup>3</sup> at which Ami Ayalon, the former head of the Shin Bet,<sup>4</sup> was invited to speak, was forcefully interrupted and violently broken up by pro-Palestinian protestors. The incident was widely reported in the Jewish and national press, and prompted a swift and comprehensive investigation by the authorities at King's College, who concluded that the protestors "chose to behave inappropriately," "crossed a line" and "should be held accountable for doing so." Their report concluded that "there is sufficient evidence of misconduct which constitutes a major infringement of the regulations against

3 Yachad is a UK-based non-governmental organisation that works to build active support for a two-state solution in the British Jewish community through educational projects and campaigns.

4 The 'Shin Bet' is the popular name for the Israeli Security Agency. Its official name is *Sherut ha-Bitachon ha-Klali*, meaning general security service; it is sometimes referred to by its acronym 'Shabak.'

those who chose to participate in the protest ... and recommends referral to a Disciplinary Committee.”<sup>5</sup>

In addition, during the fieldwork itself, Alex Chalmers, Co-Chairman of the Oxford University Labour Club (OULC), published an open statement on Facebook claiming that *“A large proportion of both OULC and the student left in Oxford more generally have some kind of problem with Jews. The decision of the club to endorse a movement [Israel Apartheid Week] with a history of targeting and harassing Jewish students and inviting antisemitic speakers to campus, despite the concerns of Jewish students, illustrates how uneven and insincere much of the active membership is when it comes to liberation.”*<sup>6</sup> His resignation from a club that counts some of the best known and most prominent politicians in the Labour Party among its former members also received widespread national coverage, and prompted an inquiry by the Labour Party headed by Baroness Royall. The inquiry subsequently became amalgamated into a larger inquiry into antisemitism in the Labour Party as a whole, led by Shami Chakrabarti, following the suspension of several Labour Party members for alleged antisemitic remarks, including Naseem Shah MP and Ken Livingstone, former Mayor of London, the results of which were published in June 2016. Furthermore, soon after the fieldwork was completed, Malia Bouattia ran for, and was successfully elected as the President of the National Union of Students (NUS), a victory that was reported to cause considerable concern among at least some Jewish students. A year prior to her election, Bouattia had been reproached by an NUS inquiry for the content of a speech she had given which was described as “antisemitic and therefore in breach of the NUS Code of Conduct.” During her election campaign, Jewish students, including over fifty JSoc Presidents, signed a letter alleging that Bouattia indulged in antisemitic tropes, and expressed concern over her apparent support for violent resistance by Palestinian groups. Bouattia strongly denied the allegations, and has described antisemitic prejudice as “despicable.”<sup>7</sup> Whilst her election occurred after the data were gathered (so there is no commentary here about how Jewish students feel about it), in general, the study took place in the context of a great deal of debate and anger about leftist antisemitism and anti-Zionism, both within the Labour Party and, more specifically, on university campuses.

More broadly, the research also took place at a time when there was a considerable degree of concern about Islamist extremism across Europe, following horrifying murderous jihadist attacks against French civilians in Paris in November 2015, as well as similarly deadly assaults on Jewish targets in Copenhagen (February 2015), Paris (January 2015) and Brussels (May 2014). The summer 2014 war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza saw widespread political and media condemnation of Israeli military tactics, with accusations of indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks particularly common, despite strong Israeli counterarguments. The war sparked a dramatic spike in the number of antisemitic incidents in the UK and across the continent; indeed, the Community Security Trust figures for 2014 were the highest ever recorded in the United Kingdom.<sup>8</sup> An increase in violence in Israel also coincided with the beginning of the 2015-16 academic year, with a series of

5 See: Creagh, I. (2016). “King’s College London Investigation Report – Events of January 19, 2016.” Downloaded from: <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/newsevents/news/newsrecords/docs/Investigation-Report---19-January-2016.pdf>

6 See: <https://www.facebook.com/alex.chalmers.16/posts/1054958807895916>.

7 See: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/24/new-nus-president-not-antisemitic-isis-sympathiser>.

8 See: *Antisemitic Incidents Report 2014*, London: Community Security Trust.

often deadly attacks on Israelis by Palestinians in the so-called ‘Knife Intifada,’ or ‘Stabbing Intifada,’ which was still an on-going issue during the fieldwork phase of this research. These events in Israel, as we shall see, prompted a reaction by various pro-Palestinian groups at British universities. More generally, the civil war in Syria was driving many Syrians to seek refuge in Europe, and there was an increasingly frenetic debate in Britain about whether or not to allow significant numbers of migrants and refugees into the country. This issue formed part of the background to the question of whether or not the United Kingdom should remain part of the European Union, which went to a referendum in June 2016 and ultimately resulted in a majority in favour of ‘Brexit,’ although at the time of the fieldwork, the public debate about this had yet to get into full swing.

## 2 Summary of findings

This is a qualitative study involving sixty-five Jewish students based at ten universities in five UK cities. It was commissioned by the Union of Jewish Students (UJS), which had a particular interest in (i) exploring how Jewish students understand their Jewish identities; and (ii) developing a better understanding of the types of activities they are most likely to find attractive. Its aim was very much to inform UJS policy going forward.<sup>9</sup> The students were interviewed in eight separate focus groups in February 2016; the data were analysed over the following four months, and written up first to help inform UJS policy going forward, and then for wider public dissemination.

The findings are covered in-depth in the next four sections of the report. The first section, entitled ‘**Encountering others**’, explores Jewish students’ experiences of antisemitism and anti-Zionism, and the extent to which these are shaping their lives at university. Whilst these issues are not the central focus of this research, we were keen to hear about them, not least to assess how central they are to the contemporary Jewish student experience. Importantly, we found that most of the students involved in this work have encountered little, if any antisemitism on campus; on the contrary, the dominant view is that most non-Jewish students are tolerant, accepting, curious and non-judgemental. However, some Jewish students very clearly have encountered antisemitism, with those who choose to engage in political activities around Israel most likely to experience views they consider prejudicial. Indeed, they reported that the discourse around Israel, both in student politics and sometimes in the classroom, is often toxic and even threatening, and can leave Jewish students feeling a variety of emotions, including anxiety, confusion and anger.

The second section, ‘**Being together**’, finds that the themes of community and family feature very centrally in the identities of the vast majority of Jewish students. Their strongest associations about Judaism involve spending time with immediate or extended family on Shabbat and *chagim* (Jewish

holidays), or being part of a larger community in synagogue, school, informal activities or social settings. For some students, community is a *halachic* (Jewish legal) need; for others, it is more of a social desire, but being away from home, often for the first time, means that JSocs (Jewish Societies), in particular, play a critical role as a type of surrogate Jewish family or community. The implication of this is that the quality of Jewish experience that Jewish students find at university is extremely important, and Friday night dinners, Jewish festival celebrations and large-scale social event are particularly influential. As students are at an especially formative stage of their development, the ways in which they are welcomed into the Jewish student community, and the quality of experiences they find there, could be pivotal to their long-term Jewish identity development.

Communities, typically, have some sort of boundary around them – people are either part of them or they are not, although some may drift in and out. The third section, entitled ‘**Defining boundaries**’, focuses on three key tensions that exist in the lives and minds of Jewish students, that have a bearing on where boundaries are drawn around Jewish activities on campus. The first of these sits in the realm of religious practice, and the extent to which Jewish student activities are welcoming of diverse expressions of Judaism, or dominated by Orthodox positions. The second concerns Israel, and the extent to which there are opportunities for open discussion among Jewish students about Israeli governmental and military policy, and, if so, where the lines should be drawn. The third concerns the fault line between Jews and non-Jews, and how open Jewish student activities should be in this regard. As university societies, JSocs are, of course, open to all, but as Jewish students negotiate their friendships and relationships with both Jews and non-Jews, the question of the role JSocs and other Jewish organisations play in helping Jewish students to explore these issues is certainly pertinent to some.

The last of the key themes explored, in the fourth section, is entitled ‘**Creating community**’. If JSocs serve as surrogate Jewish communities in some way, this section highlights some of the barriers to entry that some students feel. It highlights the themes of social or intellectual

9 Note that the report submitted to UJS contains more detailed recommendations; this report is a modified version, amended to make it more relevant to the Jewish community providers on campus in general.

intimidation, and how important it is to ensure that when students come into Jewish environments, they are welcomed in, and made to feel valued. It touches again on the notion that, in certain instances, some non-Orthodox students feel judged by others, although it also notes that attempts to include them are not necessarily embraced. Some students also called for more dedicated spaces for Jewish activities, with the situation in Nottingham highlighted as a particular concern. To encourage more Jewish students to engage, it would appear that these are some of the issues that need to be overcome. At the same time, this section of the report explores some of the areas where more creative programming might help to draw more students in, and indicates that there may be additional potential in the areas of Jewish learning, particularly around the Holocaust, Jewish history and Israel, as well as innovative sports programmes and volunteering opportunities.

Reflecting on all of these themes has led us to the following conclusions. Creating Jewish community on campus is important – it is what many young Jews understand Judaism to be, and what many desire and need in order to fulfil their Jewish obligations and/or pursue their Jewish interests. In seeking to achieve that, one needs to think carefully about what Jewish community on campus ought to be – a challenging issue because of the diversity of Jewish student requirement and preferences. Yet certain themes come to the fore.

Collectively, the students in this study were calling for Jewish spaces that are multi-faceted – offering multiple possibilities to respond to the diversity of needs, whilst being essentially tolerant, accepting, welcoming and non-judgemental about difference. They also need to be spaces that are actively creative – constantly looking for innovative ways to engage, as well as opportunities for both inspirational input and self-reflection. Familiar Jewish moments are key – Friday night dinners and chagim; large-scale socials and quieter, more intimate gatherings both have a part to play. There is scope for creating more Jewish educational opportunities – both of the traditional textual kind, and, arguably more importantly, of the self-reflective type that encourages students to find their own answers and meaning rather than being fed particular lines or positions. Indeed, much of the purpose of Jewish education at student stage should be to create Jewish self-learners – Jews who are able to go out into the world having already reflected considerably on some of the key issues that concern Jews today, and are sufficiently well-adjusted and equipped to be able to seek out and continue the journey on their own terms.

The back section of the report – the Appendix – provides some of the detail about the types of students involved in this study. By explaining the sample's Jewish and demographic character, it aims to provide the reader with a clearer understanding of the students expressing the views articulated here.

## 3 The findings

### 3.1 Encountering others

The prospect of leaving home and going to university has always been one laced with a combination of excitement and apprehension. It constitutes a key moment in the process of becoming an adult – a first opportunity to taste freedom and independence, without the constant presence of the familial safety net. It is natural, therefore, for students to be drawn to universities to which their friends have also applied; knowing someone, at least, brings with it a small degree of security that would otherwise be absent.

The 2011 National Jewish Student Survey demonstrated that half of all Jewish students in the UK attend just eight universities, a fact that indicates the degree to which they seek one another out, or desire this sense of familiarity (Table 1).<sup>10</sup> In many respects, this is simply a result of their upbringing; there are several distinct geographical areas in which the Jewish population as a whole clusters together, and where the community has built an increasing number of Jewish schools to accommodate the growing desire for education within these institutions.<sup>11</sup> The result is that many young Jews know one another; they live in the same neighbourhoods, go to the same schools, and participate in the same informal educational activities. The tendency to cluster together at a small number of universities is an inevitable outcome of these dynamics.

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As one student said: *“there was a set of unis that most people were applying to for several reasons: because they’re good ones, and then because they are places that people tended to go ... a lot of my friends were going there. Yeah, they’re Jewish, but they’re my friends.”*

The extent to which this social factor is influential obviously varies from student to student. Yet for some, it is absolutely fundamental. One Birmingham University student maintained that whilst the course of study was important to him, the presence of a large population of Jews on campus was one of, if not the main reason for his choice. *“I didn’t feel like there had to be a compromise coming to Birmingham ... I knew the whole set-up that was here. I knew, for me, that it was a religious Orthodox set-up, and so if I went to maybe another university, I might not have been able to do as much as I wanted or have as much involvement just because of the infrastructure. I wouldn’t want to sacrifice my focus on religion for academia when I can have both in the same place.”* For him, an Orthodox Jew,<sup>12</sup> this should not be construed as a lack of desire for social mixing or integration, but rather a need for community and community services. For Orthodox Jews to be able to attend universities in cities away

Table 1. Where UK Jewish students study: 2011 National Jewish Student Survey

1st quartile (most Jewishly populous universities)	University of Leeds; University of Birmingham; University of Nottingham
2nd quartile (second most Jewishly populous universities)	University of Manchester; University of Cambridge; University College London; University of Oxford; King’s College London
3rd quartile (third most Jewishly populous universities)	University of Bristol; Nottingham Trent University; London School of Economics; University of St. Andrews; City University London; University of Warwick; University of York; Imperial College London; Manchester Metropolitan University; Birmingham City University; Durham University; Leeds Metropolitan University; University of Southampton; Queen Mary University of London

Note: Fourth quartile not shown. See: Graham and Boyd (2011), op. cit.

10 Graham and Boyd, *National Jewish Student Survey*, op. cit., p.26.

11 See: Graham, D. (2013). *Thinning and Thickening: Geographical change in the UK’s Jewish population, 2001-11*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research; Staetsky, L.D. and Boyd, J. (2016). *The rise and rise of Jewish schools in the United Kingdom*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

12 The way in which each student is characterised Jewishly throughout this report is based on how each one self-identified in the pre-focus group questionnaire. They were offered the following possibilities to describe their current Jewish identity: ‘Secular/cultural’; ‘Reform/Progressive’; ‘Masorti’; ‘Traditional’; ‘Orthodox (e.g. would not turn on a light

from their family home, certain facilities have to exist: in particular, a community of Jews with whom to practise Judaism, and the availability of kosher food.

Yet, even in instances where these practical needs are a matter of individual preference rather than religious obligation, there is evidence of a common desire among young Jews for a degree of Jewish familiarity, or, at the very least, to follow their Jewish friends. One Masorti student in Birmingham maintained that a Jewish social presence was absolutely fundamental to her. She said: *“I didn’t even look at the course before I came here. It was 100% weighted. I applied to Birmingham, Nottingham, Manchester, Bristol and Leeds [each of which have sizeable Jewish student populations], but I didn’t really care.”* In a rather less explicit example, another student at Birmingham who described his Jewish denominational identity as ‘Just Jewish,’ commented: *“I actually didn’t apply to Birmingham for any sort of Jewish reasons. Well, sort of backhanded, because I followed my friends who just happened to be Jewish, they went here so I went here.”* In his case, he was clearly influenced by his friends, and the fact that many of these were Jewish (he attended a Jewish secondary school) prompted him to apply for a place at Birmingham. In essence, the geographical clustering appears to be driven partly by the halachic needs of some Jewish students, but also by social desire – a common explicit or implicit wish to study in the same places as other Jewish friends. As an aside, it is worth noting that this is not always the case by any means; indeed, had this study focused more attention on Jewish students based at universities not shown in Table 1, we probably would have found evidence of Jews deliberately wanting to study *away* from large Jewish student populations. Yet, the strong tendency among Jewish students to cluster in a small number of universities suggests that for most, Jewish social and religious issues are a factor.<sup>13</sup>

on Shabbat’; ‘Haredi (strictly Orthodox)’; ‘Mixed – I am both Jewish and another religion’; ‘Just Jewish’; ‘Other (please write in)’. They were able to tick up to two of these.

13 For further discussion of this issue, see Graham and Boyd, *National Jewish Student Survey*, op. cit., pp.24-25.

“The geographical clustering appears to be driven partly by the halachic needs of some Jewish students, but also by social desire – a common explicit or implicit wish to study in the same places as other Jewish friends.”

Whilst geographical clustering has been a common feature of Jewish student life in the UK for many years, it is not inconceivable that it may also be connected in some way to a heightened sense of insecurity among Jews due to anxieties about antisemitism on campus. A strong narrative about antisemitism, and certainly anti-Zionism, at UK universities pervades the Jewish community at present, exemplified by a range of recent high profile incidents around the country. Just before the fieldwork for this study began, pro-Palestinian protestors forcefully broke up a Kings College London event organised by Yachad<sup>14</sup> and the Israel Societies of Kings and LSE, at which the ex-head of Shin Bet, Ami Ayalon, was speaking, an incident that subsequently prompted a full enquiry by the university. In the midst of the fieldwork phase, the Chairman of the Oxford University Labour Club resigned his position in protest, after claiming that its members “have some kind of problem with Jews,” with the result that the Labour Party initiated an enquiry into the matter headed by Baroness Royall. And during the analysis phase, Malia Bouattia, a student leader known in the Jewish community for her extreme anti-Zionist views, was elected President of the National Union of Students, a result which was headline news in both the national and Jewish media, and led to multiple university student unions threatening to cut ties with the national student body.

Given this, it is unsurprising to find evidence showing that A-Level students at Jewish schools are being prepared for university with a strong awareness of the potential risks that exist. A Warwick University student remarked: *“I went to a Jewish school [and] in sixth form a lot of the talks we had about coming to university were like everyone’s out to get you, everywhere you turn there’s going to be antisemitism, like anyone who asks you about being Jewish is like going to attack you ...”* Another, referring to her family at home, commented that *“everybody’s worried about what could happen to you.”* Others similarly spoke of

14 See footnote 3.

being “*apprehensive*” or “*cautious*” before starting university, concerned about how they might be perceived when fellow students discovered that they were Jewish. For some students, the school-based preparation that they received was quite formative. One graduate of a Jewish secondary school who had gone on to become quite politically active at the University of Nottingham said that his school “*ran this programme when I was in Year 12, and they showed us these videos of American campuses and the pro-Palestinians protests that you would have there. I’d never seen anything like it before because I was quite insulated to that world ... that in particular kind of made me realise there’s a need to speak up, and I think that is the main trigger for what I do now.*” Yet, at the same time, clearly discernible in a number of students’ comments of this type was a degree of cynicism about this; a sense that the risks were being over-stated. One said: “*Before I came here, especially in school and stuff, I felt that we were told a lot of the time this is what you’re going to experience, you’re going to have a lot of people making comments because you’re Jewish and a lot of people [on campus] aren’t going to tolerate it and blaady-blah ... I feel like it’s a big problem because I feel like a lot of adults make you feel like everyone’s going to hate you for your beliefs when most people aren’t like that.*”

And, interestingly, most students involved in this study said that they had experienced little, if any, antisemitism at university. One Birmingham student said: “*I’ve only had one negative comment this year, so I was actually quite shocked that there weren’t any more.*” A London-based student remarked: “*there really is not much antisemitism at all, especially when you walk around the streets of London, you can freely wear religious clothing and nobody’s going to say anything at all. I’ve never experienced any kind of antisemitism on campus.*” One Nottingham University student similarly said that he had “*never been insulted as a Jew,*” and another said that he hadn’t “*experienced any*” and that it is “*a very, very rare thing.*” Indeed, these types of comments captured the sentiment most commonly expressed across the sample.

In fact, the most pronounced types of encounters Jewish students have had with non-Jews have been positive. As an Orthodox student in Birmingham said, “*I’ve never ever experienced antisemitism on campus. Most times, people are just interested.*”

“Most students involved in this study said that they had experienced little, if any, antisemitism at all ... In fact, the most pronounced types of encounters Jewish students have had with non-Jews have been positive.”

*I wear my kippah everywhere, wherever I go.”* A female Masorti student at the same university reported similarly: “*I’ve never really experienced any vitriol of antisemitism. A lot of my friends are like very very ignorant about the issues, but in a positive way. So I’ve had lots of people kind of ask me things and engage me in conversation.*” Another Masorti student at the University of Nottingham maintained that she had “*never personally experienced antisemitism directly to me on campus*” and that whilst the non-Jews living in her halls “*were quite overwhelmed by the amount of Jews in one place considering they’d never met any before ... , in general I would say there was quite a positive reaction. It was like, wow, how do you all know each other, I wish we had that kind of sense of community, can I come to a Friday night dinner, is that okay, this, that and the other. Very interested.*”

All of that said, a number of students were more than familiar with street level antisemitism. One said: “*Coming from Manchester, I’m used to very blunt antisemitism. I’m used to walking down the street in my kippah and having someone shout ‘Kike!’ at me from across the street, people telling me to go and die. You get used to it. My sister was walking down the street [with me], I think she was shocked by how used to it I was. Girls get it a lot less because they are a lot less visibly Jewish.*” Another identifiably Jewish Orthodox student recounted: “*I was on the tube and I got pulled out, someone shouting at me, called me a fucking evil Jew and a murderer, said he’s going to come and slap me up.*” Others had similar stories to recount, either about themselves or friends. Whilst this type of harassment and violence seems to be rather more prevalent on the street than on the university campus, it still clearly shapes and informs the experience of being Jewish in contemporary Britain, particularly for some young Orthodox (i.e. identifiably Jewish) men.<sup>15</sup>

15 Evidence of a distinction between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews regarding their perceptions and experiences of antisemitism can be found in the 2012 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights study of the topic. See: Staetsky, L. D. and Boyd,

Even if they have not personally experienced these types of incidents, some students reported that they have still been made to feel quite uncomfortable about their Jewishness at university. One second-year student, based in London, whilst noting that she hadn't "experienced one antisemitic event" throughout her time at university, said: *"I've felt kind of uncomfortable in more Israel-related situations, but never for my Judaism. I don't engage in political events or anything like that, so it's just been from fellow course mates who have had strong views and expressed them. So I've inwardly felt uncomfortable ..."* This discomfort sometimes manifests itself by Jewish students hiding their Jewishness in certain instances, for example in the case of a Nottingham student who took off her *Magen David* (Star of David) necklace before going into a nightclub because *"you just don't want to take the risk."* In other instances, perceived or real dynamics may be leading them to conceal their connections with Israel. A Nottingham student said that he finds it *"personally very uncomfortable talking about it [Israel] ... When people asked me what I did on my gap year, I said I volunteered in the Middle East and Africa, because I was scared of someone saying, well you know ... Israel ... so what did you do? Because there's obviously a stigma and reputation about it. So I personally do get quite scared."* A London student similarly maintained that *"I've never encountered any antisemitism, but having said that, there is a sinister undertone of something on campus – and I don't think it's particularly tangible – but when I say I'm Jewish, and especially when I say I support Israel, it sounds more of an admission than just a statement of fact about my identity ... It's like a dirty secret ..."*

Indeed, in many instances, it is when Israel comes up for discussion that the dynamics appear to shift dramatically. Most Jewish students, it seems, encounter these types of discussions about Israel fairly infrequently, which perhaps explains why most have rarely experienced anything that might be construed as antisemitic hostility. On a day-to-day level, they are going about their lives, and Israel does not come up.

"Even if they have not personally experienced an antisemitic incident, some students reported that they have still been made to feel quite uncomfortable about their Jewishness at university ... and in many instances, it is when Israel comes up for discussion that the dynamics appear to shift dramatically."

Indeed, as one Birmingham student said about the place of Israel in day-to-day student life, *"I think at the university, no one cares, and literally no one is interested whatsoever about religious differences ... They just don't care and that's my personal experience."* However, as a London student said: *"If we're really involved, it can feel as if there is a real kind of anti-Israel sentiment on campus, but then that's because you're really in the thick of it."* Another London student agreed: *"I have been there arguing with Pal Soc, whatever you want to call it, defending Israel on campus, so I guess I've had more of the antisemitism. Like some random girl said to me, 'You should go back to where you come from.' I'm not sure where that is exactly ... I haven't had it so bad, but once I went to a Norman Finkelstein<sup>16</sup> event at LSE and they asked a question and I started 'As a Zionist ...' and the whole room turned and gave me the biggest evil look I've ever seen ... Just the way some of the people from Pal Soc act, they don't care what opinion ours is, as long as it's pro-Israel they don't want to know, and they want to ban us from campus ..."*

One particularly politically active Jewish student in London said: *"As I've got more involved in Jewish life, we've had people threaten to kill us. We have to even today hide the location of our Jewish Society events because it could pose a threat. We only release it at the very last minute, and these are aspects of our everyday life ... Israel events get shut down, we get censored, whereas Islamic extremists are on campus preaching what they preach. As I got more involved in Israel [student activism], you'll have people who are less sly, not like the political leftists, these people come straight out and say exactly what they think should happen to you and they will shut you down like they did"*

J. (2014). *The Exceptional Case? Perceptions and experiences of antisemitism in the United Kingdom*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

16 Norman Finkelstein is an American Jewish political scientist and activist, known for his often controversial views on Israel and Palestine and the politics of the Holocaust.

*in King's [College] where they physically assault people and smash all the alarms, or they'll invade your meetings or play loud music so that you can't hold events as no one can hear the speaker ...*" He added that vigils had been held on several London university campuses "commemorating the people who had stabbed Israeli civilians [in the 'Stabbing Intifada']<sup>17</sup> – the indiscriminate targeting of unarmed and innocent civilians ... And this was allowed to go forward by the [university student] union and even encouraged by the union on certain campuses. These people were not targeted because they had any political affiliation, these people were indiscriminately targeted because they were Jewish, and some of them were children, and their murderers were celebrated by the Palestinian societies as heroes on our campus."

Whilst the politically active are the most likely to express these sentiments or experience these types of incidents, anti-Israel and antisemitic attitudes do have ways of affecting even the least engaged Jewish students. One first-year King's College London student described her experience during Freshers' Week: "My first impression of King's as a whole was a massive Pal Soc stand, and they were handing out badges and anti-Israel propaganda ... and it was just like, although it might be a minority, when you see that, these people were quite loud, and so it was really intimidating. I found it very uncomfortable. Even if it's not ... if I'm not involved in it, just the fact that I know it's happening right in front of me, I find that horrible." A London student mentioned a similar exhibit in the entrance of SOAS: "Imagine being a Jewish student walking through the front doors of your university and seeing pictures of murderers and them being celebrated as heroes ... That is not something sinister under the surface, that's pretty blatant ..."

More disturbingly, the Nottingham-based students described how a series of posters and

stickers had been posted across the campus in the two weeks prior to the fieldwork there, with the message 'Hitler was right.' They reported that the Jewish Society had responded by taking down as many posters as they could, but it had found an unsympathetic ear at the Student Union, where Union representatives voted against a motion to remove the offending items. One Jewish student activist said: "I got so angry, I walked out. The university should do more, and as for the Student Union, I think their statement was disgusting." Another added: "even though it was a small isolated incident ... it can have a real effect on Jewish students on campus."

"Nottingham-based students described how a series of posters and stickers had been posted across the campus with the message 'Hitler was right.'"

One of the older students, based at the University of Birmingham, also referred back to the situation on campus around the time of the Gaza War in 2012. "There was a massive demonstration in Mermaid Square,"<sup>18</sup> he said. "They had megaphones and people waving Palestinian flags. We had a whole sort of side as well and there was like security separating the two sides. I mean awful, there was absolutely no dialogue. It was just shouting, oh, you're a baby killer."

Yet the dynamics are not always like this, and clearly vary to some degree from one campus to another. Jewish students in Bristol, for example, described a refreshingly different reality. "I think we have it really good at Bristol. We engage very well with the Friends of Palestine Society. We have discussions with them. We are putting forward a motion with them at the AGM in a few weeks on mutual cooperation ..."

Another student there said: "We're exceptionally

17 The 'Stabbing Intifada' (variously referred to also as the 'Knife Intifada' or 'Lone Wolf Intifada') in Israel involved a series of seemingly lone wolf and often murderous attacks on Israelis by Palestinians, which began in autumn 2015, and was still ongoing at the time of the fieldwork. Most of the attacks involved stabbings; other approaches saw Palestinians driving into Israelis on the street, and throwing rocks at buses. In a number of these incidents, the perpetrators were shot dead at the scene, leading to claims of

extrajudicial killings and use of excessive force by Israeli security personnel from Palestinians leaders and some human rights organisations.

18 Mermaid Square is a large open area directly in front of the Guild of Students building on the University of Birmingham campus (Edgbaston). It is right next to the main entrance to the university.

*fortunate in the way that Israel and Palestine is talked about on campus. The only comments and conversations I've had with course friends, people I've met, a few societies, have been in positive interest and genuine questions wanting to know more ... I haven't encountered anything really derogatory or negative in the way that antisemitism and anti-Zionism usually floats around campus."* Interestingly, her explanation for why this might be the case lies in the make-up of the student body at Bristol: *"It's one of the most un-diverse universities. It has exceptionally low statistics in terms of ethnic minority students. Often, most of the students are from the South West, South East, Londoners, and from higher socio-economic backgrounds, and I'm sure that plays into the way in which Israel and Palestine is dealt with on campus."*

While most of the comments made about antisemitism and anti-Zionism on campus focused on student politics and activism, there was some discussion about the classroom environment too. One episode in particular stands out, during the first lecture of a sociology degree course at the University of Nottingham: *"Just last week, my housemate came back from uni in tears because of what I'd see now as intellectual antisemitism, in that she went to her lecture and the lecturer made a statement that said 'Just as the Nazis did to the Jews, the Jews are now doing to the Palestinians.' She was hysterical about it and she didn't know what to do – it was her first lecture, she didn't want to get off on the wrong foot with the lecturer, but she wanted to say something and wasn't going to let him get away with it. She went to him the next day at the beginning of the seminar and said, 'Look, I'm Jewish, I'm a Zionist, I'm in your class for the next ten weeks, and I'm not prepared to feel uncomfortable ...' He probably had no idea that there was one Jew sitting in the lecture, fine, but behind that he is putting across his personal agenda in an academic environment, and that's completely unacceptable [but] ... he still stood by his view. She was upset, and this is a girl who is actively Jewish and comes from quite a religious family, and to feel like that in an academic environment kind of shook us a bit ... He said sorry for offending her, but he wasn't sorry for what he said."*

### **Summary and reflections**

In attempting to piece together the various comments reflected in this section, there emerges

something of a mixed picture. It is important to stress that most students included in the sample had encountered little, if any antisemitism on campus at all; on a day-to-day level, most feel safe and are having a largely positive experience, which comes as something of a surprise to some, given what they were told to expect as Jews on campus. However, there is also clear evidence to indicate that both anti-Zionism and antisemitism are alive and well in student political discourse and action, and that these often feel deeply uncomfortable, hurtful and threatening to a proportion of Jewish students. In addition, there is some evidence here of anti-Israel ideas being taught in university lecture halls, using the type of language considered beyond the pale in many other contexts. In seeking to capture the nature of Jewish student life today, different people will choose to highlight different parts of this picture, but the reality is that it is complex and multifaceted.

Part of the challenge to Jewish schools and other bodies involved in running pre-university programmes for young Jews is how best to prepare them for their campus experience. On the one hand, it is clear that there is some need to engage them in the harsh realities of anti-Israel politics that they may encounter, and prepare them for the political and psychological implications of this. On the other, it is clear that, for the most part, they are unlikely to experience antisemitism, so placing undue emphasis on the threats that might exist, over and above the opportunities, is probably doing them a disservice. Indeed, given the high proportions of Jewish children who study in Jewish schools, preparing them to engage proudly and confidently as Jews, without undue anxiety about how they might be perceived, is arguably a more urgent need.

The results of this study also point towards at least two educational agenda items that ought to be explored. The first concerns Israel education. There are numerous opportunities for Jewish students to learn about Israel, from programmes organised by UJS, other Jewish student providers, and from courses offered by the universities themselves. Israel is clearly of interest to a significant proportion of Jewish students. Yet the question of how best to meet this need is complex. Interestingly, the educational opportunity that stood out for students in this study was the Ari

## Written comments about Israel education

*"I take every opportunity to hear about Israeli politics, especially people off my own views (challenge/stretch rather than affirm.)"*

*"[Shavit was] a really great speaker, interesting and educational. Great for students. UJS paid for drinks afterwards."*

*"High profile speakers are vitally important for engagement. Inspired by his profile and impressiveness of his important, non-radical voice."*

Shavit speaker tour which took place during the 2015-16 academic year.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, no other educational programme discussed with this sample of students – on any topic – received the same positive response. More work needs to be done to assess why this was the case, but one can offer a few hypotheses: (i) Shavit's personal profile as a prominent and well-known analyst, which created the sense that students would gain some genuinely thoughtful insights; (ii) the assumed impartiality of his analysis and the auspices under which the tour was organised – whilst Shavit is very much a man of the left, the event was not organised by one of the Israel advocacy groups with a particular political agenda; (iii) the fact that his tour was very much student-led – the idea itself came from a group of students who made it happen with UJS support; and (iv) the duration of the event – short, with negligible commitment required from any attendees.

The second educational agenda item relates to the relationship between antisemitism (or anti-Zionism) and Jewish identity. In the current

<sup>19</sup> Ari Shavit is a very well-known Israeli writer and reporter, and, until recently, a Senior Correspondent at the left-of-centre Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*. He is the author of *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel* (Random House, 2013), which explores aspects of the history of Israel through Shavit's personal experiences and insights, and became a *New York Times* bestseller. Shavit went on a UJS-sponsored speaker tour in October 2015, which saw an estimated 550 students in total attend events held in Birmingham, Cambridge, London, Leeds and Oxford. In autumn 2016, he was accused of inappropriate sexual behaviour towards women, and he resigned his position at *Haaretz* in response. However, this was unknown at the time of the UK speaker tour.

context of rising Islamist extremism, it is natural for Jews to be at least somewhat fearful of the threats that exist, particularly given the place of antisemitism in Jewish history. Yet learning how to manage this anxiety in a constructive way may be an important issue to consider. Developing educational programmes that allow Jewish students to explore some of the darker chapters of Jewish history, and how to healthily incorporate these elements of the past into their understanding of what it means to them to be a Jew today is an area that ought to be investigated.

### 3.2. Being together

Jewish students look for community. For some, community constitutes a practical need – for example, to be able to *daven* (pray) in a *minyan* (prayer group) or to have easy access to kosher food. For others, it is more social – to be able to spend time with people from a similar cultural background. Some want Jewish community more than others, but more or less all of the students involved in this study were looking for opportunities to connect with other Jews, at least occasionally. This near universal feeling may have been challenged by the inclusion of students from universities with very small Jewish populations and little, if any, Jewish infrastructure, but that caveat aside, this desire for a sense of community was unquestionably the strongest theme to emerge from the focus group discussions.

*"More or less all of the students involved in this study were looking for opportunities to connect with other Jews, at least occasionally ... For many of them, this sense of community is Judaism; it is the idea that sits at the very heart of what they understand Judaism to be."*

However, this is not simply about a desire for religious or cultural connectivity. It is much deeper than that. For many of the students interviewed, this sense of community *is* Judaism; it is the idea that sits at the very heart of what they understand Judaism to be. As one Birmingham University student said, *"what I enjoy about Judaism is the sense of community. I'm not a*

religious person, but what I kind of get out of Judaism is the sense of community, whether you're chatting to people at the synagogue, or to people round at your house eating. That's what I enjoy, and that's kind of the connection I see with Judaism." A Bristol University student agreed: "For me, being Jewish is not just about spirituality, doing Jewish things, making Friday night dinner, having Shabbat and all of that, it's about the community you get from it, the social side." A London-based student commented: "I didn't really appreciate it until now when I moved to London, the idea of a stronger community and the idea of relying on a community for support, even if it's like a Shabbat meal or for something a bit bigger. I think that's important." A University of Nottingham student spoke similarly about the importance of community in Judaism: "It's kind of like a wider version of family, so wherever you go, you know there's going to be other people like, say at university, especially this university, you know there will be other people who identify with what you identify with, and it just makes life a lot easier."

Indeed, the idea of family resonates in a similar way – many Jewish students see family as the crux and essence of Judaism, and the key mechanism that enabled them to develop a sense of Jewishness in the first place. An Orthodox student at one of the London universities said: "My family is the reason I am so close to my Jewish identity. They brought me up in a Jewish home, they sent me to Jewish schools ... but also, my Jewishness is why I am still so close to my family, because they are very strict on having Friday night dinner, having Saturday lunch, and that's my time to go to see my family, and keeps my connection alive with them." A secular Warwick University student said: "Pretty much everything, all my involvement in Judaism until coming to uni has always been entirely family-oriented. It was always like going to shul with my family, or, you know, Friday night dinners as well or to celebrate something, it was primarily with my family." Another secular student, this time at Bristol University, commented: "Throughout my life, family, the Shabbat table, the Friday night table, has been the hub of my Judaism. It's been getting around the Friday night table with my family, catching up with my cousins, my aunts and uncles, and that's all of what I feel makes me Jewish." And a Masorti

student at the University of Nottingham said: "the thought of a family and a Friday night dinner ... it just makes me feel really kind of happy and like at home and like at peace and with my Judaism." These types of feelings are clearly strongest at times when the Jewish family and community most commonly congregate, namely Shabbat and festivals. A self-declared 'Traditional' student at Nottingham captured the common feeling: "I generally feel closest with my family during the festivals ... That's when we'll have family meals, we'll invite around the grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles ... they're the people that kept me closest in touch with my Judaism, and that is most experienced through the Friday night meals."<sup>20</sup>

"One of the elements that often defines the university experience is the absence of daily contact with family or home community ... Many Jewish students, and particularly those in the early stages of their university degree, want to find Jewish community on campus, and see Friday night dinner, in particular, as a key moment to do so."

Of course, one of the elements that often defines the university experience is the absence of daily contact with family or home community. Most Jewish students in the UK move away from their home to go to university, so particularly on Friday nights during term time, this fundamental aspect of their Jewishness is largely unavailable. They are not with their family. Obviously, this can be a liberating experience to some degree – an opportunity to have new experiences and to explore who they wish to be on their own terms. Yet the evidence from this study suggests that many Jewish students, and particularly those in the early stages of their university degree, want to find Jewish

<sup>20</sup> This finding – that the experience of Jewish life in the family home is of profound significance – helps to confirm a key finding in the secondary research JPR conducted on the NJSS dataset, published in: Graham, D. (2014). *Strengthening Jewish identity: What works?* London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

community on campus, and see Friday night dinners, in particular, as a key moment to do so. One Traditional student at the University of Nottingham recounted: *“When I came to Nottingham in the first week of Freshers’ there was like this UV rave on a Friday night, so a lot of Jews went. I don’t go out on a Friday night, so I didn’t go, and I came here to this house [which serves as the centre of Jewish activities on campus] where there was a marquee outside that was huge and falling apart, and I met a boy who I now live with – he’s a housemate, he’s from New Zealand – he knew absolutely no one here. He had come to the Friday night dinner because he didn’t know what else to do, like he just wanted to meet Jewish people, and for me, he’s now one of my best friends. He was from the complete other side of the world, came to a campus and knew not one soul, and turned up at a Friday night dinner and felt immediately welcome – kind of secures a sense of community.”* A British student at Warwick told a similar story: *“I had a very rough first term. I don’t think I’m the only one in the first year who does – it’s kind of difficult to come into a whole new environment and not know anyone ... and one of the few things in the first term which I truly enjoyed was that first Friday night dinner which I went to and it was amazing ... Immediately I felt fully like, right, this is a kind of community, this is exactly like Judaism feels at home.”*

The implication, of course, is that Jewish Societies and organisations active on campus can be, and perhaps should be, rather like a surrogate family for Jewish students when they are at university – a place to go to find the warmth and familiarity of Jewish community, particularly at times when students might be missing that most – Shabbat and festivals. As one student said, *“Key Jewish dates around the calendar – that’s the kind of structure we have as Jews and kind of keeps us all in sync with the same time zone, and that helps to create the kind of community we have.”* And indeed, the evidence from this study shows very clearly that some of the most popular Jewish events on campus happen at these moments – particularly Jewish Society Friday night dinners. Indeed, a standard Friday night dinner organised by a local JSoc received not only one of the most positive responses of all programmes investigated, but also the least negative response – only one of all students included in this study said they would

*“Jewish Societies and organisations active on campus can be, and perhaps should be, rather like a surrogate family for Jewish students when they are at university – a place to go to find the warmth and familiarity of Jewish community, particularly at times when students might be missing that most – Shabbat and festivals.”*

not go.<sup>21</sup> Shabbat, in many respects, appears to be a key time for Jewish students to connect with each other, whether or not they engage with Shabbat in a religious sense. As one secular student in Bristol put it: *“My interaction with Jews can sort of be put down to an eighteen-hour period, which starts at Friday evening and ends about Shabbat afternoon, and then I tend not to see most of my Jewish friends ... I’ll tend not to see them for most of the week and then Friday evening it begins again, and then I’ll spend most of those eighteen hours with my Jewish friends, and then it’s cyclical like that. Not because I care a lot about Shabbat, because I don’t keep it, I’m not observant, but that just happens to be when the community gathers, and I gather with them.”*

That said, Friday night dinners did not come out as the most popular Jewish activity of the thirty-two investigated (see Figure 20, Appendix). Interestingly, the programme that achieved that position during the 2015/16 academic year was the ‘Willy Wonka Purim Party,’ organised by UJS. What might explain this? It is likely that this same community factor plays at least some kind of role. Many of the most prominent Jewish festivals commonly occur out of term time, so quite often, students return home for them. However, Purim rarely does. The idea of marking it in some way may fulfil a certain desire for community at this time. However, it also introduces a heavy dose of pure unadulterated fun. It is a party; an opportunity simply to socialise with other Jews at an event with some, but fairly limited Jewish content. The added component of a theme from a very well-known children’s book at a festival that is quite strongly associated with children, adds a solid shared cultural reference point that probably

<sup>21</sup> Students were presented with a list of thirty-two activities and asked to respond to each in one of three ways: I would attend it; I might attend it; I would not attend it. Friday night dinner events scored the fewest ‘I would not attend it’ responses.

## Written comments about Friday night dinners on campus

*"Friday night dinner. It's the heart and soul of Jewish social life."*

*"I like the idea of Friday night dinner, as I think that it's a chance for Jewish students to get together and socialise on a Friday night. It's also a sense of home/warm vibe."*

*"Traditionally important to me. Reminds me of home. Warm meal. Everyone is together."*

*"Always fun and enjoyable. Warm feeling. Family feel on campus. Warwick is a tight knit Jewish community, everyone is close. Care-free, unintimidating environment."*

*"Community experience. Chance to feel at home with close friends and good food. Safe space."*

widens its appeal to more Jewishly peripheral students. And, of course, the whole theme is also somewhat tongue-in-cheek – there is a heavy element of irony and humour in running an event for students that has such a childish leitmotif. As one Warwick University student summed it up: *"I like parties. I like to socialise with other Jewish students. I like to celebrate Jewish holidays."*

'Booze for Jews,' organised by a group of JSocs, was seen by the sample in a similar way. In this instance, there is no Shabbat or festival component, but the strong ideas of Jewish togetherness and fun are very much present. One Birmingham University student said about it: *"I really like the parties involving Jewish people from other universities as it's a great way to reunite with friends not just from the same university as me. They are also really well organised – coaches, ticket system, and really well advertised."* Not dissimilarly, a Warwick student summed it up in writing as follows: *"Lots of friends going, opportunity to stay with friends for the weekend, fun and social, no religious pressure."* One male University of Nottingham student captured its appeal in even more simple terms: *"the shidduch potential."* However, unlike the Willy Wonka Purim Party, it generated a much more critical response from a small but vocal minority. Their critique centred mainly on a dislike of excessive drinking and the cliquy

nature of the event, particularly for those who are not especially well-networked into the Jewish community. One or two suggested that it was un-Jewish in some way, objecting to it on religious grounds. But one of the participants in the pilot focus groups summed up the criticism most succinctly: *"Uggghhhh, no. Loud, crazy, grim. Not a nice way to meet people. Haaattttee. Alcohol and loud, drunk Jewish friends I haven't seen in years = much much unhappiness."* In attempting to gauge the overall reaction, Booze for Jews is one of the most popular Jewish student events on the annual calendar, and it seems to particularly appeal to those who are already socially integrated into the Jewish student community. In this regard, it appears to play a valuable collective role, reinforcing connections between Jewish students around the country, helping to strengthen the social links between them. At the same time, it turns some off, and they can be left feeling excluded or judged for not going, due to its widespread popularity among so many.

### Summary and reflections

When students in this study were asked to describe what really matters to them about Judaism and their Jewishness, they gave a number of different answers. Israel came up, as did antisemitism, social justice, a sense of history, learning and marrying someone Jewish. Jewishness is complex and multi-faceted, and clearly, different students identify with different Jewish concepts and values. Yet the vast majority focused in some way on notions of community – warm, collective experiences often with family at home, on Shabbat or Jewish festivals, which best capture what they understand Judaism to be. Intriguingly, they love and value that aspect of Jewish life, perhaps all the more so as students because many are away from home for the first time. For all the excitement and opportunities that come with being a student, one also senses a particular strain of Jewish homesickness – a yearning of sorts for some of the comforts of home that Judaism offers. Different students adapt to university life in different ways and at different rates, but most appear to value and appreciate a good Friday night dinner, in the company of people with whom they share cultural beliefs and practices, and can therefore relax and feel at home. Abraham Joshua Heschel's notion of Shabbat as a sanctuary or palace in time springs to

mind<sup>22</sup> – Friday night dinners and Jewish festival celebrations appear to be key moments when many Jewish students greatly appreciate an opportunity to retreat into a comfortable, hospitable Jewish space, where they will be welcomed and fed, and can be themselves without having to worry about being judged.

Friday night dinners on campus, or similar events on Jewish festivals, play this role, and in many respects, emerge as the most important activities that take place for Jewish university students. In addition to UJS, a number of Jewish organisations active at universities around the country understand this well – Chabad, in particular. As one Nottingham University student said, “*Chabad is very ‘Regardless of what you do, we don’t really care, like if you come to our programmes, cool, if you don’t it doesn’t matter, still come to Friday night.’*” Indeed, on some campuses, Chabad appears to function very much like a surrogate home for Jewish students – one Birmingham student described how she chose to go there for lunch one day because she forgot her purse and knew that they would welcome her in. Chaplains perform a similar function too; some students described them as “*the centre of Jewish life*” who run events with a “*homely feel*.” As with Chabad, not all students feel this way, but certainly they work to provide this fundamental service.

In essence, it is very important to understand the social and psychological role that all of these types of events play. If they are, indeed, serving as a type of home away from home, or as a surrogate Jewish family or community, the experience Jewish students have when attending them is critical. Positive experiences can potentially play a very formative role in the development of students’ Jewish identities, and the types of Jewish communities created can serve as models that students will take with them into their adult life. On the other hand, negative experiences could be quite damaging – being turned away, judged or rejected in these spaces may have the opposite effect, leaving Jewish students without easy access to a form of Judaism that compels them to want to stay involved.

Educationally, this points to the importance of creating Jewish communities on campus that are places in which Jewish students genuinely want to spend time. However, creating community is not a simple task – in the best types of community, as the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has written, “we all understand each other well, we may trust what we hear, we are safe most of the time and hardly ever puzzled or taken aback. We are never strangers to each other. We may quarrel – but these are friendly quarrels, it is just that we are all trying to make our togetherness even better and more enjoyable than it has been so far, and while guided by the same wish to improve our life together, we may disagree how to do it best. But we never wish each other bad luck, and we may be sure that all the others around us wish us good.”<sup>23</sup> Yet creating such environments is complex when dealing with a diverse Jewish student body, because, as Bauman also notes, being in community often involves giving up an element of individual autonomy. Communities privilege the collective over the individual; the way one student practises his Judaism may be different from the way another practises hers, yet to build community, they need to come to some kind of accommodation that works for both. Creating a sense of collective security alongside a sense of individual freedom are two equally precious and coveted values which need to be balanced. It may be that learning how to best negotiate and balance this polarity in a university context ought to be a central training component for anybody involved in constructing Jewish life for students on campus. Translating any lessons learned into creating Friday night dinners and Jewish festival celebrations that are warm and comfortable whilst simultaneously being tolerant and accepting of difference is an important part of working in a university context with a diverse and varied Jewish student body.

### 3.3. Defining boundaries

One of the key challenges when seeking to create a sense of community involves figuring out how and where to draw the boundaries around it. Jewish students do not comprise a homogeneous group; there is considerable diversity within the Jewish student population, particularly in terms of beliefs and practices, so determining who should be welcomed in, and who should be kept at arm’s

22 Heschel, A. J., and Schor, I. (1951). *The Sabbath*. Macmillan.

23 Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

length, is not always a simple question for different Jewish organisations.

One of the areas where this plays itself out most acutely is in the domain of religious observance. The 2011 National Jewish Student Survey highlighted this issue too; in its conclusions, it noted that: *“several groups of Jewish students do not feel that they are being appropriately provided for on campus, and worse, feel alienated from what is on offer ... Chief among these, though not alone, are students who identify as ‘Reform/Progressive.’ Some of these describe how they have felt rejected by their more ‘Traditional’ peers, and frustrated in their desires to create spaces in which to practise their type of Judaism.”*<sup>24</sup>

“It is clear that there remain quite strong views about different types of religious practice on campus.”

Whilst this issue was not particularly pronounced in this study, it is clear that there remain quite strong views about different types of religious practice on campus. One self-identifying ‘Traditional’ student based at the University of Birmingham, said *“I’m very keen on preserving the letter of the law, and I actually think that progressive Judaism is potentially detrimental to the community as a whole.”* Commenting later about whether or not he would attend an egalitarian minyan, he wrote: *“I disagree with progressive Judaism and what it stands for. It will be, above all, the destruction of the faith.”* A London-based Orthodox student similarly described such a minyan in writing as a *“distortion of Judaism. Wrong”*, and an Orthodox/haredi student in the same city, wrote: *“I believe the separate status of men and women in Judaism is very important. From a spiritual perspective, we each have our own purpose in this world. I definitely agree that there should be more inclusion, but to a limited extent.”* Another Orthodox student at Birmingham also dismissed the idea of an egalitarian minyan: *“It is against my Jewish beliefs. I would feel uncomfortable in that environment.”* Others rejected it on slightly less ideological grounds: it would simply feel

*“awkward,” “not my scene,” or “too in your face.”* In a not dissimilar vein, a London-based ‘Traditional’ female student, when discussing the Women at the Wall movement in Israel, said: *“Stuff like that really frustrates me. There are so many bigger problems Israel has to deal with internally, and the Gaza situation is a big problem ... Deal with the bigger issues, then we can focus on the little things ...”*

Yet, for some, egalitarianism in Judaism is not a little thing. One Reform student at the University of Nottingham said: *“For me, a big part of my Judaism is fighting for that equality between the sexes ... I don’t want to be sat in an Orthodox service with the women ... when the women are, from my experience, just chit-chatting. I don’t go to a service to sit there and not be able to hear what’s going on or participate in it.”* Others from various non-Orthodox backgrounds, and particularly women, expressed similar sentiments. One Reform student at Nottingham said *“I think traditional – very, very traditional – Judaism, is amazing, and I think tradition needs to be carried forward, otherwise we wouldn’t be where we are. But I think some views towards women are wrong in this day and age.”* Another Masorti student at Warwick said: *“Over the last few years, I’ve felt increasingly kind of alienated from the kind of Orthodox type of Judaism, but like very interested in kind of that more egalitarian side, so for me I think, that’s increasingly what my Jewish identity is becoming.”* Another ‘Reform/Secular’ student in Bristol maintained that *“until quite recently, it wasn’t even something I really had to worry about, because everything I was used to was egalitarianism, like it was egalitarian. I went to an egalitarian youth movement, I go to a Reform synagogue and my family is very egalitarian. But increasingly, as I’ve got older, I’ve found that I’ve had to defend my Judaism, especially since coming to university, and I think that’s made egalitarianism even more important to me because a lot of my identity comes from that. My gender, my sexuality, everything that I think about Judaism, I think I get from an egalitarian point of view.”*

And, indeed, it was possible to pick up some quite strong and critical language about Orthodox minyanim, to counterbalance the critique of egalitarianism. Asked whether or not she would attend one, a female Masorti student in Warwick

24 Graham and Boyd (2011), op. cit., p.61.

## Written comments on Jewish religious practice

*"I am not interested in the religious aspect of Judaism. I want to be involved in social activities, political activities and opportunities to learn about Jewish history."*

*"Prayer is not a strong part of my Jewish identity and instead makes me feel more isolated from those around me."*

*"I'm not interested in a Jewish service that I can't follow well or know what is going on."*

*"I have no interest in praying, liturgy, separate seating or orthodoxy."*

*"I don't feel the need for egalitarian Judaism. Don't like the idea of mixed seating, and don't enjoy prayer."*

said she would not, on the grounds that it is "brainwashing," "has an agenda" and "does not relate to me." Another female student there, with a Traditional background expressed similar sentiments: "It looks boring and exclusive, and not very warm and friendly", and a student with the same profile based in Bristol argued that it "seems exclusivist and unaccepting" and "does not relate to my Jewish identity."

Nevertheless, in the midst of all of this, there was a considerable degree of moderation. Questioned about the attractiveness of egalitarian minyanim, many Orthodox Jewish students expressed quite accepting views. One said: "It's not how I was raised, but good for them that they have it." Another remarked, "As an Orthodox Jew, I am most comfortable in Orthodox services. But having spent time in a variety of different services, I would recommend others to attend." Another said: "I don't believe in this movement. However, it should run – I just don't agree with it." And a female student in Birmingham, talking about a traditional Orthodox minyan with separate seating for males and females, remarked, "I am Orthodox and would be comfortable [in such a minyan]; others might not be, but should be able to go elsewhere."

Equally, beyond all of these views, was another very commonly expressed sentiment about prayer generally, particularly in its traditional

Orthodox form. "Prayer bores me," said a male 'Traditional' student at Birmingham University; "I don't enjoy praying" said a London-based female secular student; "I'm not interested in a Jewish service that I can't follow well or know what is going on" maintained a female Masorti student in Nottingham, and "It sounds incredibly boring and not at all how I would like to spend my time" argued a male 'Traditional' student at the same university.

It is impossible to discern from this study whether or not views about religious observance are becoming more extreme or moderate among the Jewish student population as a whole, but the existence of such different opinions will inevitably test the capabilities of an organisation like UJS that seeks to be cross-communal. Importantly, we did find evidence of students feeling excluded or alienated because of religious dynamics around Jewish events. One female, Traditional/Secular student in London argued that people who are not well-integrated into the Jewish social scene, perhaps because they did not attend a Jewish school, commonly opt out: "If you don't know anyone who participates in London JSoc, there's a general view that it's quite religious." The presence of some Orthodox-specific organisations on campus appears to reinforce this sense in some instances: a male 'Traditional' student in Nottingham argued that "Genesis and Aish, they're very 'if you want to be involved with us, yeah, welcome, come round to our house, we'll have you round' and all that, 'We'll be really nice to you,' but if you don't want to get involved with them and you don't do any of their programmes, they're just like, they don't want to know you." A female Reform student there, who is involved with the egalitarian minyan on campus, shared her experience of this: "Whilst I have no issues with the Aish rabbi and his wife in Nottingham – they are a lovely couple – it's kind of a place where I don't feel particularly comfortable ... It's not an open space, it's a space where unless you fit into that box of Orthodox, you don't tend to have a place in the Ortho-centric JSoc that Nottingham seems to have become." Similarly, a Reform student in Birmingham with a strong Jewish background recounted an experience where a friend of his advised him not to tell one of the Orthodox rabbis on campus that he was Reform. "When the rabbi went around and asked 'What synagogue

*are you part of?’ and I said Kol Chai Reform Synagogue, there was sort of like an ‘Oh.’ It wasn’t that it put me off, but I’m very busy a lot of the time ...”* The sense he was trying to convey was that whilst the rabbi’s comment did not particularly affect him, it was dismissive enough for him to feel that he was not going to interrupt his schedule in future to come again. Indeed, with plenty of other things to do on campus, it is easy for non-Orthodox students to disengage on the back of such experiences. A Nottingham-based student, who had previously served on the JSoc committee, recounted an episode where he actively tried to engage with a progressive Jewish student who said that he would not come to a JSoc Friday night dinner anymore because of its ortho-centricity. *“I said it’s terrible that you don’t feel you can come. Please speak to me about it. But he never did, he never got back to me. I thought that was such a shame, because there was not a willingness [on his part] to take that forward. He expressed his dissatisfaction, saw I was willing to do whatever possible to make it better, including running an egalitarian minyan on a Friday night and so on, but he never came back to me.”*

In hoping to address some of these challenges, a number of students expressed a familiar desire for Jewish organisations to cooperate more actively with one another. One bemoaned the *“very fragmented sense of community”* in Nottingham, arguing that *“when each organisation is trying their best to make everyone feel like home, it’s just so sad that they [different Jewish community organisations] can’t cooperate together, and that’s how I kind of feel, so it’s almost disheartening.”* Another, at the same university agreed: *“It’s nice that we’ve got so many different organisations that kind of cater for the various different needs of the different students on campus ... but there’s enough hatred from other people and to have a sense of community, especially at university, is really really important. So, I mean, the organisations should kind of come together.”*

Beyond differences around religious practice, a somewhat similar fault line appears to exist around internal Jewish discourse about Israel. Several students expressed very strong views about Jewish organisations that actively critique the Israeli government and military. Referring to ‘Breaking

“Several students expressed very strong views about Jewish organisations that actively critique the Israeli government and military ... At the same time, other students called for more open debate about Israel.”

the Silence,<sup>25</sup> one female, London-based student said: *“I don’t understand why they feel that they should come out of Israel and tell their stories ... The world’s getting enough bad media, bias and everything against Israel from everywhere else. Why do they feel the need to come and make it worse and speak to people? I don’t know what they’re really doing to help. They really annoy me.”* Reacting to an image of a demonstration by ‘Jews for Justice for Palestinians’<sup>26</sup> marching under a banner of ‘Jews Against the Siege of Gaza,’ another Orthodox, female student in London said: *“I can’t even put into words how much it makes me angry,”* and a male, ‘Traditional’ student in the same city described them as *“Jews who are ashamed of their Judaism. They are Jews on the days that they come out to condemn Israel as Jews, and all the rest of the time they are not. I unambiguously consider a lot of these people to be traitors.”*

At the same time, other students called for more open debate about Israel. An Orthodox student in London said: *“I don’t see any reason why Jews can’t criticise Israel. I think it is wrong to use your Judaism as a tool to say I have more legitimacy in my opinion because I’m Jewish, and there’s obviously an appropriate forum for doing it, but there’s no reason why people shouldn’t protest against things they think are wrong, about social and political things in Israel, events, actions that occur in Israel that they think are wrong. Even more than that, I think it’s important that we do. I know that there are some people who think you shouldn’t criticise Israel in public, but I think that just detracts from the good thing you have to say if you don’t consider it as well as a regular*

25 ‘Breaking the Silence’ is an Israeli organisation, founded in 2004, that represents the views of veteran Israeli soldiers who seek to expose the Israeli public to the reality of everyday life in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

26 ‘Jews for Justice for Palestinians’ is an organisation that seeks to represent the views of a network of British Jews who oppose Israeli government policies they regard as being destructive to the human, civil, political and economic rights of the Palestinian people.

country that has shortcomings as well as huge gifts and positive points.” A female student at Warwick went a little further: “Being pressured to be a Zionist – like, I mentioned my grandmother, I love her to bits, but her attitude really annoys me. It’s just she acts like Israel is just the best place in the world, which is okay if you think that, but don’t make people feel bad if they don’t agree. That’s what annoys me.” A male student there added: “Judaism is a religion that tends to be very introspective. We like to discuss things ... so I think it’s actually kind of sad that a lot of the time if you aim to discuss Israel practically, it gets so political. I’m very much a Zionist in the idealist sense, but it’s not unreasonable to say that the way the Israeli government has treated certain issues is not optimal, or there are actually complicated moral issues in what’s going on. And I think that when debate comes up within the Jewish community ... it’s seen as even sort of un-Jewish to express concern about what’s happening or express opposition to certain actions. I find that very difficult, I think that’s really sort of the opposite of what Judaism is about most of the time.”

That stated, we did not find much evidence of any kind of clamour for more open debate about Israel. Rather, the popularity among the sample of the lecture tour given by the *Haaretz* journalist Ari Shavit suggests a common desire simply to understand more about Israeli history, politics and society. It seems that Jewish students are looking for opportunities to learn more, in a safe and thoughtful space, less from those who wield a particular political agenda, and more from those perceived to have genuine depth and authority. Creating open Jewish spaces for short events, particularly involving opportunities to engage with sophisticated and thoughtful analysts, may be the best way to bridge the divide that exists.

In addition to the boundary issues around religious observance and Israeli politics, there is a third area of debate – where to draw the lines between Jews and non-Jews. This discussion played itself out in the focus groups, particularly in the context of discussion about intermarriage. In thinking about the realities of choosing a life partner, it is important to bear in mind that the average age of marriage among Jews in Britain today is 32 for men and 30 for women – i.e.

approximately ten years post-university.<sup>27</sup> Thus relatively few relationships started at university are likely to blossom into marriages. However, many Jewish students, like many students generally, are experimenting with relationships, so questions about whom to date, and whether or not it is appropriate to have a non-Jewish boyfriend or girlfriend, are active issues.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, Jewish students are involved in trying to ascertain how to negotiate the dynamics between their Jewish lives with their general lives: whether to include non-Jewish friends in Jewish activities, or whether to keep these two parts of themselves entirely separate. It is possible that this is particularly challenging for those who have been educated exclusively in Jewish schools, as university may be the first time that they have had to confront it.

“Jewish students are involved in trying to ascertain how to negotiate the dynamics between their Jewish lives with their general lives: whether to include non-Jewish friends in Jewish activities, or whether to keep these two parts of themselves entirely separate.”

Interestingly, a number of students spoke quite passionately against intermarriage. An Orthodox/Traditional female student at Birmingham said: “I’ve always been told that you can’t marry someone non-Jewish, otherwise you’re being disowned. You laugh [this was the reaction of others in the focus group], but it’s true, and that’s something I have always had at the back of my mind. My friends that have dated non-Jewish people – they don’t even tell me. When somebody tells me they’ve got a new boyfriend or girlfriend, the first thing they would tell me because they know it is important to me is that they’re Jewish or not Jewish, and they know not to tell me if they’re not Jewish because they know they’re going to get an earful. I feel that because so many people,

<sup>27</sup> See: Graham, D. (2016). *Jews in couples. Marriage, intermarriage, cohabitation and divorce*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research (forthcoming).

<sup>28</sup> See: Graham and Boyd (2011), op. cit., pp.54-55.

generations, have tried to wipe out the Jewish People, I think that keeping, even if you raise a Jewish child and they are just Jewish and they're not religious, just having a Jewish child brings another generation of Jewishness in, Judaism, albeit not religious." A 'Traditional' male student in Nottingham expressed similar sentiments: "I realise how the Jewish population is becoming smaller and smaller because people are marrying out. If people are marrying out, then their children won't be Jewish and then it kind of is a circle – there won't be any Jews left." A female student there, who also described her Jewish identity as 'Traditional,' agreed: "I see a Jewish marriage as like the fundamental way through which to ensure a Jewish future." Interestingly, this view was not limited to those with more traditional or Orthodox Jewish identities. One self-identifying secular female student in London said: "I think it's really important to carry on traditions, and when you come to have children, I'd want to be with someone that has the same kind of beliefs as me ... If you don't marry someone who is Jewish, he'll never really fully understand you or your heritage or your background. That's really important to me."

However, a male student in Birmingham was clearly struggling with this view. "I have a non-Jewish girlfriend and I think I don't like the fact that on a human level I don't want Judaism to interfere with me on that. My parents made little comments beforehand, like 'Are you going to get a Jewish girl?' It wasn't a big thing, as a Reform Jew it wasn't an overriding thing, but the stigma of it ... I want my kids to be Jewish. I don't know if I am going to marry this girl, but she finds it all very intriguing, and unless there's someone who's very very against the fact that that's what you want your life to be, then it's the sign of a good relationship. I just don't like the stigma, I'm scared to bring it up at times, I hate to talk about my girlfriend in front of them for that reason, and I don't like the fact that I'm scared because I shouldn't be, but I don't know."

One of the more communally-peripheral participants in this study – a female secular/Reform student at Bristol who went to a non-Jewish school and had very limited experiences of any other Jewish educational opportunities – took a more ideological stance on the issue. "I think things like in-marriage, or the idea of

in-marriage, is very exclusive. It is keeping Jews separate from the outer community and I really associate with my national [British] identity, and I think the two have to work together. I know my parents would love if I married a Jew, and I'm not saying I am against the idea of in-marriage. I think what I'm against is the concept it brings with it – of Jews sticking with Jews and excluding themselves from everything else." A secular male student there agreed: "I don't like the idea of there being quite an exclusivist policy. I feel like we should open our minds and be receptive towards other religions, towards other communities, and I think it would be a bit of a shame if we always looked internally, even though that can be hugely positive."

Determining where and how to draw these boundaries has a direct bearing on the extent to which Jewish students engage with non-Jews on campus. A Reform female student in Birmingham said: "Lots of people think that all of my friends should be Jewish and that's what I should be doing. But for me, that's not right. I like to surround myself with lots of different people, learn from other people's cultures, learn from everyone, and then, in return, they can learn from me. Lots of my friends have never had a Jewish friend before, and now they like to come and have dinners at my house, and they find it interesting as well."

"Determining where and how to draw these boundaries has a direct bearing on the extent to which Jewish students engage with non-Jews on campus."

Another female student there said that she really struggled with the whole Jewish versus non-Jewish friends issue. "I don't mean that I don't like having Jewish friends – I really do like that – but I don't like how exclusive Judaism is. I don't enjoy that at all. I've got loads of non-Jewish friends because I live with all non-Jews now and that's made me have loads more non-Jewish friends. But one of them is basically 'Jewish.' The things she does – I just think she's more Jewish than me! And she can't be a part of the community that I'm in because she's not Jewish and I think it's really sad how exclusive the whole community is ..." For

her, it was difficult to reconcile the idea that this non-Jewish friend, who seemed to be so culturally similar to her Jewish friends, could feel excluded from Jewish student life. She added: *“It was really sad when [another black, non-Jewish friend] came to me and said ‘I met some of your friends – they weren’t very nice to me.’ I was like, ‘That is so sad. They can’t even be nice to you just because you walked in and you weren’t Jewish.’ I hate that so much about this religion. That’s the one thing that really does annoy me because I think it should be fair.”*

Interestingly, this does not appear to be an issue that many Jewish student organisations particularly choose to focus on directly. It is not completely absent – UJS’s Jewish Experience Week certainly includes opportunities to discuss it, and some of the Orthodox outreach organisations provide programming about why intermarriage should be avoided – yet developing multiple ways for Jewish students to explore this part of their lives, particularly in an open and reflective manner rather than an ideological one, may be an important way to enhance the range of Jewish student activities on offer.

### **Summary and reflections**

The common thread in this section concerns community boundaries and where to draw them. Whilst the tone of all the focus groups was generally quite cordial, not least because that was one of the research ground rules, some genuine tensions exist between the positions of at least some Jewish students. As a rule, most are quite open to, and tolerant of, internal Jewish differences, but some of the language expressed, particularly in writing, suggested that, in different contexts, the students might have been somewhat more outspoken in their thoughts and beliefs.

At the larger Jewish campuses of Birmingham and Nottingham, and among students in London, there does appear to be a mainstream position that is religiously traditional/Orthodox, fundamentally pro-Israel, and with a strong focus on creating exclusive Jewish spaces. Jews who sit practically or ideologically outside of this position seem to struggle somewhat to find their way in, or, upon encountering these views, opt out altogether. This overarching position is somewhat weaker in Bristol and Warwick, perhaps because of the

nature of the Jews who typically choose to study there, and/or because the smaller number of Jewish students based at these universities creates an environment in which differences need to be tolerated more in order to maintain the collective as a whole.

The key educational question concerns how, and indeed whether, to manage difference. In many respects, the Jewish student community mirrors the wider Jewish community: there is a mainstream community and communal view that exists in much of the most densely-populated Jewish areas, around which sit more alternative and liberal perspectives that are more widely and thinly dispersed across the country. It may be that little can – or should – be done to alter this; Jewish students are the products of their upbringing and environment, and few Jewish organisations on campus have the capacity to significantly change that in any way.

Yet the fault lines identified by the students – between different types of religious observance, different positions on Israel and differences over how open or closed to be to the wider non-Jewish world – are all important issues, and fundamental parts of the ongoing challenge to maintain one’s Jewish identity in the contemporary world. For some students, their Jewish identities are already quite solid and secure, but for most, they are very much in the process of being developed. In this reality, Jewish organisations active on campus have to determine whether they wish to adopt a clear position on one side or the other of these fault lines, or to continue to seek to straddle them. The latter position makes more sense for an organisation like UJS that seeks to be cross-communal, and is working with a demographic still largely in the throes of developing its sense of self. Yet it is challenged by the growth of other, more ideologically certain Jewish players on the university scene. If an open approach is the preferred option, further work needs to be done to create spaces for Jews of all opinions to explore and develop their views, and have them challenged in ways that are thoughtful and inspiring, rather than hurtful or even demeaning. If a more ideologically certain approach is favoured, this becomes less of an issue – the key is to access motivational teachers and educators who can communicate that position in as clear and inspirational way as possible.

Educationally, it is striking to see that whilst there are many Jewish organisations and programmes that adopt a particular position on one or other side of the fault lines discussed, the students rarely, if ever, mentioned opportunities they had had to discuss the tensions in an open and thoughtful way. Such opportunities exist – UJS, in particular, offers them – but given that these are live issues, there may be a case for placing greater emphasis on them within the overall educational programme for students. Many sociologists argue that our identities evolve and develop continually rather than being permanently cast in stone; indeed, increasingly, they show a preference for the term ‘identification’ over and above ‘identity’ to capture this sense of constant change. If, indeed, this is the contemporary condition, offering Jewish students thoughtful and intelligent chances to explore who they are and how they feel about such issues, without imposing set answers, may be a more effective strategy than one which seeks to give primacy to a particular way of being Jewish upon them.

### 3.4. Creating community

In contemplating the question of how to engage Jewish students more actively in Jewish life on campus, it is valuable to identify and explore some of the barriers to entry that are sometimes at play. In so doing, it is important to bear in mind that all of the students involved in this study had in some way already crossed a key barrier. They chose freely to participate in this study after all, presumably because they had some interest in doing so; those with less interest in Jewish life are less likely to want to engage in a research study on this topic. Nonetheless, the perspectives and experiences provided by the students involved in this project offer some valuable insights.

It is worth noting from the outset that some Jewish students are unlikely to engage, irrespective of what UJS or any other Jewish organisation does. With a handful of exceptions, such students were largely absent from this study. They are probably more likely to attend universities with smaller Jewish populations, and less likely to be interested in contributing to a study like this. As one student commented, there are simply some Jewish students “*who just aren’t interested in that side of their student life ... it’s not something they would ever seek out, or ever be interested in as part of their student identity.*” At the same

time, other Jewish students will almost inevitably actively seek out, and if necessary, create, Jewish environments, out of a genuine sense of need or desire, halachic or otherwise. The Jewish political scientist, Daniel Elazar, might have conceived these two groups as the inner and outer limits of a set of concentric circles – those who are highly engaged and essentially stable in that position, and those who are most peripheral, and least likely to look for ways in.<sup>29</sup>

However, between these two groups is a third one, commonly referred to in the literature as the ‘moderately engaged’ or ‘moderately affiliated,’ and understood as that part of the Jewish student population that could move in either direction – towards greater levels of community engagement or disengagement, depending upon their experience of community when they encounter it. Given that students are at a particularly formative stage in their lives, it is possible that this group comprises a larger proportion of the whole among the student age band than most others; to whatever extent their identities were fixed or stable prior to coming to university, the very experience of living in a university environment opens up new possibilities that could draw them in or propel them out.

Evidence of this can be found in the voices of two students who arrived at university from very different positions. One student in Bristol described how he had been heavily involved in one of the Jewish youth movements at quite a senior level prior to coming to university, so much so that “*all of my friends would have thought of me as ‘the Jewish guy.’*” Yet he saw university as an opportunity to put parts of that intensive experience behind him: “*I’ve actually become less involved with the Jewish community since I’ve started university. I’d imagined it would be the other way round ... but my [Jewish] involvement at uni is pretty much minimal.*” For him, the barrier was not necessarily anything the JSoc or any other Jewish organisation on campus was doing; it was rather simply that he was looking for something else at that particular moment in time. On the other hand, another

29 See: Elazar, D. (1995). *Community and Polity. The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry*. Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society.

“To whatever extent students’ identities were fixed or stable prior to coming to university, the very experience of living in a university environment opens up new possibilities that could draw them in or propel them out.”

student at the same university, who was in his second year, went to a non-Jewish school, had a very limited Jewish educational background and considered himself to be secular, said: *“I’d like to have more involvement. I feel I’m quite ... well, not shy, but not particularly outspoken ... I’d like more of an insight into how it works. I went to a couple of debates last year. Again, I didn’t necessarily feel qualified. I should be a bit more confident and just go for it.”* For him, the barrier appeared to be more psychological – the Jewish environments he had encountered felt intellectually and possibly socially intimidating. The approaches and techniques required to draw in these two students are clearly very different, and exceptional interpersonal skills are required to do so.

A key part of what would make any such approach successful relates to the type of environment and experience students find when they enter Jewish student space. Beyond any barriers to entry in the first place, in order to come back a second time, students need to feel that the space meets their needs and interests. The focus group participants described several key experiences and feelings that made them at least question whether or not they would return.

Whilst the vast majority of students related to Shabbat, and Friday night dinners in particular, as positives, it is clear that they are not always so. One Masorti student in Birmingham commented: *“Recently, I think that Shabbat is negative because I see it puts so many people off.”* She argued that many of the Orthodox students *“think it’s a slippery slope – if you don’t keep Shabbat and you don’t keep kosher, you’re not religious, and if you do keep Shabbat and you do keep kosher, you’re Jewish. At university I feel it’s much more about putting labels on like: ‘Do you keep Shabbat? Okay, then you’re automatically Jewish.’ I really don’t like that. It feels restrictive.”* In essence, this student appeared to be saying that she felt that her Jewishness was being judged in some way within

the JSoc environment, and criticised as being inferior. Such judgementalism, which was also explored in the previous section, clearly has an impact on some.

There is also evidence to indicate that the scale of events can have a bearing. In part, this is reflected in some of the negative comments expressed earlier about Booze for Jews – the enormity of the event, and the intensive and overwhelming social environment. For example, one student in Warwick particularly liked the fact that Friday night dinners there were quite intimate, certainly when compared to the equivalent events in Birmingham, Nottingham and Leeds. *“A very small JSoc is so much nicer ... we had like thirty people on a Friday night, as opposed to hundreds ... it’s nice because everyone belongs and ... it’s just a very homely feel and it’s very nice.”* Another Warwick student noted that *“a lot of university societies bring people in by doing lots of drinking events, and the social is just everyone drinking. But JSoc socials are synonymous with warmth and hospitality and just enjoying each other’s company, and that is quite a unique experience for a lot of people.”* The risk is that one emphasises large-scale, social events with a lot of drinking that take considerable time and effort to organise – events that clearly appeal to many – at the expense of other quieter, more intimate events for those who are more likely to feel comfortable, and to flourish, in that type of environment. Both are needed.

Physical space may also have a bearing. One of the issues raised repeatedly in Nottingham was the absence of a permanent space for JSoc activities. One student there, whilst bemoaning the lack of cooperation between different Jewish organisations on campus, blamed it primarily on the problem that *“Nottingham doesn’t have a JSoc house. The house [that was being used] was the chaplain’s house and it wasn’t a place to come and kind of chill with your friends, whereas in Birmingham they’ve got that Hillel House that’s fantastic, and people do chill there all day, and people do go and see the chaplains there too or meet up for events or whatever, and it’s a central hub of Jewish life. We don’t have that ... it’s a very kind of spatially fragmented place, which makes it difficult I’m sure for those who want to be kind of involved with everything.”* Seemingly, it is harder to create a vibrant Jewish life on campus without a viable and consistent physical space within which

## Barriers to entry – what turns some students off

*“I do not like events run by organisations who tell me about my religion/what I should believe in.”*

*“I feel very intimidated by this event [a political training seminar]. I do not have the knowledge and feel like I would be looked down on or judged by others.”*

*“This [an Israel advocacy organisation activity] is why people think Jews are all the same. Discourse is needed, not arbitrary advocacy. We shouldn't be sheep!”*

*“I have never felt any real connection to prayer, and this [a particular form of Jewish religious practice] would not be my chosen form to explore this aspect further.”*

*“I'm not from a Jewish school, and once drunk [at 'Booze for Jews'], everyone breaks into their cliques. No thanks.”*

to build it, and the Nottingham-based students involved in this study, in particular, felt this absence quite acutely.

There is also some suggestion that Jewish students in each city who are not based at the main university there, may find it quite difficult to access Jewish life. A student at Nottingham Trent University said: *“I feel that there's a similar sort of fragmented community between Trent [University] Jews and Uni of Nottingham Jews, where Trent Jews are stuck either in the city, living in the city or the edge of Lenton, and maybe Freshers are on Clifton [campus], whereas 'Uni of' students, everyone's sort of in this [University Park campus] area. So all the Friday nights are always on 'Uni of' campus, maybe people who live in the city can't make it all the way over, it's too far ...”*<sup>30</sup>

In essence then, certain barriers can be clearly identified. Some concern the tone of events – their scale and volume, the degree to which they

feel sufficiently intimate to allow people to feel comfortable, and the extent to which they feel socially or intellectually intimidating. These types of issues can be addressed simply by being more attentive to them: working harder at creating a variety of events, as well as a culture that is warm, hospitable and welcoming around all Jewish student activities. Other barriers – particularly those relating to physical space – may require financial investment. It would seem axiomatic that Jewish students on campuses with large populations should have access to appropriate spaces to run their activities; finding suitable and cost-effective solutions to ensure that this is the case would appear to be an important policy intervention.

*“Certain barriers can be clearly identified. Some concern the tone of events – their scale and volume, the degree to which they feel sufficiently intimate to allow people to feel comfortable, and the extent to which they feel socially or intellectually intimidating.”*

Yet questions about what to do within such spaces remain. Calls for Shabbat and festival activities should already be apparent. Having Jewish ‘chill out’ space has previously been mentioned. But what else might students be calling for?

There is some interest in Jewish learning. It is not as pronounced as for large-scale parties like Booze for Jews and the Willy Wonka Purim Party, nor for Friday night dinners, but it certainly emerged as an area of interest, particularly among the most Orthodox. As one student in Bristol said: *“I find the intellectual aspects of Judaism and the sources and the learning and all of that wealth of Jewish literature absolutely fascinating and so important in the way that I can then approach Judaism from knowing more to shape more what I do and what I believe.”* Another in Birmingham said: *“For me learning is very central to my Judaism because I think it's the whole central aspect of Judaism in terms of thinking passed down from one generation to the next. I think it's essential*

<sup>30</sup> The University of Nottingham is split over several campuses, although most of these are in quite close proximity to one another. Trent University is split over three sites, at least two miles away from the University of Nottingham's main campus, University Park, if not considerably further.

to Judaism.” Yet, interestingly, there was no particular clamour for more of this; to the extent that Jewish students want it, they appear to be able to find it, whether through events like ‘Pizza and Parsha’ (run by Chabad) or opportunities to learn at events organised by chaplains or Orthodox organisations on campus.

In many instances, the term ‘learning’ was understood by the students in this study as traditional Torah study. Yet not all students see it in this way. Referring to yeshiva-style learning, one secular/Reform student in Bristol said: *“I feel that is what a lot of people, especially in the UK or around the world, associate with what being Jewish is. I feel no connection to it at all. I went on a Jewish gap year to Israel and ... I don’t particularly engage with Jewish learning, like text learning. I went to Israel to learn about my identity and my culture and what Judaism means to me.”* For her, Jewish learning resides not in the study of traditional texts, but rather in realms that speak directly and personally to her – she is unlikely to be drawn to a Torah shiur, but would welcome opportunities to explore and learn more about what Jewishness means to her. In many respects, hers is a different epistemological universe to the one occupied by her more Orthodox fellow students – she wants Jewish learning to be broad, open, personal and meaningful, full of opportunities to explore her own doubts and interests; others want their learning to be more bounded, full of depth and complexity, but ultimately offering clear guidance about how to live one’s life. To engage the former type of student, approaches to Jewish learning need to be offered that open up questions and encourage people to reflect on them freely, without imposing set answers.

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Certain educational topics that might form the content of such learning came to the fore. Several students expressed a real affinity with Jewish history. An Orthodox student in London said that yeshiva-style textual learning is far less compelling to him than *“remembering the past and learning about it.”* Another Orthodox student there said: *“I really enjoy learning about Jewish history. And I would say if we didn’t have such an interesting history, then it would be harder to keep in touch with the tradition. I think part of being interested in it is learning about the history.”* A history student in London described how he thinks *“about the relevance and the significance of history in understanding how it relates to me, whereas lots of other historians don’t think like that.”* In essence there is some evidence of an interest in Jewish history and how the past relates to the experience of being Jewish today – the relationship, in short, between memory and identity.

Unsurprisingly, the historical episode that came up most frequently, in this and other contexts, was the Holocaust. For most Jewish students today, the Holocaust is a key component of that history – whilst they may have some familial connections with it, most are several generations removed. However, this is not always the case. Indeed, one London-based student in this study said: *“my grandmother was in Auschwitz, so generationally, we’re actually very close – it’s my father’s mother. And I have always been very conscious, just ... in terms of relationships like I’ve had with my dad, and all of that ... I’ve always been aware that he was brought up by someone who went through the most insane torture, and lost her family.”* As an aside, when one contemplates this alongside the previously described episode of the blasé reaction from the University of Nottingham Student Union to the ‘Hitler was right’ posters, it becomes all the more disturbing.

A number of students had participated in Jewish study tours to Poland, and found them to be extremely powerful. One reported: *“I went to Poland with Genesis. That was kind of one of the times for me where – for someone that doesn’t usually have a strong association with the religion and the culture – when you get ... when I went there and I saw you know, the concentration camps, then you really get that sense of the culture and where you come from and you know, all the people that died in the name of Judaism and*

*stuff. That's kind of one thing that really made me feel like that, a kind of connection to it."*

Probed further about what it made him feel, he said: *"More proud like of my heritage, and it just like strengthened the idea that it is important to keep it going, and just that people know about the Holocaust and things like that, so it never happens again."* Another similarly said: *"I think everyone should be educated, regardless of whether you're Jewish or not, in the Holocaust and what actually happened there, because a lot of people don't know. I've asked people and I'll go 'Oh I went to Auschwitz', [and they will ask] 'Where's that?' People need to know what that is. I think Holocaust education is so important to my Jewish identity now."*

'March of the Living' proved to be one of the most popular programmes discussed with the students, and by far and away the most popular overseas trip. Very little negativity towards it was expressed at all. At the same time, several students were concerned about educational efforts that use the Holocaust as a justification for maintaining one's Jewishness today. An Orthodox student in Birmingham said: *"I feel that so much of my own Jewish education [expressed the message that] the Holocaust happened, you should be Jewish. That really pisses me off. It's like all these Jews died; how can you think about marrying out? You're just continuing Hitler's work. There's more to Jewish identity than the fact that the Holocaust happened. So much of the education in schools and youth movements is the Holocaust happened, look at the Holocaust, six million, da-de-da, like over and over again. There's so many more positive things about Jewish identity than the fact that this atrocious event happened years ago."*

Another Orthodox student, in London, agreed: *"I think some people associate themselves with the Holocaust in an unhealthy way in that they define themselves as having gone through the Holocaust instead of finding meaning or thinking about it in a more objective manner that they just take in that aspect and that's the end of it and that's how they define themselves in one way."* In developing educational responses to this, the key, it appears, is to create programmes that explore Jewish history and the Holocaust in ways that are simultaneously powerful and nuanced; allowing students space to explore major Jewish themes and ideas, and communicating their power without dictating their meaning.

*"The key, it appears, is to create programmes that explore Jewish history and the Holocaust in ways that are simultaneously powerful and nuanced; allowing students space to explore major Jewish themes and ideas, and communicating their power without dictating their meaning."*

Beyond learning, it is worth noting that a significant proportion of students are involved in sports activities of various types – football, rugby, cricket, netball, gymnastics, lacrosse, water polo, athletics, martial arts, kickboxing and American football were all mentioned. About a third of all the students involved in this study talked about this when asked about their extra-curricular activities on campus. In the vast majority of instances, these are happening in a general university context rather than any kind of particular Jewish one. Indeed, their reaction to Jewish sporting activities was rather mixed: Power League – a football programme organised by JSocs – came fifteenth on the list of thirty-two activities explored, and the JUEFA Cup, a UJS event, came 28th. In part, this was due to the reaction of some of the women in the sample; indeed, twenty women marked down their response to these activities as a negative (i.e. they would not go), compared to just six of the men. Referring to the JUEFA Cup, one female Orthodox student at Birmingham remarked *"Football is for boys,"* and another female Reform student in Nottingham commented *"Football events are much more focused towards boys. There should be a more girlie equivalent."* Another female Masorti student at Birmingham made a similar comment about Power League: *"It's a boy's thing. Not interested."* Some of the men agreed, with one, for example, describing the JUEFA Cup as *"a good way for Jewish guys to get together in a fun relaxed atmosphere."* There was some call for more mixed sporting activities (one male Orthodox student argued that *"having a sports tournament which isn't football would be great as it will be more inclusive,"* but another female Orthodox student in London maintained that she felt little need for this: *"I play lacrosse competitively on the university team and feel no need to combine every aspect of my life with Judaism. Sport is an element of my life in which I feel fulfilled and do not need any further (Jewish or other) input."* In short, the jury is out on the scale of demand for more of this type of activity;

clearly, football events appeal to some and there may be scope to develop female-specific or mixed sporting events specifically for Jewish students, but the scale of interest should be measured more accurately before investing heavily in this area.

The next most common non-Jewish activities students appear to be involved in are course-related in some way – being active, for example, in the university’s law society, or engineering group, or medical association. A number of students also said that they volunteered in some way, visiting the elderly, working in a homeless shelter, running a club for the disabled, although again, most of these activities were taking place under the auspices of a university group rather than a Jewish one. A few said they were involved in mentoring or tutoring younger students. Other general activities that some of the students spoke about were related to student politics (National Union of Students or student union/guild events); music (playing in an orchestra, ensemble or band); serving on the committee of their halls of residence; debating societies; and media (e.g. the university television or radio station). The question of whether or not Jewish student organisations should engage more actively in any of these areas – particularly professional interest groups, the arts, media and debating – may be worth exploring.

A handful of students spoke quite passionately about volunteering and social justice, suggesting a certain degree of interest in these areas. For example, a secular/Reform student at the University of Nottingham said *“I used to volunteer at an organisation called JAMI, which is the Jewish Association for Mental Illness and I’d always ... I always want to volunteer but I don’t know why, there’s some sort of like I feel like I want to volunteer for a Jewish rather than a not Jewish organisation ... I can’t like tell you why, I just like the whole value.”* Another student in London, who described her Jewish identity as ‘Traditional/Secular,’ said: *“from a young age I went to Jewish primary and secondary schools, and whenever I come face-to-face with charity or volunteering in my university life or whatever else, I always think back to the fact that school always instilled in us that charity and volunteering is such a big thing in Judaism.”* A male student at Warwick maintained that the volunteering he did as a child is *“the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done ... it’s a very big part of me, and like speaking*

*to friends from uni, no one has ever done anything like that.”* This was not a big theme in the study, but it does provide some evidence of an interest in this general area to accompany the accounts of students being involved in similar sorts of voluntary work on campus.

Also mentioned, but with even less emphasis, were women-specific issues. Only one of the students in the study mentioned being involved in the university’s Women’s Society, and the main realm in which gender was discussed in the focus groups was related to prayer and egalitarianism.

### **Summary and reflections**

We have seen in the previous sections how important the notion of community is in Jewish students’ conception of Jewishness, and where some of the most challenging fault lines lie when trying to draw the boundaries around it in a Jewish context. This section has focused on what some of the barriers to entry might be, and which activities might serve to draw more people in.

It should be apparent that not all students realistically can be engaged; some will simply choose to keep their distance from Jewish life on campus. Yet it is possible to discern in the voices of these students a number of issues that, if addressed, could make it easier for others to find a way in. It is clear that, in certain instances, some feel intimidated, socially and/or intellectually. While many love large-scale social events, some clearly find them uncomfortable – too loud, cliquy, overwhelming or unfriendly – and prefer more intimate environments. Others feel Jewishly ignorant, uncomfortable about their levels of Jewish knowledge in comparison to others, even though they may be eager to learn more. Some expressed a sense that they felt they were being judged by others, in some way, in Jewish activities on campus, most commonly for not being Orthodox enough.

Spatial issues were also raised, in two distinct ways. First, the needs of students who are situated some distance away from the main student centre of gravity in a particular city, perhaps because they are studying on a different campus or university from the main one, are not always taken into consideration. It may be difficult to do so, but developing creative solutions to aid accessibility for them may be important. Second, and probably

more importantly, the absence of a dedicated space for JSoc activities on certain campuses clearly makes it difficult for the JSoc to develop a strong programme or presence, and where this reality exists, students appear to feel it quite acutely. Students based in Nottingham argued that this issue is particularly pronounced there at the moment, so assessing the veracity of their claims and finding a solution to this particular challenge would appear to be a priority.

In considering the issue of barriers to entry, the idea of ‘community’ may be a useful construct to aid policy development. Given the powerful ways in which students spoke about it, the goal of many Jewish activities for students ought to be the creation of community in that context. Whilst there are many different definitions of community, encouraging Jewish student leaders to create a model of Jewish community on campus that thinks carefully about how to welcome people in and then provides them with a comfortable and meaningful experience once they are there, could not only be beneficial to students in the here and now, but could also, over time, serve as important training for the future leadership of the UK’s Jewish organisations and synagogues. In undertaking this work, it is critical for student leaders to take into consideration who the existing students are Jewishly, and to create an environment that suits them. This may well change from year-to-year, so reviewing definitions and re-thinking models and programmes ought to be annual activities.

In many respects, it seems that the quality and nature of the Jewish activities that students find on

campus are more important than the issue of how to encourage them to come through the door in the first place. The vast majority of students involved in this study had come to a JSoc event at least once. Indeed, based on this evidence, JSocs stand head and shoulders above anything else offered by other Jewish organisations on campus; while Genesis and Chabad featured quite strongly, JSocs remain the dominant Jewish provision. As has already been stated, Shabbat activities – particularly Friday night dinners – and chagim are key. Yet beyond these, there is interest in Jewish learning, both in its traditional textual and identity exploration forms, and clearly some interest in Holocaust education and opportunities to find out more about Jewish history. Israel education appears to be of interest too; even though this was not particularly articulated by the students, the fact that so many students expressed interest in the Ari Shavit speaker tour programme suggests that Israel is a topic which Jewish students are more than ready to explore, perhaps particularly if done independently of advocacy training or an association with a particular political agenda.

Most of the students involved in this study said that they were involved in various general campus activities to some extent; relatively few do nothing beyond their course and attending Jewish-related events, although a number may have somewhat overstated their participation levels in extra-curricular activities. The area of sports would seem to hold some potential, and a creative and accessible approach to facilitating a range of volunteering opportunities could also appeal to some.

## 4 Conclusions

This study is based on the views of 65 Jewish students studying at ten universities. Whilst one should be cautious about drawing generalised conclusions from such a small sample, the research has revealed some key themes and issues which, located in the context of previous research and contemporary Jewish community discourse about Jewish student life, point towards some significant conclusions. Many of these are discussed in the concluding paragraphs of each of the sections of the report, so in this concluding chapter we will focus on just three: (i) thinking about Jewish Societies as Jewish communities; (ii) utilising some of the tensions that exist between students – particularly about religious practice and Israel – as potential for creative and constructive learning and debate; and (iii) developing the means and the skills to share Jewish culture and life confidently with non-Jewish students.

### The importance of community

The first, and strongest finding, is related to the issue of community. When we asked the Jewish students involved in this study about the nature of their Jewish identities, the themes they most commonly mentioned and discussed were family and community. Indeed, for many of them, Judaism is community; it is what they understand Judaism to be. Judaism is not a solitary pursuit; it happens in relationship with other Jews, and many of the most powerful, warm and influential memories of Jewish life that these students have had, occurred in a family or community setting, notably on Shabbat or Jewish festivals. Yet one of the features that characterises student life is the absence of these settings, because most British Jewish students leave home to study. Thus, particularly in the early stages of their university career, their ability to find a hospitable and welcoming Jewish community is critical to the continuing cultivation of their Jewish identity. Therefore, in many respects, organisations active on campus should understand their work as efforts to create Jewish communities – places in which Jewish students will find Jewish community throughout their time at university.

Of course, this notion inevitably raises a question about the nature of community. What is a Jewish community in a university context? What should it look like and feel like? Should it prioritise

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particular theological or ideological positions (for example, by being staunchly Zionist, or overwhelmingly Orthodox), or should it adopt a more pluralist stance that welcomes and accepts any students interested in exploring and understanding Judaism and Jewish issues on their own terms? And is there an overarching position that applies to all Jewish university contexts, or does it depend upon the nature and needs of the particular group of Jewish students at each university at a given time?

Part of the answer to the question depends heavily on who is creating community. Many of the Jewish organisations active on campus are quite clear about their goals – they hold particular theological or political positions and welcome in those who share those or actively want to explore them, whilst remaining in opposition to (or at best neutral about) others. UJS is different. Because each JSoc is independent, UJS is somewhat limited in its ability to impose answers to these questions uniformly across the country. Yet this may well be part of its key value. Bearing in mind the desire for community that was expressed by students, UJS is well-placed to encourage JSoc committees to consider carefully each year what type of community they want to create on their campus, and to help them to identify and articulate the values that should inform that. Indeed, this type of work – empowering Jewish students to create Jewish life for themselves on their own terms – is one of the best forms of training one can have in Jewish life. Rather than simply consuming Jewish life as it is offered to them by others, JSocs have to create Jewish life for themselves and other students on campus. Whilst mistakes are inevitable, the experience of doing this can be profoundly formative and help instil the idea in Jewish students that Jewish community is not simply a commodity to buy, but rather something one has an ongoing responsibility to create. The work involved in determining the core values of each student community, and then trying to make those values live and breathe – for example by running Friday night dinners or other key events – is part of that training. The British Jewish community

should bend over backwards to foster this type of activity – the messages Jewish students receive about their role in creating community on campus are likely to have a significant bearing on the values and very functionality of the British Jewish community of the future.

Part of being able to create community is dependent upon the existence of a physical space to do so. In general, there was little in this study to suggest that this is a major concern, although it was raised in the case of Nottingham. In this instance, it seemed to us that the issue there was less about the lack of availability of a space *per se*, but rather the absence of a space that Jewish students felt was their own. Investigating this issue, and looking at models of best practice (for example, the Moishe House approach), is recommended.<sup>31</sup>

### The creativity in tension

Ideological or theological tensions often lead to community breakdown. There are numerous cases of Jewish communities splitting over supposedly irreconcilable conflicts – for example, over egalitarianism, or Israel, or the extent to which Jews should be open or closed to the wider world. Not surprisingly, all of these issues came up in this study – all of the tensions found in the Jewish community as a whole are alive and well in the Jewish student community too. And whilst there is no evidence here to indicate that these are causing any Jewish student groups to break down, there are suggestions that Jewish students simply opt out if they do not like, or cannot countenance, the types of Jewish community they find at university.

Many Jewish organisations on campus are very clear about how to manage such tensions. For example, some have no interest in egalitarianism – they are not going to include women in a minyan or allow them to be called up to the Torah, as doing so would compromise some of their core beliefs. Some hold clear political positions – leftist organisations are not terribly open to those with rightist views, and vice versa, and one should not expect them to be. All of these organisations tend to offer environments in which existing views are reinforced, or ‘unacceptable’ views are challenged or rejected. Tensions within these organisations

tend to be resolved in one way or another – there are ‘right’ views and ‘wrong’ views – rather than being managed in a way that allows both sides of the tension to coexist and inform one another.

Again, as a cross-communal umbrella organisation, UJS does not have the luxury of resolving these tensions; it has to allow multiple perspectives to exist. And again, this should be a key part of its strength, and a reason why its role is so important to the British Jewish community. Tensions can cause irreconcilable splits in communities, but they can also be the sparks that create the possibility of genuinely profound learning – when personally held beliefs come into conflict with those held by the larger group. As the American educator Parker Palmer has commented, the best teachers often locate themselves in the middle of such tensions, “where personal and public meet, dealing with the thundering flow of traffic at an intersection,” which often feels “like crossing a freeway on foot.”<sup>32</sup> Part of what Jewish student leaders ought to learn is how to find the creativity that can be present within these types of tensions, and use it to generate thoughtful and empowering conversations about Judaism that inspire Jewish students to want to go further in their exploration of Jewish life. Helping Jewish students to navigate their way through these types of tensions, without necessarily telling them what to do, will also stand them in good stead when similar challenges inevitably confront them in the future (in a Jewish or general context).

“Part of what Jewish student leaders ought to learn is how to find the creativity that can be present within these types of tensions, and use it to generate thoughtful and empowering conversations about Judaism that inspire Jewish students to want to go further in their exploration of Jewish life.”

32 Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The Courage to teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

31 See: [www.moishehouse.org](http://www.moishehouse.org).

To do this well requires investment in high quality content and facilitation, focusing on the issues that most preoccupy Jewish students. Based on this study, there are plenty of Jewish students who are interested in exploring questions about what it means to be Jewish, and reflecting further on their relationships with Jewish history, Israel, antisemitism and the Holocaust. The key seems to lie in the creation of collaborative partnerships between local Jewish student leaders and UJS in particular, which allow Jewish students to come up with their own ideas about what they most want to explore, whilst UJS enables those ideas to be turned into high quality programming possibilities.

### Relating to others

It is clear from this study that, particularly in the realm of political debate about Israel, Jewish students quite commonly encounter a reality on campus that feels uncomfortable, unpleasant, threatening and even, on rare occasions, dangerous. Importantly, this does not only happen within closed environments for those choosing to enter the political fray; on the contrary, it is apparent that Jewish students with no particular interest in political engagement have also experienced these feelings simply by walking across the university campus and encountering a protest or demonstration, or even in the context of university lectures. This is not always the case – indeed, on some campuses there is evidence of quite a cooperative and positive dynamic between pro-Israel and pro-Palestinians groups – but such instances seem to be the exception rather than the rule, based on this evidence.

Jewish students, often working under the auspices of UJS, have a good record of managing and responding to these political issues, and there is nothing to suggest that the workload in this area is going to subside at any point soon. Indeed, if anything, there may be a call for further investment in combating anti-Israel sentiment on campus, and in offering advice and support in cases where Jewish students encounter prejudicial views from university lecturers in the classroom.

At the same time, it is striking to note how many students said that they had rarely, if ever, experienced any antisemitism on campus, particularly bearing in mind much of the contemporary Jewish communal discourse about it. Indeed, the dominant position articulated by the students in this study was that their Jewishness was largely immaterial to most non-Jewish students, and if anything, that their fellow students were tolerant, accepting and even curious about it. Some expressed surprise about this, given the nature of that discourse, and the preparation they had received from Jewish schools and other organisations in advance of starting university.

Clearly, there is some need to prepare Jewish students for the political eventualities they may encounter on campus. However, given that most non-Jewish students will not express any hostility towards them at all, there may also be a case to think more actively about how to prepare students for this much more positive reality, as well as, perhaps, how to share Jewish culture with the wider student population. Given that so many Jewish students were schooled in exclusively or predominantly Jewish environments, exploring how they might express their Jewishness in an active, open and confident way may be an important area to consider. In short, whilst responding to threats is obviously important, creating more positive programmes and opportunities to engage as Jews with the wider student population could well serve both an important educational and political function.

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## Appendix

### Understanding the sample

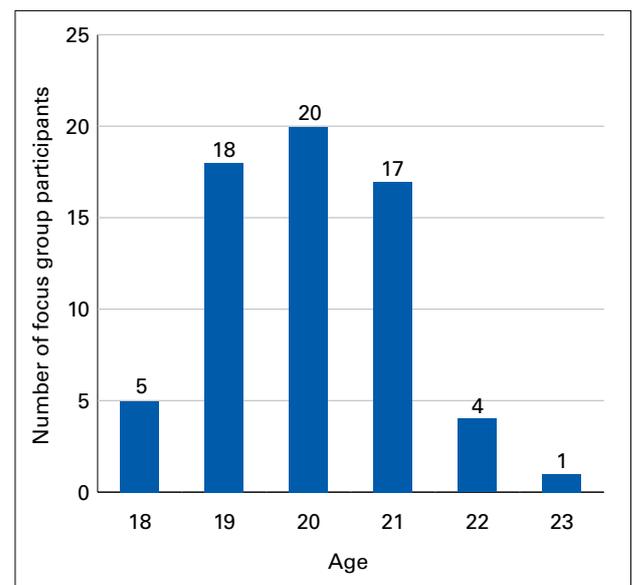
The data in this report relate only to those individuals who participated in the eight focus groups. They should not be regarded as representative of Jewish students as whole. Whilst this study was designed to include a broad cross-section of Jewish students based in the five cities, one should not assume that the proportions established in the sample can be generalised to the entire Jewish student population. This study is based on too small a sample to derive an accurate or meaningful quantitative assessment of the total Jewish undergraduate student cohort. The data in this section should rather be used as a basis from which to understand who was, and was not, included in this particular project, and provide a lens through which to understand the qualitative findings contained within the report.

65 students in total took part in the study. All were born Jewish, with one exception who converted in. All are UK citizens and grew up in the UK, and all but one gave a current permanent (i.e. non-term-time) address in the UK. The exception gave an address in Israel. Of the 64 who gave a UK address, 50 live permanently in London or surrounding areas (particularly South Hertfordshire), and 14 live permanently outside of London. Seven of the 65 also hold a second citizenship (one each from Switzerland, Australia, the United States and South Africa, and three from Israel). They were more or less equally split in terms of gender (see Figure 1).

All participants were undergraduates studying a wide range of subjects, including medicine, mathematics, history, politics, sociology, law, economics, engineering, languages and drama.

Their age range reflects what would typically be expected of a random group of undergraduate university students in the UK (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Age split of focus group participants (N=65)



The focus groups took place in five cities: London, Birmingham, Nottingham (two groups each), and Bristol and Coventry (one group each). Figure 3 shows the institutional affiliations of the students included in the study.

The study included students at different stages of their undergraduate programmes, ranging from first-year students who began university in October 2015, to final (third and fourth-) year undergraduates who were due to complete their studies at the end of the 2015/16 academic year. Figure 4 illustrates how the students are distributed across different university year groups.

Figure 1. Gender split of focus group participants (N=65)

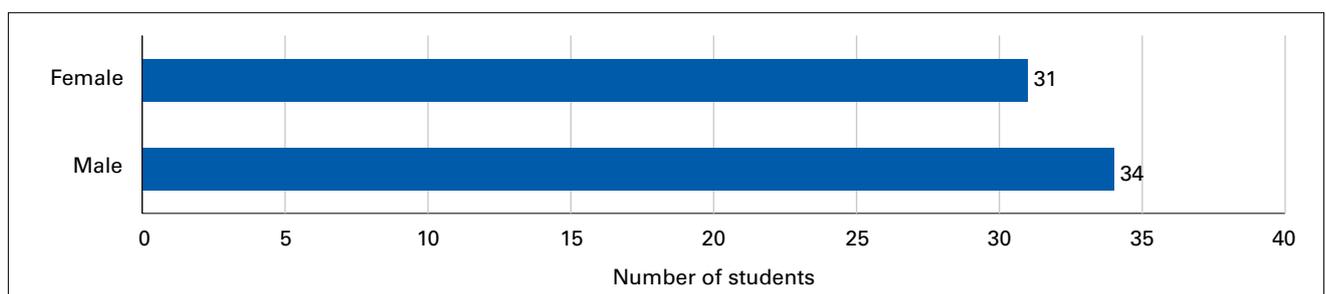


Figure 3. Universities attended (N=65)

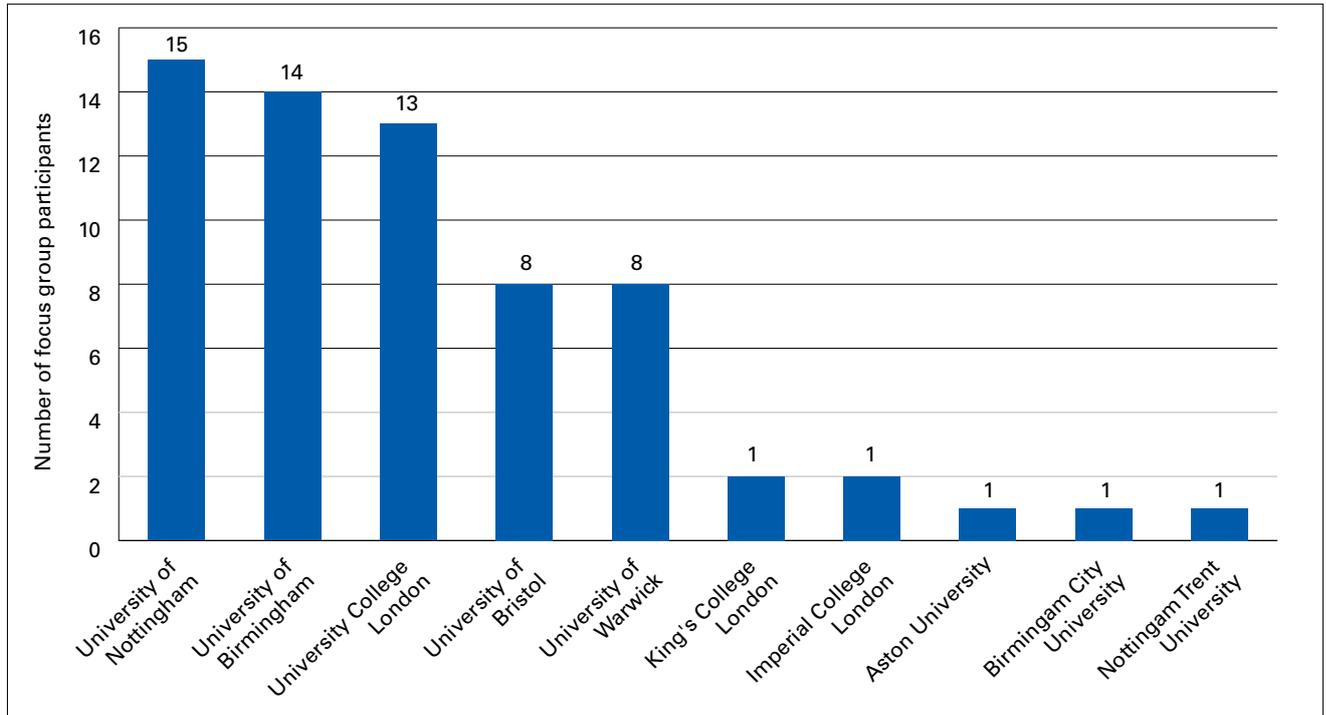


Figure 4. Year of study of focus group participants (N=65)

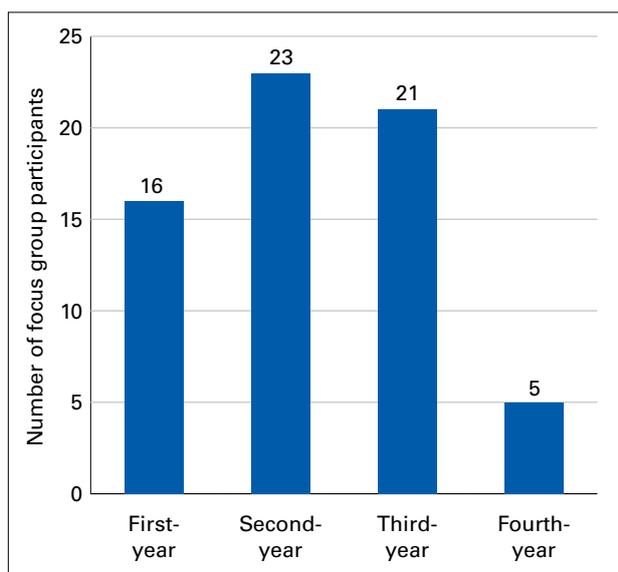
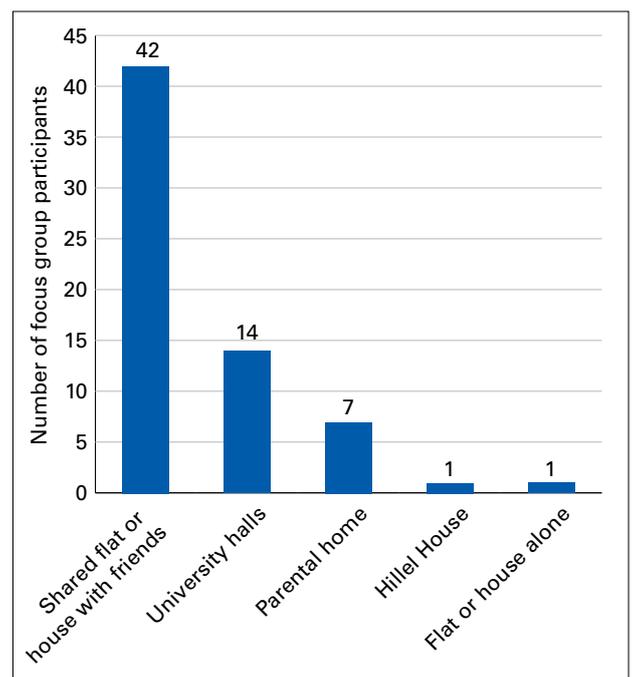


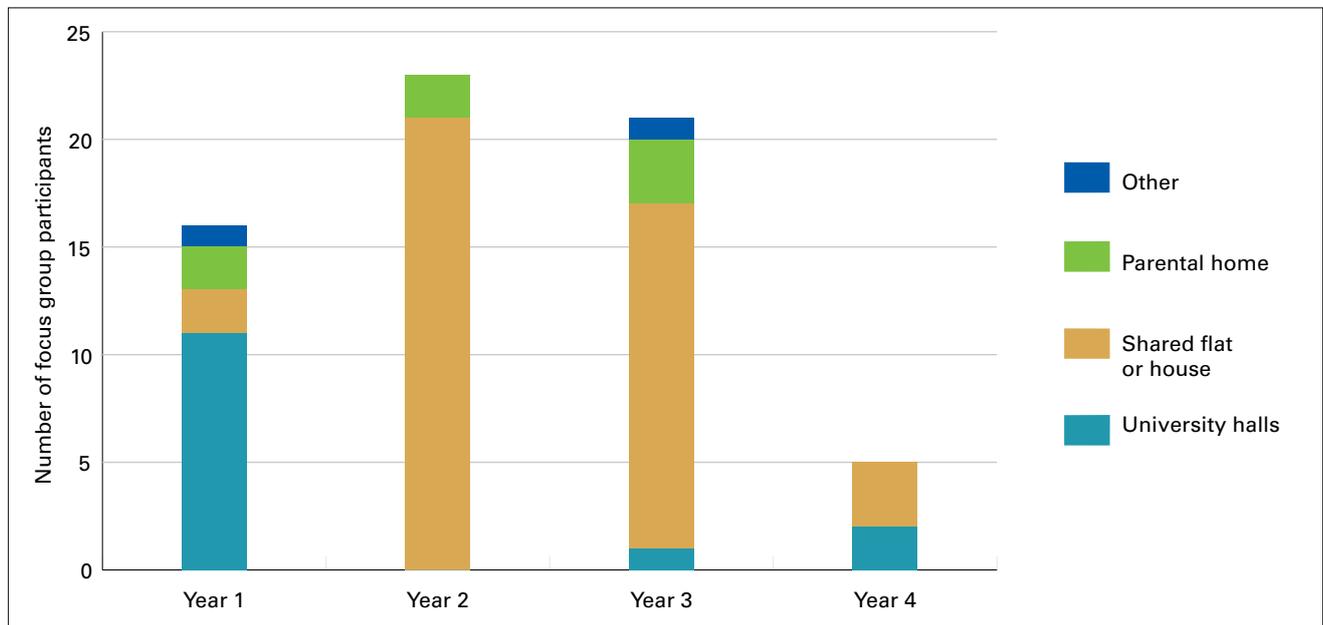
Figure 5. Accommodation choices of focus group participants (N=65)



As is typical of undergraduate students, many of the first-year students live in university accommodation, whilst most of those in their second year or beyond live with friends in a shared house or flat. However, there are some exceptions to this. Figures 5 and 6 show the accommodation

choices of the participants, across the sample as a whole, and by year group. It is worth noting that all of the students living in their parental home

Figure 6. Accommodation choices of focus group participants by year of study (N=65)

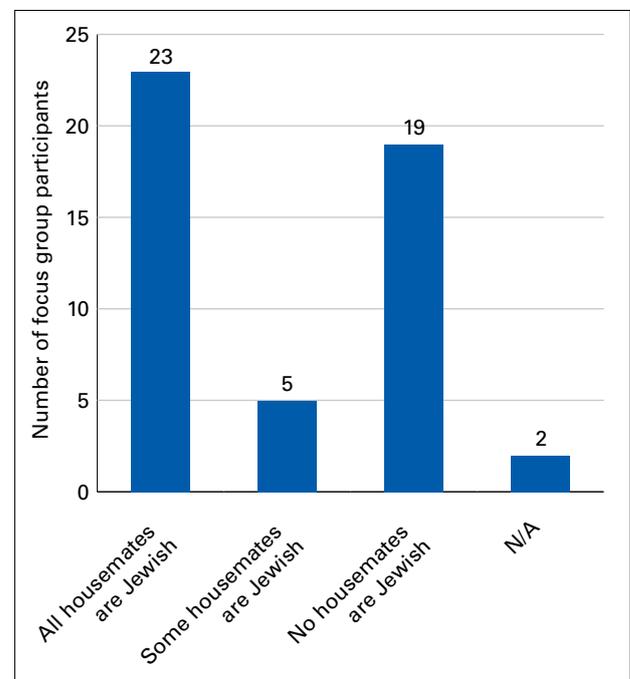


are Londoners studying at London universities, who self-define either as Jewishly ‘Orthodox’ or ‘Traditional.’

Whilst most first-year students live in university halls and are unable to choose with whom they live (although at some universities, Jews tend to apply to particular halls in order to be able to live in close proximity to one another), by their second year, students are making choices for themselves. Some choose to live exclusively with Jews, some with non-Jews, and some with a mix. Figure 7 shows how this particular group is distributed across these options.

Whilst the choices survey participants have made in terms of housemates might suggest quite a large sub-sample of Jewishly-unaffiliated individuals, this was not the case. 52 of the 65 participants said they were currently a member of the university Jewish Society (JSoc), and only seven said they had never been so. Furthermore, only two said they had never attended a JSoc event during their time at university, and 27 had served on the JSoc committee at some point. At the same time, 21 participants said that they had only ever attended JSoc events ‘occasionally.’ Collectively, the group displayed a high degree of awareness of Jewish activities on campus, and quite high participation rates, as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 7. Choices of housemates of second-year students and above (N=49)



As well as the programme and initiatives identified in Figure 8, the questionnaire each respondent was required to complete also included opportunities to identify other programmes or initiatives that were only available to some of the students surveyed because they were held on some of the campuses visited and not others. Figure 9 includes some

Figure 8. Levels of awareness of, and participation in Jewish activities for university students

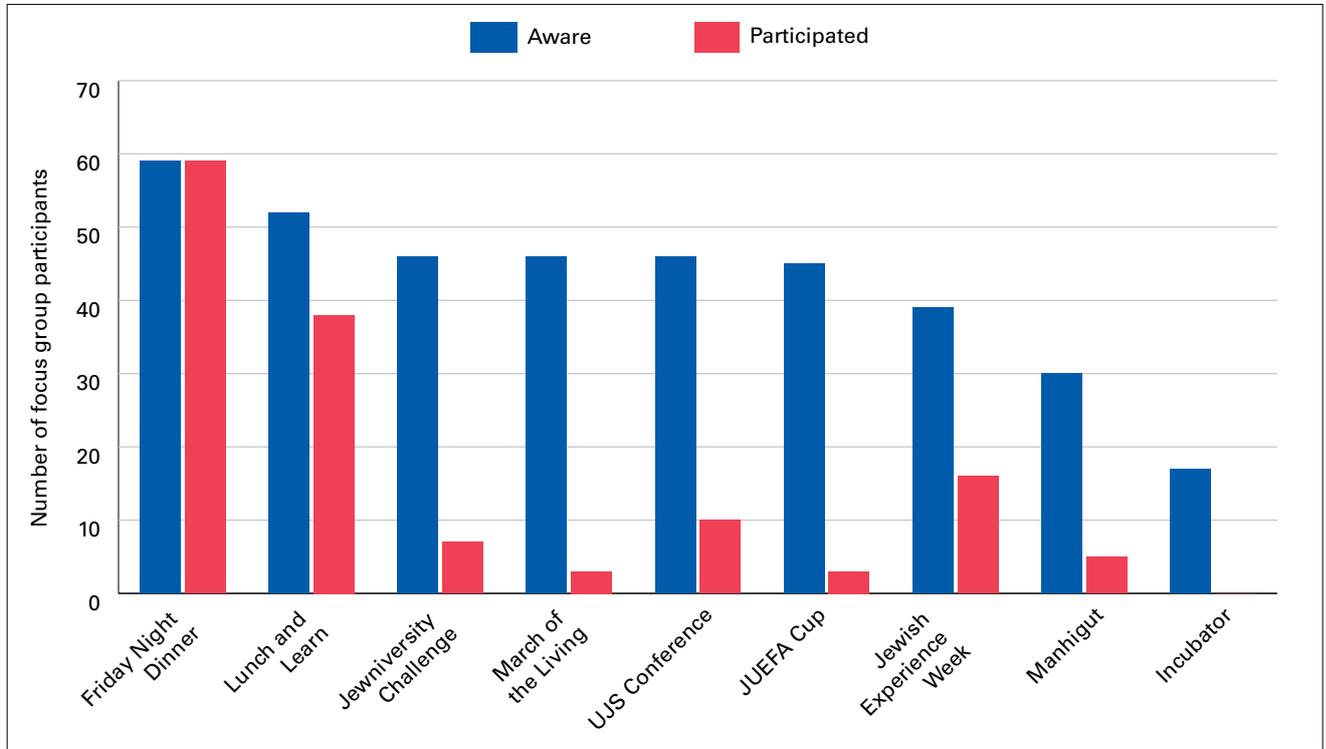
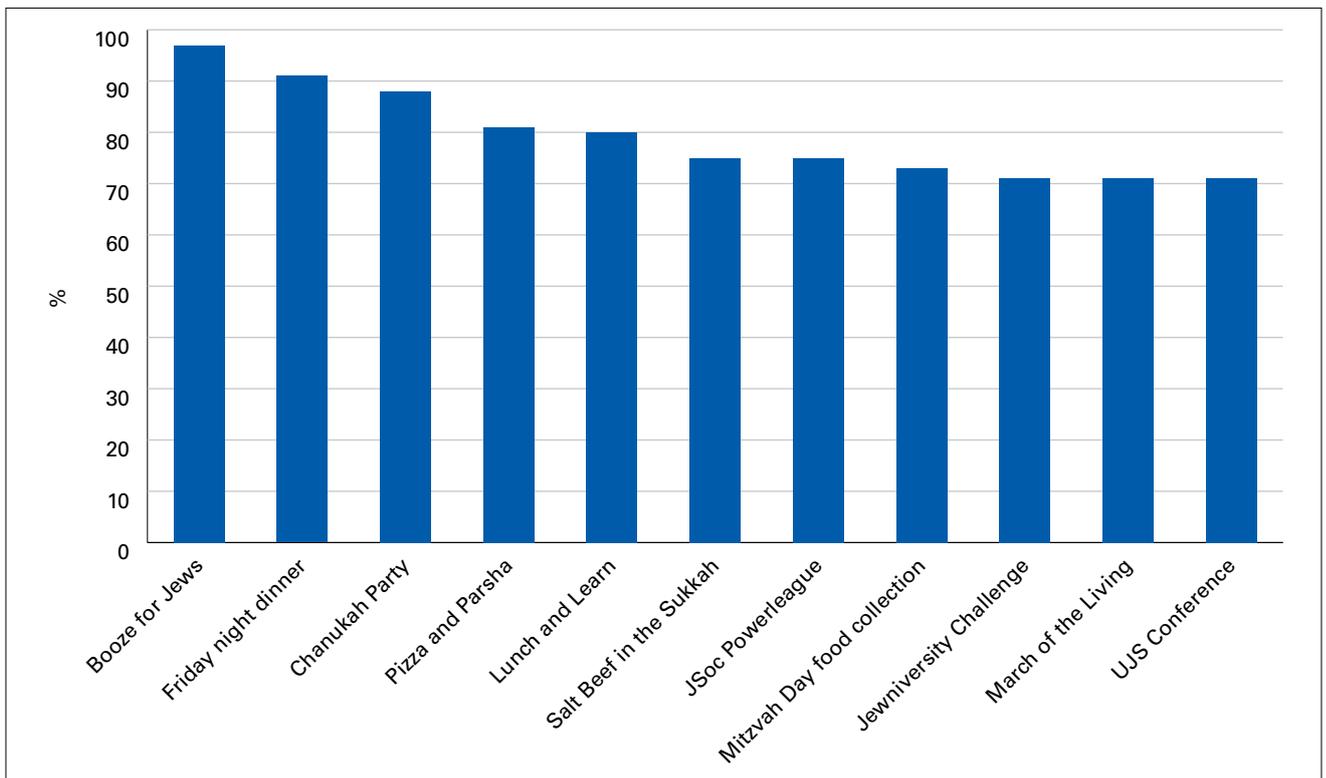


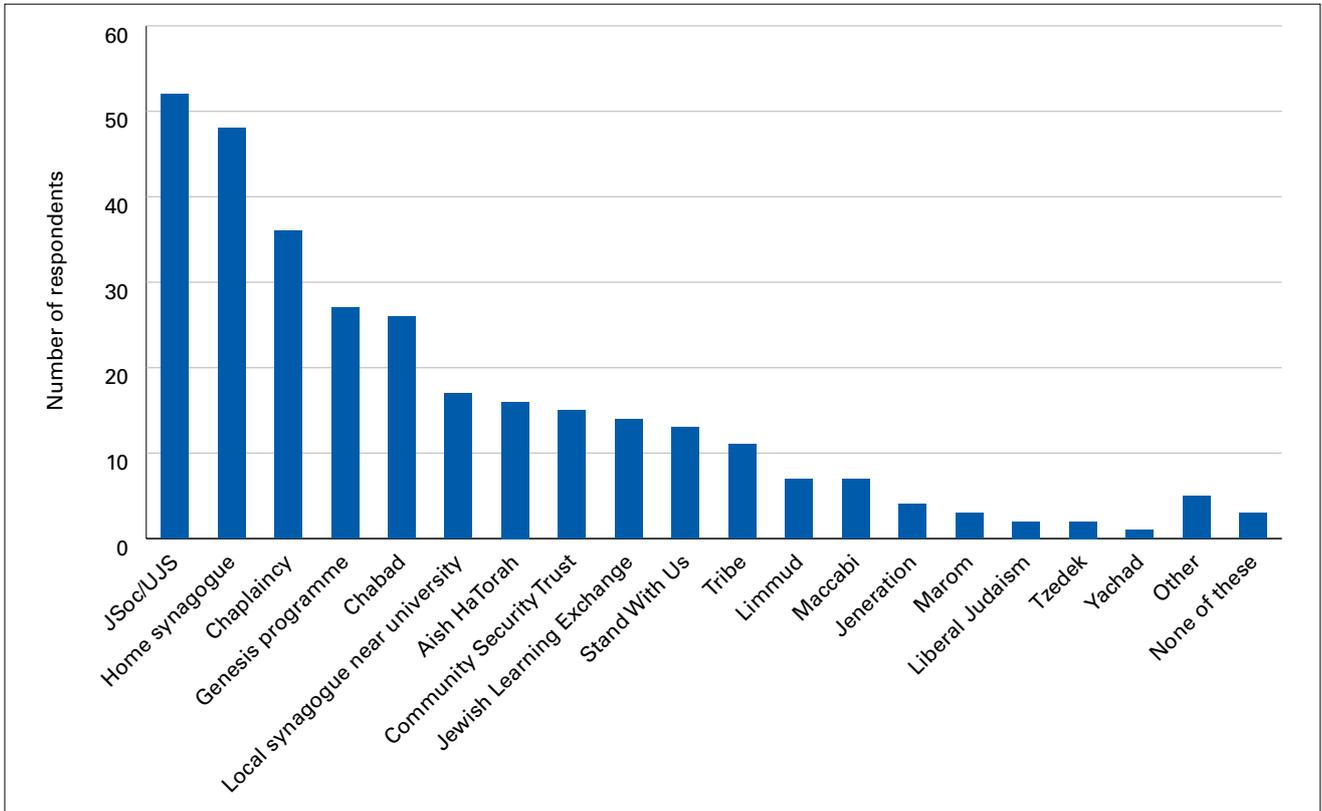
Figure 9. Proportion of respondents who participated in selected events, or types of events, for university students, relative to the numbers who were aware of them



of these events as well, and measures them by assessing the numbers of people who participated

in them relative to the numbers who were aware of them, presenting the findings as percentages.

Figure 10. Involvement of respondents in a range of selected Jewish organisations



Beyond their participation in student events on campus, respondents were also asked whether they were connected with any of a list of other Jewish organisations, either on campus, or whilst at home. The findings again indicate quite high levels of engagement among the respondent group as a whole, and a clear leaning towards UJS, their home synagogue, and Orthodox organisations (Figure 10). Note again that these figures only relate to the students involved in this study – they should not be generalised to the Jewish student population as a whole.

Not dissimilarly, the respondents also display signs of being highly socialised into the Jewish community: 54 of the 65 said that at least half of their closest friends were Jewish (Figure 11). It may be worth noting that about half of those who did not fall into this category are based at the universities of Bristol and Warwick; this is partially the result of slight sampling errors (all student recruiters were given the same targets in terms of recruiting the unaffiliated), but it probably also reflects the nature of the Jewish student bodies in these places, which

tend to attract less engaged Jews than the other universities included in this study, in Nottingham, Birmingham and London.

Figure 11. Proportion of respondents' close friends who are Jewish (N=65)

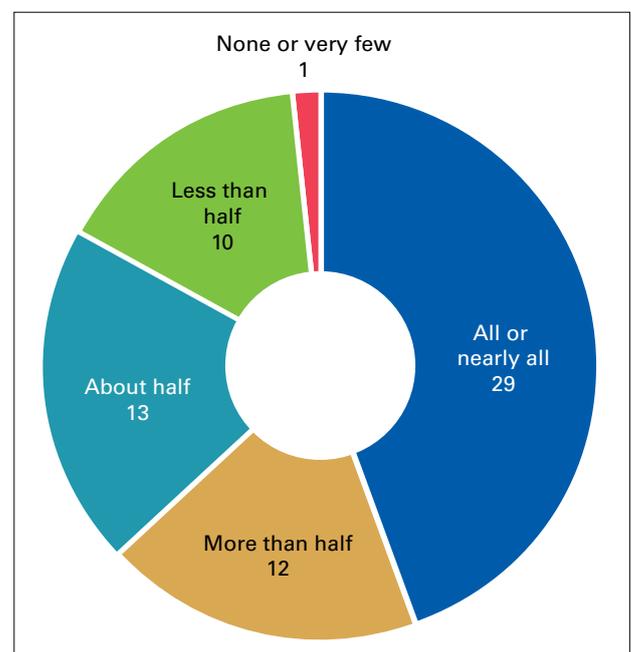
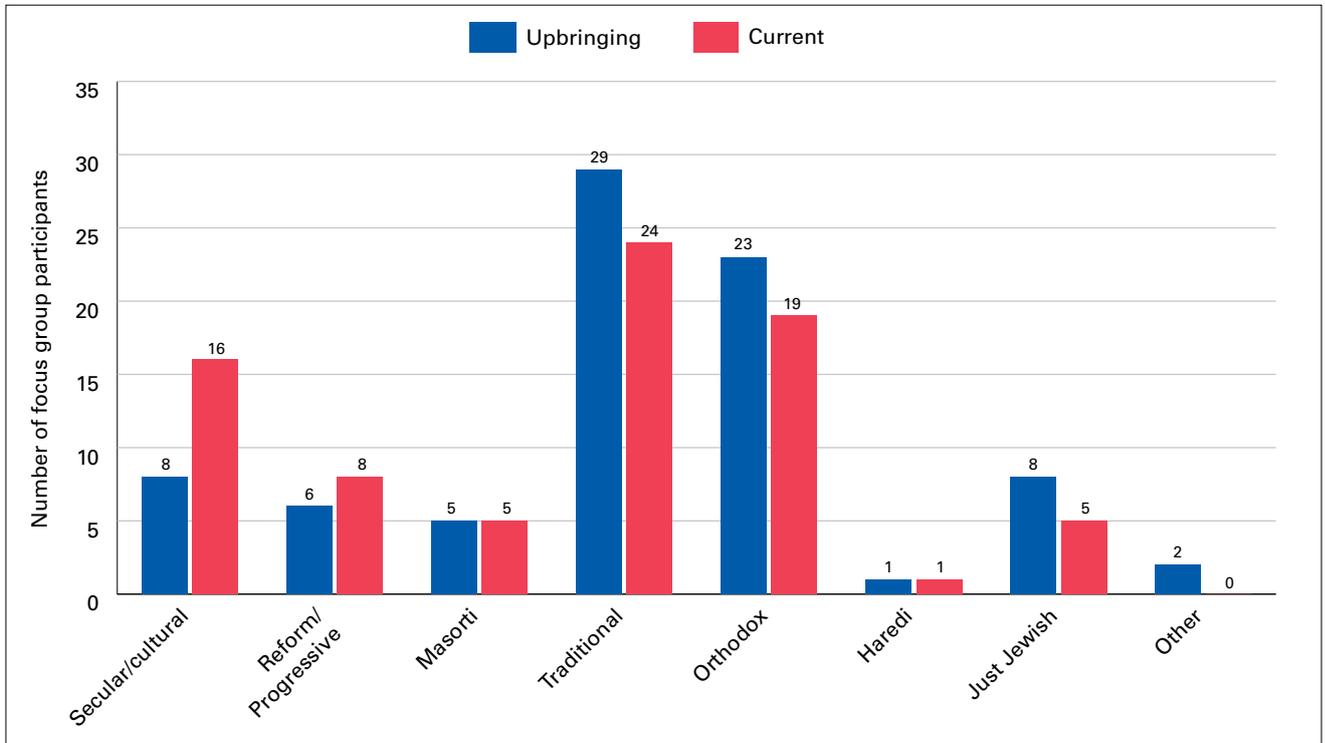


Figure 12. Indications of changing Jewish identities among respondents (N=65)\*

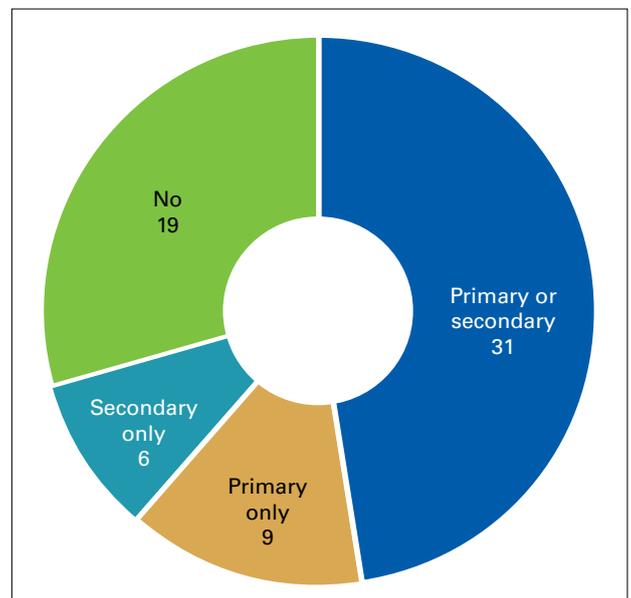


\* Note that respondents could tick up to two options for both questions, so the counts for both upbringing and current add up to more than 65.

In many respects, most Jewish students are still at too early a stage in their lives to have made firm decisions about whether to maintain the type of Jewish upbringing they received from their parents, or to depart from it. However, the general picture among Jews in the UK shows a clear shift away from the ‘Traditional’ centre ground of British Jewry towards more religiously liberal or secular positions. Whilst the sample studied in this project is very small and young, it is interesting to note that the patterns seen in the general British Jewish community are reflected in the respondents to this study, suggesting that, in this regard at least, they may be rather similar to the community as a whole (Figure 12).<sup>33</sup> As can be seen, there has been some erosion among those brought up ‘Traditional’ (typically a place holder for the United Synagogue or similar) and those brought up ‘Orthodox’ (i.e. *shomer shabbat*), whereas some growth can be seen among the ‘Reform/Progressive’ and ‘Secular/cultural.’

Most of the students in our sample attended Jewish schools, either at primary or secondary stage, or both. Indeed, 46 of the 65 fit into this category; just 19 – fewer than a third – did not go to a Jewish school at any point (Figure 13). Whilst, again, this sample is simply too small to draw

Figure 13. Jewish schooling of respondents (N=65)



33 To see the comparison, see: Graham, D., Staetsky, L. D. and Boyd, J. (2014). *Jews in the United Kingdom in 2013: Preliminary findings from the National Jewish Community Survey*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research, p.16.

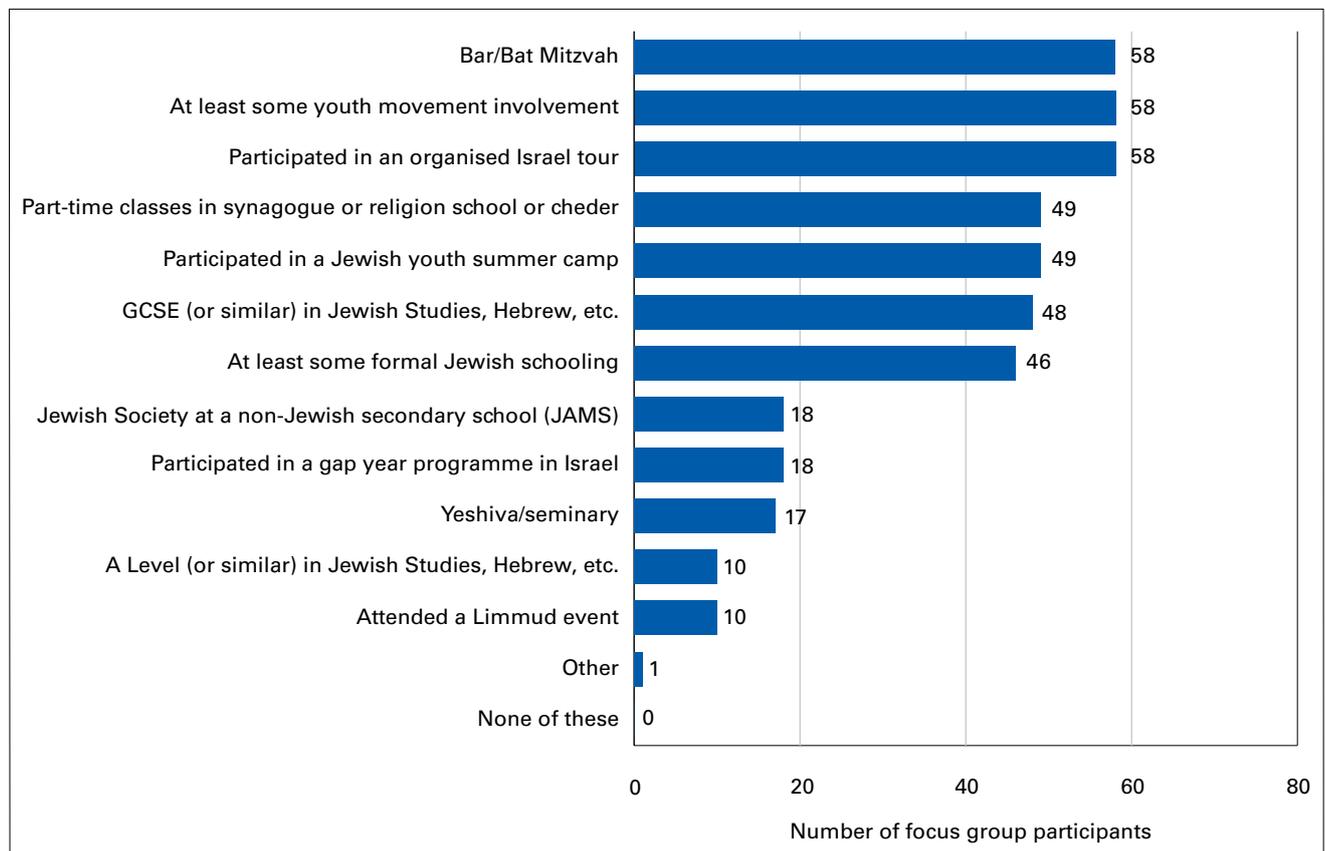
any firm conclusions from this, it is interesting to note a few points about those who did not attend a Jewish school at any stage. First, there is nothing particularly striking about where they were brought up in the UK or the denomination in which they were raised – they live in various parts of the country, both in close proximity to Jewish schools and not, and they were shaped by families ranging from secular/cultural to Orthodox. However, there is something potentially striking about the extent to which they are socialised into Jewish friendship circles and their choice of university: 15 of the 19 students who had no Jewish schooling at all said that no more than half of their closest friends were Jewish (contrast that proportion with the counts for the sample as a whole shown in Figure 11), and half of these were studying at either Bristol or Warwick, even though the students based at those universities only comprised a quarter of the sample. The suggestion appears to be that those who attended Jewish schools are considerably more likely to have an exclusively or predominantly Jewish social circle, and to choose to attend a university at least partly

on the basis that it has a large Jewish student body. Whilst much more thorough work would need to be done to confirm this hypothesis, it aligns well with the findings of the 2011 National Jewish Student Survey.

Beyond schooling, it is also evident that all of the respondents have had at least one Jewish educational experience, and a sizeable proportion has had considerably more. Figure 14 outlines the numbers that have participated in a range of Jewish educational frameworks or programmes, and Figure 15 measures the depth of respondents' engagement in Jewish life by showing how many of these they have experienced. Whilst there are clearly some exceptions, both charts indicate a sample that has been brought up largely with a significant number of opportunities to engage actively in Jewish life.

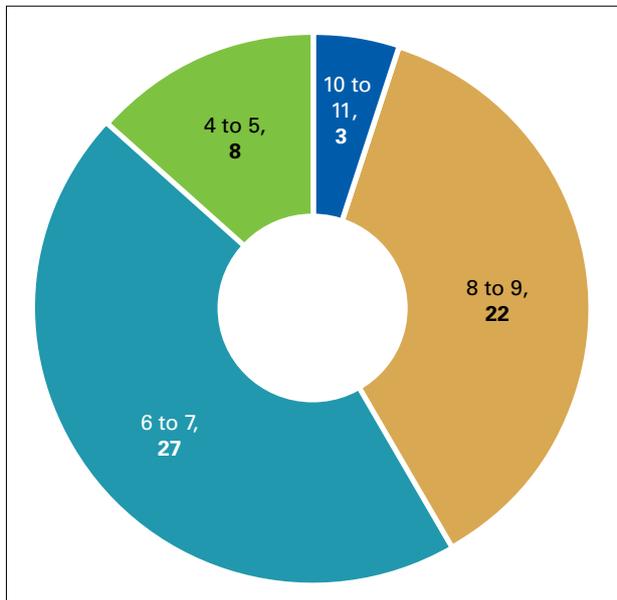
In the analysis phase, this approach to determining the nature of respondents' Jewish identities was employed to give each individual student a score, where those who had participated

Figure 14. Jewish educational background of respondents (N=65)



Note: a number of those who participated in a gap year scheme in Israel also spent part of that year elsewhere.

Figure 15. Number of listed Jewish educational experiences respondents have participated in (N=65)



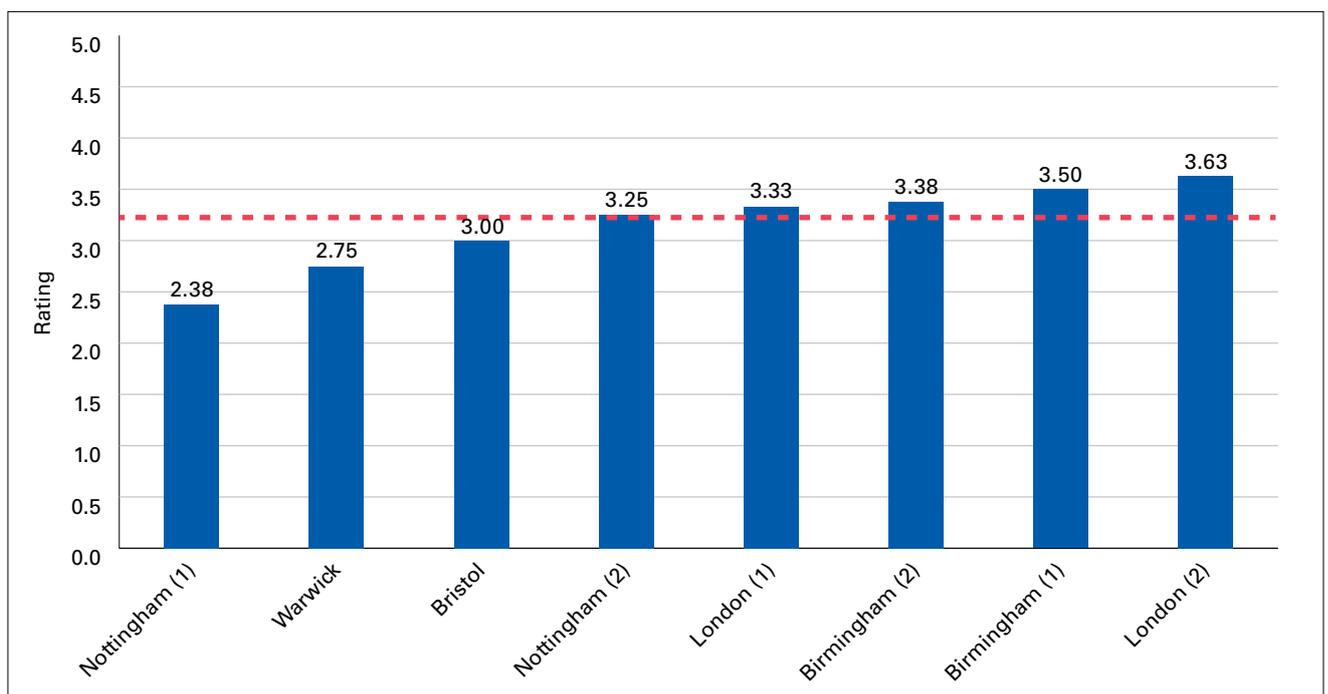
in 1 to 3 of these events scored one point, going up to those who had participated in 10 to 11, who scored five points. These scores were then used to create a 'Judaic rating' for each focus group – an average score across the group as a whole to determine the differences between them. This is not meant as a judgement of their Jewishness, or to rank them in this way; rather, it is important

insofar as it establishes a sense of what the Jewish communal dynamics were like within each group, as different levels of engagement overall could influence how people did or did not respond to the questions posed (Figure 16).

A further indication about the nature of the sample can be gleaned by looking at the organisations under whose auspices respondents participated in Jewish summer camps, Israel summer tours and gap year programmes in Israel. Figure 17 shows the counts, and whilst there is a good spread across the various organisations that run these initiatives, Bnei Akiva, and to a lesser extent FZY, stand out as key players for our sample. Again, it should be stressed that these counts relate only to the individuals involved in this study – they should not be generalised to the student population as a whole.

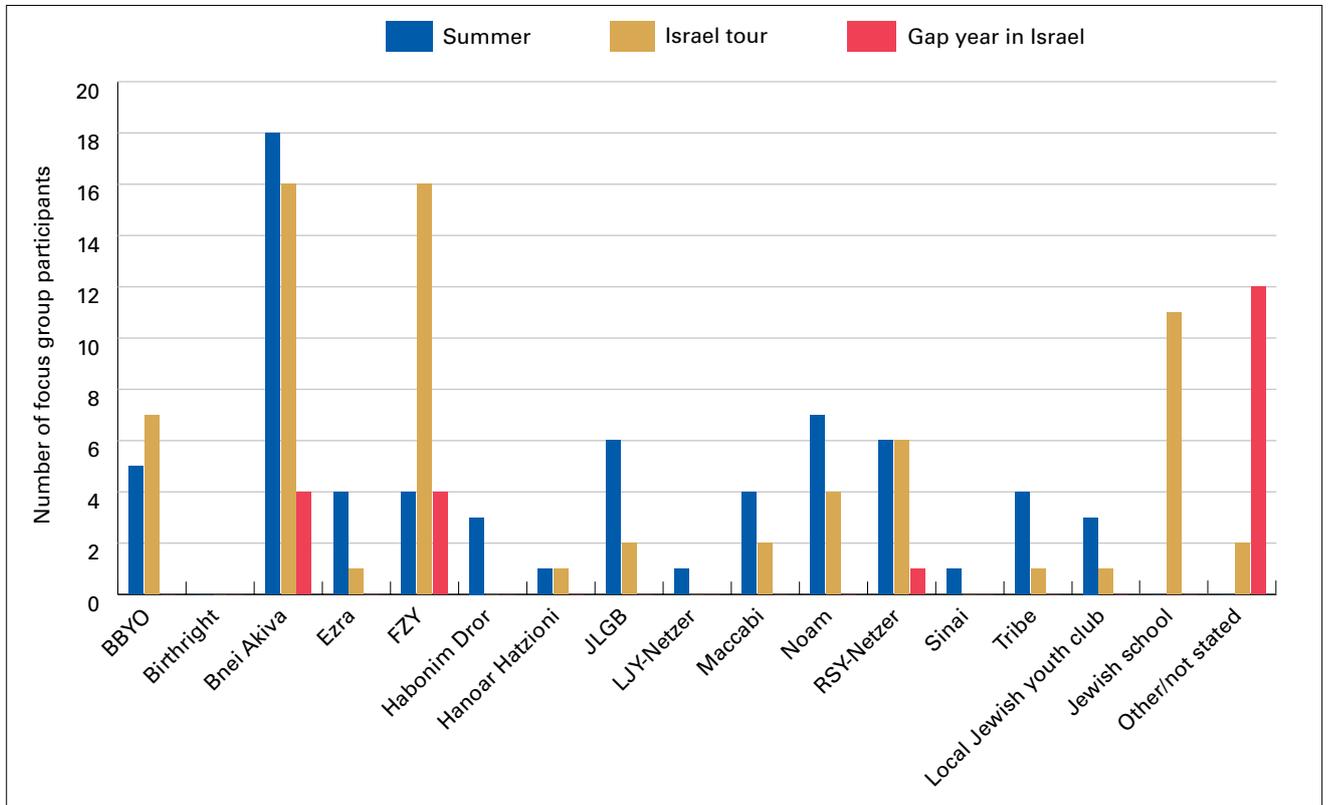
Overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards Israel were found across the sample. 62 of the 65 respondents express at least 'fairly positive' views towards Israel, and only three feel 'fairly negative.' None feel 'very negative.' On the other hand, they are rather split on how their attitudes are changing over time. 25 report 'more positive' feelings over the past five years, whilst 17 report 'more negative' feelings. 20 report no change.

Figure 16. Judaic rating: focus groups



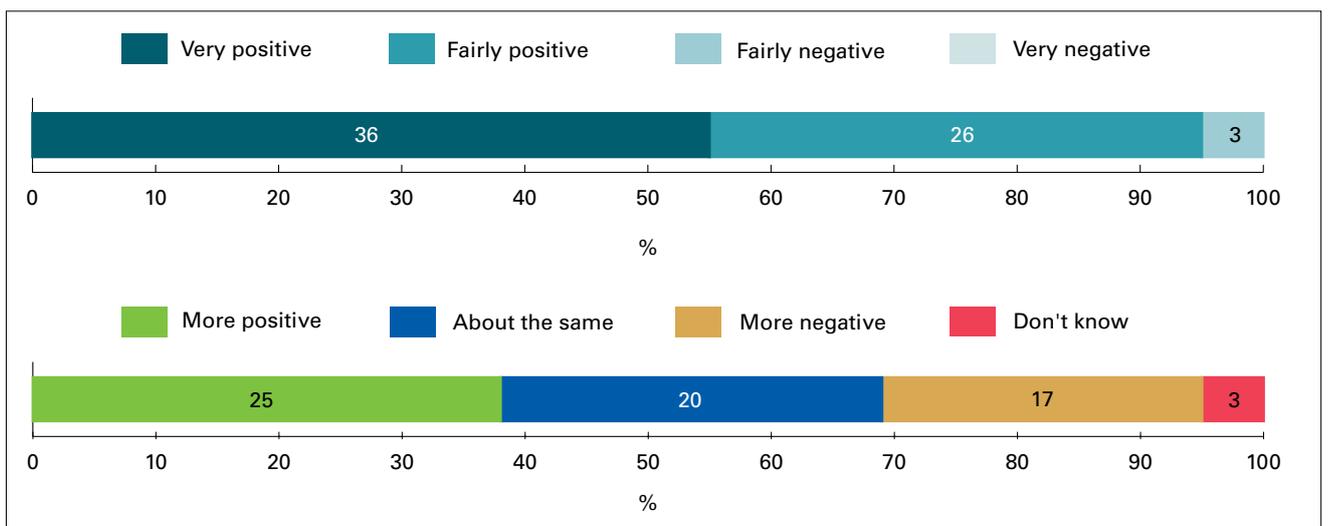
The dotted red line denotes the average Judaic rating score (3.17) across the sample.

Figure 17. Levels of participation in major informal educational programmes, and sponsoring bodies (N=65)



Note. 12 individuals indicated that they had spent at least part of their gap year in Israel, but it is not possible to determine whether or not this was under the auspices of an organised educational programme in every case. Eight of these indicated that they had spent their time in a yeshiva, two said they had done voluntary work, and two stated that they had done a variety of activities.

Figure 18. Attitudes of respondents to Israel, and change over time (N=65)



Again, it is important to stress that these figures cannot be generalised to all Jewish students; they rather reflect the small number contained within this particular sample.

That said, one can look at the groups that have developed more negative or more positive views over time, and see if there are any particular characteristics that differentiate them from the others. One should be cautious about doing this

because of the size of the sample, but a few insights may be worthy of note. There does appear to be some relationship between one’s Jewish social circle and one’s attitudes towards Israel: the more exclusively Jewish their social circle is, the less likely these respondents were to have developed more negative feelings in recent years, and the more likely they were to have developed more positive feelings. Similarly, the students at Bristol and Warwick were more likely to have developed more negative views over time than students in London, Nottingham or Birmingham – i.e. students based at universities with larger Jewish populations seem to be more likely to have strengthened their feelings towards Israel than those based at universities with smaller Jewish populations. Unpicking why these relationships exist, and which is cause and which is effect is beyond the realms of this analysis.

Finally, the study may tell us something about the likelihood of young British Jews going straight to university in the year after finishing secondary school, or opting to take a year out to do something else. Whilst a number of respondents did several different things during that year (for example, they may have gone to yeshiva in Israel and done voluntary work there, or gone straight to university or worked in the UK), Figure 19 highlights the single experience that took prominence for each individual respondent in that year. Note that in a small number of instances, this has had to be inferred, as the data provided were somewhat inconclusive.

Figure 20 presents the findings of the exercise students were invited to do at the end of each focus group. They were presented with images of thirty-two different events and activities aimed at Jewish students run by a variety of different organisations, and asked first to give their initial reaction to each of them based on the type of event it was and which organisation was running it – i.e. was it something they would definitely go to (marked in green), definitely not go to (marked in red), or might go to (marked in orange)? The purpose was to extract a gut feeling about each one. Students were then invited to write a few sentences about four of the thirty-two events and activities, focusing on two they had a particularly positive reaction towards, and two that they had a particularly negative reaction towards. In reading the results, it is important to bear in mind three key factors: (i) the results are based on the feelings and opinions of a small sample of students – just 65 people – so should not be seen as representative of all Jewish students; (ii) it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which students’ responses were comments on the type of event, the sponsoring organisation, or both, although their written remarks often clarify this; (iii) the inclusion of all of these events and organisations is indicative of their prominence in student life; without that prominence, they would not have been included in the study. Most importantly, the key assessments of the findings presented here are recorded in the main body of the report, so this chart should be examined alongside that. Note that not all events investigated are shown.

Figure 19. Primary experiences of respondents in year following completion of secondary school (N=65)

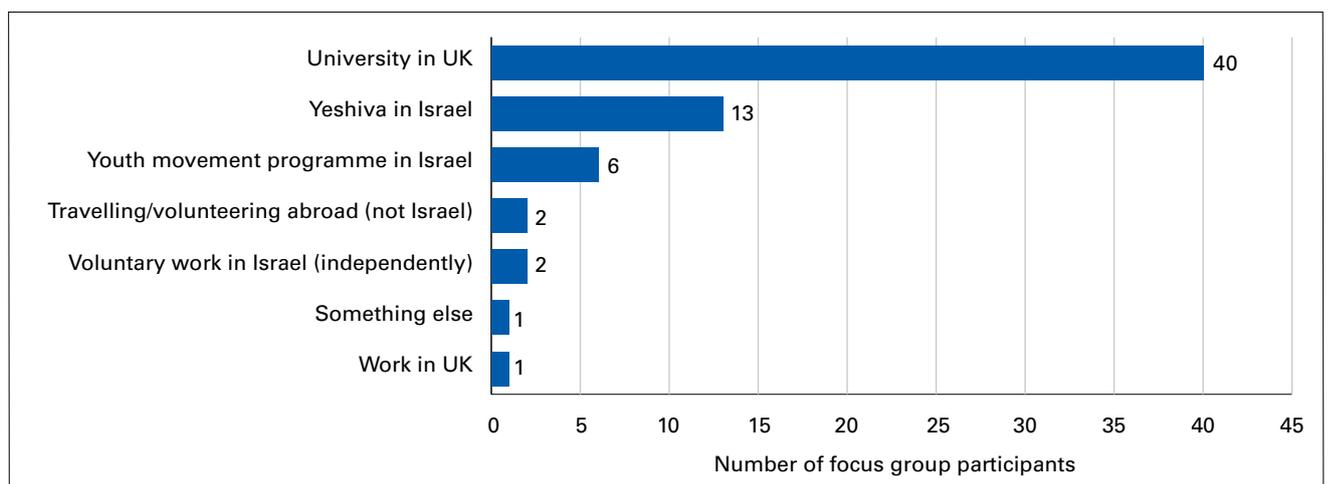
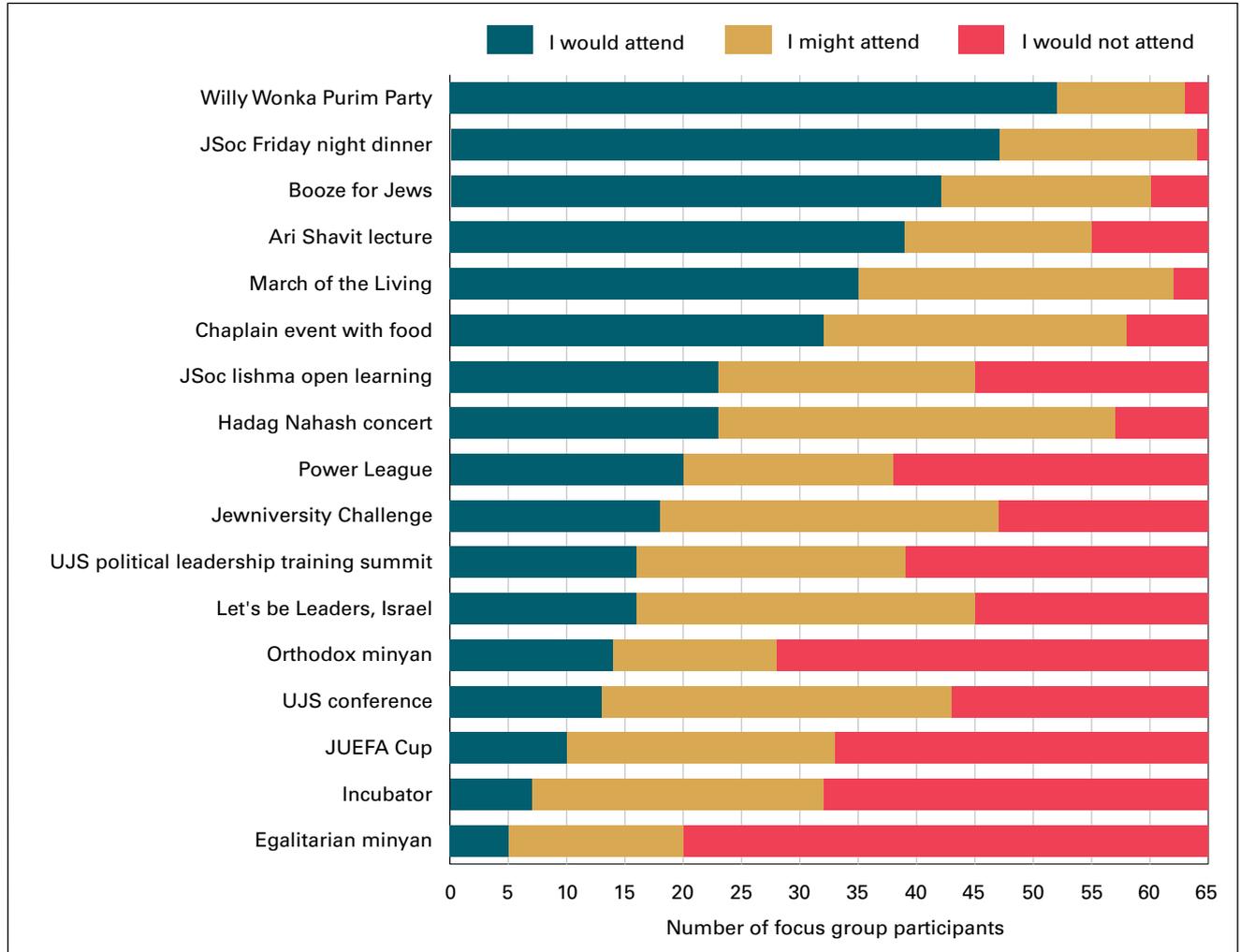


Figure 20. Attitudes of students to a range of Jewish events (N=65)



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