

# Why this night is different: How and why do Jews in the UK celebrate Passover?

Factsheet

Dr David Graham

April 2024



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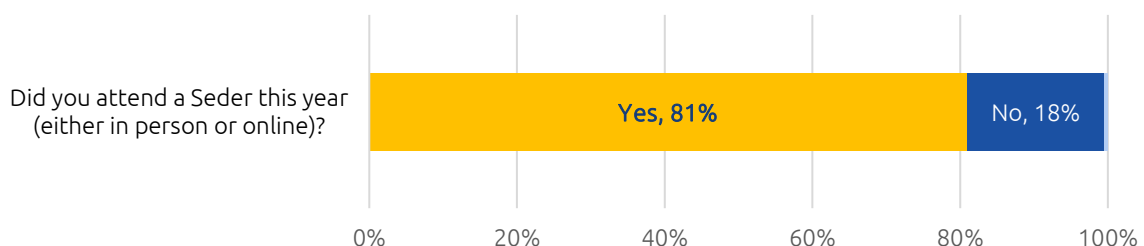
The JPR UK Jewish population research panel is designed to gather data on Jewish people's attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and preferences to help support planning across the community. In this paper, we draw on data from close to 5,000 JPR research panel members who participated in our 2022 UK National Jewish Identity Survey, to explore which types of Jews are most likely to participate in a Passover seder, and why.

## / Introduction

The Jewish festival of Passover, referred to here using the Hebrew word *Pesach*, is one of the most universally observed celebrations in the Jewish calendar. During Pesach, Jews retell the story of the Exodus – the liberation of the Children of Israel from slavery by God. It is observed for seven or eight days, depending on custom, and commences with a ritual family meal called a *seder*—literally 'order'—during which the story is retold with songs and food customs.<sup>1</sup> Throughout Pesach it is traditional, especially among more observant Jews, to abstain from eating *chametz*—most notably bread, but technically any food product made from wheat, barley, rye, oats or spelt that has come into contact with water and been allowed to rise.

In late 2022, JPR asked a representative sample of Jews aged 16 and above living in the UK (N=4,891),<sup>2</sup> whether or not they had attended a seder in April of that year. Since the COVID-19 pandemic was still lingering at the time, the question incorporated the option for online participation, although the majority of people would have participated in person. We found that over 8 out of 10 people (81%) said they had participated in a seder.

**Figure 1 / Four out of five Jews in the UK attended a Passover seder in 2022**



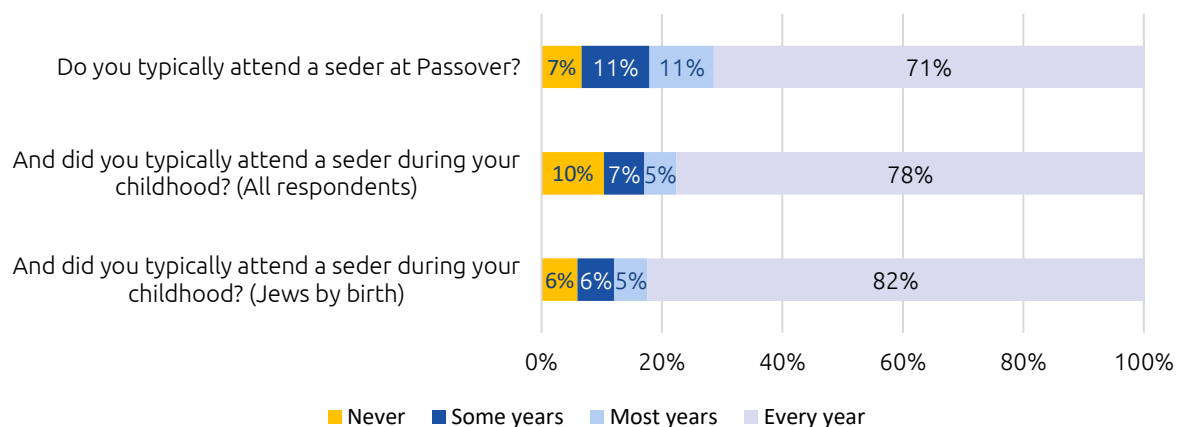
Question: Thinking specifically about Passover in April (2022), did you attend a seder (either in person or online)? (n=4,981). 'Can't remember' = 1%.

<sup>1</sup> Outside Israel, many Jews attend a seder on both of the first two nights of Pesach. Here we focus only on whether any attendance is observed.

<sup>2</sup> Graham, D. and Boyd, J. (2024). *Jews in the UK today: Key findings from the JPR National Jewish Identity Survey*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

Respondents were also asked how frequently they attend a seder. The proportion stating that they do so ‘every year’ was slightly lower, though still fairly universal, at 71%, with a further 11% doing so ‘most years.’ However, when asked how frequently they attended a seder during their childhood, the proportion saying ‘every year’ was somewhat higher at 78%, although it is worth noting this includes a number of respondents who converted to Judaism, so were not raised Jewish. Focusing only on Jews who were raised Jewish, 82% attended a seder ‘every year’ during their childhood, suggesting that in relative terms, the custom, while still widespread, is less common than in the past.

**Figure 2 / While still widespread, attending a seder is less common than in the past**



Question: At Passover (Pesach) do you typically attend a seder (Passover meal)? Response options: Currently [Never; Some years; Most years; Every year]; During your childhood [Never; Some years; Most years; Every year]. (n=4,981).

The remainder of this report focuses on those who attend a seder ‘every year’. While the overall proportion is 71%, this varies depending on multiple criteria. In the first instance, we examine demographics.

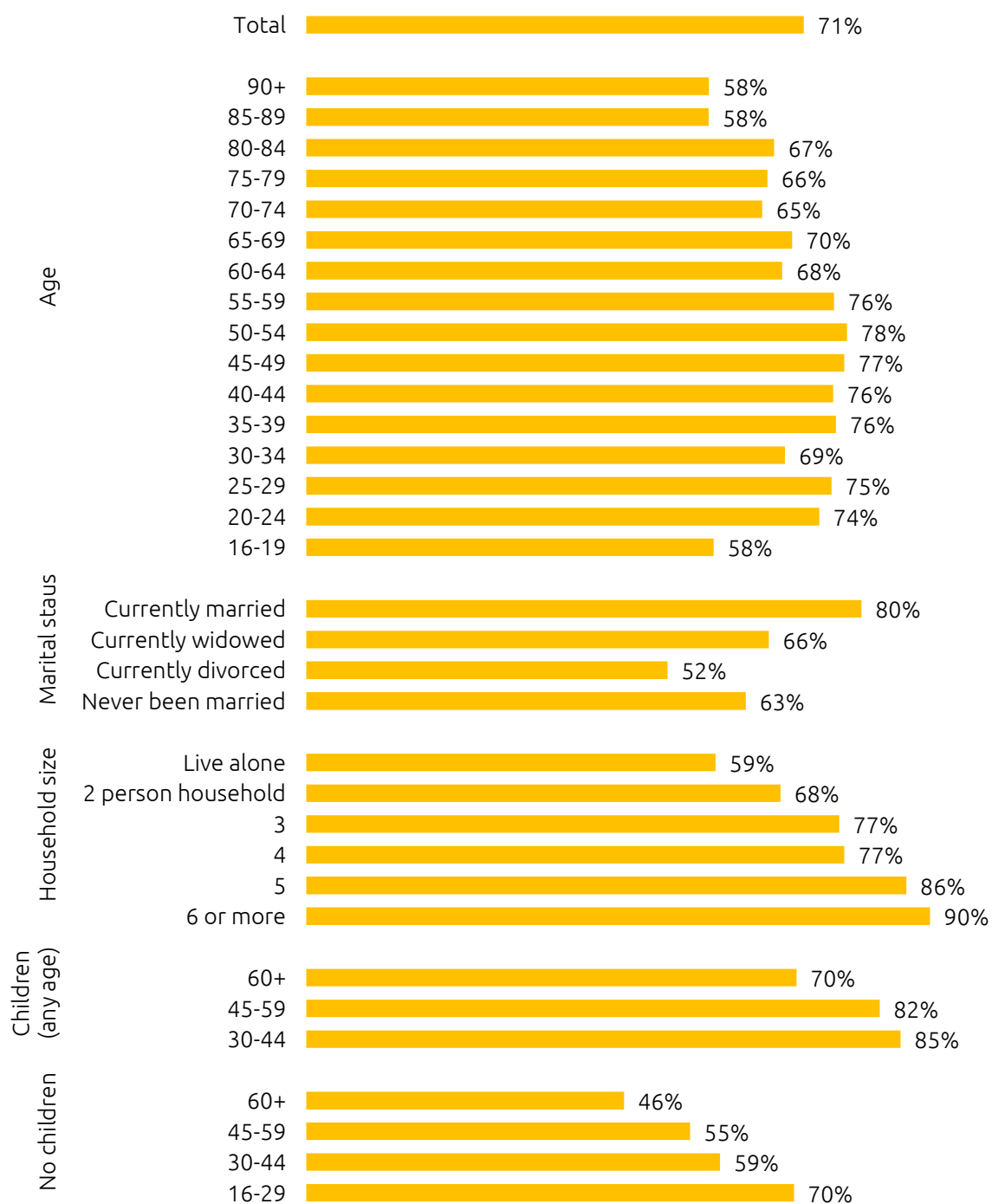
### / Demographics

In terms of age, there is a reasonably clear pattern showing that seder participation peaks in the 50-54 age group at 78%. Those in their 60s and older are progressively less likely to attend a seder every year, although the pattern is not smooth (Figure 3).

In the younger cohorts, we see that those aged 30-34 and 16-19 stand out with relatively low levels of annual participation. To understand why, we need to look more carefully at other demographics. For example, looking at marital status, married Jews are by far the most likely to attend a seder every year (80%), with those who are widowed or who have never been married being rather less likely. But the group least likely to attend every year are divorcees (52%). This highlights the fact that the seder celebration is a family affair. As if to underline this, the larger the household size, the more likely we are to see annual attendance. While 59% of Jews who live alone say they attend a seder every year, 86% of those living in five-person households do so.

But it isn't just marital status and household size that drive seder attendance; we can also see those who have children (of any age) are more likely to attend every year than those with no children. The one exception to this is those aged 16-29 with no children, 70% of whom attend every year. Of course, the majority of these young adults have yet to form families of their own and are likely attending a seder with their parents. All in all, these demographics highlight how important the family is in terms of seder participation.

**Figure 3 / Attending a seder 'every year,'  
by various demographic and household characteristics**

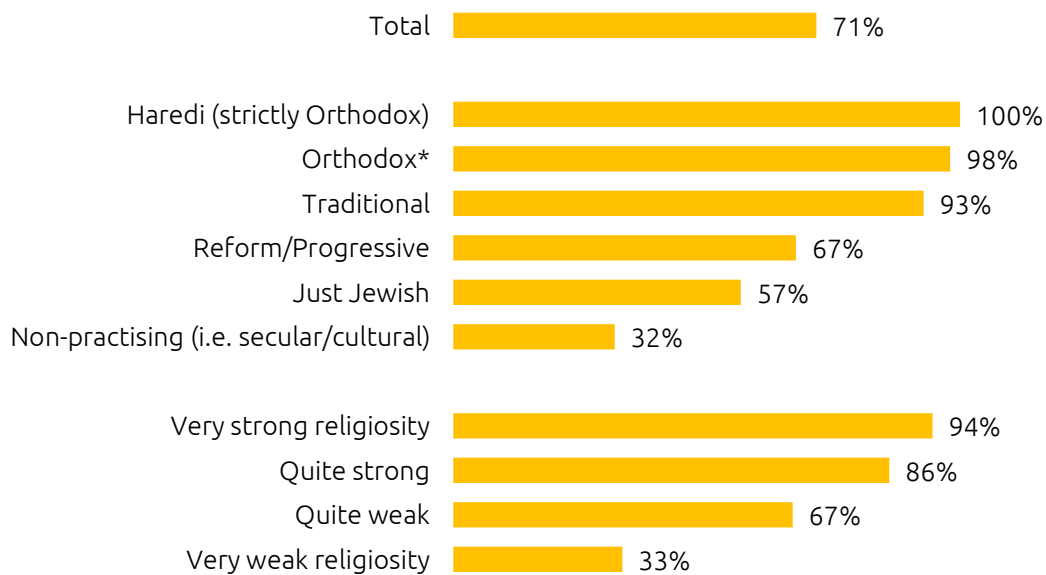


## / Religiosity and belief in God

Demographics alone cannot explain all the variation we see in seder attendance. The more orthodox and religious respondents say they are, the more likely they are to attend a seder every year, ranging from 100% among haredi respondents to 32% among secular/cultural ones. Similarly, the vast majority (94%) of those with 'very strong' religiosity attend every year, compared with 33% who have 'very weak' religiosity.

Religiosity and demographics also interact. Those who are more religious tend to have larger households, which explains the relationship observed above in terms of household size.

**Figure 4 / Attending a seder 'every year,' by denominational identification and religiosity**



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

The story retold on seder night is resplendent with miracles performed by God, most famously 'the ten plagues,' which cause Pharaoh to relent and ultimately set the Children of Israel free. This is the story as described in the Torah. Unsurprisingly, there is a clear correlation between seder attendance and belief in God, belief that God intervenes in people's lives, and belief in the divinity of the Torah.

Nevertheless, a majority of non-believers<sup>3</sup> still attend a seder every year. For example, 54% of those who don't believe in God or any higher or spiritual power say they attend seder annually. But there is no contradiction here; this simply attests to the reality that for many Jews, seder attendance is as much an ethno-cultural celebration as it is a religious one.

<sup>3</sup> 47% of Jews consider the Torah to be a human creation. Separately, 25% of Jews do not believe in God as described in the Bible, and while a further 41% say they believe in some other 'higher power or spiritual force', they do not believe in God. (Graham & Boyd 2024, op. cit.)

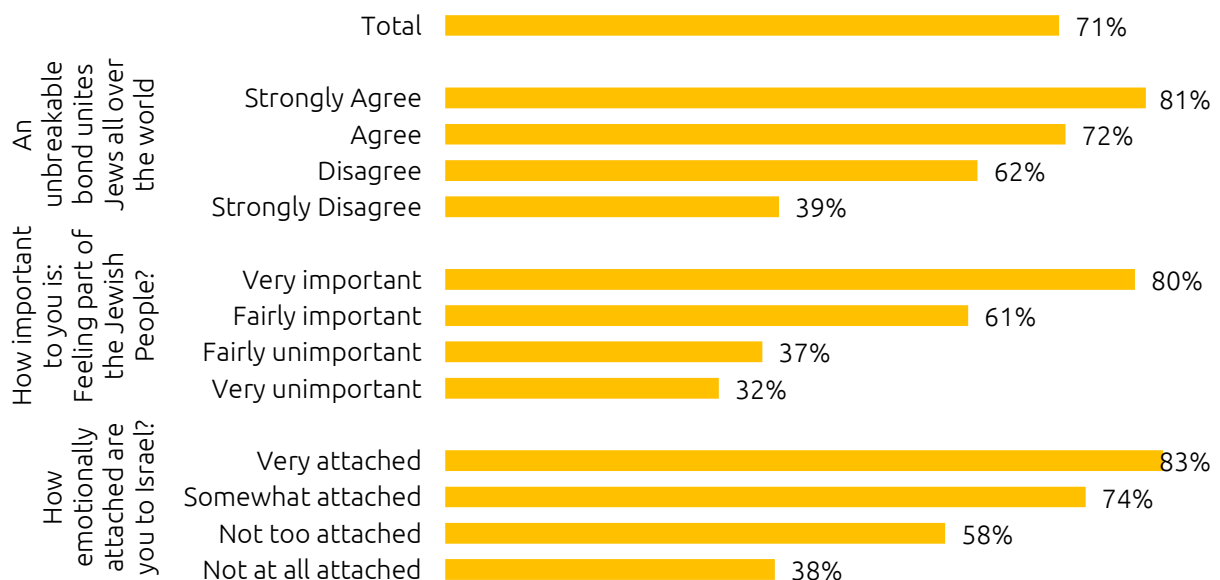
Figure 5 / Attendance at a seder 'every year,' by belief in God



/ Jewish peoplehood and synagogue attendance

Extending the notion of Jewish ethnicity a little further, it is evident that the more respondents feel they are part of the wider Jewish People, the more likely they are to attend a seder every year. This can be seen in the relationship between annual seder attendance and the likelihood of British Jews to feel 'an unbreakable bond unites Jews all over the world' or to say that 'feeling part of the Jewish People' is important to them. We see a similar relationship with people's levels of emotional attachment to Israel, a theme highlighted at the climax of the seder with the millennia-long hope to celebrate the holiday 'next year in Jerusalem.'

Figure 6 / Feelings of Jewish peoplehood and seder attendance

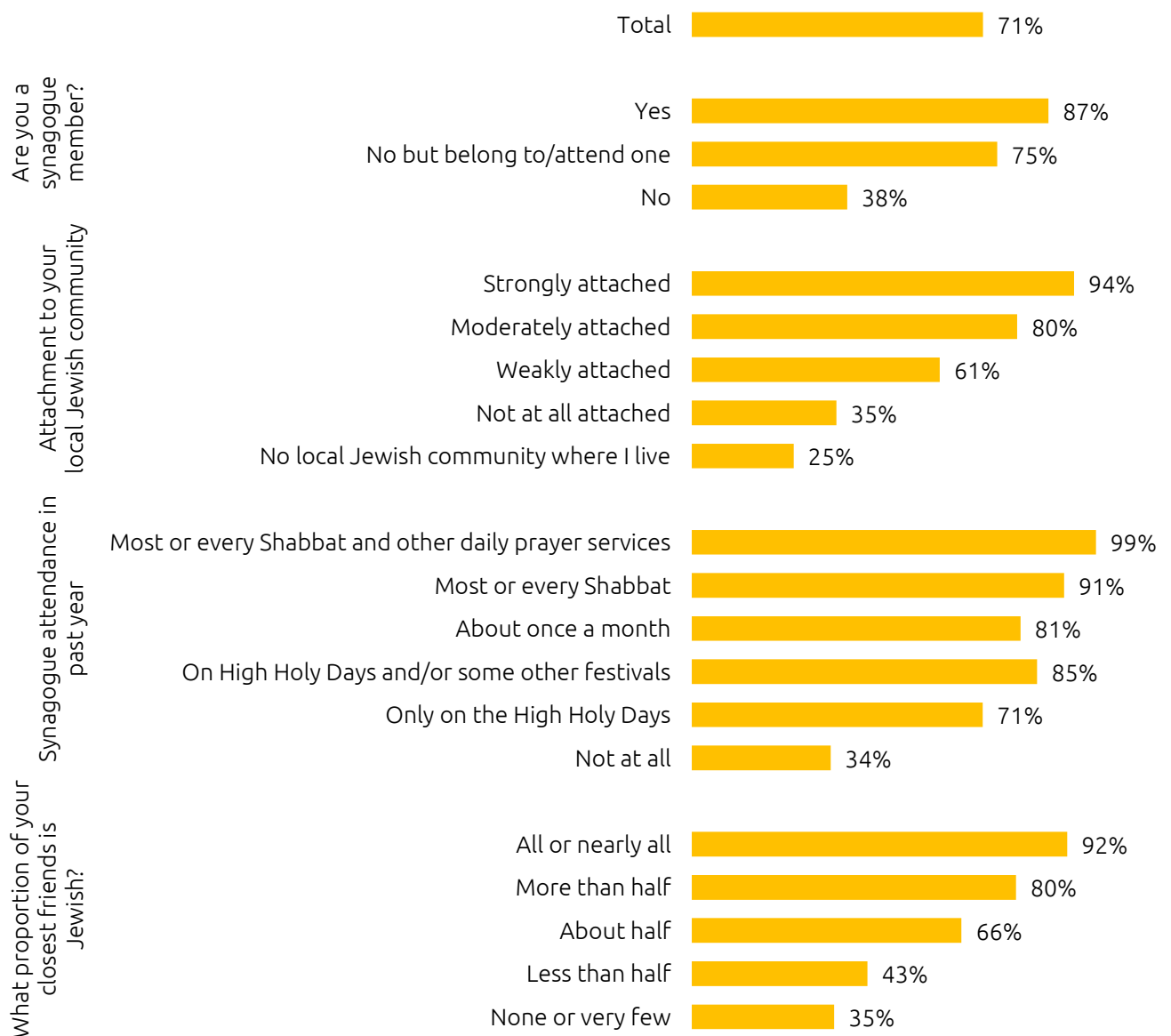




Of all the major Jewish holiday celebrations, Pesach is perhaps the one most anchored to the home. Yet seder attendance is also closely associated with synagogue engagement. Those who are members of a synagogue or who attend one are far more likely to attend seder every year than those who do not belong to a synagogue. There is also a very close association between levels of attachment to a local Jewish community and seder participation. However, frequency of synagogue attendance is not quite as strongly associated, because infrequent synagogue attendees are only marginally less likely to attend a seder every year than those who frequently attend. The exception is among those who never attend synagogue – 34% of them participate in a seder every year.

Similarly, social engagement in Jewish life also closely correlates with seder attendance, which reminds us that it isn't just families who participate in the seder; it is also customary to celebrate the seder with friends.

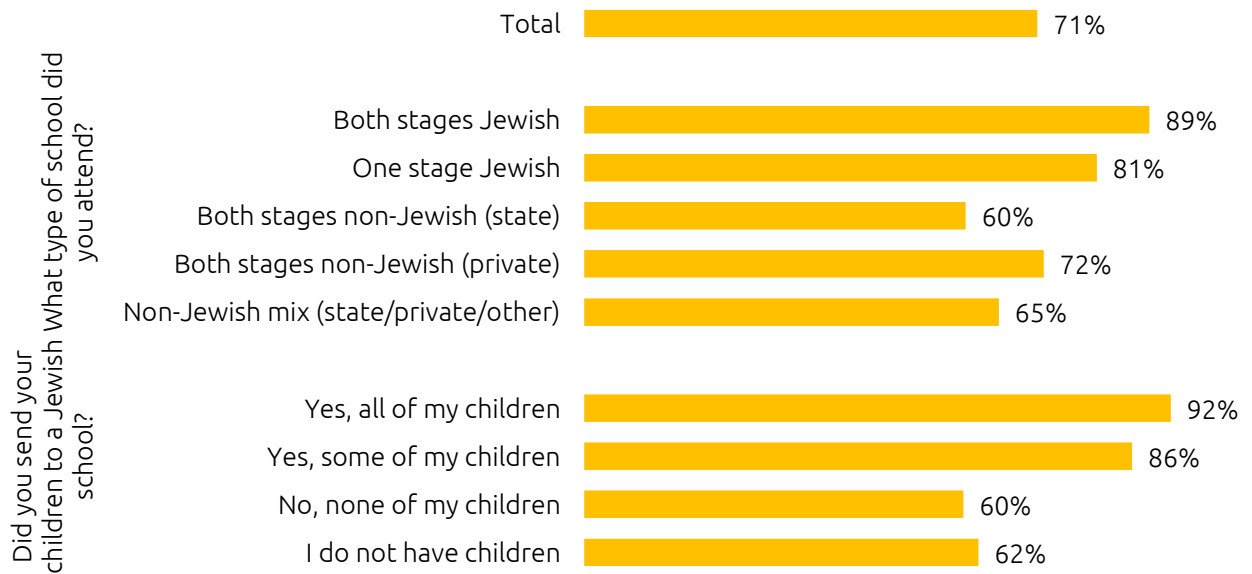
**Figure 7 / Synagogue and community life and seder attendance**



**/ Education and heritage**

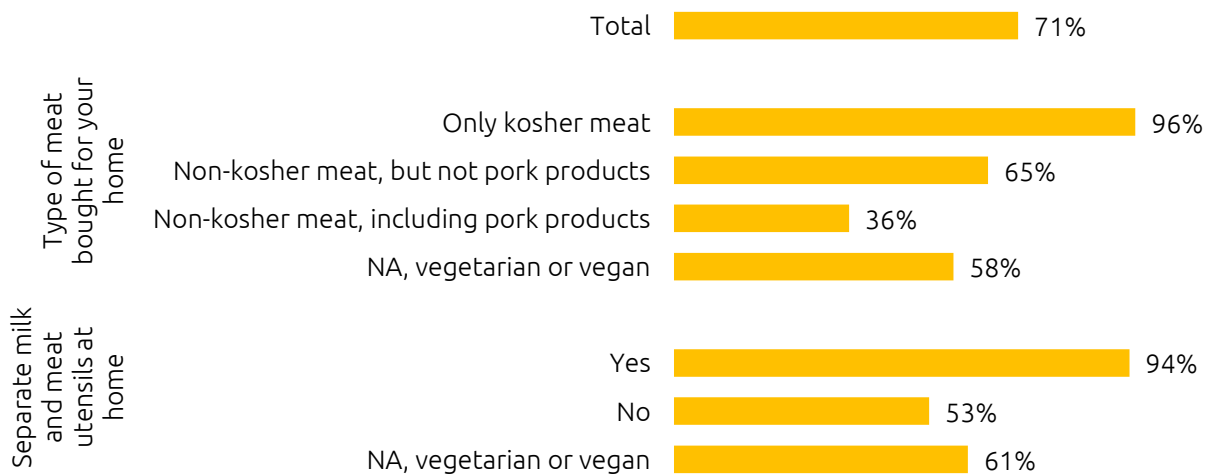
Respondents who attended a Jewish school, even if only for one stage of their education, are more likely to attend a seder every year than those who did not attend a Jewish school. And in terms of their own children, those who send or sent them to a Jewish school are far more likely to attend a seder every year than those who did not send them to a Jewish school, and indeed, those who do not have children (noted above in Figure 3).

**Figure 8 / Jewish school attendance and seder participation**



Respondents who follow the Jewish dietary laws at home strictly—that is they separate meat and milk utensils and only consume kosher meat—are far more likely to attend a seder every year than those who don’t do so. Those who eat pork products at home are the least likely to attend a seder every year (36%).

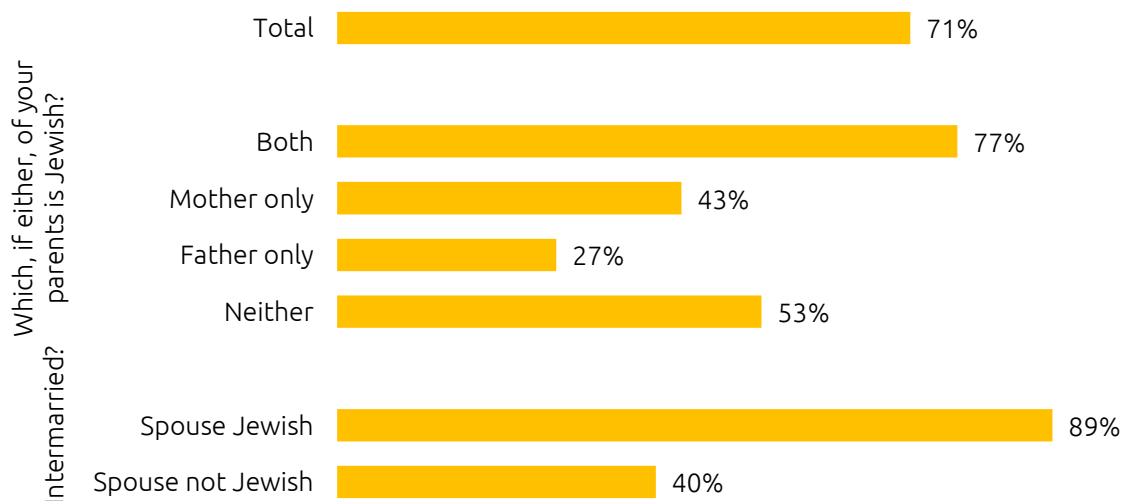
**Figure 9 / Keeping kosher and seder participation**





Respondents with two Jewish parents are more likely to attend seder every year (77%) than those with one or none. But when only one parent is Jewish, the sex of the Jewish parent is important: when it is the mother who is Jewish, there is a far greater likelihood of attending a seder every year than if it is the father. Among Jewish converts, more than half attend every year.

Figure 10 / Jewish background and seder attendance



While marital status is closely associated with seder attendance (see Figure 3), it isn't simply that fact of being married that counts, but also the Jewish status of one's spouse. In-married Jews are more than twice as likely to attend a seder every year than intermarried Jews.

### / Concluding thoughts

The telling of the story of the Exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt is the essence of the seder. Indeed, it is a biblical commandment in the Book of Exodus (13:8) for Jews to tell their children this story. And the seder is replete with distinctive and unusual traditions designed to capture the attention of children, such as the solo rendition of *Ma Nishtanah* (or 'the four questions') by the youngest child, eating unusual foods like raw horseradish—the 'bitter herbs'—placing a burnt egg in the centre of the dining table, dipping fingers into wine, and the *afikomen*—finding hidden *matza* for a reward. Perhaps this, the focus on engaging children, makes the Pesach seder one of the most enduring and commonly observed Jewish customs.

On the other hand, this biases seder participation towards those with children. As the data show, regular seder participation is much more likely among married people who live in larger households and have children. The corollary is that those without children, or whose children have grown up, or who are not part of families, are less likely to participate. This highlights a crucial aspect of the seder, and contemporary Judaism more broadly, that the family, rather than the individual, is the core unit of Jewishness.

We also see, less surprisingly, that religiosity is a key determinant of seder participation. The data show that the more strongly religious a person is, the more likely they are to participate regularly. Yet the data also show that religiosity is not a prerequisite. More than half of those who believe the Torah is an ancient book recorded by man, nevertheless attend a seder regularly. The same is true for those who don't believe in God, who didn't attend a Jewish school, and who only attend synagogue three times a year. They are all more likely to be regular seder participants than not. Part of the explanation for this is that the essence of the seder, whilst literally about God freeing the Children of Israel from slavery, also contains a collective and more universal message of freedom, thereby allowing its story to resonate far beyond Jewish religious circles alone.

But the data also reveal that those least likely to attend a seder regularly are not the childless or the Jewish atheists, but rather, those who feel distant from the Jewish community and Jewish life. These include those who strongly disagree there is an unbreakable bond uniting Jews all over the world, who do not feel being part of the Jewish people is important to them, who feel very weakly religious, who do not feel at all attached to Israel, who are not at all attached to their local Jewish community, who never attend a synagogue, and who have very few Jewish friends. These Jewish people are least likely to participate in a seder regularly.

All of this tells us something important. Without using advanced statistical analyses, without reference to key religious texts, and without explicitly asking what people believe is the essence of Jewishness, these data on Pesach help us to gain crucial insights into what being Jewish is all about. The data show that Jewishness is about family and feeling part of a community and a people, a unifying feeling that joins Jews together. In this way, the Pesach seder is a mirror we can use to reflect on Jewish identity, revealing not only its message of freedom, but also its critical emphasis on collectivity and togetherness.

## / Methodological note

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

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

The survey data were cleaned and weighted to adjust for the age, sex and Jewish identity of the Jewish population of the UK, based on 2011 Census data and other administrative sources. All aspects of the panel and its constituent surveys are developed, implemented, analysed and reported in-house at JPR. The panel and its component surveys are delivered using specialist, secure software provided by Forsta, and ZK Analytics provides additional support for data management and weighting. The panel and survey data were analysed using SPSS, while weighting was carried out using R.

## / Acknowledgements

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## / About the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR)

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

## / About the author

**Dr David Graham** is a Senior Research Fellow at JPR, an Honorary Associate at the Department of Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish Studies at the University of Sydney, and an Honorary Research Associate at the University of Cape Town. He holds a DPhil from the University of Oxford and has published widely for academic and general interest audiences.

A geographer by training and expert in the sociodemographic study of Jews in the UK, Australia and South Africa, his skills encompass statistical analysis, survey and questionnaire design, census data analysis and geographic information system mapping. Since joining the JPR team in 2009, Dr Graham has been involved in numerous studies of Jewish life and has undertaken work for several organisations, including the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Kaplan Centre at the University of Cape Town, Jewish Care, the Jewish Chronicle, UJIA, Pears Foundation, the Union of Jewish Students and JCA Australia.