

Shana Tova (Happy New Year): The observance of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur among Jews in the UK

Factsheet

Dr David Graham

September 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 how Jews in the UK celebrate the Jewish High Holy Days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

"On Rosh Hashana it is inscribed and on Yom Kippur it is sealed"
(Unetanneh Tokef prayer, recited on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur)

/ Introduction

The Jewish New Year festival of Rosh Hashana is one of the major annual Jewish holidays. It is a very different celebration to the secular New Year, which is typically brought in with fireworks, alcohol, and the singing of Auld Lang Syne. Instead, Rosh Hashana is a time for family gatherings, feasting, visiting the synagogue, and reflecting on the holiday's major themes of the creation of the world, the sovereignty of God, and divine judgement.

One of the 613 commandments in the Torah is to hear the blowing of the shofar (ram's horn) on the first day of *Tishrei* – the Hebrew date of Rosh Hashana. The evocative sound of the shofar calls the community together. It is designed to engender a spiritual reawakening on what is the first of the 'Ten Days of Repentance' (*Aseret Y'mei T'shuvah*), a period of spiritual introspection culminating in the fast day of Yom Kippur or Day of Atonement.

On Rosh Hashana, it is traditional for Jews to greet each other with the phrase 'Shana Tova' (lit. good year) and eat apples dipped in honey to hope for a sweet new year, along with other symbolic foods. There is also a commandment that Rosh Hashana be a day of rest, and many Jews attend synagogue services and abstain from work.

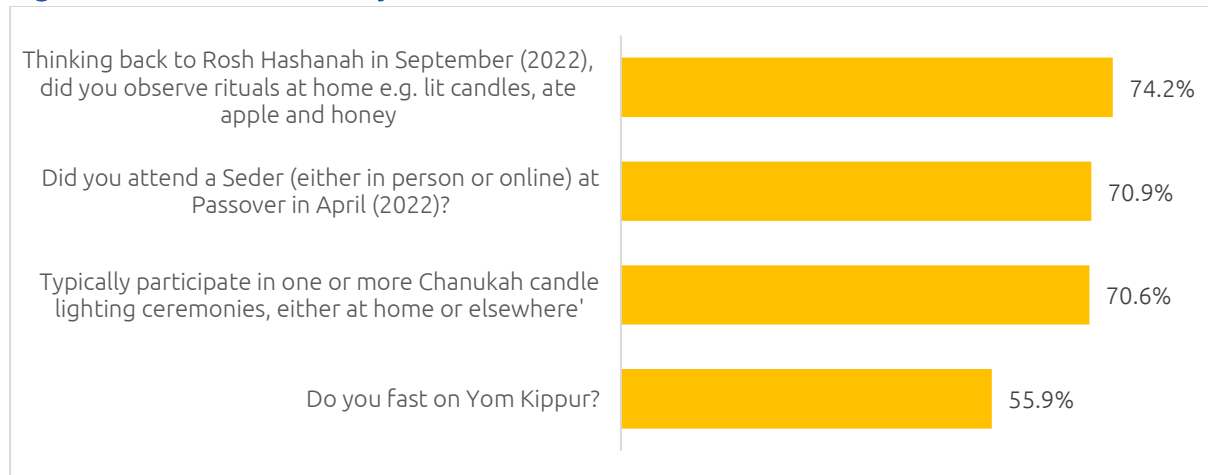
In late 2022, in our National Jewish Identity Survey, JPR asked a representative sample of Jews aged 16 and above living in the UK (N=4,891)¹ a series of questions to understand better the breadth and depth of observance of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, together known as the High Holy Days.

¹ 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.

/ Rosh Hashana: The most widely observed Jewish festival

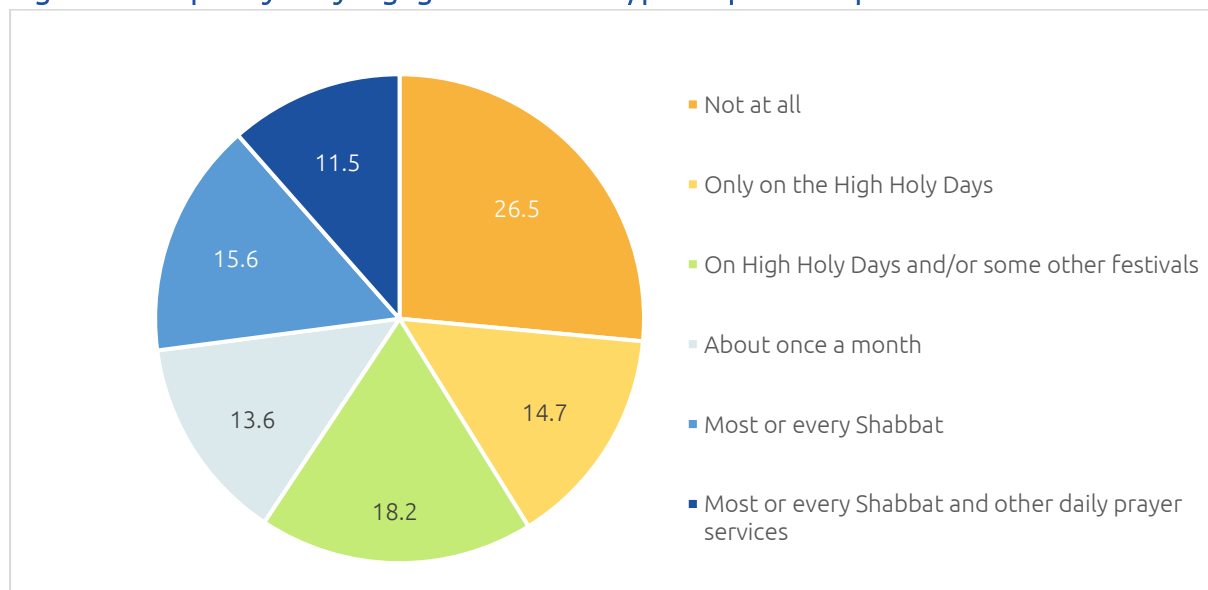
Of all the major Jewish holidays explored in the JPR National Jewish Identity Survey, Rosh Hashana is the most widely observed. Almost three-quarters (74%) of Jews in Britain observed Rosh Hashana rituals at home (e.g. lit candles or ate apples and honey) in September 2022 (Figure 1). Jews were slightly more likely to observe this festival than to attend a seder meal at Passover (71%) or a candle-lighting ceremony at Chanukah (also 71%). These are the most widely observed Jewish festivals.

Figure 1. Observance of major Jewish festivals



As noted, Rosh Hashana is a day of rest, and many Jews attend synagogue services. For some, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are the only times in the year they attend, and synagogues are usually at their busiest on these days. Indeed, JPR found that 15% of Jews *only* participate in synagogue services on the High Holy Days with a further 18% doing so on these days and/or on some other festivals (Figure 2). The survey also found that 57% of Jews had attended at least one in-person synagogue service during Rosh Hashana 2022 (not shown in the chart).

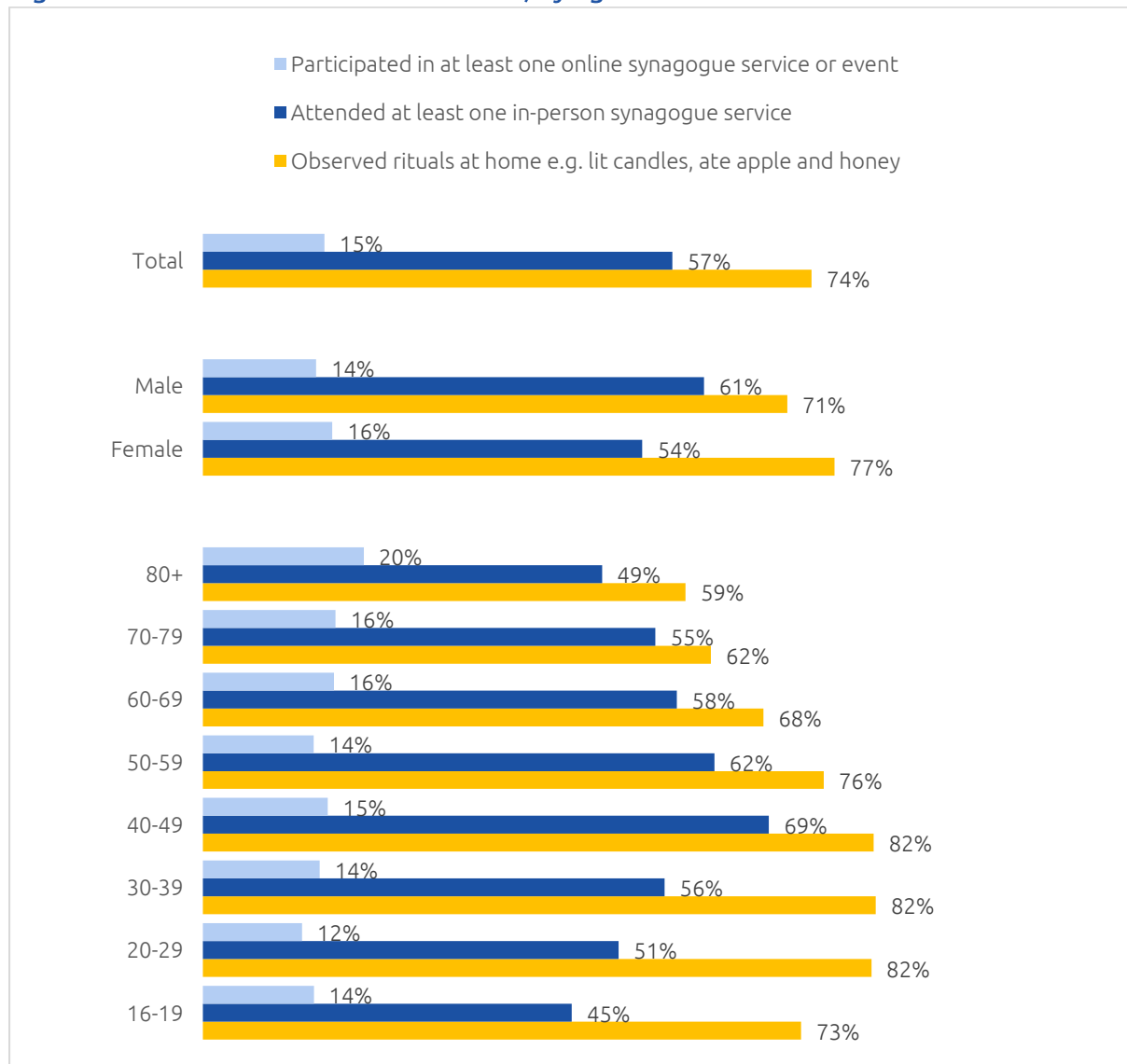
Figure 2. Frequency of synagogue attendance/participation in previous 12 months



Question: *In the past 12 months, how often have you participated in a synagogue prayer service, whether in person and/or online?"*

JPR asked respondents whether they had ‘observed rituals at home on Rosh Hashana (e.g. lit candles, ate apple and honey)’; whether they had ‘attended at least one in-person synagogue service’; and whether they had ‘participated in at least one online synagogue service or event’.² We examine these below by various demographic and religious characteristics (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Rosh Hashana 2022 observance, by age and sex

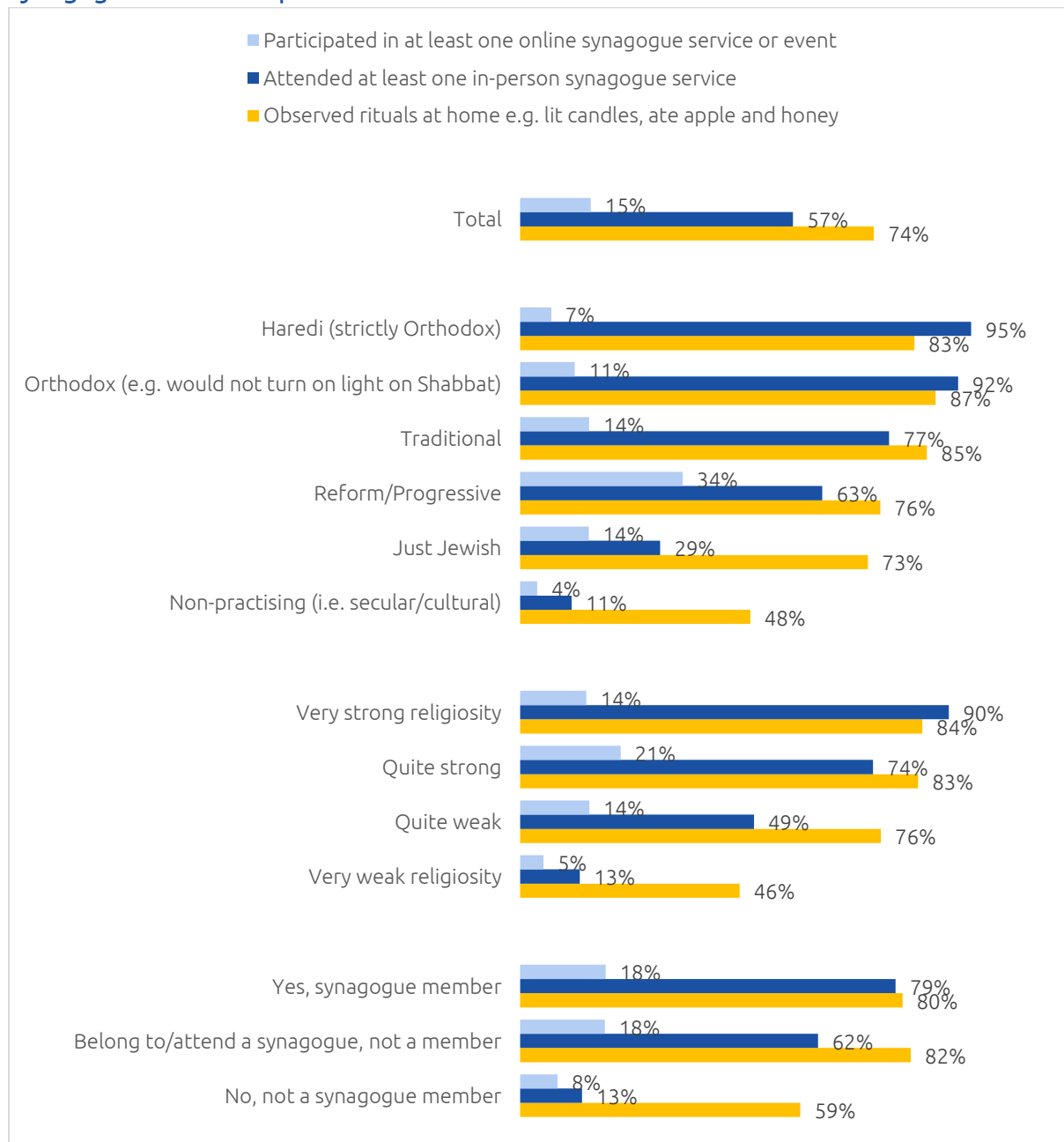


Jewish men are more likely than Jewish women to have attended a Rosh Hashana synagogue service (in person) but less likely than Jewish women to have observed ritual practices at home. There are also important differences in behaviour in terms of age. In-person synagogue service attendance initially increases with age, peaking in the forties, but steadily decreases after that. However, online participation generally increases with age. In terms of home rituals, this is more common among younger than older generations.

² While COVID-19 restrictions had been fully lifted by the time Rosh Hashana was celebrated in September 2022, there were still vestiges of concern from some community members, and online services and events were being held, especially by non-Orthodox Jewish communities. Online services have become more established since then, so these data may not be typical given that they were gathered at a time when the repercussions of the pandemic were still quite significant.

The more strongly religious and more Orthodox Jews are, the more likely they were to have attended an in-person synagogue service. The Orthodox and the 'Very strongly' religious were more likely to have attended in-person synagogue services than to have observed Rosh Hashana rituals at home (Figure 4), although most did both. Among the non-Orthodox and more weakly religious, as well as those without synagogue membership or association, we see that despite low levels of synagogue attendance, many nevertheless participated in home rituals. For example, half of 'non-practising' Jews (48%) reported observing such rituals in the home. One-third (34%) of Reform/Progressive respondents said they had participated in at least one online synagogue service or event. This is also the case for one in five (21%) of those who are 'Quite strongly' religious.

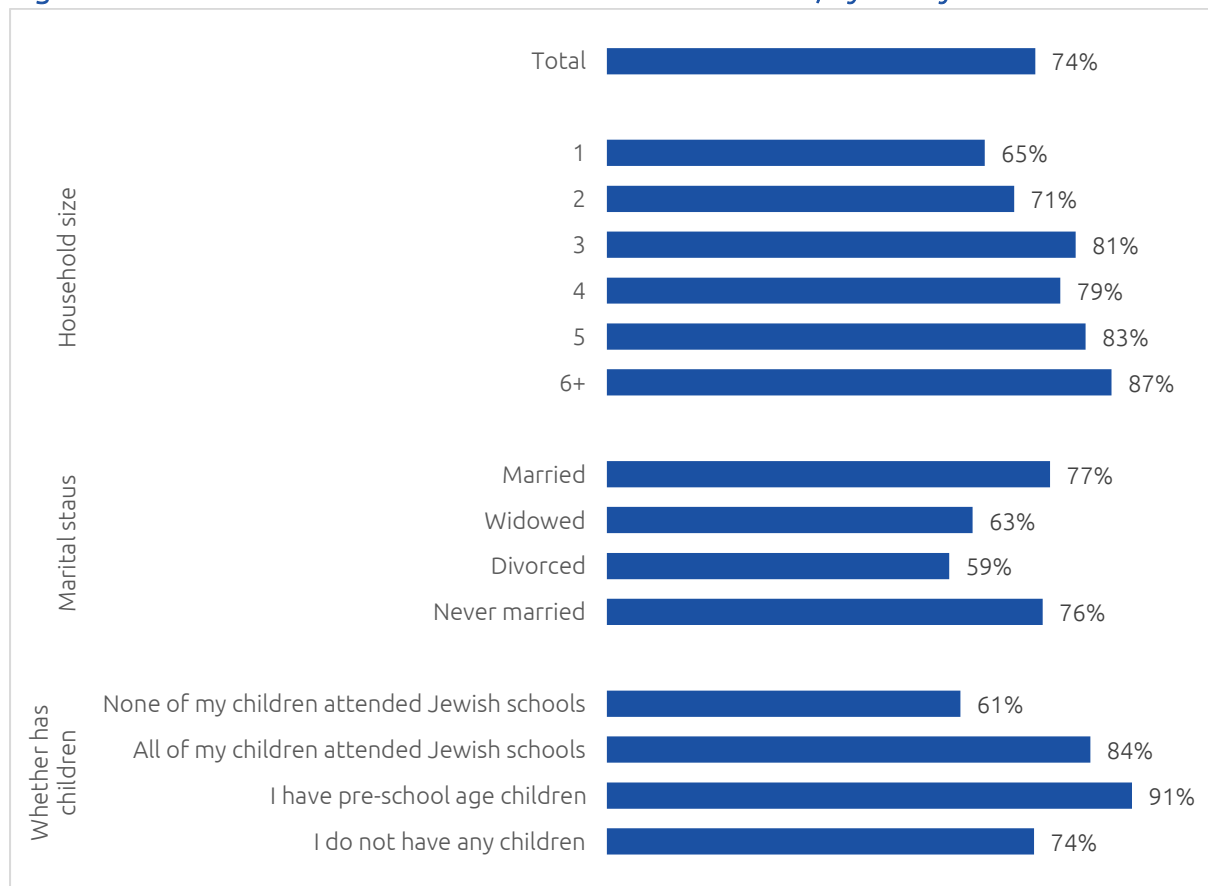
Figure 4. Rosh Hashana 2022 observance, by denominational identification, religiosity and synagogue membership



Rosh Hashana ritual observance at home is related to household size, with larger households being more likely than smaller households to observe rituals such as eating apples and honey (Figure 5).

It is also the case that married Jews are more likely to observe these rituals than those who are widowed and divorced, although there is little difference between those who are married and those who have never been married. Respondents with young children are the most likely to observe home rituals at Rosh Hashana (91%), as are those with children (of any age) who have attended Jewish schools (84%).

Figure 5. Observance of home rituals at Rosh Hashana 2022, by family characteristics

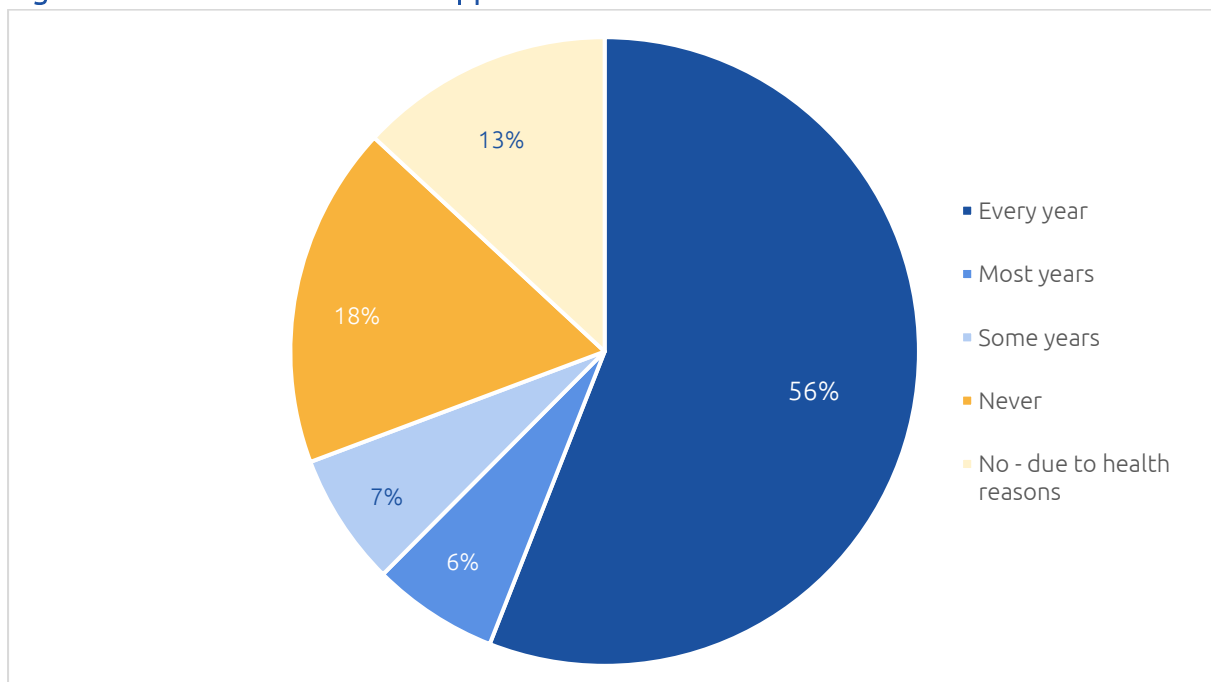


/ Fasting on Yom Kippur

The High Holy Days culminate with the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) when Jews are commanded to ‘perform self-denial and to rest from exertion’. This means that, for many, it is a fast day when they abstain from both food and water for 25 hours. It is also customary to spend the day praying in synagogue.

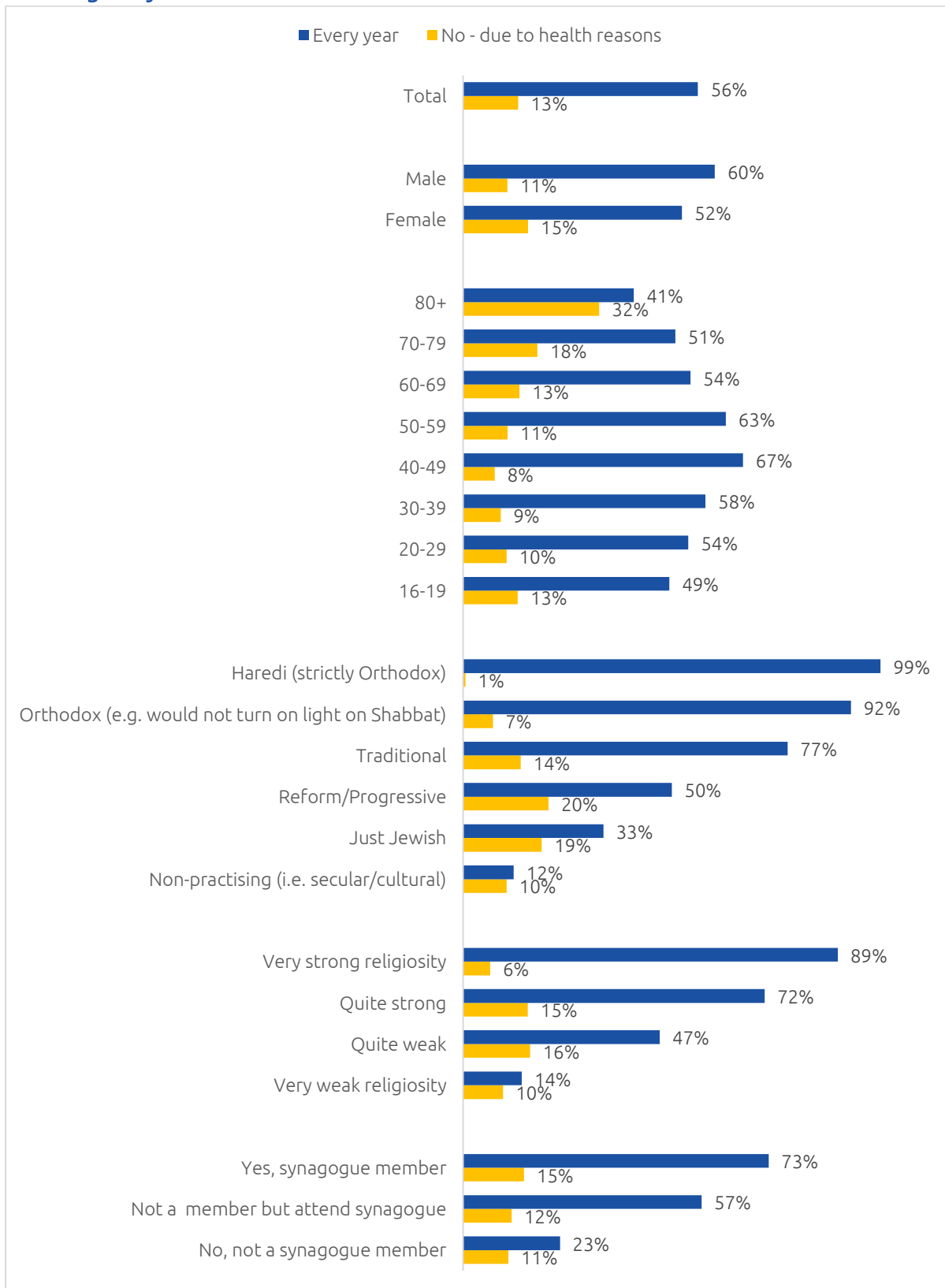
JPR asked respondents whether or not they usually fast on Yom Kippur, and just over half (56%) said that they do so ‘every year’. Almost one in five (18%) said they ‘never’ fast, and a further 13% said they do not fast ‘due to health reasons’ (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Whether fast on Yom Kippur



The likelihood of fasting on Yom Kippur initially increases with age, peaking in the forties and steadily declining with each successive age band (Figure 7). (This is a similar pattern to the one recorded in terms of synagogue service attendance on Rosh Hashana.) It is interesting to note that the choice of *not* fasting due to health reasons is the opposite to this pattern. While age is probably the main driver of why health discourages or prevents some people from fasting—almost a third of those aged 80 and above do not fast due to health reasons—religiosity plays a role, with the more religious being more willing to fast, in spite of old age or health concerns.

Figure 7. Whether or not fast on Yom Kippur, by age, sex, denominational identification and religiosity



/ Concluding thoughts

From a religious point of view, the theme of the High Holy Days is solemn and perhaps best summed up by the prayer *Untanneh Tokef*, recited in the synagogue on both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur:

“On Rosh Hashana [it] will be inscribed, and on Yom Kippur [it] will be sealed, how many will pass from the earth and how many will be created; who will live and who will die; [...] Who will rest and who will wander, who will live in harmony and who will be harried, who will enjoy tranquilly and who will suffer, who will be impoverished and who will be enriched, and who will be degraded and who will be exalted.”

(Extract from *Unetanneh Tokef* - Translation from the Complete Artscroll Machzor for Yom Kippur)

In essence, this prayer highlights the idea that on Rosh Hashana Jews are judged by God, and then, following a ten-day period for repentance, on Yom Kippur, God hands down His judgement. These are not only religious ideas; they are also intensely personal themes about one’s behaviour as a Jew and how one should aim for self-improvement, which is part of the reason why these holidays resonate so strongly. The majority of Jews, including the religious and non-religious, will have heard this prayer being read in the synagogue during the High Holy Days. This dovetails with other findings from the JPR National Jewish Identity Survey showing that Jews regard ‘Strong moral and ethical behaviour’ to be one of the most important aspects of their Jewish identity.³

As we show here, Rosh Hashana is the most widely observed of all Jewish festivals, a great coming-together at both the communal and familial levels. In 2022, well over half the Jewish population in the UK attended synagogue at Rosh Hashana and a similar proportion fasted on Yom Kippur. Almost three quarters observed Rosh Hashana rituals at home with their families. We see that observance is more likely among younger generations, those in larger households and those with younger children. But it is also more likely among the more religious and the more Jewishly engaged.

In the final assessment, the data reveal how Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur play an instrumental role in all three levels of Jewish life: the personal, the familial and the communal. The High Holy Days are a time for self-reflection, a time when families to come together and celebrate, and a time when the synagogues are at their fullest and Jewish community life at its strongest.

³ Graham and Boyd (2024), p.31.

/ 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.

/ 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.