

Do Jews in the UK celebrate Christmas?

Dr Carli Lessof

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JPR's UK Jewish population research panel is designed to gather data on Jewish people's attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and preferences to help feed into planning across the community. In this paper, we draw on data from our 2022 UK National Jewish Identity Survey, alongside other sources, to explore a new and little-understood aspect of Jewishness today: how many Jews in the UK celebrate Christmas by having a Christmas tree at home, and what characterises those that do.

/ Introduction

Jewish people have long had a complicated relationship with Christmas. In pre-modern Europe, Christmas was often experienced by Jews as frightening, both physically and spiritually. Physically, there were fears of hostility or assault (although these were far more common on Easter); spiritually, there were folklore ideas that the Christian deity controlled the night on Christmas Eve and might in some way appear and defile Jewish holy texts. Various traditions evolved, not least 'Nittel Nacht' ('Nativity Night'), still observed today by some strictly Orthodox groups, which involved deliberately avoiding Torah study and playing cards, dreidel or chess instead late into the night of Christmas Eve.

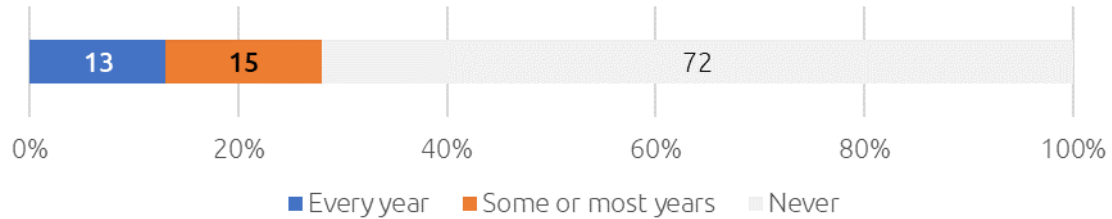
Nowadays, such thinking is relatively rare, but many Jews nonetheless avoid or limit their engagement with Christmas in other ways. For example, since 1980, some Jews in the UK have chosen to participate in Limmud, a Jewish educational and cultural festival that occurs each year over Christmas. The decision to run it at that time of year was originally simply pragmatic – it is a convenient time because people are off work – but for some, it has become a means of side-stepping Christmas and celebrating their Jewishness instead. More generally, the widespread popularity of Chanukah, a minor festival in terms of religious law, partly reflects the efforts of some diaspora Jews to offer an alternative to Christmas for their families.

At the same time, some Jews take a more relaxed attitude to Christmas, using the opportunity simply to meet up with family and friends. Still, some engage more thoroughly in the holiday, not least by putting up one of the season's prettiest cultural manifestations: the Christmas tree. In our recent National Jewish Identity Survey (conducted in November and December 2022), we were interested to understand how common this practice is among Jews in the UK, so we invited respondents to tell us both whether they typically have a Christmas tree in their home today and whether they did during their childhood.

1 / How many Jews have a Christmas tree at home?

Of the nearly 5,000 respondents, almost three out of ten Jews (28%) said they had a Christmas tree at home today, either 'every year', 'most years', or 'some years' (combined in the chart below).

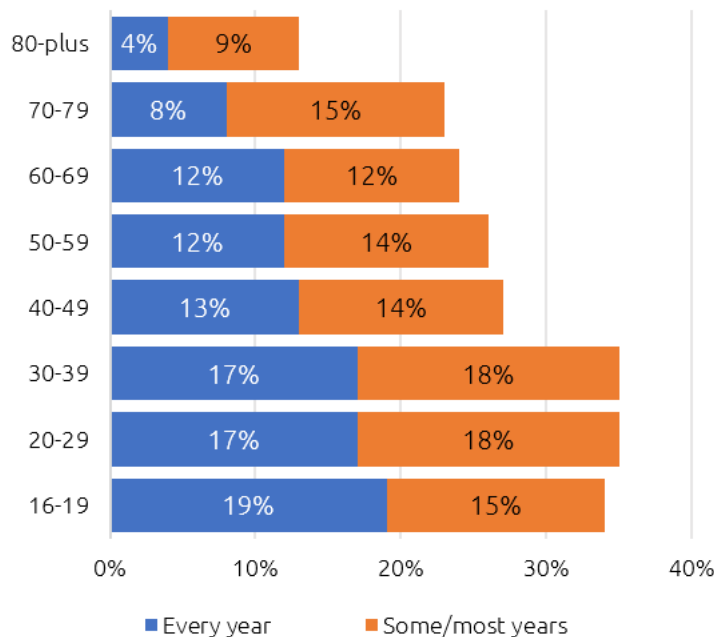
Today, close to three in ten Jews in the UK have a Christmas tree in their homes at least some years



Question: *Do you typically have a Christmas tree in your home, and did you have one during your childhood?* [Response options: Never; Some years; Most years; Every year] (n=4,981). Responses shown relate to present only, not childhood.

The results vary by the characteristics of the respondents. When looking into the age of the respondents, there is a clear pattern: the older the respondents are, the less likely they are to have a Christmas tree at home every year or at all. Those under 40 are more likely to report having a Christmas tree (around a third of them reported doing so) than those over 40 (just over a quarter).

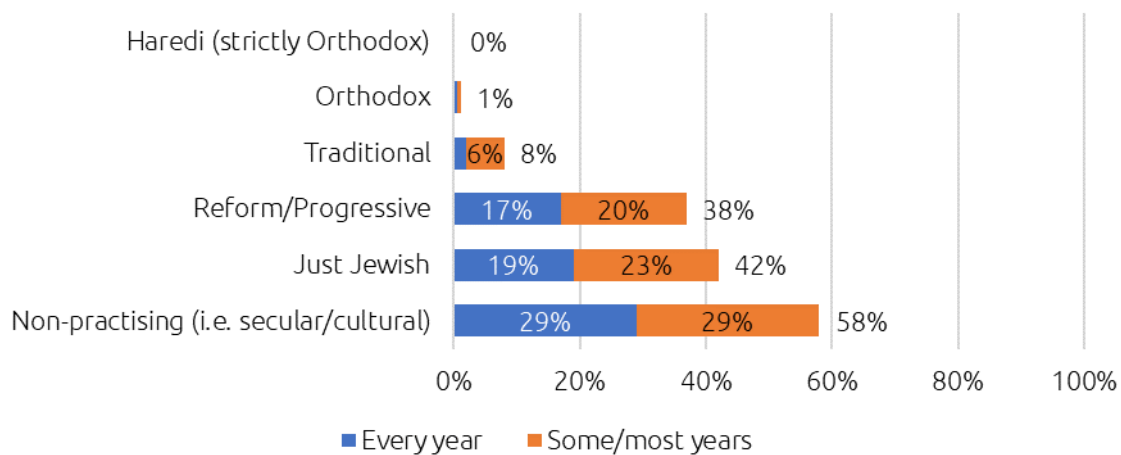
Younger people are more likely to have a Christmas tree at home than older people



2 / Christmas trees and Jewish religiosity and identification

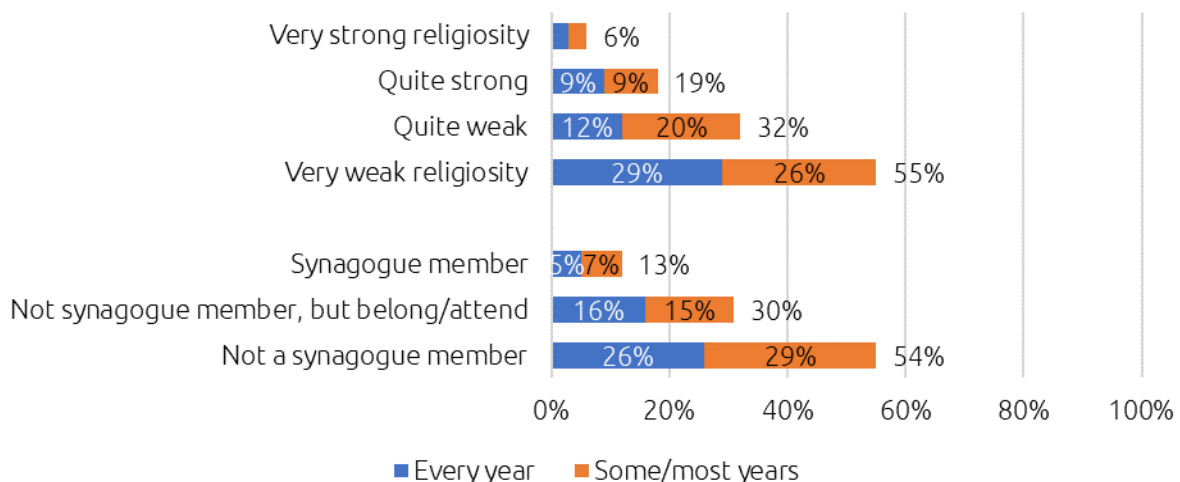
Unsurprisingly, there are much starker differences based on religious identity and practice. Having a Christmas tree is much more common among Jews who are not practising or religious. So, while almost no self-identifying Orthodox Jews have a Christmas tree (1%), well over half of Jews who describe themselves as non-practising do so (58%), either every year or some/most years. Similarly, Jews who describe themselves as 'Reform/Progressive' are more than four times as likely to have a Christmas tree (38%) as those who describe themselves as 'Traditional' (8%).

Having a Christmas tree is most common among non-practising, secular and cultural Jews



The same pattern is seen when we ask people about their religiosity. 55% of those who describe their religiosity as 'very weak' have a Christmas tree compared to 6% who describe it as 'very strong.' Similarly, 54% of those who are not synagogue members say they have a Christmas tree, compared to 13% who are.

There is a clear relationship between having a Christmas tree, and people's religiosity and synagogue membership



3 / Childhood and marriage

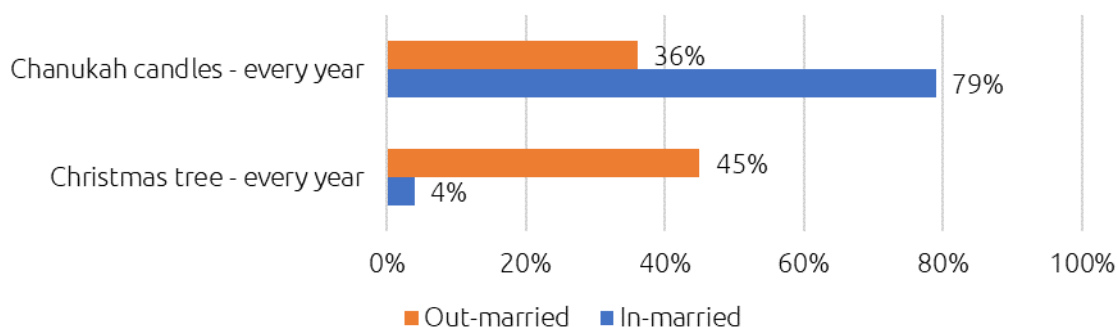
Although people's memory is imperfect, we can learn a little about how Jewish identities develop over time by asking them to reflect on their childhood. At first sight, the findings are unremarkable: 27% of Jewish people reported having a Christmas tree during their childhood, almost identical to the 28% who reported having one as adults. However, concealed behind these figures is a surprising amount of change: whilst about six in ten Jews (61%) never had a tree as a child and never do nowadays, 16% had a tree as a child and continue to do so. The remainder have switched, half one way and half the other. At this stage, we can only speculate why people may have moved *away* from having a Christmas tree. For some, having a Christmas tree may have been a short-lived childhood experience that did not hold sufficient meaning to carry into adult life, while others may have become more observant or married Jews who grew up without a tree. Others may have grown up outside Judaism and let go of this practice when becoming Jewish. Most likely, the shift *towards* having a Christmas tree also reflects a mix of experiences, with some Jewish people becoming less observant, some partnering with people who are not Jewish, or who are Jewish but simply like to have a Christmas tree.

Close to four in ten have had a Christmas tree at home, either now, in their childhood, or both



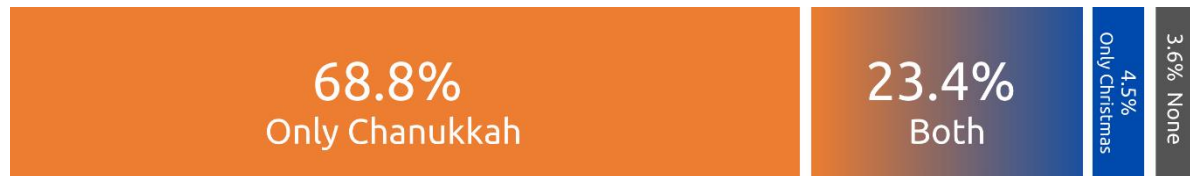
Certainly, intermarriage and mixed-faith households are likely to be an essential part of this dynamic. When a person marries someone of a different religion, they might take their partner's belief or create a household that respects and celebrates both religions and cultures. We can see the importance of intermarriage among Jews, for example, in people's decisions about having a Christmas tree: just 4% of in-married couples said they put up a Christmas tree every year, compared to 45% of respondents who are part of an intermarried couple. At the same time, it is striking to note that a not entirely dissimilar proportion of out-married Jews (36%) participates in one or more Chanukah candle-lighting ceremonies every year, either at home or elsewhere.

Almost a half of all out-married Jews have a Christmas tree at home today; over a third of them light Chanukah candles



Combining this information, we can see that almost a quarter (23%) of Jewish people have had both Chanukah candles and a Christmas tree in their homes for at least some years. By contrast, about seven in ten (69%) only mark Chanukah, and just 4% only mark Christmas. A similarly small minority (4%) do neither.

**Over a quarter of the Jews living in the UK celebrate Christmas,
Most of them celebrate it alongside Chanukah**



4 / Summary and reflections on the findings

Having a Christmas tree is surprisingly common among Jews, but the practice varies substantially by religious engagement, Jewish identification and household mix. In the United States, where common Christmas Day customs among Jews today are to go to the movies and eat out at Chinese restaurants, the figure is likely to be higher, but it follows similar patterns. In its 2013 study of Jewish Americans, the Pew Research Center found that 32% of Jews said they had a Christmas tree in the previous year. As in the UK, this was slightly higher among the under-40s and those with no denominational affiliation. It was lower among Jews by religion (27%) and higher among Jews of no religion (51%), and remarkably higher – ten-fold – among those with a non-Jewish partner (71%) than a Jewish one (7%). In many respects, these findings, both in the US and the UK, capture both the tenacity of Jewishness today and the realities of Jewish life in the modern multicultural age. All of the people in these surveys self-identify as Jewish and are sufficiently engaged in their Jewishness to spend considerable time at least completing a survey about it. Yet the choice to have a Christmas tree at home also says something about their desire or willingness to absorb wider cultural norms into their lives and the extent to which they see their Jewishness as a completely exclusive part of who they are. Maintaining a Jewish identity in a non-Jewish society has long been a challenge; the ways in which we adopt non-Jewish customs and practices says a great deal about who we are and how we manage those dynamics.

/ Methodological note

The data on the attitudes of Jews in the UK are drawn from the 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 variety of issues. The questions included in the study were developed in-house by JPR, but drew heavily on the National Jewish Community Survey which was carried out in 2013 to allow future comparison of questions about Jewish identity.

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; 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 additional support for data management and weighting is provided by ZK Analytics. Analysis of the panel and survey data has been carried out using SPSS, while weighting has been carried out using R.

/ 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 Carli Lessof is a Senior Research Fellow at JPR responsible for JPR's community statistics programme, online research panel, and monitoring and evaluation. She completed her PhD in Social Statistics at the National Centre for Social Research at the University of Southampton and holds an MA in Applied Social Research from Manchester University. Over her career, she has developed and delivered a range of complex, longitudinal surveys at NatCen Social Research and Kantar Public, and carried out research and evaluation in Government (DWP, NAO) and academia (LSE, University of Essex).