

# Shavuot in seven charts: belief in God, the Torah, prayer and Jewish learning among UK Jews

Factsheet

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The JPR UK Jewish population research panel gathers data on Jewish people's attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, and preferences to 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 different themes related to the festival of *Shavuot*.

## / Introduction

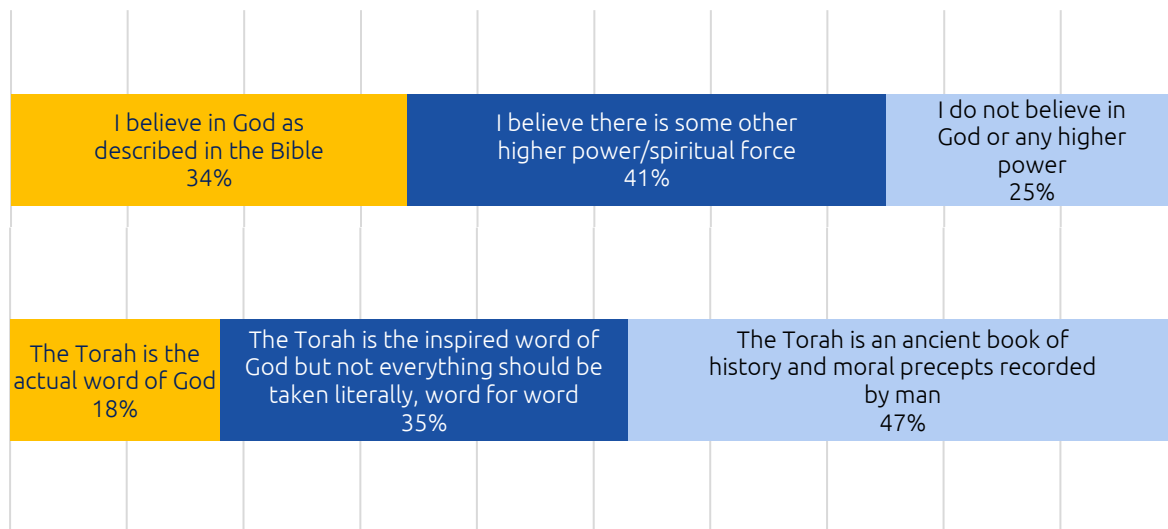
*Shavuot*, also known as the Feast of Weeks, is a major Jewish holiday that marks the end of the seven-week 'omer' period following the festival of *Pesach* (Passover). One of the three pilgrimage festivals mentioned in the Torah alongside *Pesach* and *Sukkot*, *Shavuot* commemorates the momentous biblical event of giving the *Torah* to the Israelites, known as *Matan Torah*, at Mount Sinai. While *Shavuot* also celebrates the spring and the wheat harvest in ancient and modern Israel, at its heart lies the symbolism of the covenant between God and the Jewish People, transforming them into a nation guided by a set of spiritual and ethical laws. It is traditional for Jews to study the Torah at *Shavuot* and learn about various aspects of Judaism. In this paper, we look at some recent findings about Jewish people's attitudes towards, and belief in, God, the Torah, prayer and their commitment to Jewish study.

The data come from the [2022 National Jewish Identity Survey \(NJIS\)](#), carried out between 16th November and 23rd December 2022. The final sample size was 4,891 self-identifying Jewish people aged 16 and above living in the UK.

## / Belief in God and the Torah

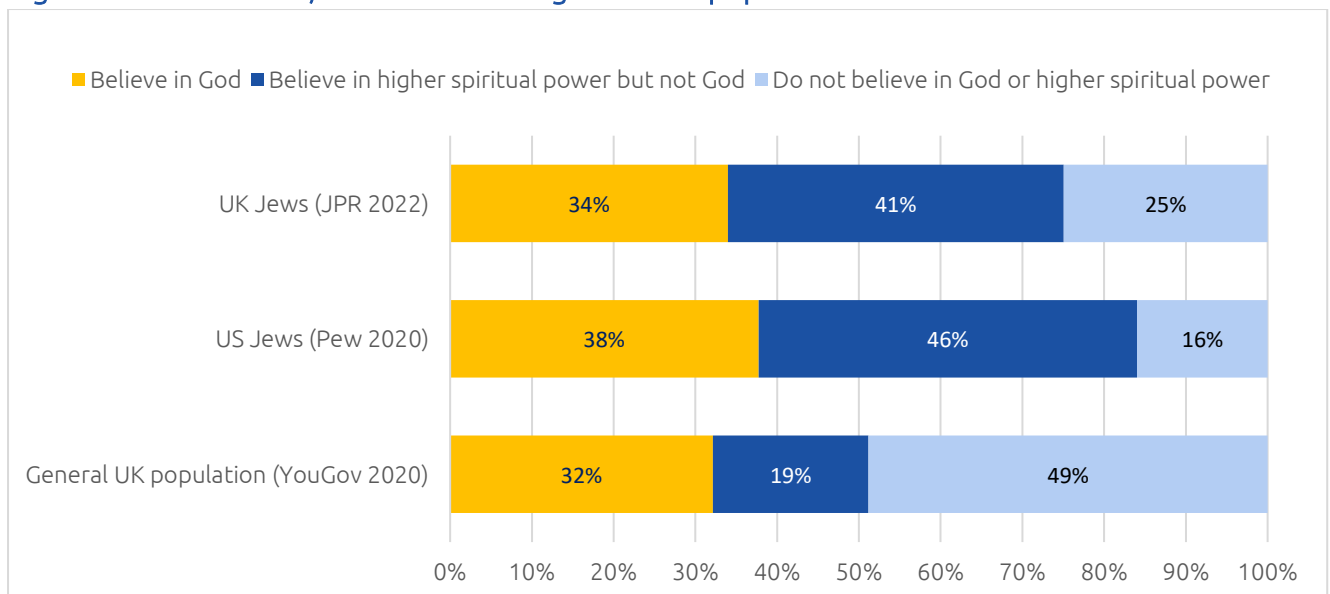
Two of the most fundamental principles within Judaism are the existence of one God who created the world and the idea that the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) is divine and was given to Moses at Mount Sinai. NJIS respondents were asked about their beliefs on both of these. Just over one in three (34%) Jews believe in God 'as described in the Bible,' although a further 41% subscribe to a 'higher power or spiritual force in the universe' (Figure 1). There is more scepticism when it comes to the origins of the Torah, with just 18% of Jews in the UK believing it is the word of God (i.e. almost half the proportion that believes in God) and close to half (47%) believing human beings wrote it.

**Figure 1. Belief in God and the Torah**



For context, a similar question about the existence of God was asked of Jews in the United States in 2020. When comparing the results, we can see that UK Jews are less likely to believe in God than their American counterparts (Figure 2). On the other hand, they are more likely to believe in God than the general population of the UK, where almost half (49%) of the population are non-believers, twice the proportion among UK Jews (25%).

**Figure 2. Belief in God, US Jews and the general UK population\***



Source: US data are from the Pew Research Center’s 2021 study, *Jewish Americans in 2020*. Author’s calculations using Pew dataset (weighted) available from <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/dataset/jewish-americans-in-2020/>; UK data from YouGov <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/2isqp28jmv/YouGov%20-%20Christianity%20study.pdf>.

## / God's role in the world

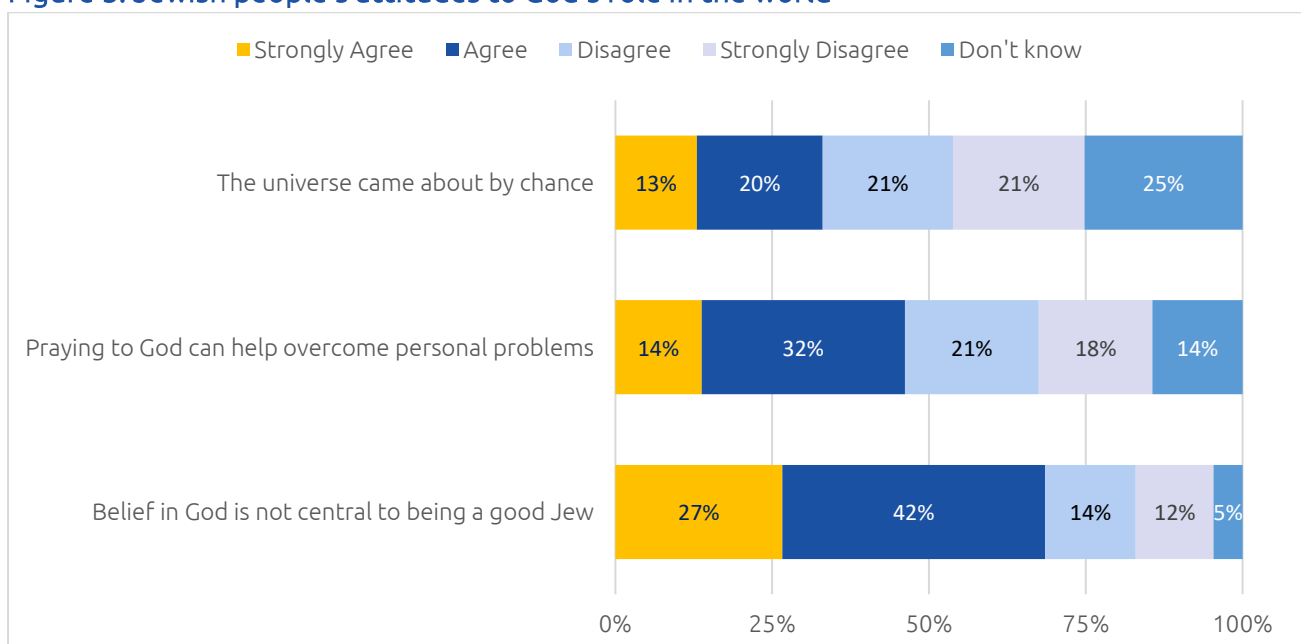
Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with three contentions about God and the nature of the universe: first, whether 'the universe came about by chance'; second, whether 'praying to God can help overcome personal problems'; and third, whether belief in God is, or is not, 'central to being a good Jew' (Figure 3).

In the Book of Genesis (*Bereshit* in Hebrew), the biblical account clearly conveys the idea that God created the world, although modern science obviously rejects this view. Invited to agree or disagree with a contention that challenges the biblical narrative – i.e. that 'the universe came about by chance' – we see that more Jews are inclined to reject this idea than to accept it: 42% disagree, saying it did *not* come about by chance and therefore sympathise more with the biblical account, compared with 33% who believe it did and therefore sympathise more with the scientific account (Figure 3). However, and importantly, 25% of Jews say they do not know if they agree or disagree with this fundamental statement about creation.

Respondents were also more likely to agree than disagree that praying to God can help overcome personal problems. 44% of Jews believe that this is the case, whereas 39% disagree with the contention – i.e. they do not believe that praying to God can overcome personal problems – although, again, we see uncertainty among many people, with 14% saying they don't know.

In contrast to these two contentions about God and the universe, the third contention asked about the place of God in Jewish identity. There is a long tradition in Jewish social science investigating Jewish people's conceptions of what constitutes a 'good' Jew. As Jewishness can be expressed in religious, ethnic, cultural and national ways, one should not assume that God is, or even should be, central to all Jews' Jewish being. Indeed, we see that for most Jews (69%), belief in God is not seen as central to being a 'good Jew', and only a quarter (26%) believe that it is (Figure 3).

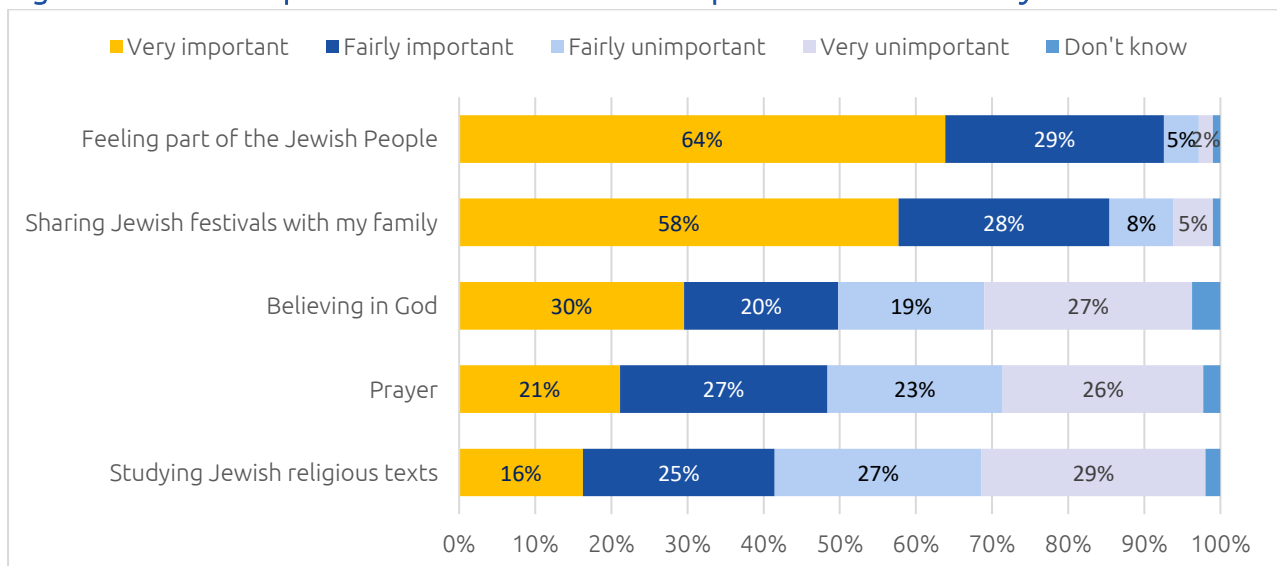
**Figure 3. Jewish people's attitudes to God's role in the world**



## / Importance of God to one's Jewish identity and synagogue attendance

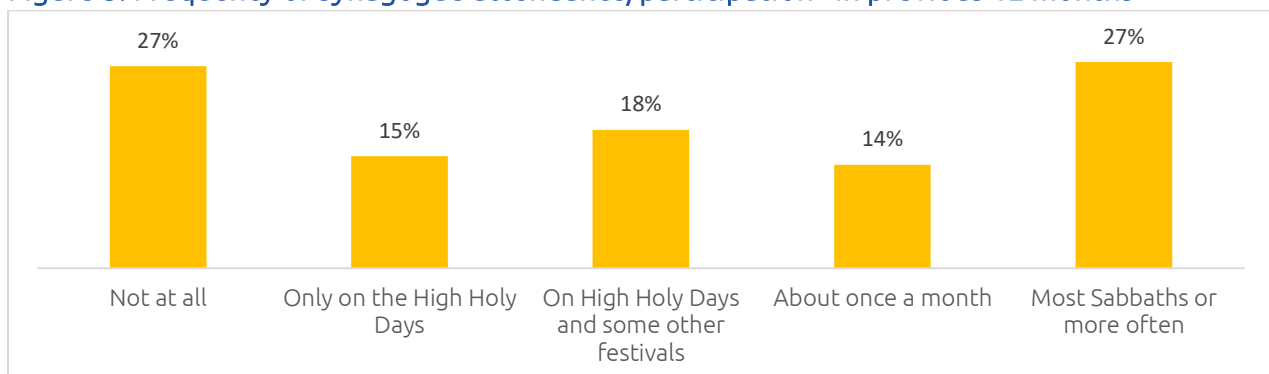
Jewish identity can be expressed in multiple ways. To try to capture the breadth of this richness, respondents were presented with a list of different aspects of Jewishness and invited to assess how important or unimportant each item is in terms of how they see themselves Jewishly. Several of these items are pertinent to this discussion, revealing what matters most to Jews when celebrating a Jewish holiday like Shavuot (Figure 4). Most Jews believe that feeling part of the Jewish people is either a very or fairly important aspect of their Jewish identity (93%), highlighting the importance of belonging to the larger Jewish collective in Jewish identity. A similar proportion feels that sharing Jewish festivals with family is important (86%). However, notably fewer Jewish people are likely to feel that belief in God (50%), prayer (48%) and studying religious texts (41%) are important. The data suggest that for Jews, festivals such as *Shavuot* are more likely to be about the celebration of family, community and peoplehood than the underlying religious meanings.

**Figure 4. Level of importance attached to various aspects of Jewish identity**



Switching the focus to synagogue attendance, we see that more than one in four (27%) Jewish people attends synagogue weekly or more often, while three out of five (59%) attend synagogue during many of the main Jewish festivals, such as Shavuot (Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Frequency of synagogue attendance/participation\* in previous 12 months**



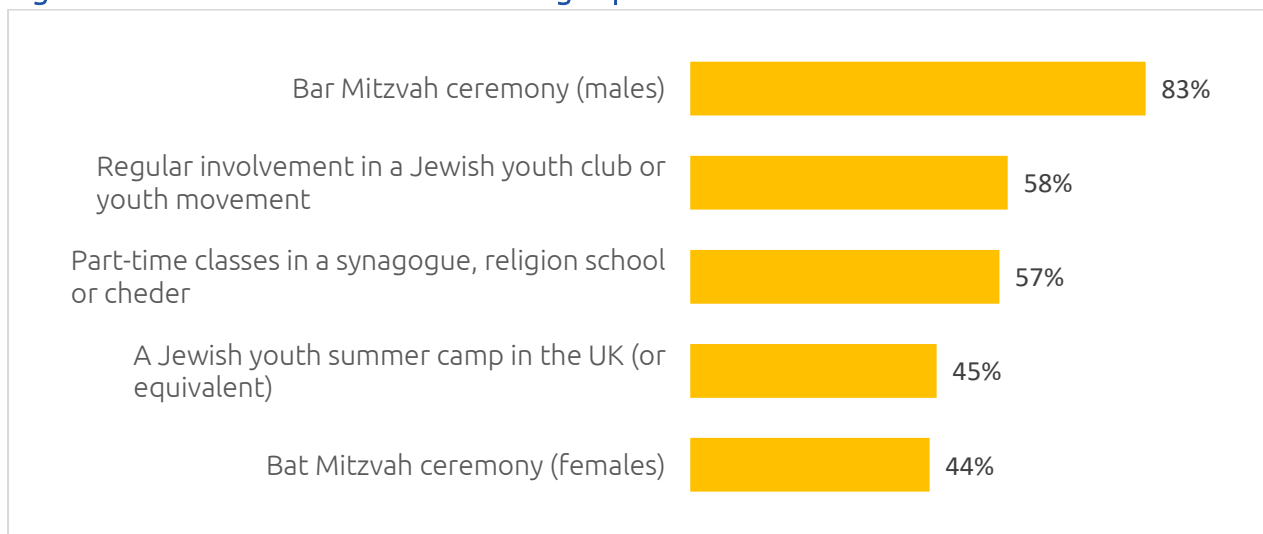
\* Note that NJIS took place when the COVID-19 pandemic was still of concern for some. Therefore, the question also incorporated online participation in synagogue services.

## / Jewish learning experiences

One of the ways in which the festival is celebrated is by holding a 'Tikun Leil Shavuot' – dedicating the night of Shavuot to Jewish study, usually in groups. However, Jewish education takes place in a multitude of contexts, and in our survey, we were interested in understanding how many 'critical informal Jewish experiences' respondents had growing up.

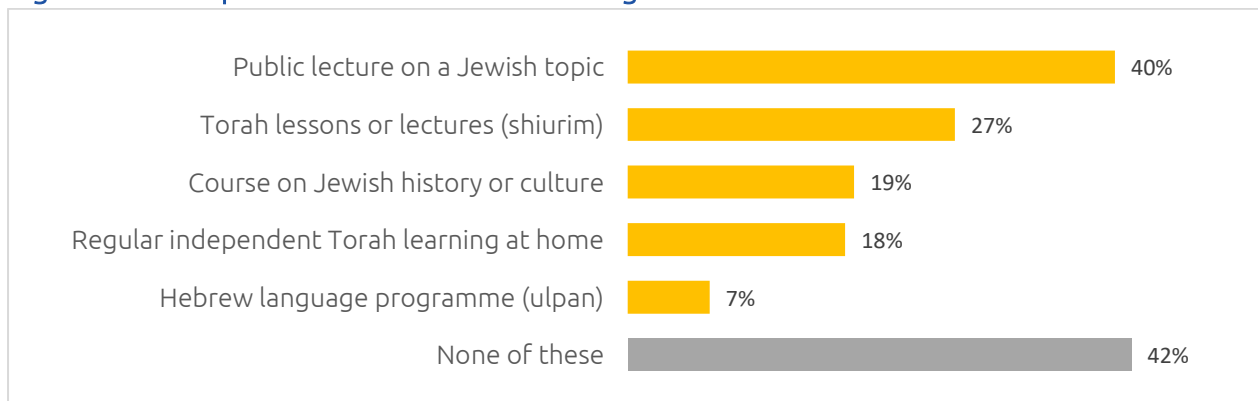
The most common Jewish educational experience is a Bar Mitzvah ceremony (83%), celebrated by 13-year-old Jewish males. By comparison, just over half as many females (44%) reported having had a Bat Mitzvah ceremony (Figure 6). All other items are for both sexes, and the most frequently mentioned educational activities were involvement in a Jewish youth group (58%), part-time classes in a synagogue (cheder) (57%) and a Jewish youth summer camp (45%).

Figure 6. Critical informal Jewish learning experiences



Like learning in general, Jewish education is not limited to childhood. There are numerous communal opportunities to continue Jewish education throughout life, such as Tikun Leil Shavuot, and the survey asked respondents whether they had recently participated in any adult Jewish learning, encompassing cultural, religious, linguistic or historical activities. Two out of five (40%) Jews said they had attended a public lecture on a Jewish topic (in person or online) in the previous twelve months, and 27% said they had participated in Torah lessons or lectures (*shiurim*) (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Participation in adult Jewish learning activities



## / Concluding remarks

During Shavuot, Jews celebrate the giving of the Torah to the Jewish People, and this paper uses empirical data to explore briefly how that idea translates in the contemporary Jewish context.

We see that a majority of Jews in the UK do not believe in God as described in the Bible, nor do they believe that the Torah is the actual word of God. Fewer than half believe that God created the universe, and about four in ten do not believe in the power of prayer. However, while only a minority of British Jews consider studying Jewish texts to be important to their Jewish identity, it remains the case that a majority participate in adult Jewish learning activities. Moreover, for the vast majority of Jews, feeling part of a broader Jewish collective is essential, as is sharing and celebrating Jewish festivals, such as Shavuot, with their family, and attending synagogue services to be with their community at these times.

So, for most Jews, Shavuot may be less about religious laws and texts, and more about the Jewish People and how they are unified by those laws and texts, irrespective of their origin and whether or not they obey them. It is this notion of Jewish peoplehood that endures and that resonates into the present day.

## / 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, and 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.