

Report May 11, 2021

[Jewish Americans in 2020](#)

2. Jewish identity and belief

Religion is not central to the lives of most U.S. Jews. Even Jews by religion are much less likely than Christian adults to consider religion to be very important in their lives (28% vs. 57%). And among Jews as a whole, far more report that they find meaning in spending time with their families or friends, engaging with arts and literature, being outdoors, and pursuing their education or careers than find meaning in their religious faith. Twice as many Jewish Americans say they derive a great deal of meaning and fulfillment from spending time with pets as say the same about their religion.

And yet, even for many Jews who are not particularly religious, Jewish identity matters: Fully three-quarters of Jewish Americans say that “being Jewish” is either very important (42%) or somewhat important (34%) to them.

U.S. Jews do not have a single, uniform answer to what being Jewish means. When asked whether being Jewish is mainly a matter of religion, ancestry, culture or some combination of those things, Jews respond in a wide variety of ways, with just one-in-ten saying it is *only* a matter of religion.

Many American Jews prioritize cultural components of Judaism over religious ones. Most Jewish adults say that remembering the Holocaust, leading a moral and ethical life, working for justice and equality in society, and being intellectually curious are “essential” to what it means to them to be Jewish. Far fewer say that observing Jewish law is an essential part of their Jewish identity. Indeed, more consider “having a good sense of humor” to be essential to being Jewish than consider following halakha (traditional Jewish law) essential (34% vs. 15%).

Orthodox Jews are a striking exception to many of these overall findings. They are among the most highly religious groups in U.S. society – along with White evangelicals and Black Protestants – in terms of the share who say religion is very important in their lives. A plurality of Orthodox Jews say that being Jewish is mainly about religion alone (40%), and they are the only subgroup in the survey who overwhelmingly feel that observing halakha is essential to their Jewishness (83%). Fully three-quarters of the Orthodox say they find a great deal of meaning and fulfillment in their religion, exceeded only by the share who feel

that way about spending time with their families (86%). And 93% of Orthodox Jews say they believe in God as described in the Bible, compared with a quarter of Jews overall.

Identification with branches of American Judaism

More than half of U.S. Jews identify with the Reform (37%) or Conservative (17%) movements, while about one-in-ten (9%) identify with Orthodox Judaism. One-third of Jews (32%) do not identify with any particular Jewish denomination, and 4% identify with smaller branches – such as Reconstructionist or Humanist Judaism – or say they are connected with multiple streams of U.S. Judaism. Among Jews by religion, branch affiliation generally mirrors the broader pattern among Jews overall. Most Jews by religion identify with either Reform (44%) or Conservative (23%) Judaism, and fewer say they do not belong to a particular denomination (15%). Most Jews of no religion, on the other hand, do not identify with any institutional branch or stream of Judaism (79%), while the remainder largely describe themselves as Reform Jews (17%).

It is often assumed that for U.S. Jews, branch affiliation goes hand in hand with synagogue membership – e.g., they belong to a Conservative synagogue, and so they identify as Conservative, or they belong to a Reform temple, and so they identify as Reform. But this is not always the case, because the percentage of Jewish adults who identify with some branch of U.S. Judaism (67%) is considerably higher than the percentage who are synagogue members or have someone in their household who is a synagogue member (35%).

Among Jews who are neither synagogue members themselves nor live in a household where anyone else belongs to a synagogue, 47% do not identify with any institutional branch or stream of Judaism.

37% of U.S. Jews identify as Reform

% of U.S. Jews who identify as ...

	NET Jewish	Jews by religion	Jews of no religion
	%	%	%
Orthodox	9	12	<1
Conservative	17	23	1
Reform	37	44	17
No particular branch	32	15	79
Other branch	4	5	3
Don't know/refused	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u><1</u>
	100	100	100

Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.

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Among Jews who are not synagogue members, 36% identify as Reform

Among U.S. Jews who are not a member of a synagogue (and no one in their household is a member), % who identify as ...

	%
Orthodox	1
Conservative	11
Reform	36
No particular branch	47
Other branch	4
Don't know/refused	<u><1</u>
	100

Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.

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But roughly half identify as Reform (36%), Conservative (11%), Orthodox (1%) or another Jewish denomination (4%), even though they indicate that, at present, they have no formal connection to a synagogue. This pattern is similar when looking only at respondents who are themselves not members of a synagogue, regardless of the status of others in their household. There could be multiple reasons for this, including Jewish denominational attachments retained since childhood, participation in Chabad or other synagogues that do not have a formal membership structure, and financial barriers to synagogue membership, among other possibilities. (The survey asked separate questions about branch affiliation, synagogue membership and synagogue attendance, without probing the exact connections; it did not ask people who identify as Reform Jews, for example, whether the synagogue they attend, or belong to, is a *Reform* synagogue.)

Jewish adults ages 18 to 29 are particularly likely to identify as Orthodox (17%), compared with those who are 30 and older, of whom 7% are Orthodox. The youngest Jewish adults also are more inclined than their elders to have no branch affiliation (41%), while smaller shares are Reform (29%) or Conservative (8%).

At the other end of the age spectrum, 44% of Jews ages 65 and older identify with the Reform movement, and a quarter say they are Conservative.

Jews less inclined than U.S. adults as a whole to consider religion very important

Younger Jews more likely than older Jews to be Orthodox or have no branch affiliation

% of U.S. Jews who identify as ...

	Ages 18-29		30-49		50-64		65+
	%		%		%		%
Orthodox	17		11		7		3
Conservative	8		11		22		25
Reform	29		37		35		44
No particular branch	41		36		30		22
Other branch	5		4		5		4
Don't know/refused	<1		1		1		1
	100		100		100		100

Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding. Figures include both Jews by religion and Jews of no religion.
Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.

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Nearly half of U.S. Jews say religion is either “very” (21%) or “somewhat” (26%) important in their lives, while 53% say religion is “not too” or “not at all” important to them personally.

Jews by religion are far more likely than Jews of no religion to say religion is at least somewhat important in their lives (61% vs. 8%). And Orthodox Jews are especially likely to say that religion is important: Nearly nine-in-ten (86%) say religion is very important to them, compared with a third of Conservative Jews (33%) and 14% of Reform Jews who consider religion very important in their lives.

Religion is more important to Jewish women, on average, than to Jewish men. Jewish adults ages 30 and older are more likely than those under 30 to say religion is at least somewhat important to them (49% vs. 39%). And two-thirds of married Jews who have a Jewish spouse say religion is very (35%) or somewhat (31%) important to them, while far fewer intermarried Jews say this (8% very important, 20% somewhat important).

Jews who did not obtain college degrees are more inclined to say that religion is very important in their lives. For example, about a third of U.S. Jews whose formal education stopped with high school (32%) say religion is very important, compared with 13% of those with bachelor’s degrees and 15% of those with postgraduate degrees.

One-in-five Jews say religion is very important to them

% of U.S. Jews who say religion is _____ in their lives

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not too/not at all important	No answer
	%	%	%	%
NET Jewish	21	26	53	1=100
Jews by religion				
Jews of no religion	2	6	91	<1
Orthodox	86	9	4	1
Conservative	33	46	20	<1
Reform	14	33	53	<1
No particular branch	5	10	84	<1
Men	18	21	60	1
Women	24	30	45	1
Ages 18-29	25	14	61	<1
30-49	20	25	55	1
50-64	21	31	48	<1
65+	20	31	47	2
Married	23	26	50	1
Spouse Jewish	35	31	34	1
Spouse not Jewish	8	20	71	1
Not married	16	26	57	1
High school or less	32	23	44	1
Some college	28	24	48	<1
College graduate	13	26	60	1
Postgraduate degree	15	29	55	1
U.S. adults	41	25	34	1
Christian	57	29	14	<1
Protestant	63	26	11	<1
White evangelical	76	20	4	<1
White, not evangelical	32	42	25	1
Black Protestant	78	16	6	<1
Catholic	43	37	19	<1
Unaffiliated	6	12	82	<1

Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.
Source: Survey conducted Nov. 15, 2018-June 3, 2020, among U.S. Jews, and Aug. 3-16, 2020, among U.S. adults overall.
*Jewish Americans in 2020.

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Compared either with U.S. Christians or with the adult public overall, U.S. Jews are far less likely to say that religion is important in their lives. However, Orthodox Jews rank among the most religiously devout subgroups in the country by this measure; 86% say religion is very important in their lives, as do 78% of Black Protestants and 76% of White evangelical Protestants, two of the most highly religious Christian subgroups. Meanwhile, Jews of no religion are even more likely than religiously unaffiliated Americans to say religion is “not too” important or “not at all” important to them (91% vs. 82%).

The fact that many Jews say religion is relatively unimportant in their lives does not necessarily mean their Jewish identity is not meaningful to them. In fact, three-quarters of U.S. Jews say that “being Jewish” is either very important (42%) or somewhat important (34%) in their lives, while only 23% say it is not too or not at all important to them.

Jews by religion are far more likely than Jews of no religion to say that being Jewish is very important to them (55% vs. 7%); 55% of Jews of no religion say being Jewish is of little importance to them.

Nearly all Orthodox Jews in the survey (95%) describe being Jewish as very important in their lives. A majority of Conservative Jews also say being Jewish is very important (69%). Fewer Reform Jews (40%) and Jews of no denomination (17%) say the same.

Married Jews are more likely than those who are not married to say that being Jewish is central to their lives (48% vs. 33%). Being Jewish tends to be particularly important for Jews who have a Jewish spouse (64% say it is very important).

To U.S. Jews, being Jewish is not just about religion

There is no one way that American Jews think about being Jewish, as the survey makes clear. When asked whether being Jewish is mainly a matter of religion, ancestry or culture,

Most Jews say being Jewish is at least somewhat important to them

% of U.S. Jews who say being Jewish is _____ in their lives

	Very important %	Somewhat important %	Not too/not at all important %	No answer %
NET Jewish	42	34	23	1=100
Jews by religion	55	33	11	1
Jews of no religion	7	38	55	<1
Orthodox	95	5	<1	0
Conservative	69	25	5	<1
Reform	40	44	16	<1
No particular branch	17	37	47	<1
Men	40	32	26	1
Women	44	36	19	1
Ages 18-29	37	30	33	<1
30-49	40	35	25	<1
50-64	47	33	20	1
65+	46	36	17	1
Married	48	32	20	1
Spouse Jewish	64	26	9	<1
Spouse not Jewish	26	39	35	1
Not married	33	38	28	1
High school or less	50	33	16	1
Some college	42	32	25	1
College graduate	35	36	28	1
Postgraduate degree	44	35	20	1

Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.
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some Jewish respondents pick each of those things, and many choose some combination of them. In fact, among the most common answers – expressed by about one-in-five U.S. Jews (19%) – is that being Jewish is about religion, ancestry *and* culture.

Similar shares say being Jewish is mainly a matter of just culture (22%) or just ancestry (21%). About half as many (11%) say being Jewish is mainly about religion alone. The remainder give other responses, such as that being Jewish is about both ancestry and culture (10%).

All told, about half mention ancestry among their responses (52%). A similar share point to culture either alone or in combination with other answers (55%). But fewer mention religion (36%), suggesting that most U.S. Jews do *not* see being Jewish as primarily about religion.

Even among Jews by religion, just 44% mention religion as a primary facet of Jewish identity, although Orthodox Jews stand out in this regard: 40% say being Jewish is about only religion, and an additional three-in-ten Orthodox adults say it is about some combination of religion, ancestry, and culture, or all three of these.

The vast majority of Jews of no religion say that for them, being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry (41%), culture (25%) or both (15%).

U.S. Jews more likely to say being Jewish is about culture or ancestry than about religion; to many, Jewish identity is about more than one thing

% of U.S. Jews who say being Jewish is mainly about ...

	Religion	Ancestry	Culture	Religion and ancestry	Ancestry and culture	Religion and culture	Religion, ancestry and culture	Other	No answer
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
NET Jewish	11	21	22	2	10	4	19	9	1=100
Jews by religion	14	14	21	2	8	4	23	11	1
Jews of no religion	3	41	25	<1	15	3	8	4	1
Orthodox	40	16	4	7	3	1	21	7	2
Conservative	15	13	17	2	6	5	28	14	1
Reform	10	14	27	2	9	6	21	11	1
No particular branch	4	37	25	<1	17	2	10	5	1
Men	13	23	24	2	10	3	17	7	1
Women	10	20	21	2	10	4	21	11	1
Ages 18-29	12	26	27	2	9	1	18	4	1
30-49	12	20	22	2	12	5	19	7	1
50-64	12	19	20	1	11	5	21	10	1
65+	10	21	21	1	9	3	18	14	2
Married	12	19	21	2	12	4	20	8	1
Spouse Jewish	15	14	18	3	8	6	24	11	1
Spouse not Jewish	7	26	26	1	16	2	15	5	1
Not married	10	25	24	1	8	3	18	10	1
High school or less	19	28	24	1	7	2	8	9	1
Some college	13	21	17	1	9	5	20	12	2
College graduate	7	23	24	3	13	4	19	7	1
Postgraduate degree	9	15	24	1	11	4	25	9	1

Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.

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The survey asked Jews whether each of 10 attributes and activities is essential, important but *not* essential, or not important to what being Jewish means to them. The answers show that to U.S. Jews, being Jewish is about many things. Fully three-quarters (76%) say remembering the Holocaust is an essential part of what being Jewish means to them, and nearly as many (72%) say leading an ethical and moral life is essential. Majorities of U.S. Jews say working for justice and equality in society (59%) and being intellectually curious (56%) are essential to being Jewish.

Most Jews say remembering the Holocaust, leading an ethical and moral life are essential to being Jewish

% of U.S. Jews who say _____ is an essential part of what being Jewish means to them

	NET Jewish	Jews by religion	Jews of no religion
	%	%	%
Remembering the Holocaust	76	81	63
Leading an ethical and moral life	72	81	47
Working for justice and equality in society	59	63	47
Being intellectually curious	56	58	49
Continuing family traditions	51	61	24
Caring about Israel	45	52	27
Having a good sense of humor	34	36	28
Being a part of a Jewish community	33	40	12
Eating traditional Jewish foods	20	23	11
Observing Jewish law (halakha)	15	19	3

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults. "Jewish Americans in 2020"

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Half of U.S. Jews say continuing family traditions is an essential part of their Jewish identity (51%), and 45% say caring about Israel is essential. One-third or fewer mention having a sense of humor (34%), being part of a Jewish community (33%), eating traditional Jewish foods (20%) or observing Jewish law (15%) as essential aspects of their Jewish identity.

The survey also asked respondents to describe in their own words anything else that is essential to what being Jewish means to them; see [topline](#) for results.

Nine of these items (along with the final, open-ended question) were included in the 2013 survey, while the item about continuing family traditions is new. In terms of relative importance, respondents ranked the items similarly in each of the two surveys. For instance, remembering the Holocaust, leading an ethical and moral life, and working for justice and equality were the top three responses in both 2013 and 2020.²¹

While Jews by religion are more likely than Jews of no religion to consider each of the 10 attributes or activities in the 2020 survey essential to being Jewish, both groups generally rank the items in a similar order. Majorities of both Jews by religion and Jews of no religion cite remembering the Holocaust as essential, and both groups rank observing Jewish law and eating traditional foods toward the bottom of the list.

Despite these similarities, there are large gaps between the two groups on a few aspects of Jewish identity. For example, Jews by religion are far more likely than Jews of no religion to say that continuing family traditions is essential to what it means to them to be Jewish (61% vs. 24%). And Jews by religion are nearly twice as likely as Jews of no religion to say that caring about Israel is essential (52% vs. 27%).

Those with a Jewish spouse differ significantly from those without one on the importance of continuing family traditions. Among Jews with a Jewish spouse, seven-in-ten say continuing family traditions is essential to what it means to them to be Jewish, while far fewer Jews married to spouses who are not Jewish (37%) say the same.

Older Jews are more likely than younger generations to see certain things as essential to being Jewish. Compared with Jewish adults under the age of 30, larger shares of those 65 and older rank remembering the Holocaust, caring about Israel, being intellectually curious and having a good sense of humor as essential parts of their Jewish identity. However, younger Jews more likely than the eldest cohort to say that observing Jewish law is essential to being Jewish (19% vs. 12%).

What's essential to being Jewish also tends to vary according to the respondent's branch or stream of Judaism. Orthodox Jews are more likely than the non-Orthodox to say that following Jewish law and being part of a Jewish community are essential to what it means to them to be Jewish. Non-Orthodox Jews are more likely than the Orthodox to say that remembering the Holocaust, being intellectually curious and having a good sense of humor are essential.

Most Orthodox Jews say following Jewish law is essential to being Jewish

% of U.S. Jews who say _____ is an essential part of what being Jewish means to them

	Remembering the Holocaust	Leading ethical/moral life	Working for justice/equality	Being intellectually curious	Continuing family traditions	Caring about Israel	Having a good sense of humor	Being part of a Jewish community	Eating traditional Jewish foods	Observing Jewish law
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
NET Jewish	76	72	59	56	51	45	34	33	20	15
Orthodox	51	90	43	36	80	53	20	69	30	83
Conservative	88	82	67	63	73	66	37	53	29	21
Reform	79	78	64	59	52	49	34	31	21	5
No particular branch	72	53	49	51	32	28	34	12	11	5
Men	71	68	52	54	45	42	32	29	16	14
Women	81	76	65	57	57	48	35	36	23	15
Ages 18-29	61	68	57	51	51	35	27	32	22	19
30-49	72	70	53	53	54	43	29	31	22	17
50-64	83	73	60	58	56	49	33	33	19	12
65+	84	75	64	61	46	52	44	34	15	12
Married	79	74	57	56	56	46	33	35	18	16
Spouse Jewish	79	82	58	54	70	57	32	51	23	24
Spouse not Jewish	79	63	57	58	37	31	35	12	12	4
Not married	71	69	60	56	44	43	35	29	21	12
High school or less	73	75	55	48	52	53	38	42	24	30
Some college	74	73	67	64	47	45	39	32	21	17
College graduate	78	68	53	51	50	42	31	27	16	8
Postgraduate degree	78	73	61	58	56	43	30	32	19	8

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.

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Three-quarters of Jews believe in higher power of some kind, but just one-quarter believe in God as described in the Bible

Three-quarters of U.S. Jews say they believe in God or some spiritual force in the universe, including 26% who say they believe in "God as described in the Bible" and about twice as many (50%) who believe in some other spiritual force. Belief in God is much more widespread among Jews by religion than among Jews of no religion. But even among Jews by religion, 14% say they do not believe in *any* higher power or spiritual force. Meanwhile, 44% of Jews of no religion say they do not believe in any higher power.

Nine-in-ten Orthodox Jews (93%) say they believe in the God of the Bible, compared with 37% of Conservative Jews, 18% of Reform Jews and 12% of Jews with no denomination.

U.S. Christians are far more likely than U.S. Jews to say they believe in God as described in the Bible, and far less likely to say they believe in some other higher power – or no higher power at all.

American Jews derive a great deal of meaning from spending time with family and friends

The survey also included a set of questions asking respondents to rate how much meaning and fulfillment they draw from each of seven possible sources: spending time with family; spending time with friends; their religious faith; being outdoors and experiencing nature; spending time with pets or animals; their job, career or education; and arts and literature, such as music, painting and reading.

Three-quarters of U.S. Jews say they derive a great deal of meaning from spending time with their family (74%), and six-in-ten find a great deal of fulfillment in spending time with friends (61%). Arts and literature (55%), spending time outdoors (51%), spending time with pets (43%) and jobs (38%) also are common sources of meaning and fulfillment. Among Jews, religious faith is by far the least common source of meaning of all the options presented by the survey; just one-in-five U.S. Jews say they get a great deal of meaning and fulfillment from their religion.

Jews by religion are somewhat more likely than Jews of no religion to say they draw a great deal of meaning from their families and from their faith, although even among Jews by religion, only a quarter say their religious faith carries a great deal of meaning.

There are also differences in where Jews find meaning based on their denominational affiliation. Nearly nine-in-ten Orthodox Jews say they find spending time with family very meaningful (86%), compared with three-quarters of Conservative and Reform Jews. And three-quarters of the Orthodox find a great deal of meaning in their religious faith, versus 32% of Conservative and just 13% of Reform Jews. Conversely, non-Orthodox Jews are far

Overwhelming majority of Orthodox believe in God of the Bible; most Conservative and Reform do not

% of U.S. Jews who ...

	Believe in God of the Bible	Believe in other higher power/spiritual force	Don't believe in either	Unclear
	%	%	%	%
NET Jewish	26	50	22	2=100
Jews by religion	33	51	14	3
Jews of no religion	7	48	44	1
Orthodox	93	6	1	<1
Conservative	37	50	9	3
Reform	18	59	21	2
No particular branch	12	52	35	1
Men	24	45	29	2
Women	27	56	14	2
Ages 18-29	27	49	23	1
30-49	25	51	23	1
50-64	29	54	15	2
65+	23	49	24	4
Married	26	50	22	1
Not married	24	51	21	3
High school or less	44	35	18	2
Some college	31	48	19	1
College graduate	17	58	23	2
Postgraduate degree	18	55	24	3
U.S. adults	56	33	10	<1
Christian	80	18	1	<1
Protestant	84	14	1	<1
White evangelical	94	5	<1	0
White, not evangelical	70	27	3	<1
Black Protestant	88	12	<1	<1
Catholic	71	27	2	1
Unaffiliated	18	54	27	1

Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding. "Believe in other higher power/spiritual force" included a small number of respondents who did not specify whether they believe in God of the Bible or some other higher power. "Unclear" includes those who did not answer the question as well as those who do not believe in God but declined to say whether they believe in a higher power.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. Jews, and Jan. 25-Feb. 8, 2020, among U.S. adults overall.

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more likely than the Orthodox to find meaning in arts and literature as well as pets or animals.

Jewish Americans are less likely than U.S. adults as a whole to find a great deal of meaning in their religious faith (20% vs. 40%).

One-in-five U.S. Jews say their religious faith is highly meaningful, fulfilling

% of U.S. Jews who say _____ provides them with a great deal of meaning and fulfillment

	Spending time with family	Spending time with friends	Arts and literature	Being outdoors	Spending time with pets	Your job, career or education	Your religious faith
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
NET Jewish	74	61	55	51	43	38	20
Jews by religion	77	62	53	49	41	39	26
Jews of no religion	64	59	60	55	48	34	3
Orthodox	86	53	30	41	9	39	75
Conservative	75	56	48	47	37	38	32
Reform	75	65	58	50	46	34	13
No particular branch	67	60	62	54	49	40	5
Men	69	56	47	47	39	37	16
Women	79	66	63	55	46	39	24
Ages 18-29	62	67	57	54	52	34	22
30-49	77	61	51	57	41	44	20
50-64	78	63	63	58	50	47	19
65+	75	56	55	38	34	29	20
Married	81	61	54	54	39	41	22
Spouse Jewish	85	61	50	49	31	39	34
Spouse not Jewish	76	61	60	61	50	44	5
Not married	62	60	57	46	48	33	16
High school or less	72	55	48	45	35	26	28
Some college	68	51	56	43	47	34	21
College graduate	74	67	56	54	45	38	16
Postgraduate degree	78	66	59	57	43	50	17
U.S. adults	74	49	42	54	43	35	40

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.
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Due to differences in how the surveys were conducted, the exact percentages of Jews who cite several of these items as essential to their Jewish identity are not directly comparable to the 2013 survey. See [Appendix B](#) for details.