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We are all Jews

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Abstract

My Sklare Award presentation focuses on the practice and outcomes of our research, discussing some of the less common research methods that we used and reviewing their discoveries. Opting for open-ended questions allows respondents to identify their religious identification in their own words. Replicating our research design repeatedly enables the exploration of societal trends, e.g., the rise of the Nones among American adults. Investing time and research capital on a longitudinal study of the bar/bat mitzvah class of 5755, tracking the development of Jewish identity from adolescence through adulthood, we addressed a critical research question: When do shifts in identity formation occur? The longitudinal design allows us to identify early signs of behavior that become apparent and consequential later. By collecting qualitative alongside quantitative data, we obtain personal stories that complement and explain the survey results. Collaborating with scholars from multiple disciplines and countries helps us understand hard and soft secularism across cultures. I highlight four main findings. First, polarization of the Jewish community upsets many of the young people we studied, with one telling us, "We are all Jews." Second, a Jewish None is not an empty vessel. Despite the erosion in religious observance that Sklare documented, Jewish peoplehood has endured and even intensified among members of the bar/bat mitzvah class in their thirties. Third, the decline in religious identification increases the rate of mixed marriage, and vice versa. Fourth, Jewish identity is fluid, and tracking its development from adolescence to adulthood allows us to better understand that complexity.

Keywords Sklare Award · Longitudinal study · Jews · Nones · Millennials · Intermarriage

What a great privilege it is to stand on the *bimah* at the annual conference of the Association for Jewish Studies in front of all my colleagues and accept the Sklare Award. Marshall Sklare's visionary work on American Jews is still a road map for

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us, the researchers. An example is connecting Jewish identity with attitudes toward the State of Israel (Sklare 1993), a topic that is dear to me, an Israeli, as I continue to explore shifts in young North Americans' ties with Israel (Keysar and Kosmin 1999; Keysar 2021).

My focus here is on the practice and outcomes of our research. I start by discussing some of the less common research methods that we used. I conclude by reviewing the discoveries that those methods enabled us to make over a span of three decades.

How did we do it?

First, by opting for open-ended questions:

"What is your religion?" The open-ended religion question was introduced in NJPS [National Jewish Population Survey] 1990. In NJPS 2000-01, AJIS [American Jewish Identity Survey] 2001, and the ARIS [American Religious Identification Survey] series in 2001 and 2008, we modified the question to "What is your religion, if any?" Respondents were not offered a list of options. They had to identify themselves in their own words. This approach resulted in the discovery of new subjective vocabularies and tendencies of self-identification. Try it with your family members or friends; you will be surprised by the answers. Self-identification is an expensive and time-consuming instrument, rarely used on a large scale—certainly not with over 100,000 respondents as in 1990 or with over 50,000 respondents as in 2001 and 2008. However, this helped us document over 100 religious self-identifications, including small ones such as Santeria and Paganism (Kosmin and Keysar 2006). We found an increase in self-identification in the generic "Christian" category along with a sharp decrease in the "Protestant" one. Further, between 1990 and 2001 we discovered the rise in choices such as "nothing," "no religion," "atheist," "agnostic" and "secular." We grouped them together as the religious "Nones."

Second, by replicating our research design repeatedly:

NJPS 1990, AJIS /ARIS 2001, and ARIS 2008 followed the same research design, a choice that enabled the exploration of societal trends, e.g., the rise of the Nones among American adults (Kosmin and Keysar 2006; 2009).

True, there are trade-offs. The reason researchers don't always stick to a methodology is that the questions and methods start to become out of date. We faced that problem. In 2001, as noted above, we changed our question, "What is your religion?" to add the clause "if any."[1] Also, in surveys since ARIS 2008 we have moved to the use of online methods.

Third, by investing time and research capital in a longitudinal study:

The longitudinal study of Americans and Canadians raised in Conservative synagogues, which began in 1995 and has been conducted by Barry Kosmin and me, in collaboration with colleagues at JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary], employed a mixed-methods design, tracking the development of Jewish identity by conducting both surveys and in-depth conversations with early millennials, born in 1981 (Keysar and Kosmin 2019). Our mixed methodological design

[1] A subsequent validity check based on cross-samples of 3,000 respondents in 2002 found no statistical differences between the patterns of responses according to the two question wordings (Kosmin and Keysar 2006).

was praised by Dr. Mark Schulman in his presidential address at the 2003 annual meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (Keysar and Kosmin 2004).

As part of an extensive study of the Conservative movement, sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts, over 1400 Americans and Canadians aged 13–14, who celebrated their bar/bat mitzvah in 1994–1995, were interviewed in what became the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah Survey, 1995* (Wertheimer 1996; Kosmin 2000). Their parents were interviewed separately. The young subjects were re-interviewed as part of The High School Survey, 1999 (Kosmin and Keysar 2000; Keysar and Kosmin 2001), and again during college as part of The College Years, 2003 (Keysar and Kosmin 2004; Keysar and Kosmin 2005). Most recently in 2018, at age 37–38, in the fourth phase of the study an online survey replaced the telephone one, and members of the class were re-interviewed as part of The 20+ Up study (Keysar and Kosmin 2019; Keysar and Kress 2021).

By repeating survey questions to the same individuals in different stages of their life cycles, we can make comparisons over time and create what Barry likes to call a movie, not only a snapshot.

The trove of Jewish family histories generated by tracking a cohort over two decades is unprecedented in Jewish studies. One of the developmental psychology research questions we are able to address is: When do shifts in identity formation occur? The longitudinal design allows us to identify early signs of behavior that become apparent and consequential in later waves. For example, we found that young Conservative Jews who became less observant as adolescents were more likely to become Jewish Nones in adulthood, corroborating the psychologist of religion Beit-Hallahmi's theory (2015).

Fourth, by collecting qualitative alongside quantitative data:

The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) states: "Unidimensional approaches are often insufficient. Mixed methodological research designs facilitate expanded scientific inquiry and broaden understanding of problems that extend beyond what is possible from a strictly quantitative or qualitative approach."[2] I agree.

In our integrated design, the quantitative and qualitative components complement each other. The survey data unveil topics of interest, of tension, and even of harmonization (i.e., lack of gender differences in an egalitarian religious upbringing, see Keysar and Kosmin 1997), while the in-depth conversations provide personal narratives and authentic voices of young people, which explain patterns found on the group level.

For the qualitative data, we were innovative. Online chats are common means of communication today, but in 2003, named online bulletin boards, they were new research tools (Downes-Le Guin, et al. 2002). Our moderated chat rooms extended over a week. In The College Years Project, the third phase of the longitudinal study, each day (excluding Shabbat) was devoted to a specific topic: the family; dating/relationships; religious life on campus; Jewish identity; anti-Semitism; and the future. These conversations produced a wealth of personal stories spanning 162 pages of transcripts.

[2] https://portal.aapor.org/integratedEvents/home/WEB1221

We had been discouraged from using chat rooms instead of traditional focus group sessions. But it was relatively inexpensive and allowed us to recruit participants who completed the telephone survey and were spread all over the globe. Students studying abroad logged on from the Netherlands, Australia, and the United Kingdom, joining their American and Canadian counterparts. Our method was also well suited to including students who studied in colleges in North America with just a few Jews on campus.

To our surprise, within seconds of our posting the first set of questions, students began to answer. They wanted their voices to be heard. While male students hardly spoke up in the in-person focus groups we conducted on several campuses, the males who participated online were very expressive and detail-oriented.

In 2019 we again conducted week-long online discussions, this time with four groups of participants of the online survey: with mothers, fathers, intermarried, and with singles.

The in-depth conversations with participants were rich and revealing—helping us better understand the meaning behind the surveys' results. But they were not only beneficial for the researcher(s) who asked the questions; the participants who answered them apparently gained as well. Here is what one said in 2019:

> *The conversations have made me realize that there are so many different ways to identify as Jewish.*

For others, the conversations became a vehicle for a Jewish soul searching:

> *I think the conversations have been helpful in that they have made me face and consider the path I am on right now and where I'd like to steer it. The questions give me pause and offer an opportunity to be more intentional about what I am doing with my life and how [I] can be weaving in Judaism.*

Someone else shared a similar thought:

> *This has made me think a lot about what I thought I would be doing at this stage of life (but am not) with respect to Judaism.*

At the end of the week, after discussing their religious/spiritual engagements and the holidays, and for the single group, their living arrangement, relationships, and the future, respondents were asked to reflect on how the conversations benefited them. They read other participants' answers, engaged with them, and compared their differences and similarities. It was reassuring to them that they were not alone:

> *This conversation has benefited me in that it's nice to know many of the challenges I have faced are not unique to me, and perhaps part of the zeitgeist of our generation. Solidarity!*

Fifth, by looking for general patterns:

Studying Jews is not done in isolation. Ours began with research on religion in general, on the characteristics of no religion, and on measuring religiosity and secularity (as measured by the three B's of belief, belonging, and behavior) (Keysar 2014). In the early 2000s, our proposition that there were cultural Catholics

did not resonate as well as the notion of cultural Jews. Now multiple scholars are studying the phenomenon of cultural Catholicism (Pew 2015).

Sixth and last, by collaborating:

In the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College, founded with support from the Posen Foundation, we, the sociologist and the demographer, collaborated with scholars from multiple disciplines: psychology, economics, history, political science, religion, education, public policy, and even various natural sciences. This is the kind of collaboration suggested by Michelle Shain in her response to the Sklare Award Lecture in 2012 (Shain 2014).

I like to say that things that you see from there you don't see from here. A Brit and an Israeli, Barry and I are foreigners. Growing up in Jewish communities outside the U.S., we adopted an international comparative approach to our mode of inquiry. As outsiders we were not afraid to break boundaries—we had already crossed international borders. And "breaking traditional boundaries" became one of our research topics. The Nones and the intermarried break societal norms in the U.S. and elsewhere. We brought together international colleagues, from as close as Canada and as far as India—all enriching each other. We found differences between the soft secularism of the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Israel and the hard secularism of China and the former U.S.S.R. (Kosmin 2007). In India we found that secularism is perceived not as negation of religion but as tolerance for various religions and philosophies (Keysar and Kosmin 2008). I was also the principal investigator for the United States in the 13-nation cross-cultural, mixed-methods study of religious subjectivities and values, Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective (YARG), which was run out of Åbo Akademi in Finland (Nynäs et al. 2021).

So, what did these methods enable us to discover? In a nutshell:

ALEF: "*We are all Jews*," the title of my presentation, is a phrase expressed by "Sol" (not his real name), a college student in the online chat room in 2003. Asked if he had ever considered being an Orthodox/a Reform Jew and why or why not, Sol answered:

> *I have never at any moment in my life considered being an Orthodox Jew. I do not believe in god, I am not a spiritual person, I like to eat what I want, I have other priorities in my life then [than] spiritual practice, and I would not want to wear a thick black suit in the summer. Reform and reconstructionism appeal to me most out of any brands of Jewish Religious practice.*

This opinion was a harbinger of the path taken by others of Sol's cohort, namely distancing themselves from the Conservative Judaism of their upbringing and rejecting mainstream Jewish denominations.

But Sol had more on his mind. He went on to say:

> *I do not like how all these different brands of Judaism divide us as a people. We are all Jews.*

We might never have picked up on this sentiment, which others also expressed, if we had not given the panel members the opportunity to speak for themselves.

Indeed, we are all Jews. However, the polarization in Jewish society contradicts Sol's enlightened outlook. The Pew 2020 survey of American Jews revealed that compared with their parents' and grandparents' generation, young Jews are more polarized religiously. Larger shares of them belong to both the most religious, the Orthodox (17% among ages 18–29 compared with 3% among 65+), and the most secular, the Jewish Nones, who do not identify with any Jewish denomination (41% among ages 18–29 compared with 22% among 65+).

Religious polarization has many consequences. Being at one pole or the other correlates strongly with one's behavior, worldviews and politics. For 83% of Orthodox Jews an essential part of being Jewish means "observing Jewish law," yet that was essential for only 5% of Jews with no particular branch. Seventy-five percent of Orthodox identify as Republicans while 75% of Jews of other branches or of no branch identify as Democrats (Pew 2020). The Middle East conflict and support for Israel have become wedge issues tearing apart many Jewish communities and leading to societal alienation.

Pinker (2021) projects that by 2063 the Orthodox, Conservative/Reform, and No-Jewish denomination will have roughly equal numbers. That will further change the character and dynamics of American Jewry.

We don't have to wait 40 years. Already in 2020 Pew showed societal alienation: just 9% of Reform Jews say they have "a lot" in common with Orthodox Jews and just 9% of Orthodox feel they have "a lot" in common with Reform Jews (Pew 2020).

Jewish peoplehood has been considered a bedrock for all Jews regardless of the level of their religiosity. Orthodox Jews are the most likely to say that "being a part of a Jewish community" is essential to being Jewish (69%), and to feel a "great deal" of responsibility to help Jews in need around the world (80%). For Conservatives the percentages are 53% and 42%, respectively. But given the alienation between branches of Judaism, it is not clear that when these more religious Jews express a sense of peoplehood, they have the entire Jewish community in mind. As for less religious Jews, only 31% of Reform and 12% of Jews of no particular branch say "being a part of a Jewish community" is essential to being Jewish, and only 23% of Reform and 14% of Jews of no particular branch feel a great deal of responsibility to help Jews in need around the world.

BET: A Jewish None is not an empty vessel. Jewish millennials whom we classify as Nones are telling us, some explicitly, others only implicitly, "I'm not nothing." One thirtysomething, when asked in the survey in 2018 about her Jewish denomination, chose not to name any of the commonly recognized denominations, rather under the "other, specify" option wrote in detail: *Secular Judaism without daily rituals but with very strong faith*. She made *aliyah* and lives in Israel now. Her message to us was clear; not belonging to any of the established denominations has not diminished her Jewishness.

About one-third of participating members from her cohort, all of whom were raised in Conservative synagogues, do not identify with any Jewish denomination, similar to three in ten US adults who are religiously unaffiliated (Pew 2021). As one of the bar/bat mitzvah classmates had already told us in college: *I believe each Jew is entitled to create their own eclectic brand of Judaism, with tenants*

[tenets] derived from all the various factions. Freedom of choice and expression are paramount values and ways of life for this generation.

Jewish life outside the synagogue is vibrant—packed with cultural activities, art, music, media, theater, film, and comedy (Kosmin and Keysar 2013). For our self-defined culturally Jewish millennials, one fun activity is cooking Jewish food with their kids passing the Jewish tradition in their own particular way by picking and choosing to share the experiences they fondly remember with their children. In the words of one father who does not care about eating matzah during Passover, yet considered making charoset with his children:

> *I like celebrating cultural Judaism, cooking the foods I grew up with for my family, … It does sound fun to make charoset for the boys though, they'd enjoy the experience of cooking with me.*

Or a single woman who likes hosting the Jewish holidays at her home, yet in a secular environment:

> *I have a crew of secular Jewish friends and we do like to do holidays together sometimes, but our spiritual engagement isn't necessarily tied to Judaism.*

For her the High Holidays involve meditation, women's circles, and pagan rituals tied to the cycle and holidays, as she explains diving *deep into spirituality from a very secular perspective*.

GIMEL: No-religion is linked to mixed-religion—each phenomenon feeds the other. Open social boundaries and diminishing levels of religiosity encourage tolerance and mixed religious dating and marriages (Lehrer 1998; Chaves 2011; Sherkat 2014). At the same time, intermarried partners often minimize religious practices to avoid conflict (Voas and Doebler 2011; Bengtson 2013; Keysar 2016).

Religious intermarriage is among the strong predictors of switching religious identification, as people search for compatibility in mate selection (Keysar et al. 2000). With porous religious boundaries in American society, intermarriage rates are on the rise. While only 19% of all Americans who wed before 1960 married out, 39% who wed during 2010–2014 married out (Pew 2014). Religious groups that have low rates of intermarriage also have the lowest rates of switching (Sherkat 2014). In religious switching, the "Nones" make big gains, while Catholics and Mainline Protestants have experienced big losses (ARIS 2008; Pew 2019).

In the case of the Jewish population, the two phenomena are even more spectacular. First, the growing secularity among Jews, as the share of Jewish Nones rose from about 20% in 1990 to 37% in 2008 (Kosmin and Keysar, 2013). And Jewish millennials have the highest share of Nones (32%) compared with 19% of Jewish boomers and 7% of the cohort born in 1914–1927 (Pew, 2013).

The rise in the Jewish Nones is linked to intermarriage as only 28% of children in mixed-religion families are raised as Jews by religion. And married Jews of no religion are also far more likely to have a non-Jewish spouse (79%) compared with Jews by religion (32%) (Pew, 2020). Thus, they are contributing further to religious mixing and religious switching.

Raising children with no religion is a way of overcoming the December Dilemma, the agony of choosing between celebrating Hanukkah or Christmas (Phillips 1997). It may be viewed as a way to avoid offending grandparents of both religions.

The longitudinal study brings to light stories of mothers who pressured their children to "only marry a Jew." College students resist such pressure. For some young men the pressure "to find a nice Jewish girl to marry" is what they dislike about being Jewish. Almost all (95%) of our cohort was raised by two Jewish parents. However, the prevalence of intermarriage, around 40% of married respondents, is a major feature of this cohort. The study also sheds light on who is most likely to intermarry. I found that dating patterns in college are a strong predictor even after controlling for Jewish upbringing, education, and engagement.

DALET: Jewish identity is fluid and tracking its development from adolescence to adulthood allows us to better understand that complexity.

Both in high school and in college, we asked our Jewish millennials if they could ever be Orthodox, and if they could ever be Reform. The proportion of students who strongly agreed that they could never be Orthodox rose from 41% in high school to 52% in college. At the same time, the attraction of Reform Judaism rose slightly from high school to the college years.

What about the commitment to Conservative Judaism? Sol, for example, told us in college: *Just because I attend a conservative synagogue, does not mean that I am a conservative Jew*. A decade and a half later at age 37, he self-identifies as culturally Jewish.

Indeed, the longitudinal study allows us to look both at the group level and at the individual level. The small number of participating members from the bar/bat mitzvah class of 5755 who self-identify as Orthodox Jews at age 37–38 had previously expressed wishes to become more religious and they have accomplished it. Others who said in college that they could imagine being Orthodox Jews did not become Orthodox but tended to be more religious than their bar/bat mitzvah classmates and retained the Conservative Jewish identity.

What about those who seemed open to become Reform Jews during college; have they done so? Millennials open to the more liberal branch of Judaism in college became either Reform or cultural Jews or identify with no Jewish denomination at age 37–38. Currently they are by far less likely to identify with Conservative Judaism and almost none with Orthodoxy.

In conclusion, Sklare's prophecy of the crisis of confidence in Conservative Judaism and the Conservative movement is borne out in the bar/bat mitzvah class of 5755. All were raised in Conservative synagogues in the 1980s and 1990s yet less than half (44%) continued to self-identify as Conservative Jews in 2018 at age 37–38. Sklare worried that the problem of retention of young Jews was "a particularly knotty one to Conservatism, with its stress on cultural reconciliation and the blending of Jewish and general culture" (Sklare 1993: 71).

Sklare found a steady erosion of observance among Conservative Jews and concluded that the "Conservative strategy of liberalization, innovation, and beautification has been a failure" (Sklare 1993: 67). He was correct. Because so many young people have left the Conservative movement, Conservative Jews are older than Jews who identify with other streams (Pew 2020). The erosion of observance has not

spared the Jewish millennials we studied. Frequent synagogue attendance (once a week or once a month) has declined steadily, from 71% the year after their bar or bat mitzvah to 45% in high school to 31% in college to 19% in their thirties (Keysar and Kosmin 2019).

What might have surprised Sklare is the strong sense of Jewish peoplehood that remains even among non-observant Jews. Fifty-two percent of our bar/bat mitzvah study participants agreed strongly with the statement "I feel connected to the Jewish people" at age 37–38 compared with 39% during college. The value of helping fellow Jews around the world has endured as well. The share of those who agreed strongly with the statement "I feel a responsibility to help Jews around the world" increased from 26% during college to 35% at age 37–38 (Keysar and Kosmin 2019). As one 38-year-old participant from the bar/bat mitzvah class, a single who is an active synagogue member, says:

> *For me the key aspect of Judaism is peoplehood—not the religion. It's a shared tribal identity that comes with a culture that generally encourages questioning, free thinking, and has a strong commitment to ethics.*

As noted above, Jews who express a strong sense of affinity to other Jews may not have all Jews in mind. Still, it's undeniable that our cohort overwhelmingly exhibits Jewish pride. From adolescence to adulthood 98% of participants consistently agree with the statement "I am proud to be a Jew." As a college student in 2003 said*: Being Jewish is more an ethnicity than a religion—I believe that being Jewish means being part of a people, and it provides for me a direct link to an ancestry*.

A decade and a half later, in 2018 he self-identified as culturally Jewish.

The findings I have reviewed here don't fit neatly into a narrative of Jewish renewal, but neither do they tell a story of total rejection. The motion picture is nuanced, sometimes confusing, sometimes even contradictory. For me, the researcher, it has supplied a fascinating career.

Thank you again for the Sklare Award. It is a great honor.

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