

# S3KReport



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## How Spiritual Are America's Jews?

### Narrowing the Spirituality Gap Between Jews and Other Americans

American spirituality has attracted both popular and scholarly interest in recent years. Since the 1990s, especially, a mounting social scientific literature has investigated all manner of things spiritual: spiritual growth, spiritual practice, spiritual literature, the spiritual marketplace and more.

Sociologist of religion Wade Clark Roof attempts to define the term, even as he notes its ambiguity:

*Spirit and spiritual remain difficult to grasp. ... Spirituality ... may ... include religion in the sense of tradition, yet for many it is not bound by doctrinal, creedal, or ecclesiastical categories. ... [That said] spirituality encompasses ... four ... themes: a source of values and meaning beyond oneself, a way of understanding, inner awareness, and personal integration. (1999: 34, 35)*

As Roof's definition implies, consensus about the meaning of spirituality is elusive. Its various definitions include (among other things) some mixture of reflectivity, transcendence, ultimacy, inwardness, sacredness, God, religiosity, meaningfulness, and more.

Roof is also clear that spirituality and religiosity are far from identical. The refrain, "I'm spiritual, but not religious," is heard frequently. Similarly, among Jews especially, it is commonplace to hear, "I am religious, but I do not even know what spirituality means." As Jewish historian Jack Wertheimer of JTS puts it,

*I have a lot of trouble with the term, "spirituality," because I'm not sure what it really means. It can mean everything from a very personal connection to nature, or to God, that's divorced from any kind of organized religion. Some people, I would say, are looking for spirituality at independent minyanim.*

Observers, therefore, distinguish "spiritual" from "religious." While the two terms may overlap, the claim to being spiritual need not assume belief in religious doctrines or affiliation with institutionalized religion. To be spiritual is not necessarily to be religious, and to be religious need not include being spiritual.

Is there even such a thing as distinctively *Jewish spirituality*? Some say there is such a phenomenon (Hoffman, 2002). Others, such as Rabbi Rachel Cowan, Director of the Jewish Spirituality Institute, define spirituality as a more general phenomenon that is available to Jews as well as everyone else.

#### S3K Report

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## About the Authors

**Professor Steven M. Cohen**, a sociologist of American Jewry, is Research Professor of Jewish Social Policy at HUC-JIR and Director of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner. He is also the Director of Research for Synagogue 3000. In 1992, he made aliyah and taught for 14 years at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Previously, he taught at Queens College, with visiting appointments at Yale, Brandeis, and JTS. With Arnold Eisen, he wrote *The Jew Within*, and with Charles Liebman he wrote *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and American Experiences*. Cohen's earlier books include *American Modernity & Jewish Identity* and *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?* With Isa Aron, Lawrence A. Hoffman, and Ari Y. Kelman, he is a co-author of the forthcoming book, *Sacred Strategies: Becoming a Visionary Congregation*. His current research interests focus on the patterns of Jewish engagement among American Jews under the age of 40.

**Dr. Lawrence A. Hoffman** was ordained as a rabbi in 1969, received his Ph.D. in 1973, and has taught since then at the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. From 1984 to 1987, he directed its School of Sacred Music as well. In 1994, he co-founded "Synagogue 2000" (now Synagogue 3000). In 2003, he was named the first Barbara and Stephen Friedman Professor of Liturgy, Worship and Ritual. Rabbi Hoffman has written or edited 33 books, including *My People's Prayer Book* (Jewish Lights Publishing), a ten-volume edition of the Siddur with modern commentaries, which was named a National Jewish Book Award winner for 2007. A follow-up, *My Peoples Passover Haggadah*, appeared in February 2008. His most recent book is *Rethinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life* (2007).

*Among whom have I seen spirituality? There's certainly a group of people who are doing meditation, yoga, and for them it's a spiritual practice. I think for a lot of people, it's a spiritual connection they feel to the environment. And a lot of people are really into belonging to minyanim. And do they say that's spiritual? I don't know. For me, a spiritual practice connects me with a sense of deeper meaning in my life, connects me with God. Above all, it connects me to something transcendent, something that stands for a set of values and ethics. Spirituality helps me see that I'm not the whole story here, that I'm just part of something much bigger.*

To be clear, we will label the Jewish access of this universal phenomenon *spirituality among Jews*, thereby retaining the possibility of other forms of spirituality that are innately Jewish. Jews search for spirituality in a wide range of ways and places, only some of which are particularly or particularistically "Jewish" in approach.

Whatever "spirituality" is, many learned observers and religious leaders believe that Americans have more of it than they had twenty or thirty years ago. And insofar as what characterizes the larger society often characterizes the Jews within it, students of American Jewry claim, or at least suspect, that Jews too have become more open to the spiritual.

Some, like Cowan, believe they see a growth in spirituality among American Jews in general and younger adult Jews in particular. Others, like Wertheimer, are dubious about both. Wertheimer, in fact, suggests that insofar as the phenomenon may be manifest in the interest in Jewish "healing," it is more prominent among older than younger Jews: "Some people are into healing; but we're talking about middle-aged if not older people who are into this business."

Interest in "healing" (broadly conceived as "wholeness," not just absence of illness) is indeed at least one manifestation of spirituality that is clearly identifiable as a major current among Jews by the 1990s, by which time "healing services" had become commonplace. But healing services are but one component in a larger "Jewish healing" movement whose fecundity has produced over 6 million entries on Google (November 17, 2008). A handful of Jewish healing centers now dot the country. Additionally, the Jewish Healing Foundation, an online training institute, grants a certificate in Jewish healing.

We have already referred to the Institute for Jewish Spirituality which, by measures of support, personnel, program, and reputation, seems to have met with widespread success in recent years. Jews are also thought to comprise an over-represented segment of Buddhists in America (hence, the appellation "Jew-Bu"), and to participate heavily in yoga, meditation and other movements associated in the public mind with spirituality or its nearby conceptual terrain.

The rise of the Kabbalah movement presents one more sign of ferment in the world of spirituality, in this case, distinctively *Jewish spirituality* as opposed to *spirituality among Jews*. Quite strikingly, some have managed (in effect) to take Kabbalah public, enticing non-Jews as well – most notably, perhaps, celebrities like Madonna. The Kabbalah Center boasts at least ten local operations from Florida to Washington State, and California to Massachusetts – and not just in major metropolitan centers, but in smaller places like Tyler, Texas and Evansville, Indiana too.

Despite all that has been said above, basic questions still remain about the character, scope, breadth, and the demographic profile of Jewish spirituality. In particular:

- 1) To what extent, indeed, may Jews be seen as spiritual?
- 2) Are they more or less spiritual, on average, than non-Jews?
- 3) Are younger Jews more spiritual than older Jews (a possible consequence of cohort-driven increases in Jewish spirituality over the years)?
- 4) Are we discussing Jewish spirituality, spirituality among Jews, or both?
- 5) What do the answers to questions 1-4 imply for synagogues?

Not all of these questions can be answered with equal certainty, but to the extent that they can, they speak to contemporary concerns of rabbis, educators, lay leaders, parents, and policy-makers of all sorts. In an era where ties to Jewish life and Judaism attenuate, particularly among the young, does spirituality hold out hope for Jewish re-engagement?

## A National Survey of Jews and Others

In September 2008, we addressed these questions with two nearly simultaneous surveys of the American population, one of Jews, and the other of non-Jews. We drew our samples from Synovate, Inc., a research company which provides a data-base of 1.3 million members who agree to participate in occasional surveys by invitation. Prospective respondents complete member registration forms that provide key demographic information about such things as household composition, income, age, employment status, and so on. This database is updated periodically.

Respondents are classified as “Jewish” if they choose “Jewish” as their response to the following request: “Please mark whether you are (or your spouse is): Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Other/None. Notably, “Jewish” appears as one of several *religious* categories implying that the initial recruitment and screening procedure fails to elicit Jews whose religion is “none” (about 20% of American Jewry, according to other surveys – see discussion below).

By way of a combined mail-back and web-based approach to this panel, we surveyed Jews, as defined above, as well as a General Population sample, which was comprised of only a small number (about 2%) of Jews. Using both samples, we received completed surveys from 1596 Jewish, and 1520 non-Jewish respondents.<sup>1</sup> The

General Population sample was weighted so as to conform to US Census findings with respect to age, household size, region, education, and income. Comparisons with non-Jews are limited to those whose race is white (that is, we excluded African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics so as to maximize conceptual comparability).<sup>2</sup>

From the outset, we were faced with a dilemma as to who we want to study, and as noted, we excluded some 20% of Jews who do not claim Judaism as their religion. We were comfortable doing so, on the basis of previous research into the character of these “no-religion” Jews (those who identify as Jews but list their religion as “none”). While a few are ardent Jewish secularists or adherents of Eastern religions, most are fairly unengaged with being Jewish. They tend to be 1. the offspring of mixed married households or married to non-Jews but uninterested in Jewish engagement; or 2. younger adults who as yet have no children and affiliate with no synagogue. Insofar as we want to know the situation among all Jews, including this relatively unengaged sector, our sample probably yields slightly inflated estimates of levels of spirituality. Insofar as we want to focus on synagogue policy, however, the sample limited to “Jews by religion” is apt.

## The Challenge of Measuring Spirituality

The inherent ambiguity in the notion of spirituality presents an analytic challenge. If we lack agreement as to its conceptual and definitional boundaries, how can we measure it?

To contend with this challenge, our survey cast a wide conceptual net, asking numerous questions on such things as spiritual commitment, contact with clergy, God, prayer, and spiritual experiences. Using a factor analysis to determine how variables cluster, we constructed several indices measuring aspects of religiosity and spirituality. (See the questionnaire at our website, [www.synagogue3000.org](http://www.synagogue3000.org), for wording of questions and frequency distributions.)

1) The *Spiritual Inclination Scale* consists of responses as to whether the respondent had a spiritual experience in the last year; the level of commitment to spirituality in one’s life; the amount of time devoted to spiritual life; the importance of growing spiritually; interest in spiritual exploration; desire to learn about sacred texts; and feeling it is essential that one’s clergy talk about spiritual needs.

2) The *Spiritual Mentorship Scale* derived from two questions about speaking with a clergy person and a non-clergy

person about spiritual concerns.

3) The *Involvement with God Scale* tested two things: *belief in God*; and *engagement with God*. For the first, we have a direct question about belief in God and another regarding certainty about that belief. For the second, we inquired about spending time trying to image what God is like; seeing God as important to one's religious or spiritual life; and feeling it essential for one's clergy person to speak about God.

4) The *Religion and Prayer Scale* derived from the following items: affirming that religion is important in one's life; commitment to religious faith; frequency of religious service attendance; daily prayer outside of services; level of active involvement in a congregation; reading religious literature; seeing regular prayer as important to one's religious or spiritual life; and seeing conversations with a clergy person as important to one's religious or spiritual life.

5) Finally, a *Spiritual Experience Scale* counted spiritual experiences that respondents rated as very important: relating to God; meditation; conversations with friends; music; nature; group celebrations of holidays; group worship; volunteering; group study; talking with a clergy person; and relating to Israel. The scale includes items of *Jewish spirituality* (holiday celebration, worship, study of Jewish texts, Israel); and *spirituality among Jews* (spirituality through friends, nature, volunteering, meditation, and music).

We considered the first index (the Spiritual Inclination Scale) particularly important for this analysis because it measured potential openness to spirituality in the future.

### **Preliminary Concern: Language or Belief**

Before looking at the findings, we need to address the question of how to interpret them. As our initial quotation by Jack Wertheimer indicates, many Jews are uncomfortable with spirituality. But is it *spirituality* or the *language of spirituality* that they suspect? That issue has come home to us in other areas where the accepted language of discussion sounds Christian: theology, for example. Although today it is commonplace to discuss Jewish theology, a generation ago, it was not. If surveyed on whether they had a theology (or what that theology was) most Jews would probably have answered negatively. Though they probably had views about God, they hesitated to use conventional language to express them, and, having no other language, could not express them at all.

Since we do not fully know what we cannot say, they may not even fully have known what they believed, even if they believed it.

The issue is joined today about specific theological ideas, for example, the love of God and the related concept of "grace." Grace is generally defined as divine love freely offered, even though unearned. It is taken directly from the lexicon of Christian spirituality. Only lately has it become somewhat "normal" for Jews to hear "love of God" mentioned from the pulpit, used in study groups, or discussed by their rabbis. Grace, however, still sounds distinctly foreign to Jews. If asked if they believe in grace, they are likely to answer in the negative or even to dismiss the question as meaningless. Yet some Jewish theologians are beginning to apply the word "grace" to God's revelation of Torah. Presumably, as usage spreads (the way it did with "theology"), Jews may eventually be comfortable explaining Torah as a sign of grace.

The parallel case regarding spirituality arises in focus-group experiments where people are asked if they have had spiritual experiences, and then, if the answer is "Yes," to describe them. Christians customarily answer positively and mention as examples such things as holding the hand of a dying father, climbing a mountain, and hearing great music. Jews answer "Yes" far less frequently. But if asked whether they have had "profound experiences, the impact of which remains with them," they change their answer to "Yes," and then identify precisely the same sort of things that Christians name as spiritual. Jews add their own specifically Jewish experiences too: seeing Jerusalem; experiencing Jewish community; and visiting remnants of Jewish communities in Europe. Regardless of what term Jews use, the parallel with what Christians name as "spiritual" suggests that the same universal experiences named by Jews can be considered *spirituality among Jews*; the specifically Jewish instances would be *Jewish spirituality*.

So in what follows, when people score low on issues of spirituality, it may be that they really lack the language to describe the experience more than they lack the experience itself. To be sure, some of our questions escape this issue of linguistic familiarity – when we ask questions in secular language (like, "Have you read religious or inspirational literature in the last twelve months?"), we can take the response at face value. But what are respondents denying when they answer "No" to "Have you had a significant spiritual experience in the last twelve months?" or "Do you consider it very important to grow in your spiritual life?" As we will see, whatever our scale means, Jews score lower than Christians on it. We just do not know whether

their lower score indicates: 1. that whatever spirituality is, Jews who have experienced it find it less important; 2. That it is equally important for Jews as for Christians, but Jews do not associate it with the language in which we couch our questions; or 3. That without a language to talk about it, the very experience of it is so fleeting that it is lost to retrospective consciousness.

Much depends on this question. If, for example, Jews are genuinely uninterested in spirituality, rabbis might (as a matter of policy) decide not to teach it because it seems “unJewish,” or because they prefer addressing other concerns that their congregants actually say they have. If, however, people question the language more than what the language denotes, rabbis would likely decide to address spirituality a good deal, if only to inculcate a language for people who actually are spiritual, so that they can then name what they experience or seek, and, thereby, heighten the significance of it.

It is important to note that we chose a great number of survey questions which had been asked previously of non-Jewish respondents in other studies, so as to facilitate comparisons between Jews and non-Jews. All the more, then, are we faced with the problem of using language that is commonplace for Christians, but not for Jews.

Bearing this proviso in mind, we can move on to the analysis of our five scales.

## Jews Less Spiritually Inclined

**On all items measuring Spiritual Inclination, non-Jews surpass Jews ~ especially with respect to the question of whether it is important to grow in your spiritual life.**

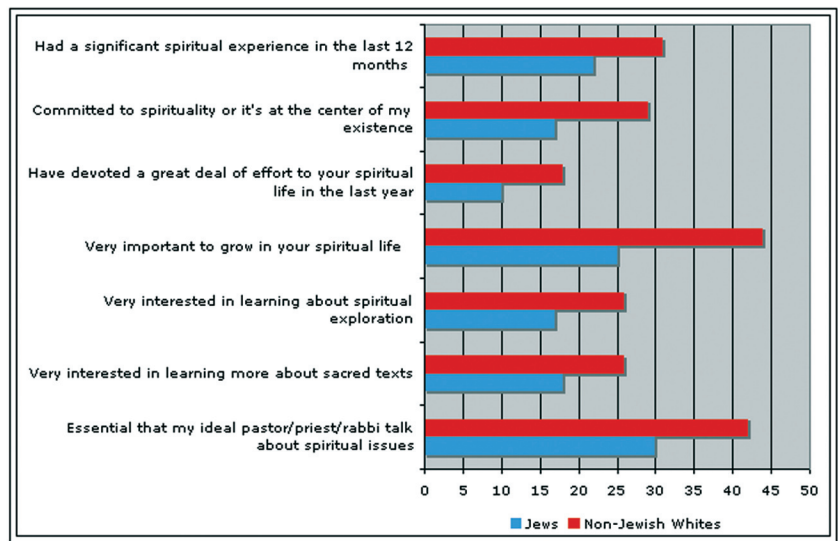
We find especially noteworthy the response to the question about the significance of learning more about sacred texts. Unlike some other activities in our list of things “spiritual,” text study is clearly a familiar Jewish pastime. Even people with a low regard for spirituality ~ because (for example), they think, as Wertheimer does, that it is mostly about healing ~ might still be attracted to study of Jewish texts. If anywhere, then, Jews should have scored relatively high there compared to Christians. But they do not; there too, Jews trail Christians by about the same percentages as they do in other questions asked as part of this index.

The high score for Christians on this question is not surprising given the emphasis on Bible study among Evangelicals. But still, given what most observers see as a recent surge in text study among Jews, we wonder why “learning more about sacred texts” scores lower than, for example, the affirmation that it is “very important to grow in my spiritual life”; and much lower (almost half) than feeling it is “essential for rabbis to talk about spiritual issues.”

## Jews Report Fewer Spiritual Mentors

Jews also report lower levels of Spiritual Mentorship than non-Jews do. Feeling less spiritually inclined, they are less likely to maintain a relationship with someone who may qualify as a spiritual mentor. Not that the number is high among Christians either, a finding that should cause consternation to not just Jewish, but Christians seminaries too, insofar as they think they are ordaining graduates to address spiritual needs of their congregants.

However, a forthcoming S3K report describes the small percentage of congregants going through divorce who choose to discuss their situation with the rabbi; some of the rabbis mistakenly conclude that there are few divorces in their congregations. So here, we wonder if the low score for seeking out clergy for spiritual counsel is as much an index of low rabbinic reception to such requests as it is to a disinclination to seek out rabbis to start with. That probability rises when we see that Jews (like Christians) are doubly likely to discuss such matters with non-clergy. In the spiritual inclination graph (above), we saw that 25% of all Jews think it is important to grow in their spiritual life; only half that number talk to rabbis about it.



**American Jews are less spiritually inclined than non-Jewish white Americans**

## Previous and Forthcoming Publications of the Synagogue Studies Institute

**Members and Motives: Who Joins American Jewish Congregations and Why** by Steven M. Cohen, Fall 2006

**Synagogues That Get It: How Jewish Congregations are Engaging Young Adults** by Tobin Belzer and Donald E. Miller, Spring 2007

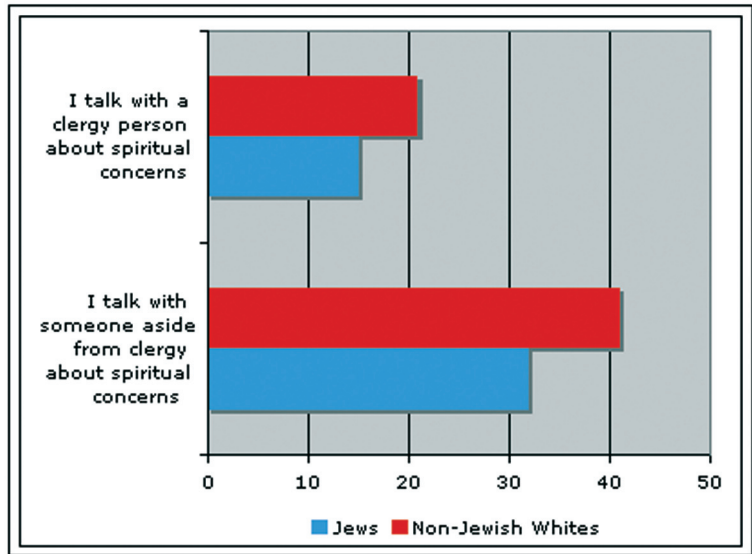
**Preliminary Findings 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study** by Steven M. Cohen, Elie Kaunfer, and Shawn Landres, Fall 2007

**Synagogues and Social Justice: Creating Sustainable Change Within and Beyond the Congregation** by Nancy T. Ammerman, Mark Chaves, and Richard L. Wood, Fall 2007

**The New Jewish Spirituality and Prayer: Take "BJ" For Instance** by Ayala Fader and Mark Kligman, Spring 2009 (projected)

**Bringing Conversations about Israel into the Life of American Congregations** written by Alex Sinclair and Esti Moskowitz-Kalman. Spring 2009 (projected)

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**Jews report fewer spiritual mentors in their lives than non-Jews**

## Jews Less Involved with God

Whether spirituality necessitates belief in God is not clear. On the one hand, many eastern forms of spirituality have little to do with a God concept. On the other hand, American religion, influenced as it is by Christianity, has always made God central. It is no surprise, therefore, to find God playing an important role for many of our informants; but again, Jews trail non-Jews.

It will be recalled that we actually tested two related matters: *belief in God*; and *engagement with God*. Though related, they are not the same thing. To measure *belief in God*, we asked if and to what extent people profess belief in God. The extent to which people *engage with God* is derived from the importance people place on thinking about, relating to, and discussing God.

The straightforward question on belief in God is the easiest to answer: since the 1950s, believing in God has been widely accepted as part of being a good American. It is relatively easy to assent to simple belief, and indeed, 81% of all respondents and 71% of Jews we spoke to did. As for the other pole, those with a “certain” belief in God, we find just 35% of Jews and 58% of other Americans.

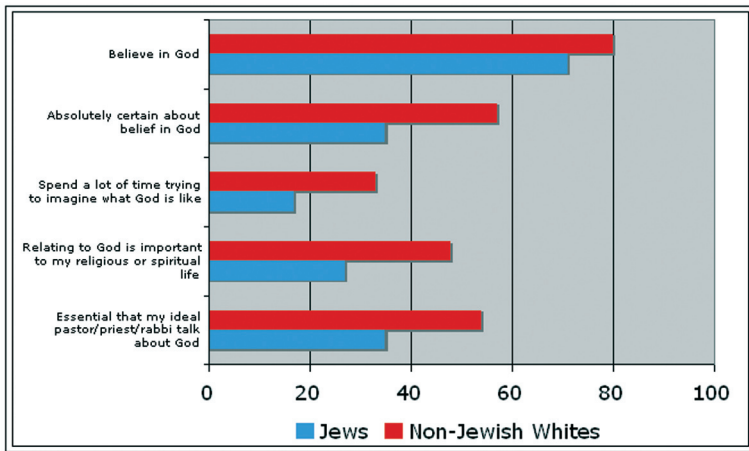
Language use is determinative here. Unlike Jews, Christians find God talk ubiquitous; as a “faith,” Christianity demands it and churches feature it. Philosophers have long drawn our attention to the interrelationship between language use and conceptual belief. Contrary to expectations, even though belief can occasion language, language can also occasion belief. That is because, to some extent, belief is less about things we think than it is about sentences we say. When sentences sound familiar, we are more apt to consider believing them; when they are not the kind of sentences we are used to hearing and, therefore, find easy to say, we are less apt to believe them. When Synagogue 3000 first began holding congregational conferences, congregants were initially shocked at the ease with which the speakers discussed God; by the end of the conference, however, they too

were making “God sentences.” Belief in God, then, is partly a function of participating in a language community where God-talk is normative.

When forced to reflect on the sentences they make about God, even Christians are less certain that they believe what they have been saying; all the more so Jews, for whom the language is alien. Beyond a relatively automatic assent that Americans offer easily, statements asserting certainty about God are especially unattractive to Jews.

What about engagement with God? To what extent do people think a lot about God, yearn for a relationship with God, and want their clergy to say more about God?

**Here too, Jews fall far short of non-Jews.** The limited Jewish reaction to the question on yearning for a relationship with God is also unsurprising, since Judaism is more action-based (doing mitzvot) than faith-based. However, the answers to the question on wanting clergy to talk about God give us pause. Although far fewer Jews than non-Jews want their clergy to discuss God, the number of Jews who do is higher than the number who think about God a lot. Not surprisingly, people who think about God want to hear about God; but apparently, even people who do not think a lot about God want at least to hear something about the issue, or at least believe their clergy should talk about it.



**Jews' relationship with God is more skeptical, weaker, less salient than among non-Jews**

## Religion & Prayer: Less Important for Jews

Unlike contemporary Protestants and Catholics (the majority of Americans), Jewish identity still depends on more than religion. Protestants and Catholics too came here as ethnic churches, but over time, lost their ethnic baggage and became purely religious – a development American culture has encouraged, given its assumption that people may (and indeed, should) belong to “the religion of their choice” (Herberg, 1955). Jewish identity, however, has entailed ethnic elements such as political liberalism (which has endured even through the last presidential election; see Cohen and Abrams 2008), patterns of residence and friendship, combating anti-Semitism, and support for Israel; Jews associate with each other

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not just in synagogues, but in federations, JCCs, a plethora of organizations (like Hadassah), online, and informally in Jewish neighborhoods and extended families. Jews still play Jewish Geography; Episcopalians and Presbyterians have no equivalent. We can be Jews by culture, ethnicity, religion, Israel-consciousness, social networks, and more. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first survey to inquire if, how, and to what extent, Jews can also identify as spiritual – not the same as religion, but, we would assume, related to it.

In fact, there is no reason Jews might not claim to find spirituality in more familiar (and non-religious) aspects of Jewish identity: hearing Jewish music, for example, and pursuing Jewish causes. But Americans think of spirituality as distinctively religious, so that is what we are measuring here. We want to know how Jews and non-Jews compare on the normative ingredients that go into specifically “religious spirituality.”

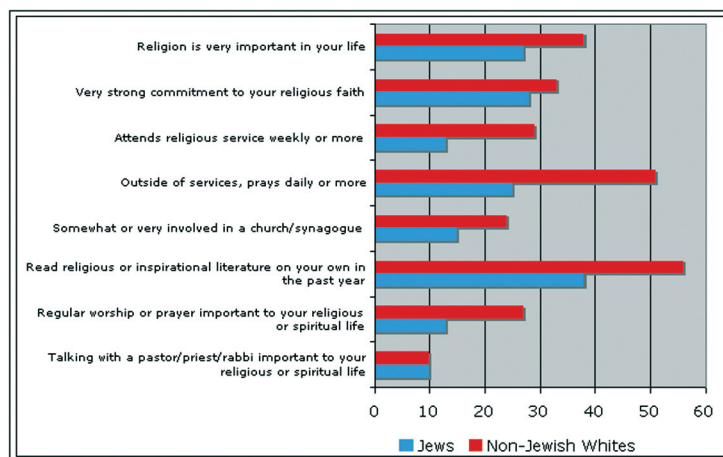
Typically, on social surveys, Jews attach more importance to “being Jewish” than to “having religion in your life,” suggesting that a good many Jews see being Jewish in some overall sense as transcending religion. Given this propensity, as well as the complexity of Jewish identity beyond just religion, we are not surprised to find that Jews trail non-Jews with respect to every measure touching upon religion and prayer. The gaps are especially large with respect to prayer (frequency, importance) and to reading religious literature. In short, Jews are less religious than non-Jewish whites.

Studies regularly show an erosion of support for institutional religion, especially the mainline churches, which are aging and worried about attracting the next generation (see, for example, Wuthnow 2007, Kinnaman and Lyons 2007 ). People who leave institutional churches, however, can convert religious interest into private spirituality – like praying, or studying the Bible informally in small groups. Jews who leave synagogues are unlikely to do that. To begin with, Jews can remain Jewish culturally and ethnically without finding a spiritual reason to do so. In addition, however, the issue of language arises again, since bookstores and popular media are saturated with “how-to” books on personal prayer and Bible readings that appeal to spiritually minded Christians but not Jews. For all these reasons, Jews score low on our religion index.

Moreover, Christianity’s historical focus has been on prayer. From the beginning, as a “faith,” Christianity has emphasized prayer at the expense of other religious activities. Also, prayer encompasses more to Christians than to Jews – it includes not just uttering words to God,

but also such things as meditation and even just silently waiting for insight to dawn from within the self (a gift of the holy spirit, as many Christians would label it). Hence, many non-Jews say they pray outside of services. By comparison, even though Jews are asked to pray three times daily, prayer has remained just one of many ways that Jews express their Judaism. As we have already said, we believe that the other Jewish options (study, social justice, visits to Jerusalem, for instance) have the potential to count as spiritual, even though spirituality is not so identified in American culture at large.

It is hard to know what to make of the question: “Talking with a pastor/priest/rabbi is important to your religious or spiritual life.” To some extent it replicates the questions on the mentorship scale (above), where, also, a relatively low number of people said they talk with clergy about spiritual concerns.”



### Jews attach less importance to religion and prayer

But the score is lower still when we ask about “religious and spiritual life” rather than “spiritual concerns”; here Jews and non-Jews score equally low. We suspect the word “concerns” is taken to mean personal, family, or life cycle crises, where people seek out clergy more than when there is no “concern” at stake. Talking to clergy about “religious or spiritual life” scores lower, then, because no pressing concern is involved. Certainly the low score cannot be simply because of lack of interest in spirituality, since even non-Jews (who are “more spiritual”) do not talk to their clergy very much about their “religious or spiritual life.” Is that because the clergy in America have been defined as professionals – like doctors, lawyers, and accountants? Professionals are constrained by specific roles, and sought out for those alone. Perhaps Jews and non-Jews do not see “talking with them about religion and spirituality” as one of those roles. Perhaps also clergy



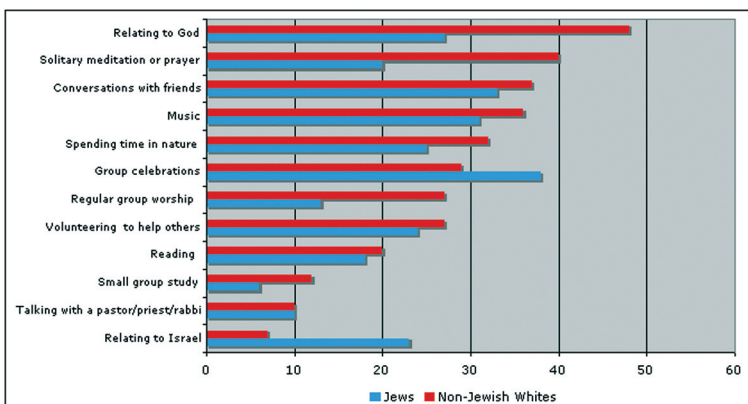
themselves are more adept at life-cycle events, where “concerns” are apt to arise, than they are at serving as general spiritual mentors to their people.

## Spirituality in the Collective

The final set of questions deals with the extent to which respondents see a variety of *experiences* as “very important to your religious or spiritual life.” Here too, non-Jews outscore Jews. Our overall linguistic caveat comes into play again, however, when we consider that non-Jews are more likely than Jews even to see various experiences as religiously or spiritually important.

That said, we find two reversals; that is, instances where Jews actually out-score non-Jews. Obviously, Jews find Israel more important to their religious and spiritual lives. More interesting is the fact that they also find more religious or spiritual significance in group celebrations of holidays and other special events. Of note here is the collective nature of the experience – a sharp contrast with solitary meditation or prayer, where non-Jews vastly outscore Jews. **We suspect that Judaism’s long-standing emphasis on peoplehood and community finds its expression in the unusual number of Jews who find spiritual meaning in group occasions.**

The findings here accord well with three facts already established: 1. Jews are more than just a religious group; 2. Prayer and faith are less important in Judaism than in Christianity; and 3. Jews are less likely to use language of religion and spirituality even for things that Christians easily call spiritual, because spiritual sentences are embedded in Christian, but not Jewish, culture.



**Jews see fewer religious or spiritual experiences as very important than do non-Jews**

## Closing the Spiritual Gap

We wondered whether our findings represent Americans of all ages, or just the numerically larger percentage of respondents who are middle-aged and over. Presumably, synagogues are especially interested in meeting the needs of tomorrow’s population – “next generation” or “NextGen” Jews. How do they score relative to their elders?

We found, in general, that **among the next generation, the gap between Jews and non-Jews is closing.** It is also true that spirituality among non-Jews receives lower scores among young respondents. That is to say, when it comes to spirituality, younger non-Jews score lower, while younger Jews score higher, than their parents and grandparents.

## Older Americans Are More Spiritual

**Among non-Jewish white Americans, all measures of religiosity and spirituality rise with age.** That is, for non-Jews, older people are more religious and more spiritual than young. As with other cross-sectional comparison by age groups, this one too lends itself to two interpretations.

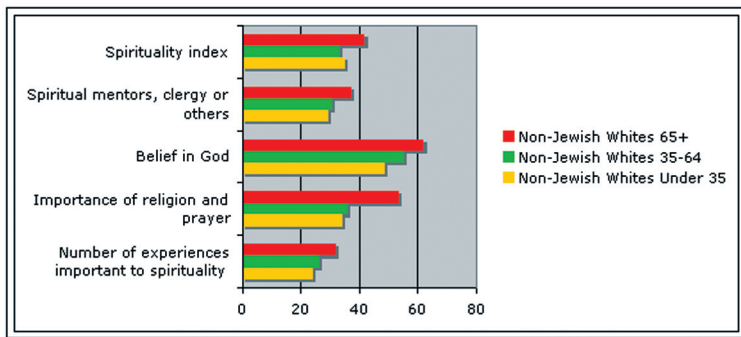
The first is rooted in birth cohort. In this view, different generations develop long-term characteristics that remain with them as they go through life. What matters most is the year in which one is born. If that is the case, the lower levels of spirituality among young people reflect a decline that will simply continue as they grow older.

Support for this interpretation comes from Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone*) who contends that American civic engagement (in general) and involvement in organized religion (in particular) peaked around 1960, and has gone steadily down ever since. Also, spirituality is largely an uninstitutionalized affair – we saw that many more people pray privately than publicly; that other than a relationship with God (which is private), music and talking with friends (also private) rank high; that relationships with clergy are minimal; and so on. Indeed, declining religious affiliation may go hand in hand with rising privatized spirituality.

Elsewhere, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons (*UnChristian*) discuss the tarnished image of church and religious leaders, and the consequent disillusionment of young people with religion. Again, however, that disenchantment would not necessarily impact negatively on the privatized search for spiritual experience.

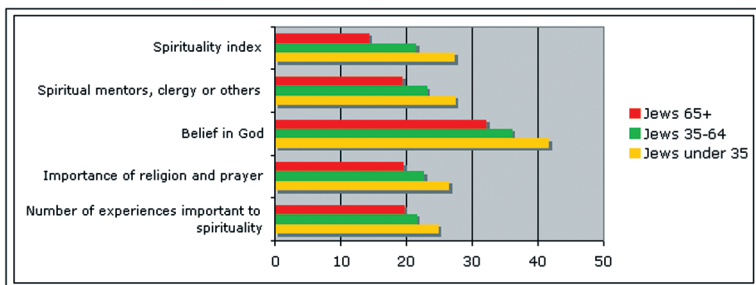
An alternative interpretation has to do with stages in the life cycle. Parents who worry about raising children have to think about the religious heritage they wish to

pass along. As we age, we become more connected to family, friends and community; and more reflective, more aware of our mortality (Erikson, *Life Cycle Completed*). Robert Wuthnow (*After the Baby Boomers*) notes that young people today marry and have children later than their parents did. If spirituality is partly a function of parenting and aging, most of the NextGen population has just not encountered it yet; our sample is biased toward the “pre-reflective” stage of young adulthood.



**Among non-Jewish white Americans, younger cohorts score lower than their elders on all five measures of spirituality and religiosity**

Whatever the causes, the lower levels of religious and spiritual interest among younger non-Jewish Americans underscore the quite startling contrary tendencies among American Jews.



**Among Jews, younger cohorts score higher than their elders on all five measures of spirituality and religiosity**

## Younger Jews are More Spiritual

For Jews, younger adults are *more spiritual and more religious than their elders*. On the key index of Spiritual Inclination, mean scores rise from 14 among the oldest group, to 22 for the middle-aged, to 27 for those under 35. But we also observe increases in Spiritual Mentoring, Belief in God, Importance of Religion, and Number of Spiritual Experiences. All five indices register higher scores among the young than the middle-aged, and higher among the middle-aged than the elderly.

These patterns are remarkable not just because they run counter to the general patterns among non-Jewish Americans, where old out-score young, but also to the patterns for Jewish identity among American Jews discovered elsewhere (see, for example, *Uncoupled* by Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman). In virtually all recent research on American Jews, we find that on most measures of behavior and belonging, younger Jews trail older ones. That is, younger Jews report lower levels of Jewish *association* (marriage, friends, neighbors), Jewish *affiliation* (organizations, synagogues, federations, etc.), and Jewish *ritual practice* (e.g., observance of holidays). If, however, we exclude the intermarried, younger Jews rival or even surpass their elders with respect to selected *attitudes* – like pride in being Jewish, importance of Jewish friends, attachment to Israel, and interest in self-directed Jewish exploration and growth. The attitudes of the young toward spirituality and religion reported here fly in the face of the lower levels of Jewish association, affiliation, and practice, but are consistent with younger Jews’ higher scores on select attitudes that go into a positive view of Jewish identity.

If, however, we understand the essentially privatized nature of the current spiritual search, the two trends are not in conflict. In addition, it helps to differentiate three distinctive Jewish types that we found in our survey. Spirituality is falling in one but rising in the other two.

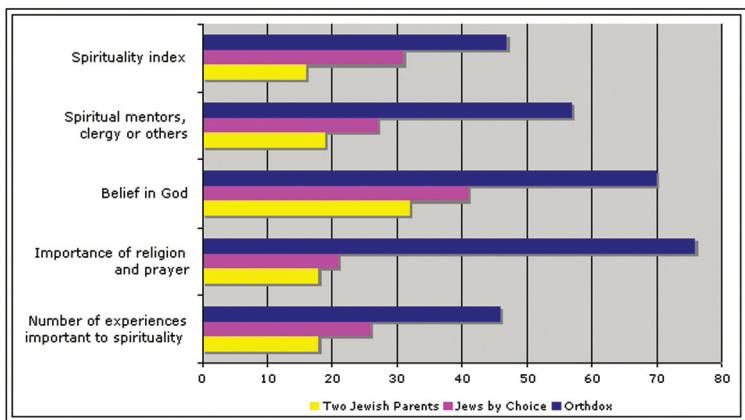
One explanation lies in the essentially privatized nature of the current spiritual search. As with mainline Christianity, so too in Judaism, younger generations are disillusioned (perhaps for different reasons) with organized church and synagogue. In addition, what happened for Christians two generations ago, is now happening for Jews: with anti-Semitism virtually absent, and Jewish involvement in American life equivalent to everyone else’s, ethnicity is disappearing. So Jews join synagogues and ethnic Jewish organizations less readily; their friends are no longer as likely to be Jews. They marry out often and spread out through many neighborhoods rather than cluster together in one. But they do not on that account dismiss spirituality from their lives, since spirituality is a privatized enterprise, pursued independently in nature, music, and so on.

## Orthodox Jews: Highly Spiritual

A more nuanced view comes from the changing composition of the Jewish population. **Orthodox Jews far outscore non-Orthodox on every measure**, not just the Religion and Prayer Scale (which would be expected), but also on Engagement with God, Spiritual Mentorship, the

number of Spiritual Experiences and Spiritual Inclination, the most critical measure of the five. On the Spiritual Inclination Scale (scored on a 0 to 100 metric), the Orthodox out-score the non-Orthodox who are children of in-married Jewish parents by a factor of nearly 3:1. The Orthodox score a mean of 47 as compared with just 16 for the others.

Orthodoxy today has been shaped not just by the details of *halakhah* but the spiritual reasoning behind those details, especially through the Rov, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, whose writings (*Halakhic Man* and *The Lonely Man of Faith*) are unabashedly spiritual. Then too, students in many (though not all) modern *yeshivahs* are increasingly attracted to *musar* (Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshivah*), a trend toward spirituality established by Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810-1883) ~ not the austere asceticism and emotive extremes of its early years, but its value-based and inner-directed understanding of *halakhah* (Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*).



**Levels of spirituality and religiosity by type of Jew**

Given all of this, much of mainstream Orthodoxy has internalized such issues as God’s purpose, teachings about nature and the environment, and a host of other matters. To be sure, other denominations too emphasize these broader questions, but Orthodox Jews are more likely to invest time studying them. Also, higher rates of service attendance, ritual performance, Jewish study, and socializing among people who regard themselves as religiously committed are likely to prompt equally higher levels of interest and experiences with spirituality, at least as Orthodox respondents understand the term. Seeing themselves as “religious” or “observant,” Orthodox respondents may react positively to statements about “spirituality” simply because they see “spirituality” as a near-synonym for “religious.” In any event, far more Orthodox Jews than non-Orthodox Jews see themselves as more spiritual.

## The “Extended Jews-by-Choice”

But the vast majority of American Jews (92% or so) are not Orthodox. Within this non-Orthodox majority we turned up a distinction of some note: *Jews with two Jewish parents score lower on all measures of spirituality and religiosity than do Jews with just one Jewish parent or with none.* Another way of putting it is to say that a child growing up with at least one non-Jewish parent will more likely resonate with spirituality.

A word about nomenclature is in order. A child of two Jewish parents is the offspring of an in-married couple (a decreasingly common phenomenon, though still the majority of Jewish children). Of the remainder, some have no Jewish parents, but became Jewish anyway, sometimes as a personal journey of faith, but usually as a result of relationships with, or marriage to, born-Jews. Some, however, were already children of mixed marriages, that is, they already had one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent. About 40% of such children are raised Jewish, and 25% or so continue on to identify as a Jewish adult.

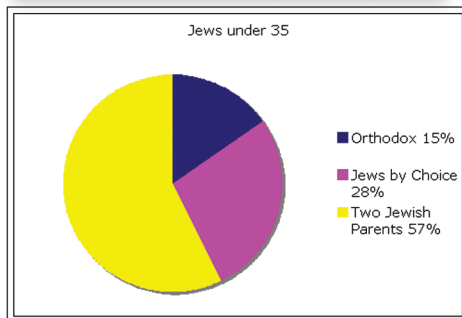
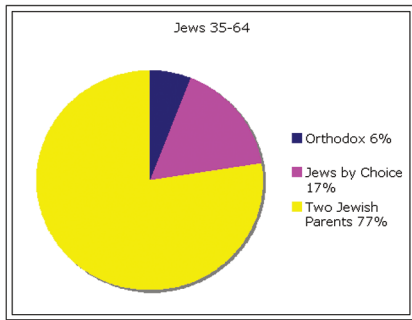
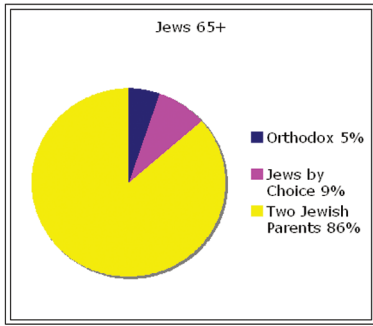
Both sub-groups (those with no Jewish parents and those with one Jewish parent) report very similar scores on spirituality. In all instances, their scores fell between those of the high-scoring Orthodox and the low-scoring non-Orthodox Jews with two Jewish parents. Hence, for analytic purposes, we combined both sub-groups to constitute a single category labeled, “Extended Jews-by-Choice,” a modification of the term often applied to converts. This group consists of those Jews widely called Jews by Choice as well as those whose mixed parentage gave them the *de facto* familial choice to identify as Jewish or not.

In sum, Extended Jews-by-Choice score considerably higher on the indices of spirituality than Jews with two Jewish parents. For example, on the Spiritual Inclination Scale, the most significant index, their scores are nearly double (31 vs. 16) those of Jewish children of in-marriages.

One reason for the higher rates of spirituality in this group is that spirituality, as we have seen, is a more frequent concern for non-Jews than for Jews. If nothing else, Extended Jews-by-Choice have been raised with widespread acceptance, even expectation, of spiritual language within religious settings, and even at home. Christians are more comfortable characterizing themselves as spiritual and speaking about spirituality. That being the case, those Jews socialized as children by a non-Jewish mother or father (or both) report higher levels of spirituality than those brought up by two Jewish parents.

## Shifting Composition of American Jews

The shifting dimensions of the Jewish population with respect to the three groups (Orthodox, Extended Jews-by-Choice, and Jews with two Jewish parents) account for higher spirituality scores among young adult Jews than among their elders. In moving from the elderly to the middle aged to those under 35, the proportion that is Orthodox grows from 5% to 6% to 15%. At the same time, the number of extended Jews-by-Choice grows from 9% to 17% to fully 28% of those under 35 years old.



**The changing distributions of types of Jews by age.**

decline. The presence of more Orthodox Jews and more Jews of non-Jewish ancestry means more Jews culturally pre-disposed to spiritual concerns.

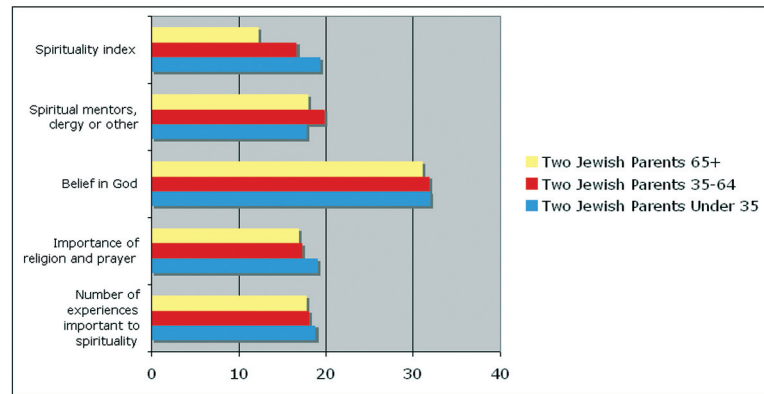
## More Spirituality Among Younger Jews

But even if we focus solely upon non-Orthodox Jews with two Jewish parents, we find more elevated spirituality among the youngest adults. On four of our indices ~ Spiritual Mentoring, Belief in God, Importance of

Among those 65 and over in this study, fully 86% are in this category. But their number drops to 77% among those 35-64, and falls to just a slim majority (57%) among those under 35.

The composition of the Jewish population has been shifting dramatically, and with it, the openness to, and interest in, things spiritual. The two population groups with higher levels of spiritual interests have been growing, while the once numerically dominant group with lower levels of such interest has been in demographic

Religion, and Number of Spiritual Experiences ~ younger and older Jews report essentially the same scores. But on the index of Spiritual Inclination, we find higher scores among young Jews who are non-Orthodox and have two Jewish parents. Average scores on this scale (scored from 0 to 100, low to high) move from 12, to 17, to 19 for older, middle-aged, and younger respondents, respectively. When compared with other white Americans their age, young adult Jews from this sub-group may still not be all that spiritual (their score is only 19, as compared with 35 for the non-Jews); but they are far more spiritual than their parents(who average around 12). As we go from old to young, the disparity in expressed spirituality between Jew and non-Jew is narrowing.



**For those with 2 Jewish parents, higher levels for younger Jews on Spiritual Inclination Scale, little variation by age on the other four scales**

## Spiritual Language, Spiritual Reality

There is little consensus on what “spirituality” means – neither its core elements nor its definitional boundaries. What we have is commonly accepted language for it, as defined by American culture and enshrined in polls and academic discussion among social scientists.

Like it or not, therefore, we have inherited an accepted language in which to frame questions that measure it, and that is the language we have used here. The rather high inter-item correlations and the ability of social dimensions to predict responses to our questions are signs that the population has at least a vague idea as to what we mean by “spirituality” – just as they do other widely used terms with hazy definitions, like, “liberal,” “conservative,” and even “religious.” These are sure statistical signs that “something” is out there; and that it has been captured in the spirituality language in common use.

What we do not know, of course, is whether there is something else out there that counts as spirituality but is

not captured in that language. Recall our example early on of the different ways that people categorize holding the hand of a dying father, climbing a mountain, hearing great music, and the like. Some have no trouble calling these things “spiritual”; for others, they are “profound.” The difference between the labels is both miniscule and enormous: miniscule in that they are obviously the same experience, with, presumably, the same psychological components of grief, awe, wonder, and so on; but enormous in that speech impacts belief. How we talk about these primal phenomena provides a cultural layer of discussion, which then impacts further experience. Labeling an experience mystical, for example, sets up the expectation for an entirely different set of further experiences than labeling it psychological does.

**Using the only accepted language of spirituality we have, our analysis demonstrates that Jews as a group are less spiritual than non-Jews.** They have less interest in learning about or growing in spiritually; they see spirituality as less significant in their lives; fewer have spiritual mentors and strong engagement with God; they attach less importance to religion and prayer; and they find fewer experiences that speak to them religiously or spiritually. The gap between Jews and non-Jews is both real and profound.

But younger Jews score considerably higher than older ones. This trend is all the more significant because among non-Jews, the young score *lower* than older people on spirituality measures. If these age-variations derive from birth-cohort effects, they portend a narrowing of the once wide chasm between Jews and others with respect to interest in spirituality.

One Jewish sub-group leading the way in spirituality is the Orthodox. They register as decidedly more spiritual for the historical reasons we mentioned, and because of their life style: extensive association with each other, along with high levels of personal engagement in prayer, ritual observance and other practices that our culture ranks as spiritual.

The other population group reporting high spiritual levels are what we called Extended Jews-by-Choice. Owing to the greater currency of spirituality among non-Jews than among Jews, the upbringing afforded by a non-Jewish parent (and his/her family and friends) predisposes Extended Jews-by-Choice toward greater receptivity of spirituality.

The higher levels of spirituality among younger Jews are, in part, a consequence of the overrepresentation of

Orthodox and of Extended Jews by Choice among them (these being the growth sectors in American Judaism). But even young non-Orthodox Jews with two Jewish parents are somewhat more spiritually inclined than their older counterparts.

The implications of these findings for the place of spirituality in congregational and educational life are notable. If spirituality is a response to a universal drive (like food, sex and water), then Jews are probably just as spiritual as anyone else. But spirituality is more probably a cultural variable. That is why we struggle with finding an appropriate language to describe it; by contrast, no one has difficulty translating food, sex and water across cultures. We must conclude, then, that the Jewish culture we have inherited in the United States is not particularly spiritual.

But that culture is changing. Receptivity to spirituality is undoubtedly mounting, especially among the two population segments that are growing: Orthodox Jews and Extended Jews-by-Choice. Even for a minority of older American Jews it remains one more route to Jewish engagement, beyond the traditional ones; and accenting spirituality will especially broaden Judaism’s appeal for Judaism among Extended Jews-by-Choice, who sometimes feel marginalized among born Jews but find familiarity in spirituality.

The special appeal of spirituality to the Orthodox opens another possible salutary benefit of an emphasis on spirituality in Jewish life. The huge impending demographic growth of Orthodoxy within the American Jewish population will require the coming generation of Jewish leaders to attend more carefully to points of tension and conflict between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. Spirituality may serve as a common religious language that allows both Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews to share interests, activities, and perspectives.

## **Synagogue Policy, Spiritual Opportunities**

This entire paper has addressed synagogue life, but here, as we end, we should add one final factor that pertains specifically to synagogue policy. Synagogue 3000 began as an organization dedicated to several perceived challenges in Jewish life. These included: 1. Judaism for adults, not what we called “pediatric Judaism” (emphasis on childhood education above all else); and 2. Promoting spirituality, especially given the decline of Eastern European Jewish ethnicity, rising intermarriage, and the growth of spirituality in American culture as a whole. This study

was designed, in part, to test the validity of the second hypothesis. Assuming the need for deeper adult engagement with Judaism, we inquired about the depth of spirituality among Jews. In that regard, we have the following recommendations:

1) It would be a mistake to emphasize spirituality at the expense of the many other areas of Jewish culture and history that make Judaism the unique entity it is. Although interest in spirituality is growing, it has by no means eclipsed more traditional Jewish pursuits like social justice, concern for Israel, a life of *mitzvot*, communal engagement, cultural participation and Jewish learning. **Spirituality is but one of several gateways into meaningful Jewish life. It is, however, such a gateway; it deserves its place; and it is growing in importance.**

2) We differentiated Jewish spirituality from Spirituality among Jews. Given our interest in cross-religious comparison, we have largely measured Spirituality among Jews – interest in God, being moved by music, and other areas of human experience that Americans in general call spiritual. We have yet to study the extent to which **deep engagement in more traditional Jewish activities might be seen as spiritual also**. Can *tz'dakah* and Torah study, for example, evoke the same subjective response in terms of some higher order of meaning that thinking about God or engaging in private prayer and meditation do? That would be hard to test since the vocabulary of spirituality is still culturally limited to the areas of religious life that have clear Christian parallels. We suspect, however, that seriously pursued, these other areas of Jewish concern are not without their own form of spiritual satisfaction.

3) Nonetheless, the kind of spirituality that we see celebrated so popularly, the kind of thing we tested here, does have proponents among Jews, especially young Jews; and within the NextGen (or, “young Jew”) category, among the Orthodox and Extended Jews-By-Choice in particular. Since those are the two growth sectors of the Jewish population, **we can affirm our S3K encouragement for synagogues to become spiritual communities**. Given the limitations to the spirituality language, especially among older Jews who still largely control synagogue policy, that openness to spirituality will not come easily. But come it must. We feel that is especially the case for non-Orthodox synagogues where Jewish identity is less certain, and Jews-by-choice more numerous.

4) One other finding is of interest. We asked people: “Suppose you could find your ideal synagogue. Would

you find it essential, desirable, unimportant or not desirable for the rabbi to talk about God, the afterlife, ultimate meaning, and spiritual issues?”

- 76% of our respondents said it was essential or desirable that the rabbi talk about God.
- 52% said it was essential or desirable for rabbis to talk about the afterlife.
- 73% said it was essential or desirable for rabbis to talk about ultimate meaning.
- 78% said it was essential or desirable for rabbis to talk about spiritual issues.

To some extent, as synagogue advocates, what we really want to know is not how the sum total of Jewish institutions should address spirituality, but how synagogues should. The numbers here are high. When it comes specifically to synagogues, more than a majority expected conversation even about the afterlife, which is hardly a major Jewish preoccupation. And they expected synagogues to address God, matters of ultimate meaning, and spiritual issues in general. **Synagogues that overlook spirituality fly in the face of expectations even by people who do not overly describe themselves as spiritual, but who would expect synagogues to become the place where they might explore spirituality, should they ever wish to.**

5) Finally, we return to the issue of language. To the extent that **we lack a native Jewish language to describe spirituality**, we are hampered by having to discuss it in language borrowed from Christianity. We believe some of the low scores that we found may be a response to the language as much as to the experience, since without language to describe it, experience (if it exists at all) is fleeting – it cannot even be put into words and shared. As familiarity with the language grows, we expect spirituality to grow as well.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Jews included those who listed “Jewish” as their “religion” in the screening questionnaire (1563), and an additional 43 who were part of the General Population sample and qualified either by declaring Jewish as their religion, or who had a Jewish parent and currently identifies with no religion (8 such cases).

<sup>2</sup> For this study, the Jewish sample was weighted by five factors: the number of adult Jews in the household, age, sex, region, and education. The targeted distributions derived from those found in the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey (Kotler-Berkowitz, et al. 2003). An extended table in the Appendix compares the Synovate sample after the application of sample weights with the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Study results for those NJPS respondents who declared their religion as Jewish, with respect to socio-demographic and Jewish engagement characteristics. With some exceptions, the gaps between the two surveys are small, suggesting that, with caution, we can rely upon the results from the Synovate sample.

## About Synagogue 3000 (S3K)

Synagogue 3000 is a catalyst for excellence, empowering congregations and communities to create synagogues that are sacred and vital centers of Jewish life. We seek to make synagogues compelling moral and spiritual centers – sacred communities – for the twenty-first century. Our offices in Los Angeles and New York direct national congregational networks and the Synagogue Studies Institute. Sacred communities are those where relationships with

God and with each other define everything the synagogue does; where ritual is engaging; where Torah suffuses all we do; where social justice is a moral imperative; and where membership is about welcoming and engaging both the committed and the unaffiliated. We wish to change the conversation about meaningful Jewish life in our time.

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