

How Religious are Israeli Jews?

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For years, reporting from Israel and the comments of those Israelis whom the reporters cover or interview has suggested that Israeli Jews are divided into two groups: the overwhelmingly majority who are secular and a small minority who are religious. While figures, even percentages, were not always stated, it was generally assumed that 80 percent of Israelis fell into the secular camp and were being religiously coerced in one way or another by the religious 20 percent.

More than that, for most outsiders, all religious Jews in Israel were assumed to be dressed in black, whether they were or not. One almost never saw a picture of a religious Jew in modern dress with a knitted kipa performing a religious act unless it was in connection with their presumed nationalist fanaticism, i.e., Jewish settlers in the territories either resisting Arabs or the Israeli government.

The May election brought the world up short. To almost everyone's surprise, those "fanatically religious" Jews suddenly seemed to have scored a major victory at the polls, providing the critical votes for the election of Binyamin Netanyahu as prime minister and themselves winning 23 seats in the new Knesset, just under 20 percent of the total which, when religious Knesset members from other parties are added, brings the total religious representation up to 25 percent. The shock of this should break through people's perceptive screens and bring them to look again at the real situation in Israel, one which Israelis and others who have followed the issue closely over the years have long recognized.

The latest survey on the subject by the prestigious Guttman Institute of Applied Social Research, published in 1993, tells the true story. Table I summarizes the critical results from that study of Israeli Jews' beliefs and behavior.

ISRAELI JEWISH RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Religious Practice	Always	Sometimes	Never
Light Shabbat candles	56%	22%	20%
Recite Kiddush (Friday night)	46%	21%	32%
Synagogue Saturday morning	23%	22%	56%
Don't work [in public] on Sabbath	42%	19%	39%
Participate in Passover Seder	78%	17%	5%
Light Hanukkah candles	71%	20%	9%

Fast on Yom Kippur	70%	11%	19%
Bless Lulav (Sukkot)	26%	15%	59%
Observe Kashrut at home	69%	18%	14%
No pork, shellfish, etc.	63%	16%	21%
Brit Milah	92%		
Bar Mitzvah	83%		
Wedding	87%		
Burial/Shiva/Kaddish	88-91%		
Mezuzah on front door	98%		
Contribute to charity	74%		

ISRAELI JEWISH RELIGIOUS BELIEF

"To what extent do you believe or not believe in each of the following?"	Believe Completely	Not Sure	Do Not Believe
There is a God	63%	24%	13%
There is a supreme power guiding the world	57%	29%	14%
Torah given to Moses on Mount Sinai	55%	31%	14%
Good deeds are rewarded	52%	33%	14%
The Jewish people was chosen among peoples	50%	29%	20%
A watch from above is kept over everyone	49%	32%	19%
The Torah and mitzvot are God's commands	47%	29%	24%
Prayer can help one get out of a bad situation	45%	35%	20%
Bad deeds are punished	44%	38%	18%
The coming of the Messiah	39%	29%	32%
There is a next world	35%	35%	30%
Those who don't adhere to mitzvot are punished	27%	36%	37%
Non-observing Jew endangers the Jewish people	21%	29%	50%

Israel's Jews are not divided into two groups but into four: ultra-Orthodox, religious Zionists, traditional Jews, and secular. Some 8 percent are ultra-Orthodox. These are the strangely (to Western eyes) garbed, black hatted Jews who are featured in all the pictures, despite the fact that they represent only 8 percent of Israel's Jewish population.

Another 17 percent are religious Zionists who normally are lost to view in the studies and the statistics because they are generally lumped with everyone else. The religious Zionists are similar to the modern or centrist Orthodox Jews in the diaspora, partaking of most or all aspects of modern civilization except that they maintain Orthodox observance of Jewish religious law and tradition.

The third group consists of the vast majority of Israeli Jews, some 55 percent, who define themselves as "traditional." These Jews are from many backgrounds but most are Sephardim from the Mediterranean or Islamic worlds. They are people who value traditional Jewish life but who are prepared to modify halakhically required Jewish practices in those cases where they believe it to be personally necessary or attractive to do so. They cover the whole range of belief and observance from people of fundamentalist belief and looser practice to people who have interpreted Judaism in the most modern manner but retain some of its customs and ceremonies.

Many of these "traditional" Jews differ from the Orthodox only because they will drive their cars on the Sabbath, use electricity, watch television, or go to a soccer game or the beach, frequently after attending religious services in the morning and the evening before. Many of the men don *tefillin* every morning, others cover the spectrum of observance. What is critical is that all are committed to a major religious component in the definition of their Jewishness and the Jewishness of the Jewish state.

The fourth and second smallest group consists of those who define themselves as secular, some 20 percent of the Jewish population. These are people whose beliefs are secular. Their practices, on the other hand, may be quite similar to those of many traditionalists, only they maintain those practices for family and national reasons rather than accepted religious ones. The fact that Jewish religious observance has such a strong national component makes it a major component of Jews' national identity even if they no longer see themselves as believers in the Jewish religion.

The Guttman study shows that three-quarters of the 20 percent follow the most common traditional religious practices. Only a quarter, or 5 percent of the total Jewish population, say they observe no religious practices whatsoever, a figure which is belied by figures that show that 98 percent of Israeli Jews have *mezuzot* on the doorposts of their houses and 92 percent circumcize their male children, to mention only two of a number of observances that are so deeply entrenched in the culture that hardly anyone thinks of them as religious observances.

As in the diaspora, almost all Israeli Jews have some form of Passover Seder. Indeed, one of the observed phenomena in Israel is how many Israelis who are planning to travel abroad

during Pesach, which means that they are not concerned about keeping strictly kosher for the holiday as Jewish law requires, schedule their departure from the country after the evening of the Seder, while almost no one leaves during the day the Seder is to take place.

What is true is that almost all the elites in Israeli society—cultural, intellectual, political, and economic—are found within the secular 20 percent, so that they frame the picture that outsiders get of Israel. Moreover, that 20 percent is overwhelmingly Ashkenazi, either Jews from Eastern and Central Europe or descended from them, the ones who are most likely to know English, to have relatives in the diaspora, or to be contacted by journalists coming to the country, thus allowing this skewed picture to emerge.

Let us look at the table more closely. Nearly two thirds of all Israelis believe that there was a God and another quarter are not sure. Even more impressive is that 55 percent believe in the literal revelation of the Torah by God at Sinai, while those who are not sure raise the total to 86 percent. So, too, with other measures of belief.

In 1948 when Israel was founded and socialist Zionism was in the saddle, there were undoubtedly many more atheists in the country than there are today. On the other hand, believers should not take too much comfort from these figures since the belief of the Israeli majority is like belief in other Western countries. Only 27 percent believe that God will punish them for not observing His commandments themselves even though twice as many believe that the commandments are of divine origin.

All told, however, most Israelis observe far more than the average Reform or even Conservative Jew in the diaspora. Moreover, since a majority are Sephardim and the Sephardi world never had a reformation like the Ashkenazi world, where religious Jews divided themselves into three or more “denominations,” even those who do not pretend to be Orthodox believe that Jewish tradition itself should stand relatively unchanged and should not be fragmented. They reserve for themselves the informal right to pick and choose, but they want the formal religion to remain as is, as in the rest of the Mediterranean world.

In the whole history of the Zionist enterprise there has been no indigenous movement to reform Judaism or Jewish religion, this on the part of a people who are prepared to have reform movements for everything. That should tell us much. Not only that, but the 1993 survey simply replicates earlier surveys going back some thirty years. The amount of observance has dropped over the years but not appreciably.

Under these circumstances it behooves everyone—Israelis, diaspora Jews, and the world in general—to reevaluate their thinking about how the Israeli majority expresses its Jewishness and how important that expression is to them. If they are not impressed by the figures, they should look at the election results. Through a combination of circumstances, the Rabin-Peres government gave most Israelis the impression that it was undercutting the expected manifestations of the Jewish character of the state and the voters responded accordingly.