

Klal Yisrael: Moving Beyond Binary Descriptions

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One recurring learning from our research at the Jim Joseph Foundation is that Jewish people are complex and covered by a broad spectrum of identities. In our Jewish communal outlook, we sometimes default to thinking of our people in binaries when we assess Jewish institutional and organizational affiliation. Our professional community often refers to young Jews in North America as being connected vs. disconnected, engaged vs. unengaged, involved vs. uninvolved and so on. Communal professionals and stakeholders tend to utilize these simplistic categorizations to make sense of those who are “participants” in Jewish life, and those who are not — who is in, and who is out. While this shorthand approach may serve us in some contexts, we run the risk of undermining our basic idea of *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish People) by relying on hierarchical labels like these.

As the Jim Joseph Foundation team delves deeper into understanding the nuances of the broad and diverse spectrum of our people (for example, [this framework for how people learn](#)), it is clear that oversimplification is unhelpful. At best, these binaries fail to capture and honor the rich complexities of individuals’ Jewish experiences, motivations and desires. At worst, it is a damaging obstacle to understanding ourselves as a people, and our work as educators and progenitors of Jewish community.

Our team is adopting a shift to more nuanced language that builds on prior research and focuses on the many diverse and divergent ways Jewish people orient themselves to their Jewishness and to formal Jewish community. This approach represents a break from binary frameworks that unintentionally or intentionally place a value judgment on individuals based on their backgrounds, Jewish journeys, participation and mixed identities.

Exact percentages vary slightly, but recent studies (including [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)) indicate a 30/70 split among young non-Orthodox Jews: Approximately 30% actively participate in and are served by established Jewish organizations and infrastructures, while the other approximately 70% are part of a majority Jewish population who do not connect to, and may even reject, mainstream Jewish life. Yet, we also know from these studies that this latter population is overwhelmingly *proud to be Jewish*. This inspiring opportunity becomes obscured by labels that divide our audience into just two very distinct categories.

Within the 30% communal participant demographic, we can begin to identify various archetypes that make up this audience. Some are more inclined toward shared communal ritual observance of traditions, prayer and services. Some simply center Judaism as a main priority in their daily lives, both in their homes and in their communities. Others find their greatest meaning and purpose in highly community-oriented expressions of Judaism. While not a perfect science, we can say with confidence these Jews are the primary end-users of both our large traditional communal Jewish institutions, and of our smaller non-traditional Jewish organizations and programming. In addition, this demographic often becomes the focus of our communal research because it usually constitutes the most willing and accessible sample. Their issues become the

most visible and their voices the most audible for communal planning. If we aren't intentional about how we understand our whole audience, we risk creating blind spots by assuming the minority represents all young Jews.

The majority 70% demographic, while unified by not being active participants in organizational life and communal initiatives, are also far from monolithic. Some of these unserved, and underserved, young Jews might lean into "do it yourself" expressions of Jewish life. Some might gather with close friends and family through home-based celebrations or find Jewish life by simply maintaining a close circle of Jewish friends. Still others have not been able to find meaningful and sustainable outlets to express their positive Jewish identities. When we think about designing specifically for this demographic, we think the opportunities for creating compelling Jewish life and learning far outweigh the challenges.

It is clear this population holds dear additional identities and interests; yet they also carry with them a personal Jewish self-concept that provides clues and information to unlock unlimited possibilities to tap a reservoir of Jewish pride. By honoring how the majority of young Jews relate to and express their Jewish selves, we will begin to mitigate the well-documented feeling among many young Jews that they are "not Jewish enough."

All young Jews deserve specific Jewish interventions and designs that are attuned to their diverse needs and wants. When we acknowledge the spectrum of young people within our big, messy, aspirational audience of *Klal Yisrael*, we can tailor our strategies to meet the needs and preferences of various groups — with the knowledge that no single intervention will reach everyone. An inclusive and dynamic Jewish community that values the richness of each unique individual will be our community's greatest strength. The future approaches with an increasingly multifaceted identity for young Jews. Jewish life and learning is up for the task. We are fortunate to possess a universal and timeless repository of Jewish wisdom, tradition, ritual and talent that can be applied to our modern lives and the dynamic time in which we live.

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