Contemporary Perceptions and Attitudes of Europe’s Jews

The Pew Research Center’s Portrait of Jewish Americans

The European survey discussed in this volume entailed wide-ranging research into how European Jews currently perceive antisemitism in their environment, and how they tend to react to it. Understandably, this survey had to start with questions intended to portray this Jewry in terms of its Jewishness. By chance, at the same period, Washington’s Pew Research Center (2013) published parallel data elicited by its own comprehensive survey of Jewish Americans. Hence, before presenting the figures describing European Jews’ self-perceptions as Jews, it is of interest to succinctly refer to the “portrait” of Jewish Americans with the aim of setting the image of Europe’s Jewry within the context of Diaspora Jewry as a whole.

To quote from the Pew Report, American Jews overwhelmingly state their pride in being Jewish and their strong sense of belonging to the Jewish peoplehood: 94% of U.S. Jews (more precisely, 97% of Jews by religion, and 83% of Jews of no religion) say they are proud to be Jewish. Three-quarters of U.S. Jews (including 85% of Jews by religion, and 42% of Jews of no religion) also reported their “strong sense of belongingness to Jewish peoplehood.”

However, the survey also shows that Jewish identity is changing in America: no less than one-in-five Jews now describe themselves as “of no religion,” and moreover, two-thirds say it is not necessary to believe in God to be Jewish. In other words, no few American Jews tend to see Jewishness more as a cultural allegiance than as linked to a religion. This impacts on the dynamics of the community: intermarriage is much more common among secular Jews than among Jews by religion: 79% of married Jews of no religion have a spouse who is not Jewish, compared with 36% among Jews by religion. Moreover, while nearly all Jews who have a Jewish spouse (96%), say they are raising their children as Jewish by religion, among Jews with a non-Jewish spouse much fewer respondents say so (20%). Here, moreover, only 25% report that they are raising their children as “partly Jewish” by religion. Yet the new survey also finds that seven-in-ten Jews say they participated in a Passover meal (Seder) in the previous year, and 53% say they fasted on Yom Kippur.
Concomitantly, respondents show a strong emotional attachment to Israel—though it is markedly stronger among Jews by religion (and older Jews in general) than among Jews of no religion (and younger ones). Overall, about seven-in-ten Jews surveyed say they feel either very attached (30%) or somewhat attached (39%) to Israel, which is essentially unchanged since 2000–2001. In addition, 43% of Jews have visited Israel, including 23% who have visited more than once. At the same time, many American Jews express reservations about Israel’s approach to the peace process. Just 38% say the Israeli government is making a sincere effort to establish peace with the Palestinians, though still fewer—12%—think Palestinian leaders are sincerely seeking peace with Israel.

Above all, large majorities of US Jews say that remembering the Holocaust (73%) and leading an ethical life (69%) are essential to their view of Jewishness. More than half (56%) say that working for justice and equality is essential to what being Jewish means to them. And about four-in-ten say that caring about Israel (43%) is essential to their Jewish identity.

**JPR and FRA’s Survey**

These data that refer to Jews in the USA are not very far from those obtained by the European survey. This latter study was performed in 2012–2013 in nine member-states of the European Union and constitutes the most extensive study of European Jews thus far. It included 5,919 subjects from Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Romania, Sweden, and the UK. It consisted of an online open web survey that took place over four weeks. The survey was commissioned by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), and conducted by a joint team from the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) in London and Ipsos MORI.

The data were analyzed by JPR’s academic staff, comprising social scientists with expertise in European Jewish life. This chapter draws from the report (Staetsky and Boyd 2013) that the research team submitted to the FRA, which subsequently endorsed and publicized the findings on its own behalf.

As shown by Table 3.1, according to estimates, there were, in 2012, 1,410,000 people in Europe who declared themselves as Jewish in national censuses or other surveys, not comprising persons of Jewish origin who preferred not to declare themselves as Jews. This number included members of Jewish households who were not Jewish according to Talmudic law but felt Jewish—as the result of intermarriages. Table 3.1 also specifies the importance of