



Berman Award Acceptance Remarks 20 December 2021

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Abstract

This is the acceptance speech delivered upon receipt of the Mandel Berman Service Award from the ASSJ (Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry).

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I'm delighted to accept this award on behalf of Pew Research Center and the team of researchers who have worked on these studies, particularly Greg Smith on the 2013 Jewish survey "Portrait of Jewish Americans," Neha Sahgal on the 2015 Israel survey "Israel's Religiously Divided Society," Becka Alper on the 2020 Jewish survey "Jewish Americans in 2020," and Conrad Hackett on the demographic elements of all three studies.

Many of the Pew staff who have contributed to these studies are neither Jewish nor experts on Jewish topics. They are sociologists, political scientists, and demographers with experience studying religion very broadly, both in the USA and around the world. I think that's a key ingredient in our secret sauce, one of the reasons why these studies have yielded some fresh insights on Jewish life. The comparative perspective that comes from studying religion and culture in general—and not just Jewish religion and Jewish culture—can be very valuable, especially when it is enriched by the expertise of the people present in this room today.

Let me give one example. When we look broadly at religious groups in America, we see that Jewish *retention* rates—the share of people raised as Jews who continue to identify as Jewish in adulthood—are relatively high, compared with many other US religious groups. This seems to surprise Jewish audiences, who are often deeply concerned about losses from the Jewish fold. At the same time, Jewish *accession* rates—the percentage of today's Jewish adults who were not raised as Jewish, and who have taken on Jewish identity at some point since childhood—are relatively low.

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In other words, in the USA (which stands out internationally for a dynamic religious marketplace in which many people change religious identities over the course of their lifetimes), Jews have been comparatively successful at holding onto people who are already in the community, but not so successful at bringing new people into the community (Cooperman 2016). This may be one dimension, lying just below the surface, of current discussions among Jewish leaders about intermarriage, Jews of Color, and related issues. Should Jewish organizations make more efforts to welcome people who recently have entered Jewish life? And perhaps not worry so much about those who have left? Pew Research Center does not take a position on such questions, but we do try to produce data that can spark good conversations and inform them.

And I know that I speak for all my Pew colleagues in saying that it is very gratifying to study Jewish populations. One reason why it's a pleasure to conduct these studies is because of wonderful funders like Bill Berman, for whom this award is named, and Joe Neubauer and Jeanette Lerman-Neubauer, my co-awardees today. The Rambam attributes particular merit to *tzedakah* in which the giver does not know who the recipient is, and the recipient does not know who the giver is. I think the Neubauer Family Foundation's support for these studies fits that description. Even though we have acknowledged their role in all our published reports, it's a safe bet that most of the end users of the data don't know the Neubauers, and Joe and Jeanette can't possibly know all the end users. The Neubauers' gifts to the Jewish community are large but indirect, with no strings attached, and with trust in all of us in this room—and many others besides—to draw meaningful lessons from the survey results.

A second reason why it's gratifying to study Jewish populations is because of the many talented and generous people working in this field. If the Pew studies stand tall, it's because they have built on others, including the 1990 NJPS that Barry Kosmin led and the sometimes controversial yet in many ways impressive 2000–2001 NJPS that Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz spearheaded. I remember that roughly a decade ago, when Pew Research Center was considering whether to step into this arena, I expressed my concerns to Len Saxe, who assured me that we could pull together an experienced and well-balanced group of advisers who could guide us through the most contested areas. Len and Laurence—together with Ariela Keysar, Sergio Della Pergola, Michelle Shain, Ari Kelman, Arielle Levites, Bruce Phillips, and many others, too many to name here—have done that for us, and we are very grateful.

We widened the circle of advisers considerably for the 2020 study, beginning with a conference and workshop in 2018, marking the fifth anniversary of the 2013 study. About 35 sociologists, demographers, and pollsters came to Washington from across the USA, the UK, and Israel. And out of that consultation came two of the main innovations in the 2020 study: the battery of questions about cultural Jewish activities and the battery of questions about why Jewish Americans do, or do not, go to synagogue.

The third and final reason why it's gratifying to conduct these studies is that, while Jews may argue vociferously over the data, at least they seem to pay attention to it. I'll share a few facts and figures with you. In the 6 months since we released our report on the 2020 study (“Jewish Americans in 2020”), it has been mentioned

in more than 1200 news articles and opinion pieces. Most have been published in the USA, but coverage of the survey has also appeared in 41 other countries. Israeli media alone have carried more than 170 articles about the survey, including 30 in *The Times of Israel*, 23 in *The Jerusalem Post*, and 9 in *Ha'aretz*. Seven different podcasts have been produced about the survey, and 1800 Tweets have directly linked to it. Becka Alper and I have given 25 formal presentations about it, and I'm aware of three books now being written largely on the basis of the 2020 survey data.

Unfortunately, we did not track all these metrics as carefully back in 2013, so I can't prove what I'm about to suggest. But, in my estimation, even though the 2020 study was a success, it did not reverberate quite as widely or loudly as the 2013 study did. There may be several reasons for this. One is that there was a lot of pent-up demand for the 2013 survey, because more than a decade had gone by since the previous nationwide Jewish population study, the 2000–2001 NJPS.

Another factor was the COVID pandemic. Although the 2020 survey was planned and largely completed before the pandemic, COVID was raging when we released our report on the results, and many Jewish leaders understandably were preoccupied by the pandemic's impact on their organizations and the people they serve. As it happened, the timing was doubly unlucky because war broke out in Gaza during the same week in which the report came out. With COVID and the Gaza War, many Jews had too much else on their minds to dig into a new population study in the spring of 2021.

There is one more reason why the 2020 survey may have caused less of an immediate sensation than the 2013 survey, and it is that the 2020 findings were largely received as good news for Jews in America, while the 2013 study was seen as bad news. My colleagues and I don't frame our reports in those simplistic terms, but media outlets and commentators often do. And in 2013, many news reports focused on rising intermarriage rates and assimilation of non-Orthodox Jews, while in 2020 the initial news accounts focused on growth in the estimated size of the US Jewish population and rising levels of racial/ethnic diversity. It's a reflection on human nature, not a knock on the hardworking press, to note that bad news tends to carry farther and faster than good news.

Whatever the immediate interpretation and reception of the survey, my expectation is that it will have what statisticians call a "long tail," meaning that policymakers, scholars, activists, and journalists will continue to revisit the data for years to come. The public dataset is now freely available for researchers to download from the Pew Research Center website and analyze in any way they wish.

Usually when I speak about our surveys, my goal is to be as impartial as I can be. But today, as I accept this award for service to the Jewish community, perhaps it's appropriate if I stop being strictly Pewish for a moment and speak as someone who is also Jewish. I want to express one concern, and one hope, about our most recent survey of Jews in this country.

The concern is about political polarization. The 2020 survey found that only 9% of Reform Jews feel they have a lot in common with Orthodox Jews, and vice versa—only 9% of Orthodox Jews in the USA feel they have a lot in common with Reform Jews. Many respondents in each of those groups said they have "not much" or "nothing at all" in common with the other group. True, the survey took place

against the backdrop of the 2020 presidential election campaign, which was deeply polarizing for the country as a whole and in which Orthodox Jews leaned heavily one way, while Reform Jews leaned heavily the other way. But America's political polarization has not abated since the election.

A number of severe shocks to the system—the January 6 riot at the Capitol, the coronavirus pandemic, and a string of natural disasters and extreme weather events—have failed to unite Americans. I spent last weekend at a conference in which several scholars and religious leaders discussed the psychological feedback loops that drive “us versus them” thinking. Tom Edsall also wrote a column in *The New York Times* last week about the psychology of extreme partisanship, and he quoted some researchers as arguing that today's political polarization is deeper than it was in 1968 and exceeded only by the 1850s, in the run-up to the Civil War. So, I'm among the many people who worry about polarization in the USA, and I'm worried about its appearance among US Jews in the 2020 survey.

My hope is that the antidote is also in the survey, which indicates that, for all the things that divide us, there are also many things that unite us, and that Jewish identity is fluid and porous, not fixed and impenetrable. Bruce Phillips made this point eloquently last night at the Marshall Sklare Award ceremony, noting—by way of example—that the group we call “People of Jewish Background,” who are not typically counted as part of the American Jewish population, engage in some Jewish practices at rates equal to, or higher than, the group we call “Jews of No Religion.” I'm not a historian, but my guess is that, throughout history, Jewish identity has often been more fluid than we realize, and it's one of the reasons that Jews are still around today. As the old joke goes: There are only two kinds of people in the world—those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't. Let us, as Jews and social scientists, stand among those who don't.

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Reference

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Alan Cooperman is director of religion research at the nonpartisan Pew Research Center, where he leads a staff of more than 20 researchers who conduct surveys, demographic analyses, and other empirical

studies of religion's role in public life and societal change around the world. He plays a key role in setting the religion team's research agenda and writing its reports. He has edited or coauthored several of the Center's landmark studies, including "'Nones' on the Rise" (2012), "Portrait of Jewish Americans" (2013), "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey" (2014), "Israel's Religiously Divided Society" (2016), and "Jewish Americans in 2020" (2021). Before joining the Center in 2009, he was a national reporter and editor at *The Washington Post*, foreign editor of *U.S. News & World Report*, and a foreign correspondent in Moscow and Jerusalem for *U.S. News & World Report* and the Associated Press. He graduated magna cum laude from Harvard in 1982 and started in professional journalism at The Berkshire Eagle in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. He lives with his wife and two sons in Washington, DC.