



Half-Jewish; Yes there is such a thing
A Facebook view into an Emerging Jewish Identity

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In recent years the term half-Jewish has begun to more clearly emerge as a way for children of intermarried parents to self identify. Whereas intermarriage has been studied at great length, minimal research has been done about this new identity, which many Jews have out right rejected for being technically (or at least halakically) impossible. This study works to shed light on both the identity of half-Jewish, and how those that see themselves as such express their Judaism and relate to the North American Jewish community. Overall, this study has found that those that self-identified as half-Jews are only marginally connected to the organized Jewish community and often feel that their “half-Jewish” identity is rejected or misunderstood by other Jews. However, despite these feelings half-Jews still display a considerable sense of Jewish identity and exhibit a significant connection to Jewish culture, ethnicity and people-hood as well as a strong interest in Israel.

This study neither advocates that “half-Jewish” should become a new and accepted category in the Jewish community, nor does it argue that it should be the goal of Jewish organizations to make “half-Jews” feel like “whole Jews.” Rather this study seeks to provide a window into one of the many complexities of modern Jewish identity, particularly as is pertains to today’s Jewish youth. Consequently, this study does present the idea that Jewish identity should not be evaluated in a zero-sum framework; that one can maintain a strong Jewish identity while simultaneously, and without inherent conflict, maintaining a different religious, ethnic or cultural identity. There are of course many challenges, both personal and communal, that such dualities or multiplicities present. As such, better understanding this emerging identity will be crucial in working towards building closer and more positive relationships between self-identified half-Jews and Jewish communal institutions and organizations.

Half-Jewish, What’s that?

According to the website *halfjew.com* “a Half-Jew is someone who has one Jewish parent, and one none Jewish parent.” The site then continues, “This is a simple answer to a complicated question...”¹ A great deal has been said and debated about who may or may not qualify as a half-Jew or if it is even possible to be half-Jewish. Whereas Jewish legal scholars often argue that someone is either completely Jewish or not Jewish at all, the fact remains that there is now a large mass of people in the United States who identify as being half-Jewish. This may not be surprising given that roughly half the children in the United States who are identified as Jewish have at least one non-Jewish parent.² However, what people mean by identifying themselves as half-Jewish has not been made clear, particularly because people with one non-Jewish parent also often identify as either completely Jewish or not Jewish at all. For the purposes of this study half-Jews were defined simply as people that self identify as half-Jewish.

¹ <http://www.halfjew.com/html/faq/>

² Klein, Daniel and Freke Vuijst. *The Half-Jewish Book*. Villard Books: New York, 2000. p. xv

Facebook and the Jewish Community

A poll conducted in March of 2007 by a major American marketing firm found that Facebook.com was overwhelmingly the most viewed website by 17-25 year-olds.³ Subsequently, in 2007 the word “Facebook” came in second on Merriam-Webster’s words of the year. Whereas less than a decade ago we were still seeking to capture contemporary trends and information through the use of telephone records and phone surveys (a tedious, time consuming and costly process), today Facebook provides almost direct access to probably the vast majority of today’s Jewish youth. The half-Jewish respondents in this survey were identified through their membership in a one of a variety of half-Jewish Facebook groups (“Half-Jew,” “Jewish? Only half? It’s ok,” “Asian and Jewish”...) and were sent the survey via a Facebook message.

The Facebook Survey

For the purposes of this study two different surveys were distributed, garnering over 550 responses. The first survey has an estimated response rate of 44% and the second survey had an estimated response rate of 22-27%.

Survey respondent details:

- 70% female vs. 30% male
- Averaged 20 years old, with a median respondent age of 18
- 33% had Jewish mothers vs. 66% that had Jewish fathers
- Came from 110 distinct North American locations

Additionally a survey was sent out to members of generic Jewish Facebook groups to be used as a comparison cohort. This survey garnered 121 responses, roughly 12% of which came from respondents with intermarried parents.⁴

Facebook Bias:

It should be acknowledged utilizing Facebook to identify a particular cohort may have resulted in creating biases in this study’s findings. This is due to several reasons, including, but not limited to, the fact that members of Facebook groups have interwoven social circles and the notion that those who would be inclined to join half-Jewish groups may have a positive disposition towards the identity. For this reason, among others, this report, does not seek to focus on or draw conclusions from narrow statistical difference or correlations, but rather to highlight clearly emerging trends and the potential questions and consequences that they raise.

³ “Facebook Extends Lead As Fave Young Adult Site” *emarketer.com*, March 2, 2007.

⁴ Unless noted the term “respondents” in this study refers to the half-Jewish respondent group.

Key Findings:

1. There is a clear clash of views in how people that identify as “half-Jewish” understand the term, and how the more engaged “Jewish” population views the term, potentially leading to tension between the two groups.
2. Respondents appeared to construct their “half-Jewish identity among a spectrum of religious, ethnic and familial formations. Subsequently, respondents’ view their half-Jewish identity in a positive light, with a mentality that they are privileged to be exposed to and/or experience multiple world/ideas.
3. Respondents’ Jewish experiences are tied closely to familial or personal connections, and are generally not connected to communal organizations or institutions.
4. While respondents have a low level of connection to their Jewish communities and Jewish organizations, they still have a significant sense of Jewish peoplehood and ethnicity.
5. Even though respondents exhibited weak connections to Israel, they still displayed a strong interest in Israel.
6. Although respondents have a positive Jewish identity they seemed to have an aversion to Jewish particularity, as demonstrated in the low levels of respondents that preferred to exclusively marry other Jews or raise their children solely Jewish.

1. A Clash of Views

Interestingly, one of the clearest contrasts that emerged between the half-Jewish respondents and the comparison respondents, was the popular expression among the comparison group that “one cannot be half-Jewish” and the seemingly widespread frustration among the half-Jewish group of being told “you’re either Jewish or you’re not Jewish” by others who don’t seem understand what they mean by half-Jewish. One can see from the following quotes a narrative of tension, confusion and resentment between the two groups.

- *I don't believe there is a "half-Jewish", and I tell people there is no such thing. It doesn't matter to me if one's father and/or mother isn't Jewish, but my feelings are if you are raised or if you convert Jewish, you're Jewish. You can't be half a religion or half a culture or half an ethnicity*
- *My father is Jewish, and my mother is not, so technically I am not Jewish at all due to the fact that religion is passed down from the mother's side. I feel that this "rule" is not necessarily correct. Half of my family is Jewish, and I have been brought up to cherish and understand my Jewish roots. If that doesn't make me at least "half-Jewish" I don't know what does.*
- *I feel that they [half-Jews] are confused about their identity as well as misinformed about the term. One cannot be half-Jewish just as one cannot be half-pregnant. You're either Jewish or you're not. The origin of the term is from Hitler, so anyone who actually thinks of themselves as half-Jewish also subscribes to the idea of the Jews as a race.*
- *I believe that if one parent is Jewish and the other one isn't, it's important to feel a connection to the other religion, in addition to Judaism because we all have half of our father's DNA, half of our mother's. I don't want to abandon one or the other, so I'd rather honor both.*

- *I think they [half-Jews] feel like being Jewish is some sort of feeling a person gets or like a nationality. I feel that people who say they are half-Jewish really don't know what they mean and are like little children using words they don't understand*
- Being half-Jewish is mostly a positive thing, and people should try to understand it more. I definitely do not feel like it is a burden or that it alienates me at all. Instead I feel like it broadens my opportunity to learn more about religion and culture. It's a blessing, really.
- *To me, there really is no such thing as "half-Jewish." To be Jewish, one must be completely and whole-heartedly Jewish; one must be fully committed to Judaism, not just half committed.*
- There is a whole other side of the family with a completely different religion. It can't just be ignored. These issues need to be discussed.

As can be seen by graph there was also a clear contrast among the half-Jewish cohort and comparison cohort as to what being half-Jewish referred to.

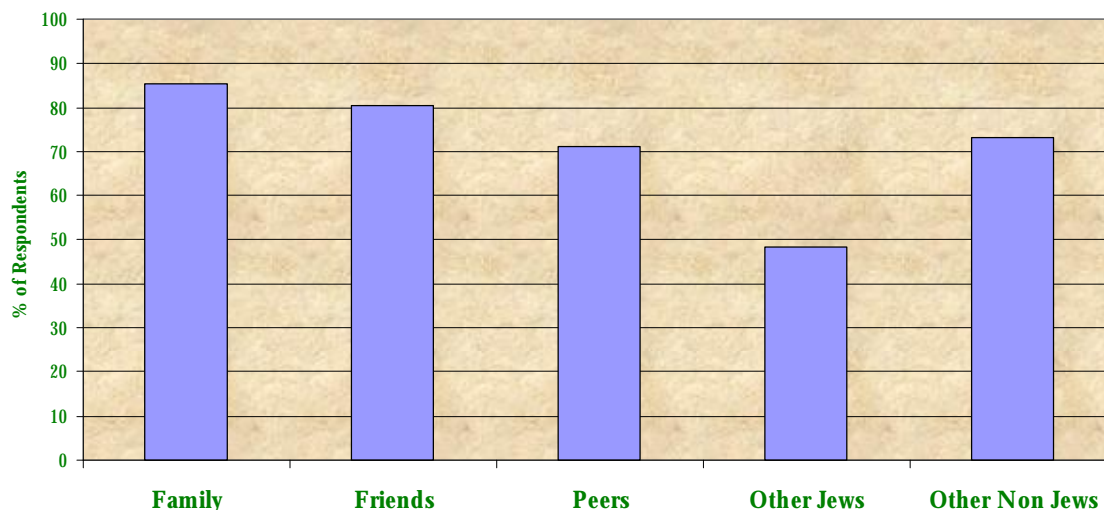


Interestingly, half-Jews seemed to be aware of, and are often frustrated by, the halakic nature in which their identity is evaluated or discounted, with one respondent stating,

“I don't understand why the Jewish community feels such a strong need to prevent the half-Jew from having some identification - at least culturally - with Judaism. If I could change one thing about Judaism, it would be matrilineal law. It has been the bane of my life.”

Further, more than half of the respondents in the half-Jewish survey said that other Jews would probably or definitely not view them as half-Jewish, even though a strong majority of respondents thought that their family, friends and peers would definitely or probably view them as half-Jewish.

I believe the following groups of people would view me as half-Jewish



2. Respondents view of their half-Jewish identity

The question of why precisely someone would identify as half-Jewish appears to have several answers, stemming from the finding that people defined the identity among a spectrum of religious, ethnic and familial formations.

When asked to complete the statement “The non-Jewish half of me is...”:⁵

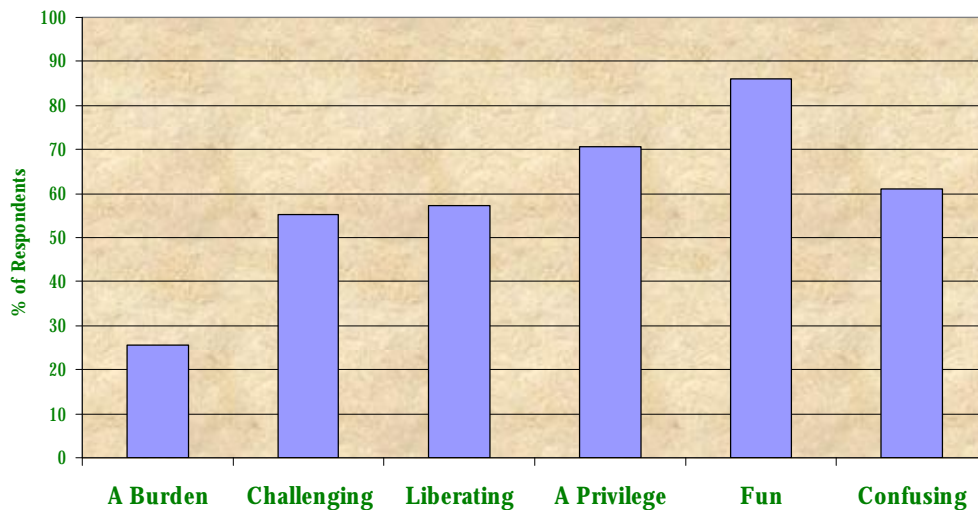
- 40% stated some form of Christianity
- 28% listed either their mother or father
- 19% stated another ethnicity (such as Irish, Italian or Swedish)
- 15% listed variety of other things such answers as:
 - wishing I had learned more about the faith as a child
 - the top half lol
 - eating pork
 - The part of me that doesn't believe in religion
 - a mix of the good parts of every religion

It is of interest to note that of those who identified their other half as Christian, less than 40% stated that “half-Jewish” referred to someone’s “beliefs” or “practices.”

⁵ Some respondents list their other half as including both a religion and an ethnicity such as “Hispanic and Catholic” causing the percentiles to add up to over 100%.

Respondents were asked about their view of being half-Jewish. As the chart below displays the majority of respondents listed being half-Jewish as being fun and a privilege, and only a small minority listed it as being a burden. These findings generally place being half-Jewish in a positive light. This is perhaps not surprising given that the respondents all belonged to Facebook groups that could be viewed as celebrating the identity.

Being half-Jewish is very or somewhat...



When asked what the hardest thing was about being half-Jewish, several common narratives arose, the most prominent being a weak or no sense of belonging or connection, which frequently stemmed from feelings of rejection or lack of acceptance by the Jewish community. As one respondent expressed it is, “the lack of acceptance from mainstream American synagogues, who are often very hostile towards half-Jews” or another who said it was, “when people say, ‘oh, so you’re not REALLY a Jew.’” Others expressed how they faced rejection and intolerance from both sides, such as “facing discrimination for being Jewish from some people, but then being called a ‘fake Jew’ by others.”

For many there was clear frustration about the difficulty in explaining to others what it meant to be half-Jewish, as one respondent wrote, “people arguing/opposing the ‘half-Jewish’ identity (people misunderstanding the idea that an individual can identify with the Jewish religion and specifically Jewish culture while at the same time relating to another cultural presence).” Other respondents expressed remorse at their lack of Jewish knowledge or experience. As one put it, “trying to work out where I fit with practicing (real) Jews. They consider me one of them, but there are huge gaps in my knowledge and the fact that my mother was born and raised Jewish won’t fill in those gaps in my own knowledge” Lastly, there were several expressions of having to choose sides or the difficulty of having to negotiate between two different worlds.

Alternatively, when asked what the best thing about being half-Jewish was, among the most frequent themes expressed were the exposure to multiple worlds or cultures and the ability to navigate between them. Respondents also stated how they were fortunate to

have the opportunity to learn about and be included in multiple cultures and how this exposure made them more open-minded and less judgmental. As one put it:

I feel connected to Judaism, but I also feel that I am more objective about many issues than members of my family. Sometimes I feel like a mediator--bridging the gap between their world-views and the mainstream. I am also not as quick to see Anti-Semitism as a motivation for many things that they do.

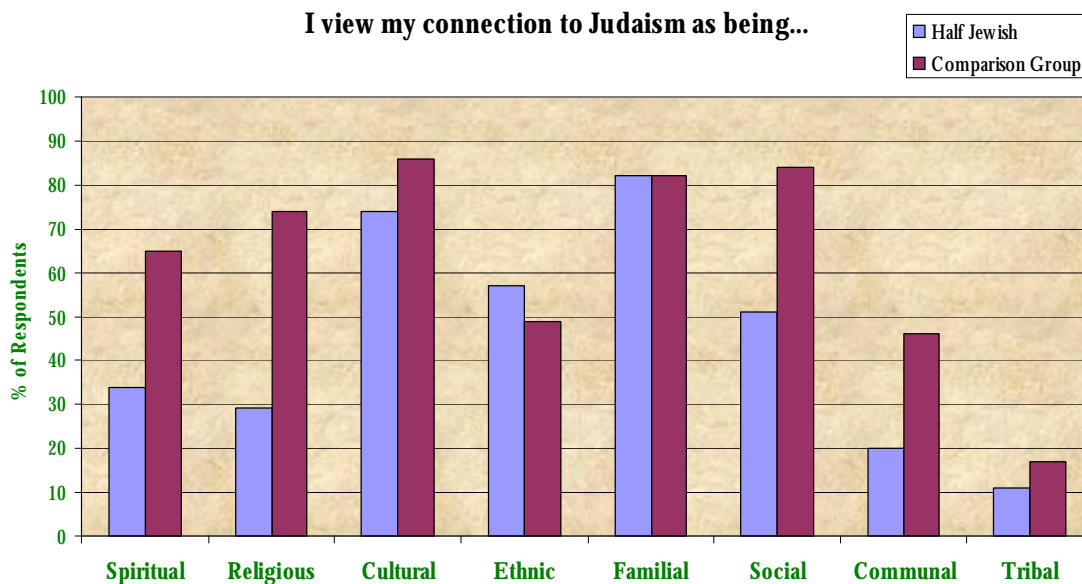
Or another:

Being comfortable with both Jews and non-Jews, understanding both sides and being able adapt to either one on command

In particular many also expressed the positive of being able to celebrate the holidays of two traditions (“both Christmas and Hannukah!”). There were also frequent responses about how being half-Jewish made them special or unique like, “My other half makes me more exotic-ish, and less likely to get cancer” or “I’m unique! McJew, baby!”

3. Jewish experiences and expressions

Family and culture appeared to play a central role in the manner in which half-Jews connected to and expressed their Judaism, whereas community or communal organizations seemed to play a marginal role at best. The chart below denotes the manners in which respondents viewed their connection to Judaism with familial and cultural being the most frequent types of connections and religious, communal and tribal being the least frequent types.



Respondents were also asked to complete the sentence “I most express my Judaism through/when I...” Two major patterns emerged in this answer set, the first being holidays and the second being a strong connection to family.

Respondents mention of:

- **Holidays:** 38%
- **Family :** 29%
- Synagogue/services: 12%
- Traditions and Rituals: 12%
- Discussions: 11%
- Culture: 10%
- Friends: 6%
- **Communal Organizations:** 4%

Of the answers relating to Jewish holidays, the two most frequently mentioned were Chanukah and Passover. Of those that presented their answer in conjunction with their family, examples included “celebrate high holidays with my Dad” or “am with my mother's side of the family.” Grandparents and other relatives were also referenced in several answers. Interestingly, although respondents appeared to have a strong connection with Jewish culture, only a small percentage of the responses presented solely cultural things, such as “cook Jewish food” or “speak Yiddish.” Conspicuously absent, especially from this age cohort, was connection to Jewish organizations or institutions (beyond synagogue) such as youth groups, summer camps or Hillel, which accounted for only 3% of all answers. When examined against the comparison group who cited Jewish organizations in roughly 28% of their answers, and only cited holidays in 12% and family in 7%, we can see a clear contrast in the manners in which these two groups are expressing their Judaism.

In terms of expressing their non-Jewish side similar patterns emerged.

Respondents mention of:

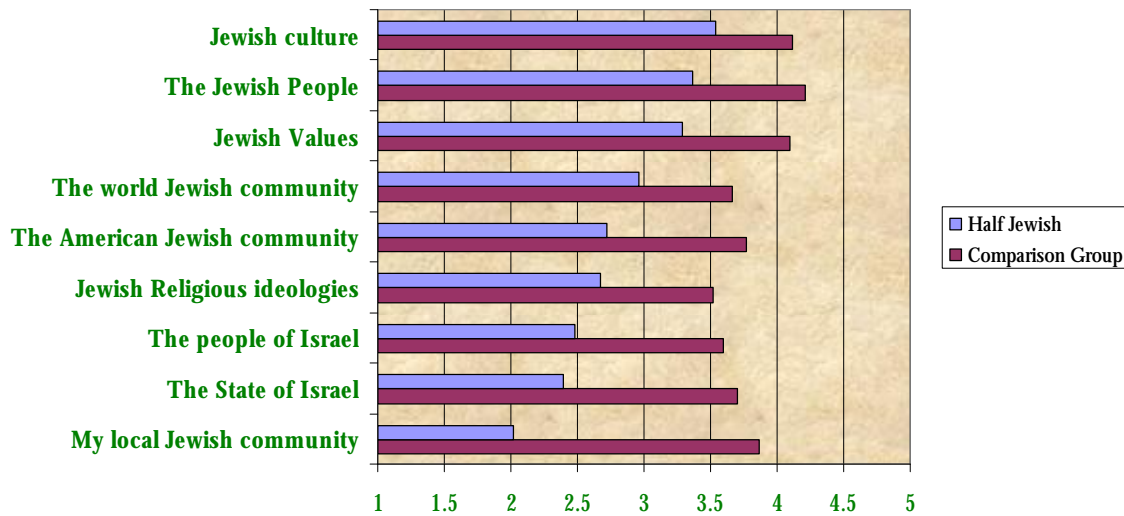
- Holidays: 31%
- Family: 20%
- Church/Services: 17%
- Jewish Oppositional : 11%

Intriguingly, there were also a significant series of answers, categorized as Jewish oppositional such as “am unfamiliar with traditions, with religious practices and Hebrew/Yiddish words,” “don’t regularly attend Shabbat Service” or “Eat pork, eat dairy and meat together and don't observe the Sabbath. Subsequently it also of interest to note that there was a positive correlation between how respondents expressed their Jewish and non-Jewish sides as related to either family or holidays.

4. Jewish Connections

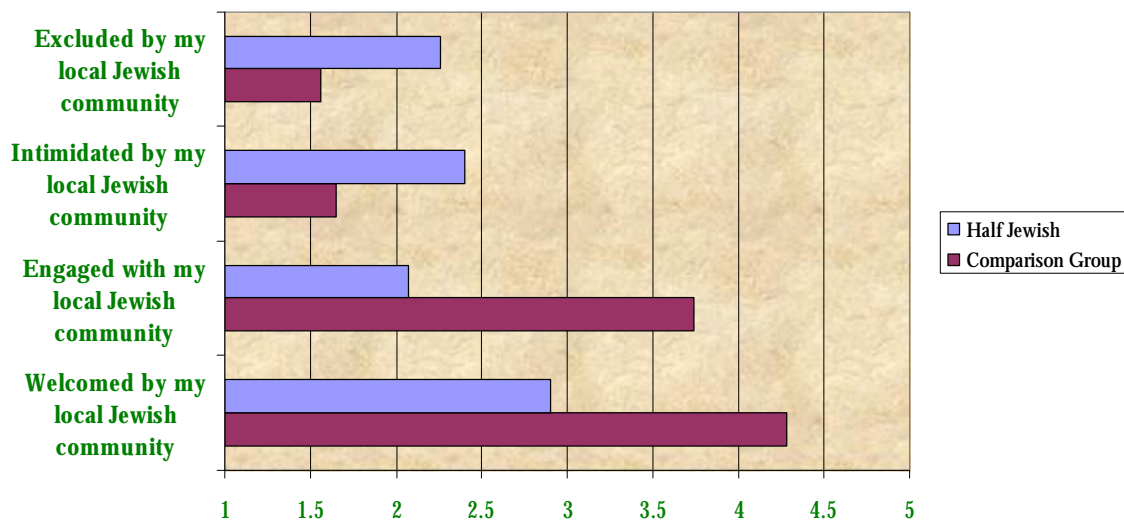
Respondents were asked to rate their feeling of connection to several Jewish things on a scale from 1-5 (5 being the highest). In this case Jewish culture, people and values received the highest rankings, whereas Jewish religious ideologies, the State of Israel and my local Jewish community received the lowest.

Respondents' Levels of Feeling Connected to...



In looking at the respondents' connection to their local Jewish community, as can be seen below there is clear difference between how the half-Jewish respondents and the comparison respondents felt about and related to their local community.

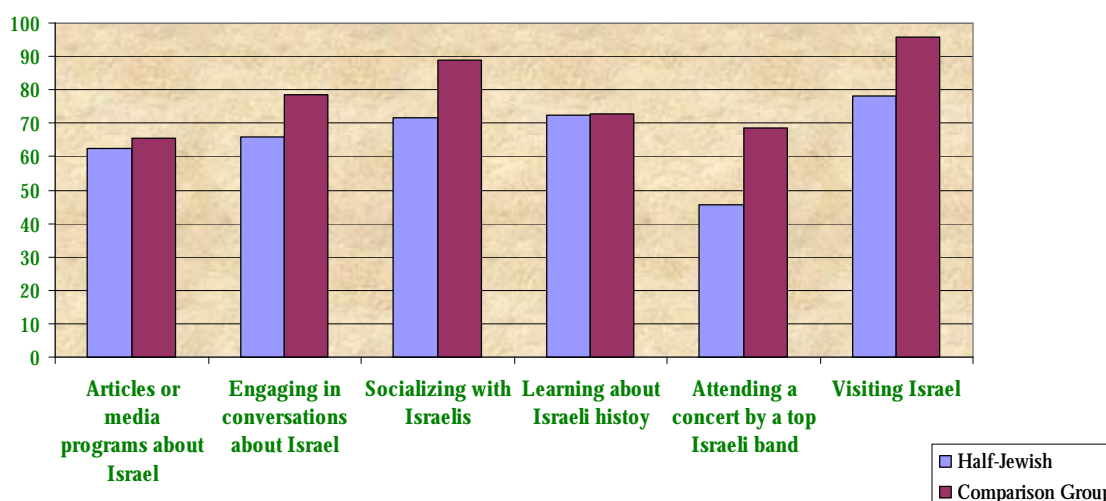
Respondents' Levels of Feeling of...



5. Interest in Israel

In looking more closely at respondents' relationship to Israel, we were able to see that although the half-Jewish respondents displayed a low level of connection to the State and its people, as the chart below demonstrates, they also showed a very high level of interest in Israel related activities. It's important to note, that although the comparison group displayed a much stronger connection to Israel, the levels of interest in Israel between the two groups was nearly equal.

Percentage of Respondents that would "definitely" or "probably" be interested in...



6. Half-Jewish Continuity

Respondents were asked their preferences for a marriage partner (with the option of choosing more than one answer). Their response broke down as:

Marriage Preferences:

- No Preference: 73%
- Jewish: 25%
- Half-Jewish: 21%
- Non-Jewish: 15%
- Other: 6%

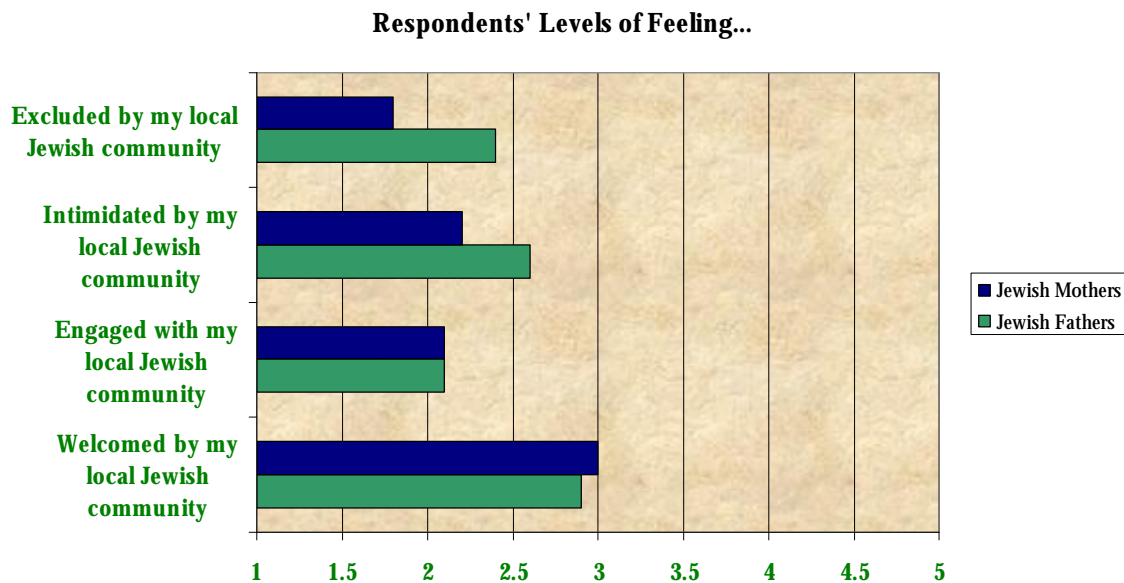
Interestingly, even among those that listed Jewish, 71% also selected half-Jewish, 36% also selected non-Jewish, and 27% also listed no preference.

When asked their preferences for raising their children, respondents' answers broke down as:

- Jewish: 26%
- Undecided/No Preference: 20%
- Would let their Children Decide: 16%
- Christian: 12%
- Agnostic/Atheist/No Religion: 11%
- Other: 9%
- Half-Jewish/Combination: 5%

7. Jewish Mothers v Jewish Fathers

Given the split 1/3 to 2/3 among split among half- Jewish respondents having Jewish mothers and respondents having Jewish fathers, and the generally accepted narrative that religious identity is most likely to be passed through the mother, it is important to note that in general, there were almost no clear cut differences in how either cohort connected to their Judaism, felt about being half-Jewish or their levels of connection to various Jewish concepts or ideas. People with Jewish father's did seem to find it slightly more confusing, and were somewhat less likely to want to marry someone Jewish (differences in rates of raising children Jewish were negligible). The only factors that clearly stood out between the two groups were their relationship to their local Jewish communities. As the chart below displays the respondents with Jewish fathers felt nearly twice as excluded from and more intimidated by their local Jewish communities than people with Jewish mothers.



Analysis

Even among those that identify as half-Jewish, the term itself appears to have taken on a variety of different meanings. Central to the formation of the half-Jewish identity seems to be respondents' positive relationship to their family's multiple heritages. Although these relationships may in some ways or instances be in competition with each other, the half-Jewish identity might be viewed more as a result of collaboration than conflict. Thus, for many identifying as half-Jewish does not mean that they fluctuate between identifying as Jewish and identifying as something else, but that they honor and appreciate both of their "halves" and that they view their experience of being exposed to/immersed in multiple heritages as providing them with unique insights, abilities or character traits (i.e. being open minded or having the ability to navigate complex cultural settings).

Half-Jewish respondents appeared very willing to challenge and defy their perceived sense of Jewish normativity. The half-Jewish group seems to be very aware that many Jews either don't believe that someone can be half-Jewish or don't view the term in a positive light (as highlighted in the responses of the comparison group). Further, more than half of the respondents in the half-Jewish survey said that they did not believe that other Jews would view them as half-Jewish. This could be viewed as a rejection of perceived Jewish norms and/or as a reflection of the social distance between half-Jews and the Jewish community, given that 80% of respondents did believe their friends would view them as half-Jewish and 70% said the same of their peers.

The perceived challenging of Jewish normativity might also be a result of the study's Facebook medium. In a sense Facebook has offered a Jewish venue, which exists and operates completely outside the reins of Jewish institutions and the Jewish community at large. This "unregulated" venue which both allows for and encourages Jewish expression and experimentation, also alleviates issues of critical mass, which can be central barriers to group identity formation and solidification, by facilitating the interaction of people with minority identities or affiliations, in this case people that identify as half-Jewish. Of interest to note is the fact that since the beginning of this study in March of 2007, the number of half-Jewish Facebook groups has more than doubled and the membership in the three largest half-Jewish groups has risen from 527 to 972.

Overall, respondents expressed the experience of being half-Jewish in a positive light. This is perhaps not surprising given that the respondents all belonged to half-Jewish Facebook groups that could be viewed as celebrating the identity. Intriguing though, is the roughly 25% that view being half-Jewish as a burden, these respondents may challenge the notion that "half-Jewish" is an identity of choice (as opposed to being inherent, in a manner similar to the way in which many previous generations felt about their Jewish identity). One the other hand, it could also convey that for these respondents the burdens of being half-Jewish are outweighed by the positives. It is difficult to discern what might be made of the equal splits between confusing and challenging. However, given that the majority of those respondents that preferred to raise their children Jewish or preferred to marry someone Jewish viewed half-Jewish as being challenging and confusing, it may be that such feelings are in fact signs of a strong Jewish identity

Half-Jews appear to be mainly experiencing and connecting with their Judaism in a manner that is tied closely to family traditions and celebrations, and is in many ways very distant from and not engaged with Jewish communal organizations. Overall these findings convey a form of Jewish identity that is very personal in nature. Interestingly, a large number of respondents who stated that they most expressed their non-Jewish halves, in what might be viewed in a Jewish oppositional framework (eating pork, not going to synagogue, not understanding Hebrew). In many ways these “oppositional” answers might speak to centrality of Judaism in the manner in which these respondents form or view their identities.

Of particular interest are the findings that although half-Jews did not have a strong connection to actual Jewish institutions or communities, they still maintained a significance connection to the meta-notion of peoplehood, or an intangible collective. Further, the fact that despite having a minimal connection to Israel, the half-Jewish respondents appeared to have near equal levels of interest in matters Israel related as those displayed in the comparison group, presents a clear notion that whereas half-Jews may not currently have a strong connection to Israel, there is great potential and interest for those connections to be formed.

In their expressed preference marriage and for raising their children we see a reticence towards Jewish particularity. Interestingly, the fact that such a small percentage of the half-Jewish respondents would like to raise their children as half-Jewish, may present the notion that perhaps half-Jews don’t view it as something that can really be passed on; that it is closely tied to their individual experience of growing up in a mixed marriage. The 45% of respondents who had no preference/were undecided, would let their children choose, or expressed answers not tied to any particular religious or ethnic tradition, may be reflective of their preference for an ideology that is welcoming/appreciating of or at least not prejudice against either of their two heritages.

Questions and Impact for the Jewish community

For many the notion of being half-Jewish is a threatening sign of assimilation, however it is not yet clear whether 20 years ago, the people that identify as half-Jewish today, would have identified as completely Jewish or completely something else. Subsequently, it could be viewed as an encouraging sign that half-Jews have exhibited a way to maintain a significant Jewish identity, while simultaneously identifying with and experiencing a completely different culture. In a society where an estimated half of today's Jewish youth now probably come from intermarried families, we must begin to put aside many of our fears and prejudices and work towards engaging anyone that wants to further their relationship and experiences with Judaism. Engagement with this particular population both poses many difficult challenges as well as presents a variety of potential opportunities.

Fundamentally, the notion of half-Jewish challenges several common Jewish norms, prominently among them what it means to identify as Jewish as well as what it may mean to be raised Jewish. Further, people identifying as half-Jewish, raises the novel notion of having a positive dual heritage; that one can have a strong Jewish identity while also having a strong connection to another heritage, culture, ethnicity or religion. Past theories on identity posited that such duality would be irreconcilable and in constant conflict. However, people that identify as half-Jewish do not exhibit sentiments of being internally torn or confused about whom they are; rather many seem to be able to mesh their Jewish and other identities in a generally workable and positive harmony. More than anything half-Jews seem to struggle with finding acceptance and a place of belonging in the two communities, and particularly the Jewish community, that they identify with.

The fact that there is a significant, and seemingly well justified, sentiment of frustration among of half-Jews that their identities are either misunderstood or rejected by other Jews or the Jewish community, as well as the fact that they appear highly disconnect from Jewish organizations and institutions, signals that much must be questioned and evaluated in terms of how the Jewish community is responding to as well as seeking to engage people that identify as such. It seems intuitive that when someone identifies as half-Jewish, they would feel rejected or uncomfortable if they were then questioned as to which of their parents was Jewish. However, it may be counter intuitive to understand that if one were to tell that same person that they were completely Jewish, this might also have the effect of making them feel uncomfortable or misunderstood, because in a sense it would also being challenging how they identify, and placing them in a category which they have actively sought not to be in.

Although, many people from intermarried families are raised mainly or exclusively Jews, this does not mean they have no connection to or identification the culture and traditions of their other parent. A great deal of Jewish programming places a strong emphasis on highlighting and appreciating the importance of one's heritage and ancestral history. Yet what has not been accounted for is that for many people appreciating and connecting to their heritage may mean doing so in relation to both their Jewish and non-Jewish halves. If we tell people that Israel is the land of their ancestors and their historical if not

“rightful” homeland, what effect does it have when they begin to think about the “homeland” of their non-Jewish ancestors? Rarely, if ever, has the Jewish community provided a space for the people that may struggle with these issues to explore them in a safe and comfortable environment. The Jewish community must find a way to be sensitive to these other connections and identities while still seeking to promote Jewish identity and experience.

In seeking to engage this population in will be critical to account for the strong values they express towards being open-minded as well as their aversions to particularism. This may poses many challenges, such as how to promote things like Jewish day schools or even Jewish summer camps to a person that might be predisposed against experiences that are inherently limiting or particular in their nature. Furthermore, those communal activities that are often central to the Jewish experience and expression of the more affiliated Jews, must be recognized as most likely being foreign to the way in which this population most frequently connects to their Judaism. Whereas communal events and experiences may be novel to half-Jews, they must be recognized as potentially intimidating or marginalizing. However, because their Jewish connections are so closely tied to family, engagement is all the more critically important because as this group ages and moves farther and farther away from their family, the less likely it is they will continue to find ways to connect with and express their Judaism.

In many ways the emergence and intricacies of the half-Jewish identity highlights our need to reexamine what have become fundamental assumptions in our evaluation of young Jews today. Weak connections with Jewish organizations and communities do not necessarily translate into weak notions of Jewish ethnicity or Jewish peoplehood. Further, just because one does not currently have a significant connection to Israel, does not mean the interest or motivation for building one is not there. In thinking about the concept of half-Jewish we must also recognize the increasing role that technology is playing in not only identity expression, but also identity formation. Jewish identity today is perhaps more fluid and complex than ever before. Only through exploring and learning to navigate these new complexities will the Jewish community be able to properly understand where we are today, and how we can get to where we want to go tomorrow.