



COVID and Jewish Engagement Research

Research Objectives

- Explore how the ongoing COVID pandemic has changed the role of Jewishness and Jewish activities in people's lives, and how it has or has not changed what it means to them to be Jewish
- Understand the role(s) that people see Jewish institutions, organizations, and communities playing in their lives right now and after the pandemic
- Map out how people observed the High Holy Days this year and why, particularly in comparison to their behavior in past years in order to better understand what it means for Jewish engagement going forward

Methodology

- Benenson Strategy Group surveyed 1,414 American Jews nationwide 18 and older from December 9-27, 2020.
- Surveys were conducted via online panel; respondents had all opted in to do research and receive invitations to the survey through their preferred method of contact. The survey then screened respondents for self-identification as Jewish.
- After fielding, data were weighted to ensure the sample was representative of the Jewish adult population of the United States.

Key Findings – COVID and Jewish Engagement

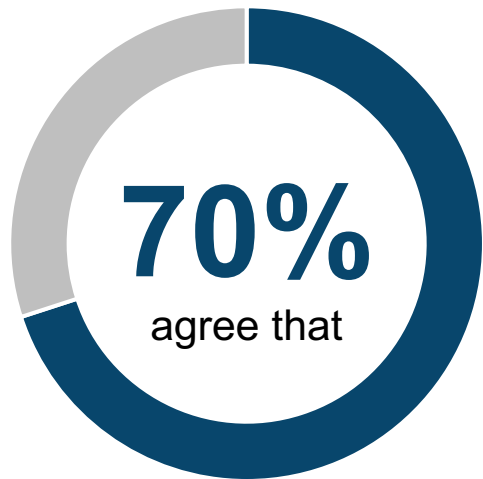
- The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have provided a unique opportunity for American Jews to connect or re-connect with their Jewish identity.
 - The combination of time, physical distance from others, hardship, sorrow, and a desire for meaning created by the pandemic has led American Jews to engage with their Jewishness as much as or more than before.
 - In fact, 1 in 3 Jews say being Jewish is “more important” to them, and while some are feeling less connected to their Jewish community due to the circumstances, a plurality of parents actually feel “more connected” during this time.
- This is demonstrated acutely in High Holiday behavior—while 56% say they did something for the High Holidays last year, 73% say they did something for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur in 2020.
 - What’s more, nearly half of “Infrequent Observers” found some way to engage—and most emerged with a positive experience. Their practices included traditional rituals and service attendance, but also significant amounts of non-traditional observance, including mindfulness practice, volunteer or charity work, and informal celebration with loved ones.
- Regular High Holiday observers tried to get as close to “normal” as possible during challenge circumstances, but feelings of disconnection from family and community were a constant undercurrent. If anything, those looking differently at Jewishness in their lives are doing so out a newfound recommitment to their families, friends, and communities.
- That said, Jewish organizations should look to bring this year’s focus on accessibility and relevance into future observances. More than a third of those who observed say they will definitely try new ways to observe going forward, including nearly half of Infrequent Observers who engaged with the High Holidays this year.



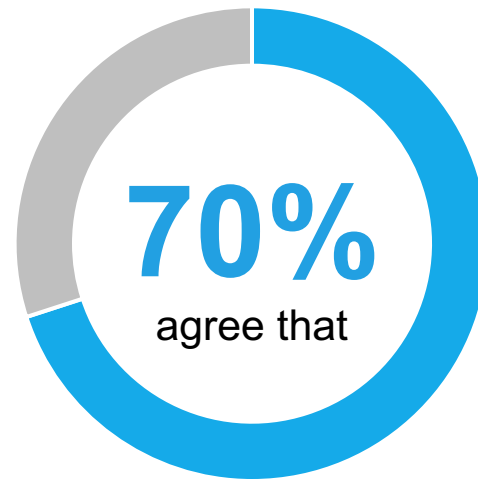
Experience and Jewish Behavior During the Pandemic

The pandemic experience has caused feelings of disconnection and a desire to re-prioritize what matters most

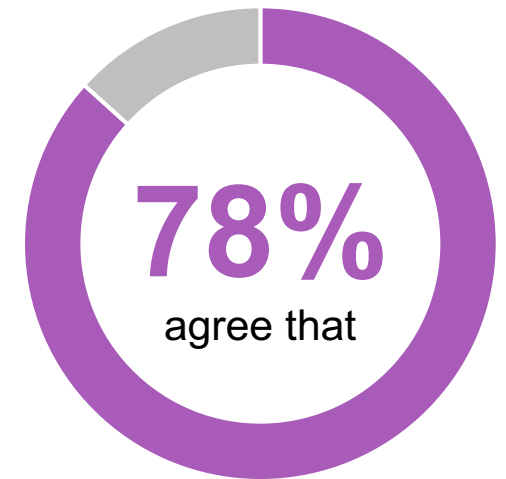
Universal experiences with the pandemic



*As the pandemic has worn on, I've felt more and more **disconnected from other people and communities.***
(26% strongly agree)



*I've found myself looking for **new ways to connect** with other people in some way.*
(27% strongly agree)



*This experience has helped me to **re-prioritize what is really important to me** in my life.*
(31% strongly agree)

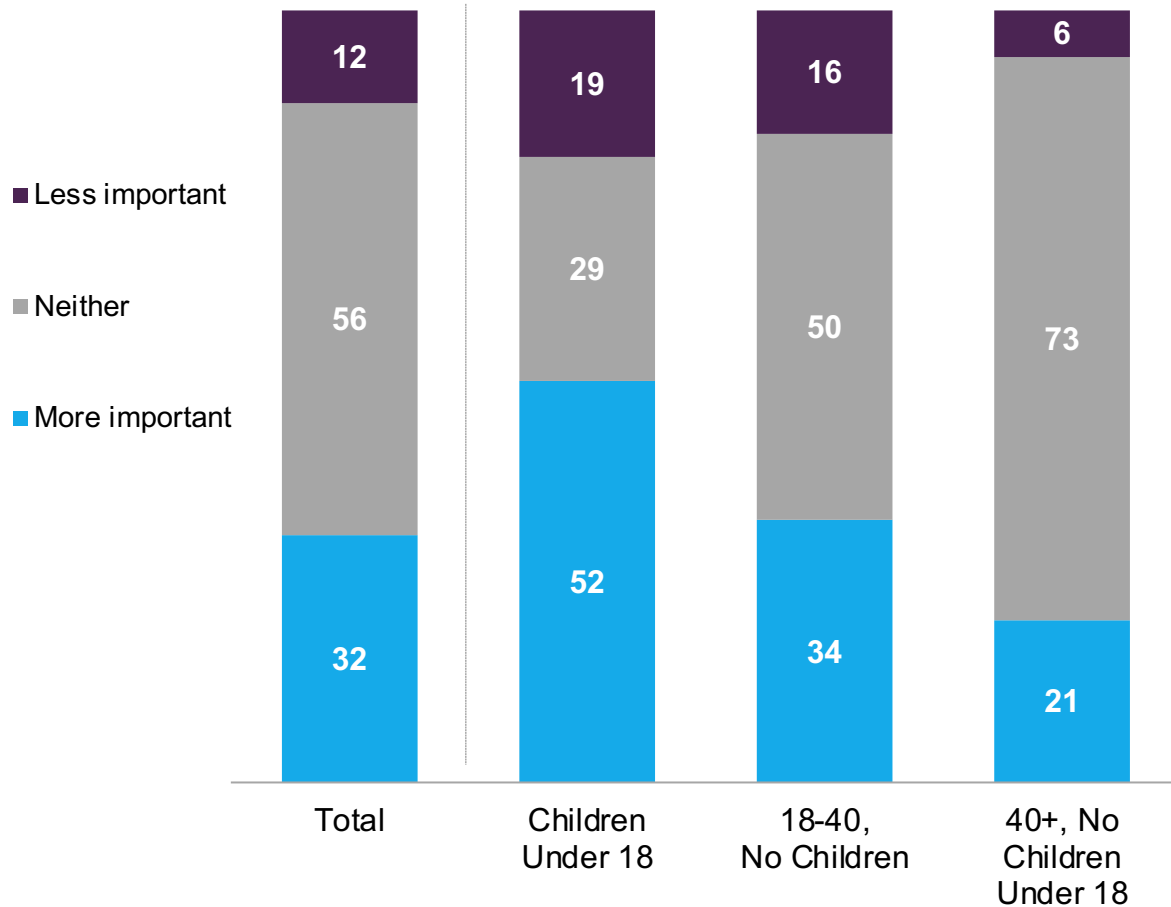
But there are indications that the pandemic is affecting younger adults and those with kids in a more acute, and possibly transformational, way

Experiences with the pandemic by life stage (% agree)

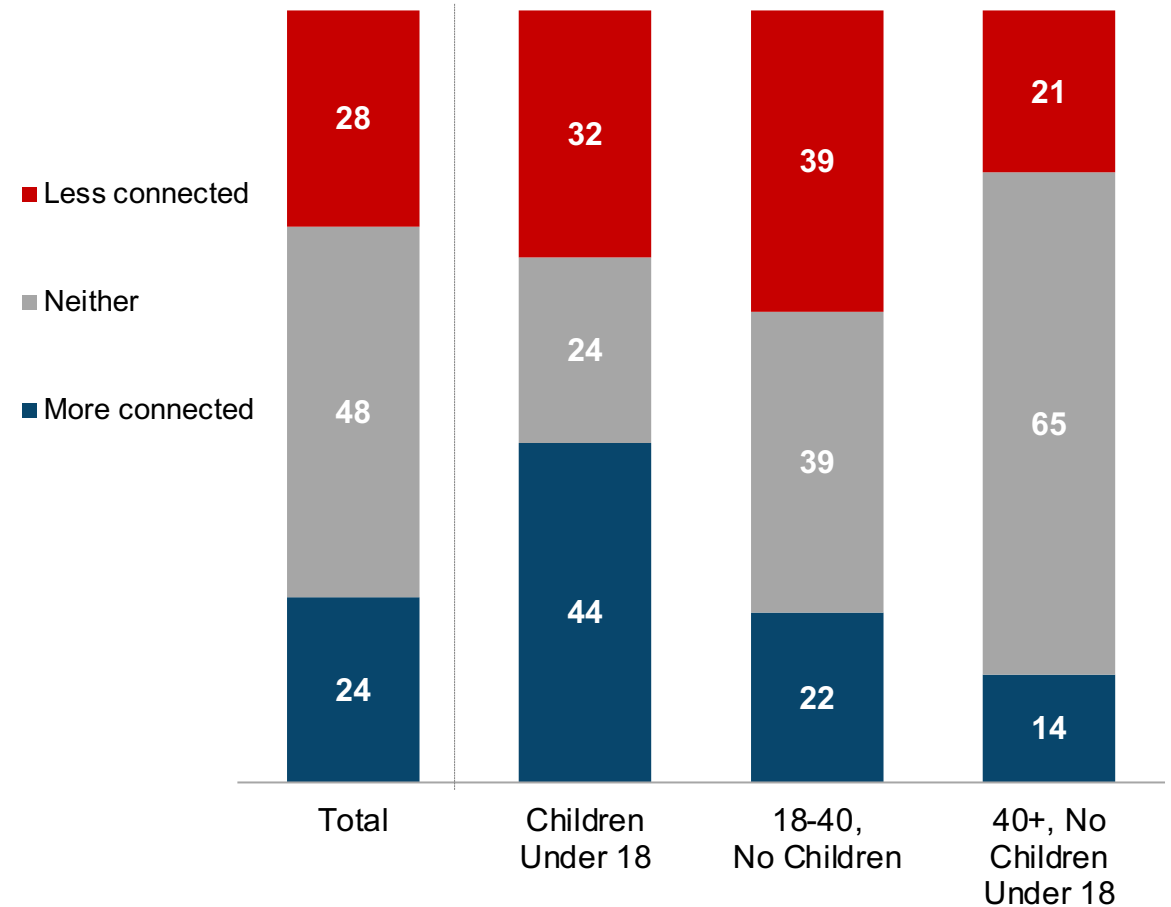
	Families With Children Under 18	18-40 Without Children	40+ With No Children at Home
<i>Are enjoying some aspects of pandemic life more than they expected...</i>	78	75	57
<i>Realize some things about pre-pandemic life weren't working for them...</i>	74	63	40
<i>Are making changes to their lives that they would like to stick with post-pandemic...</i>	78	71	59
<i>Are looking for new sources of support...</i>	80	72	48
<i>Feel sick of Zoom and other online platforms</i>	63	66	42

The pandemic is influencing how people feel about their Jewish identity, and it's highly tied to life stage

Would you say that being Jewish or doing Jewish things is more important to your life than before the pandemic, less important, or about the same? Asked of all



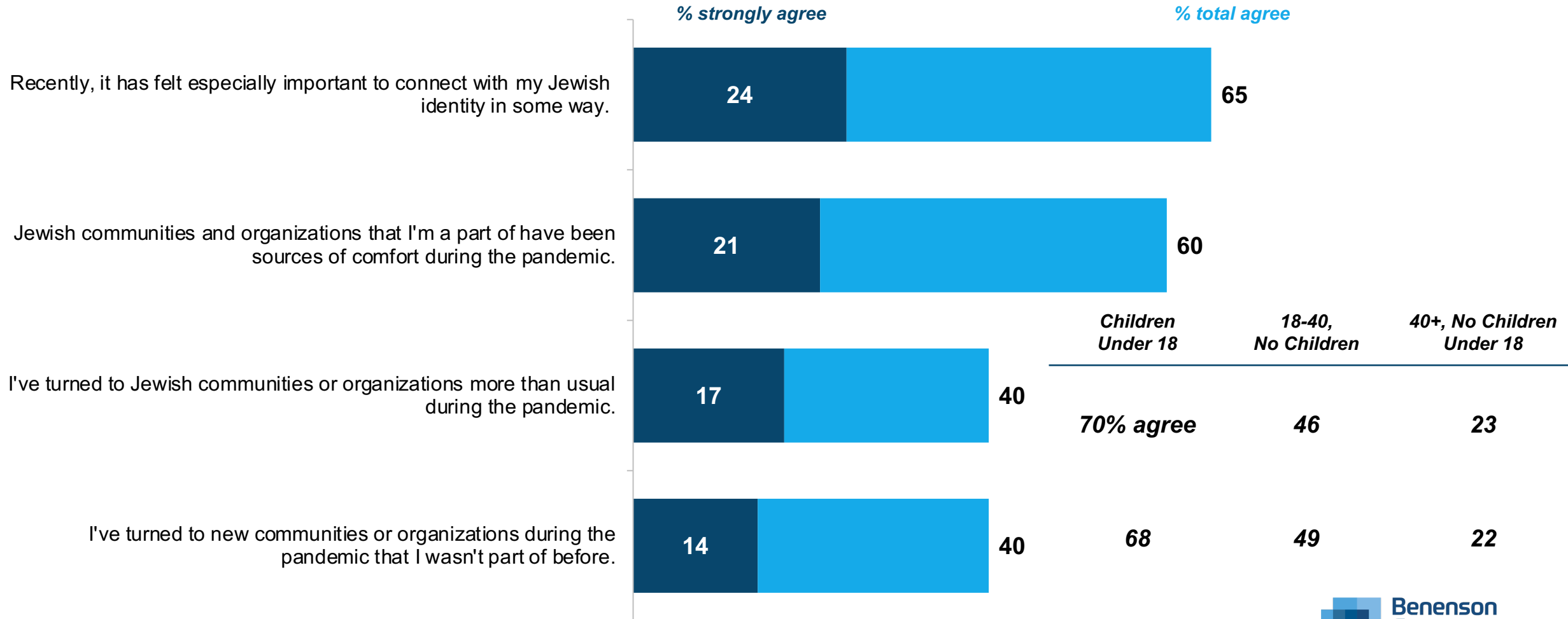
Do you currently feel more connected to a Jewish community than you did before the pandemic, less connected, or about the same? Asked of all



Overall, 76% say being Jewish is important to them right now and 59% feel connected to a Jewish community

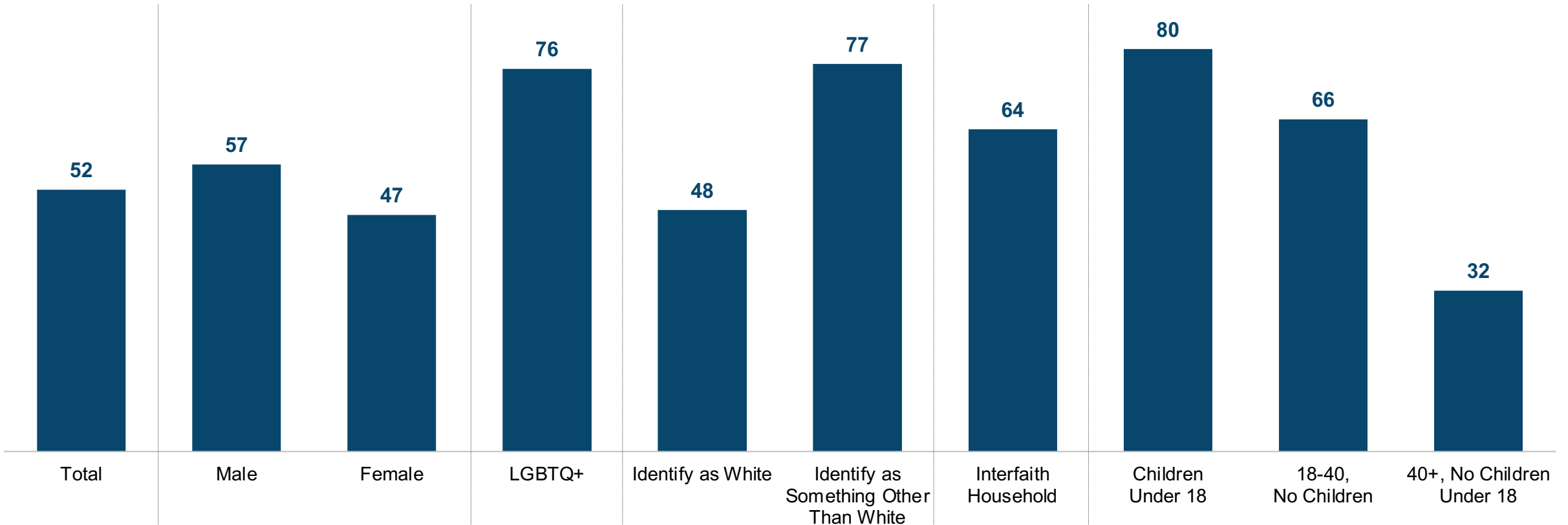
While most want to connect during this time, parents in particular are turning to the Jewish community and new organizations

Jewish attitudes related to the coronavirus pandemic



About half of American Jews have done something new that is Jewish since the pandemic started, particularly those with kids at home

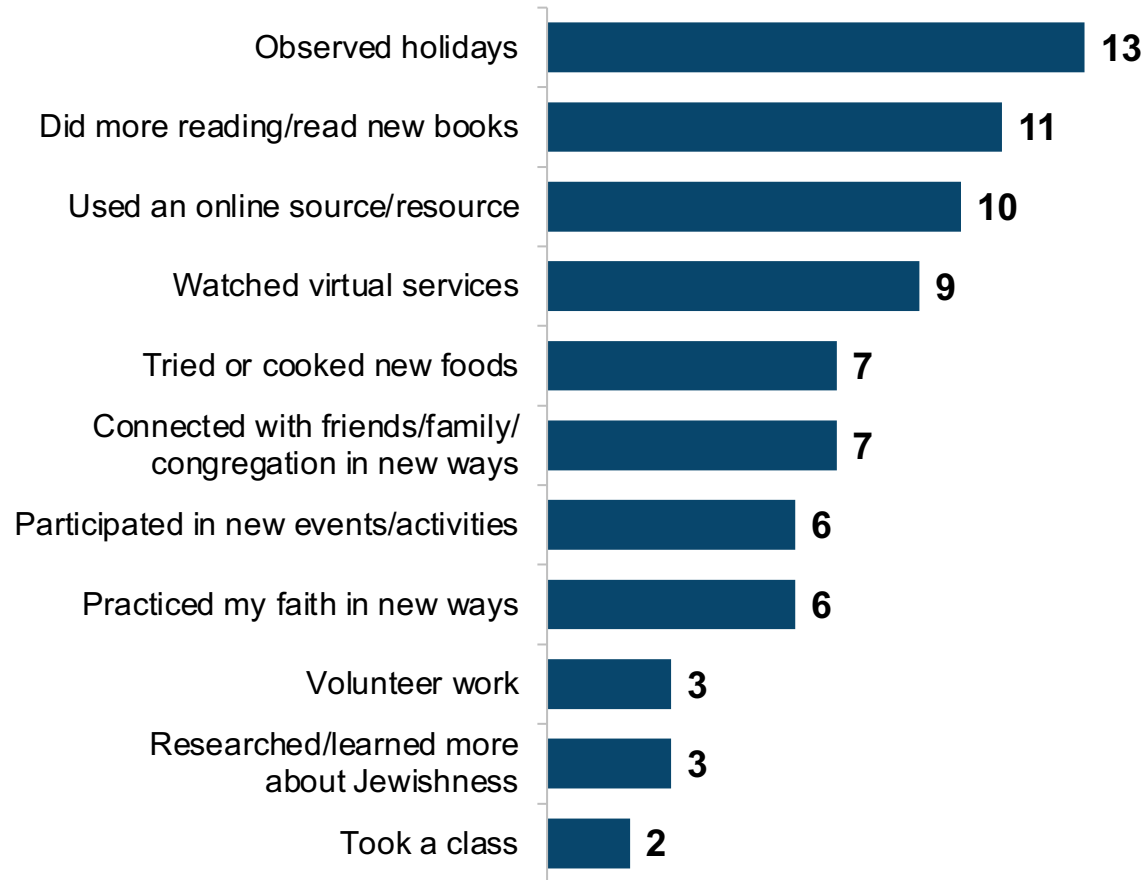
New Jewish activity during the pandemic
% who have done something new since the start of the pandemic



Includes: trying some new Jewish thing that you hadn't done before; participating in something with a new Jewish organization; observing a new Jewish ritual or holiday; or learning something new related to Jewishness

The fundamental way the pandemic has changed people's lives right now has provided the space and opportunity to connect with their Jewishness

*What specifically did you do that was new, and what made you decide to do that?
Open-ended response, asked of those who have something new*

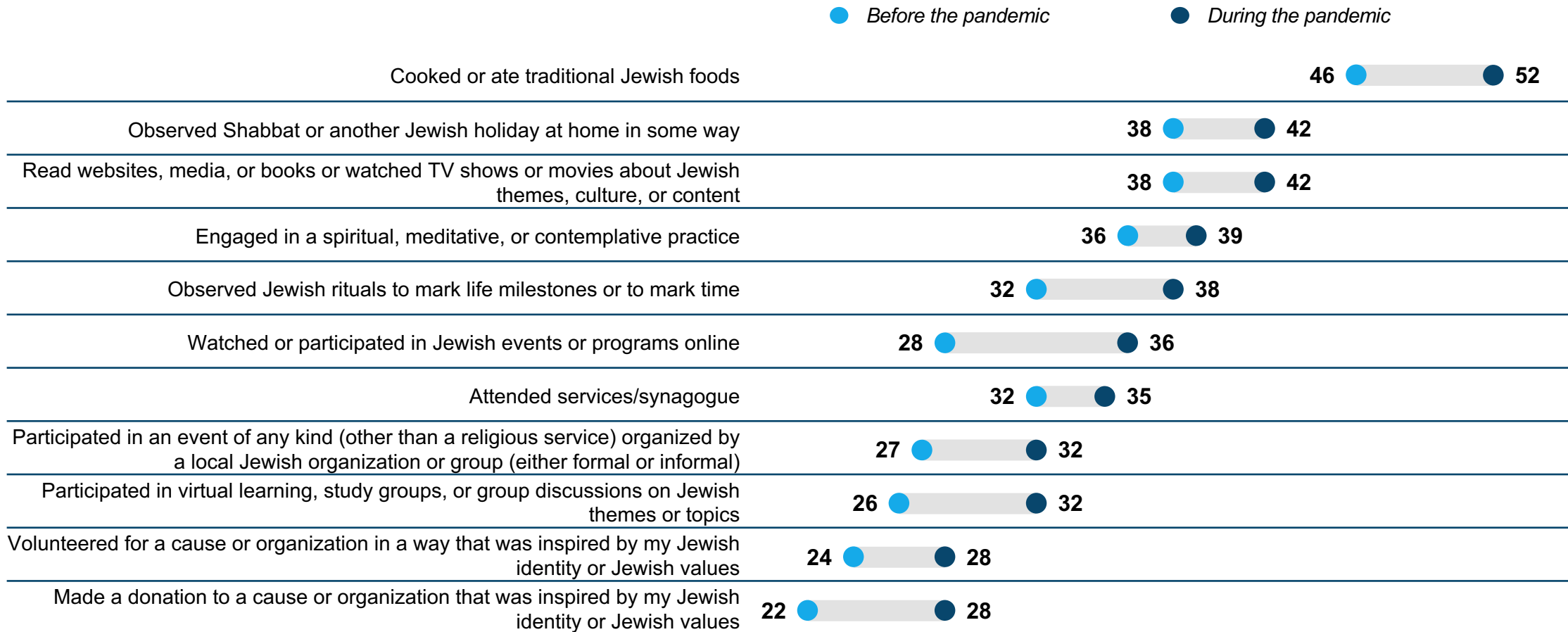


Non-specific responses or responses with 1% or less are not shown.

<u><i>In their own words</i></u>	
The pandemic has created...	
Community Hardship	<i>"I made a donation to a Jewish program as a contribution to assist the poor."</i>
Personal Sorrow	<i>"I have been learning more Jewish studies to commemorate my grandfather who passed during the pandemic."</i>
Limitations	<i>"I watched virtual services during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur with a synagogue other than my own because they were not doing a virtual service."</i>
Desire for meaning	<i>"I fasted during the High Holy Days which I had not done since I was a teenager. I discovered the spiritual meaning behind it. It helped me reflect on the year in a manner I had not before."</i>
Yearning for connection	<i>"I went to Zoom prayer services. I needed to feel that connection."</i>
Time	<i>"I read some new books on Judaism and the history of the Jewish people. I have done much more reading since the pandemic."</i>

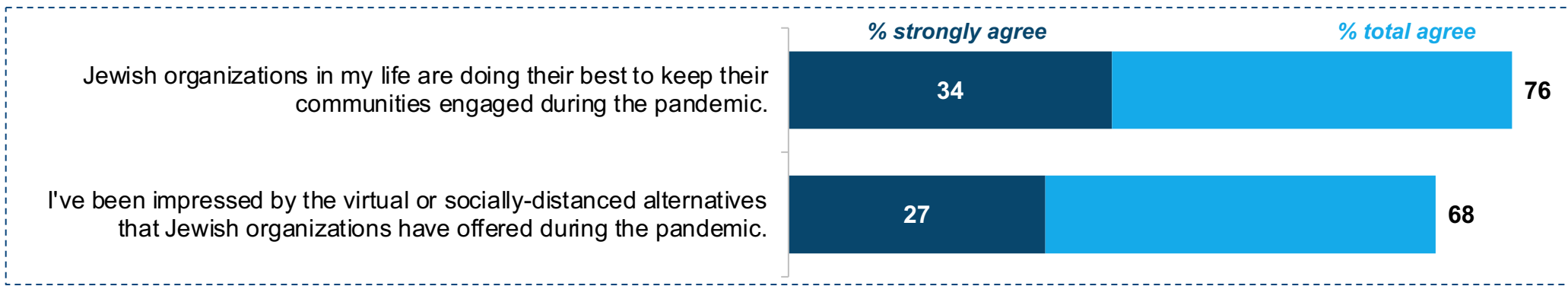
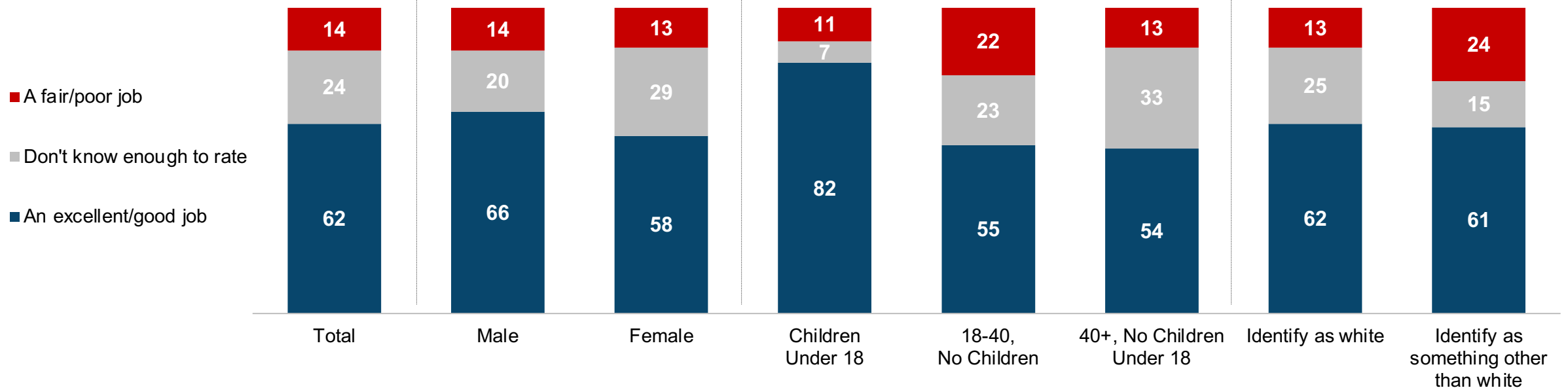
As a result, Jews are maintaining or increasing the level of Jewish activities in their lives—especially around food, ritual, and virtual programming

*How often respondents do various Jewish activities, before and during the pandemic
% monthly or more often, asked among all*



Overall, American Jews are pleased with the quality of programming during the pandemic, believing Jewish organizations are doing the best they can

How would you rate the job Jewish organizations are doing in providing opportunities for engagement during the pandemic? Are they doing... Asked of all

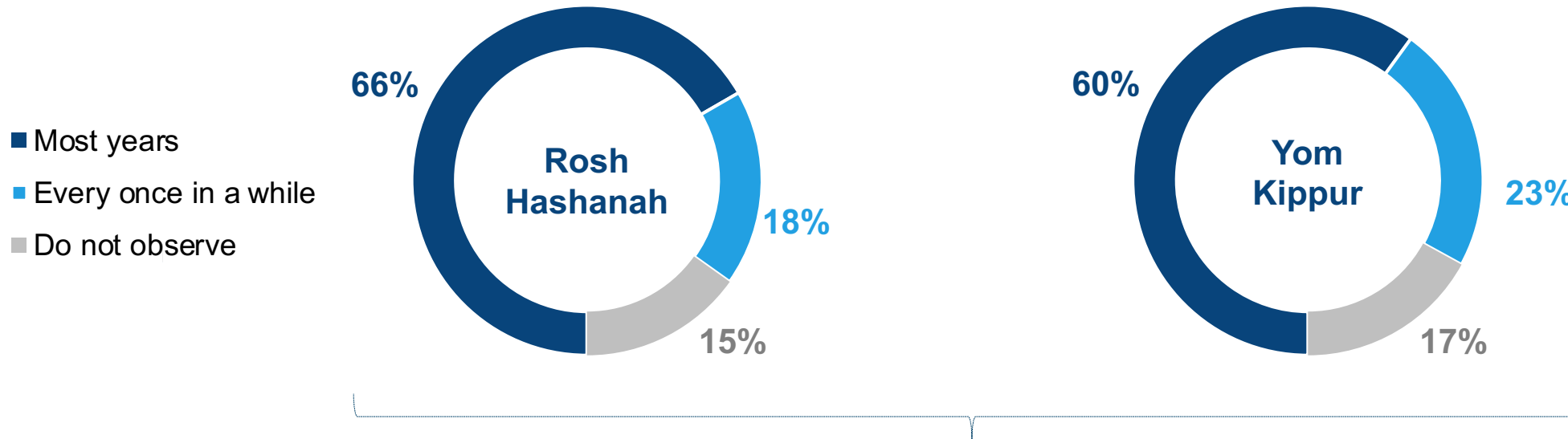




High Holidays Behavior and Experiences in 2020

Overall, just over half of Jewish adults report that they observe both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in a typical year

High Holiday observance among Jewish adults



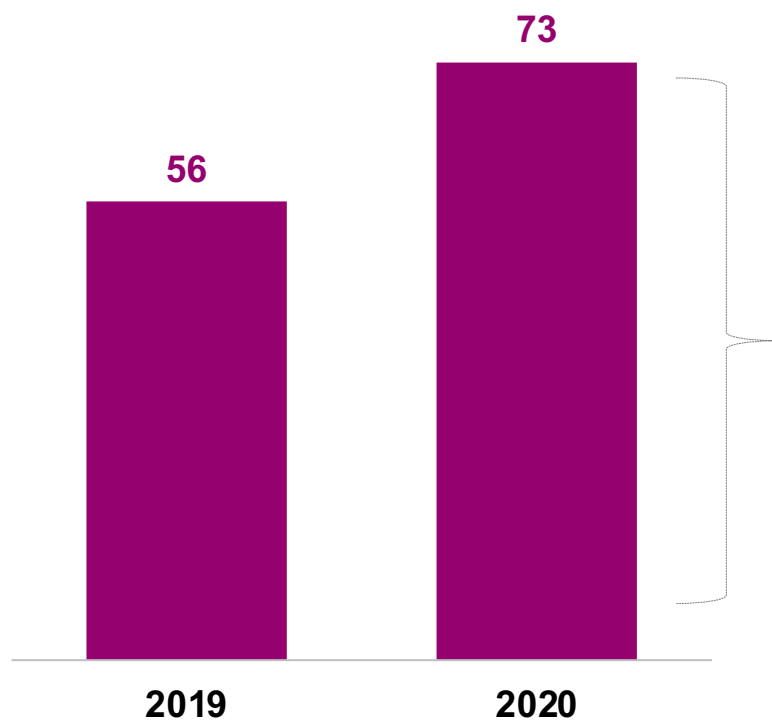
REGULAR HIGH HOLIDAYS OBSERVERS:
Observe Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur most years

INFREQUENT HIGH HOLIDAYS OBSERVERS:
Only observe one or both holidays once in a while, or not at all

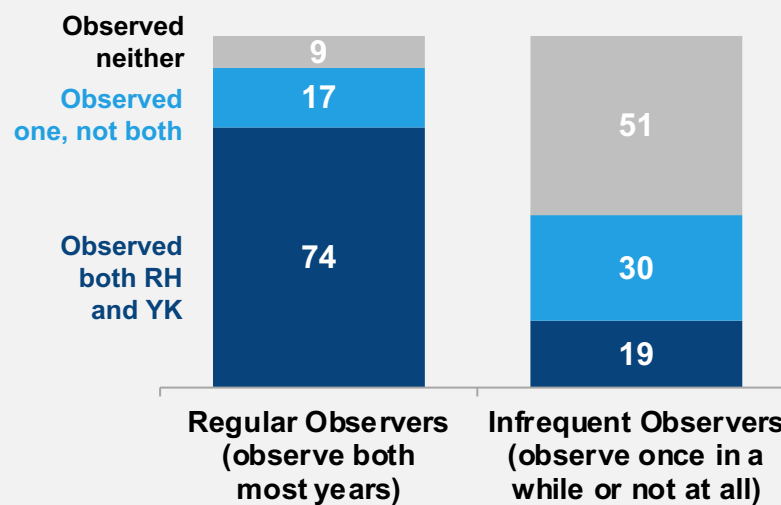


This year, High Holiday observance was notably higher, engaging half of the “Infrequent High Holidays Observers” who don’t participate on a regular basis

*Any type of High Holiday observance
(Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, or both)*



In 2020, 9 in 10 Regular Observers still observed, and nearly half of Infrequent Observers did something for the High Holidays.



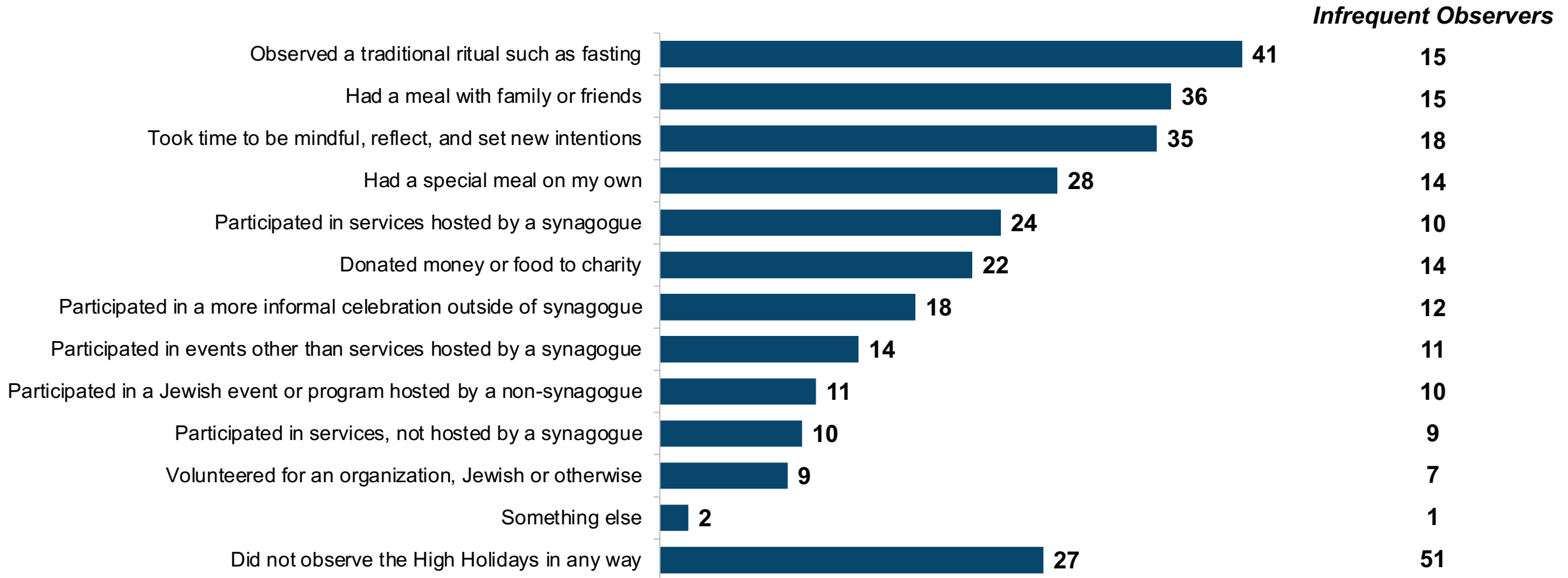
Infrequent High Holidays Observers who observed this year are...

- **More male:** 61% are male, vs. 48% of all Jewish adults
- **Younger:** 59% are <40 yrs, vs. 37% of all Jewish adults
- **Parents:** 50% have children under 18, vs. 26% of all Jewish adults
- **Interfaith:** 49% are part of an interfaith household, vs. 32% of all Jewish adults

Most marked the HH this year through traditional rituals and meals, but less formal practices—mindfulness, charity work—stand out for infrequent observers

Type of High Holiday observance in 2020

Asked of those who observed the High Holidays in some way this year - % shown out of full sample



Tradition, routine, and fulfillment were the key drivers of High Holiday behavior; many Jews wanted to get as close to normal as possible

TOP REASONS: Which of the following are reasons why you chose to observe the High Holidays the way you did this year? Asked of those who observed the High Holidays in some way this year

% Most important reason

It's what I always do during the High Holidays	51	18
I felt it would be a meaningful or fulfilling experience	48	8
It was one of the only ways I could safely observe during the pandemic	47	10
I wanted to celebrate the holiday with my children or other people in my household	42	10
It was easy and straightforward	42	4
I felt drawn to doing something Jewish during a time like this	41	5
I wanted to connect with other people like me	37	4
The format or location made it feel more accessible to me (e.g. it was online)	36	4
I wanted to connect with other people in my community	35	3
I knew other people who were doing it	34	3

Novelty and less-intimidating settings were secondary considerations, but few say they were the most important reason for how they chose to observe

2ND TIER REASONS: Which of the following are reasons why you chose to observe the High Holidays the way you did this year? Asked of those who observed the High Holidays in some way this year

% Most important reason

It was free or affordable to participate	34	2
I'm a member of an organization or a community that hosted it	33	5
A friend or family member recommended it	31	3
It seemed like fun	29	2
I didn't know of any other options for things to do	28	3
I wanted to try something new or different	27	3
I could do it without needing to know much about Jewish rituals	26	2
I'd heard about it and wanted to attend in the past, but it was too far away to participate in-person before the pandemic	25	2
I could be anonymous while doing it	24	2
Another reason	19	6

Recommendations and low barriers to entry were more important motivators for Infrequent Observers than for Regular Observers

Top Reasons – Regular Observers

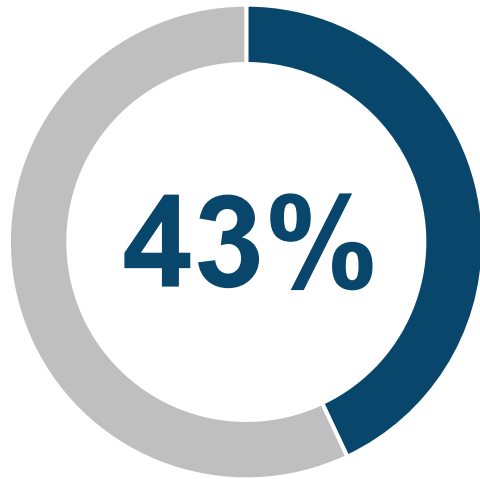
		% Most important
It's what I always do during the High Holidays	55	22
It was one of the only ways I could safely observe during the pandemic	50	13
I felt it would be a meaningful or fulfilling experience	49	7
I wanted to celebrate the holiday with my children or other people in my household	42	11
I felt drawn to doing something Jewish during a time like this	40	5
It was easy and straightforward	40	3
The format or location made it feel more accessible to me (e.g. it was online)	35	4

Top Reasons – Infrequent Observers

		% Most important
It was easy and straightforward	47	6
I felt it would be a meaningful or fulfilling experience	46	8
I felt drawn to doing something Jewish during a time like this	44	5
I wanted to celebrate the holiday with my children or other people in my household	43	7
A friend or family member recommended it	42	6
I wanted to connect with other people like me	41	9
It's what I always do during the High Holidays	41	9

Among those who observed, nearly half did so with an organization in some way, mostly as a member or otherwise paid

How did you hear about the events, programs, or experiences you participated in? Asked of those who observed the High Holidays with an organization in some way



of Jewish adults who observed the High Holidays did so **with an organization or institution in some way**



Of these, 70% did so as paying members; 62% made a specific payment or contribution in order to participate

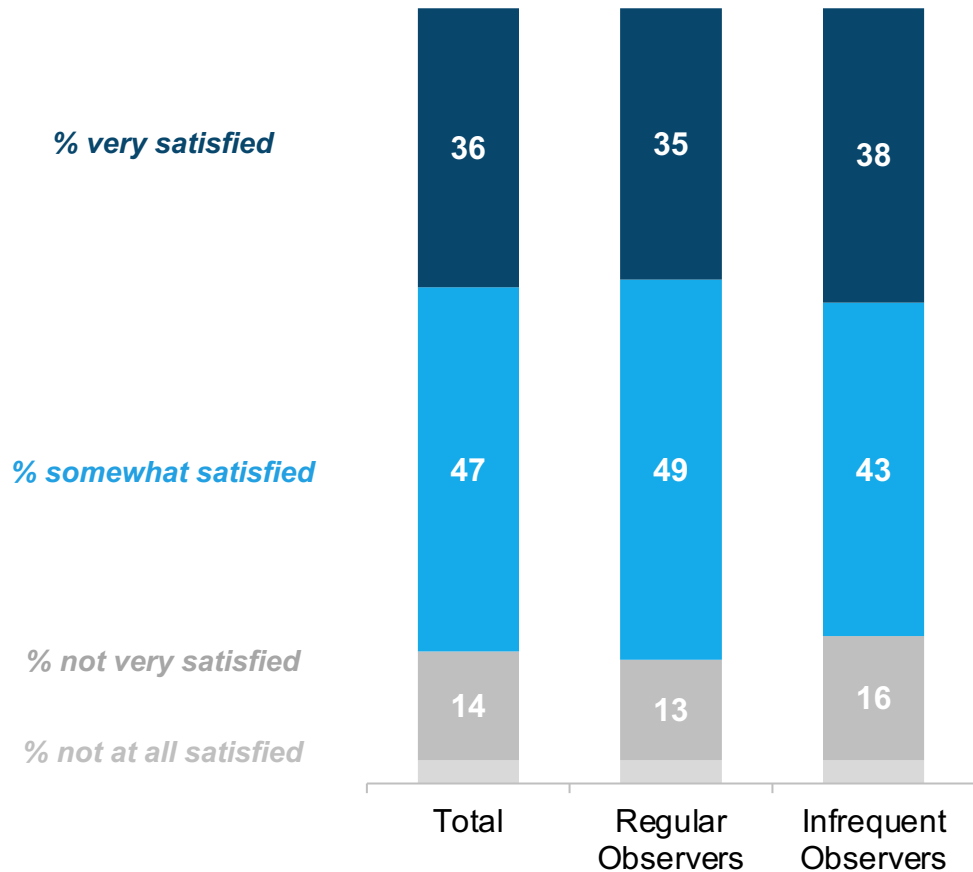


High Holidays – Experiences and Reactions

Even in the midst of a pandemic, High Holiday observers were content with their experiences, but they missed being around others

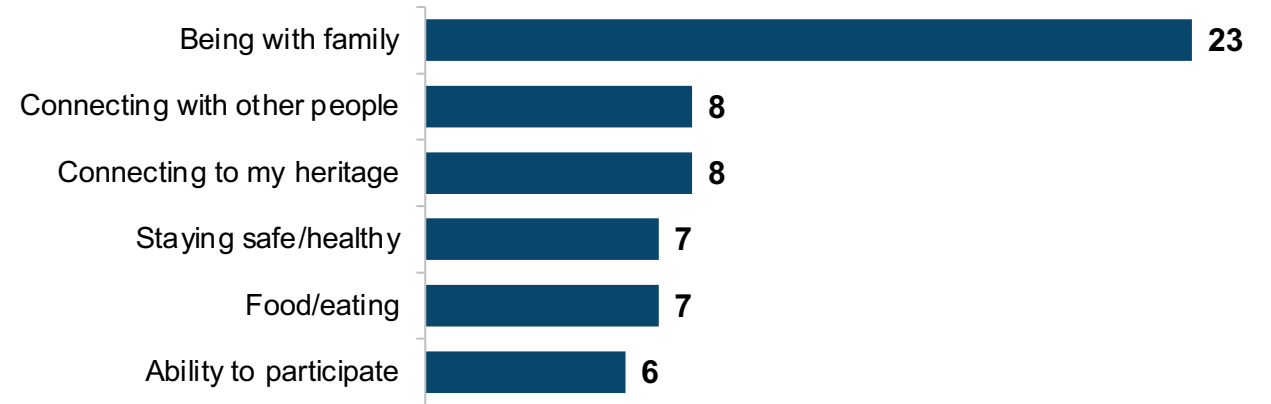
Overall, how satisfied were you with your experience observing the High Holidays this year?

Asked of those who observed the High Holidays in some way



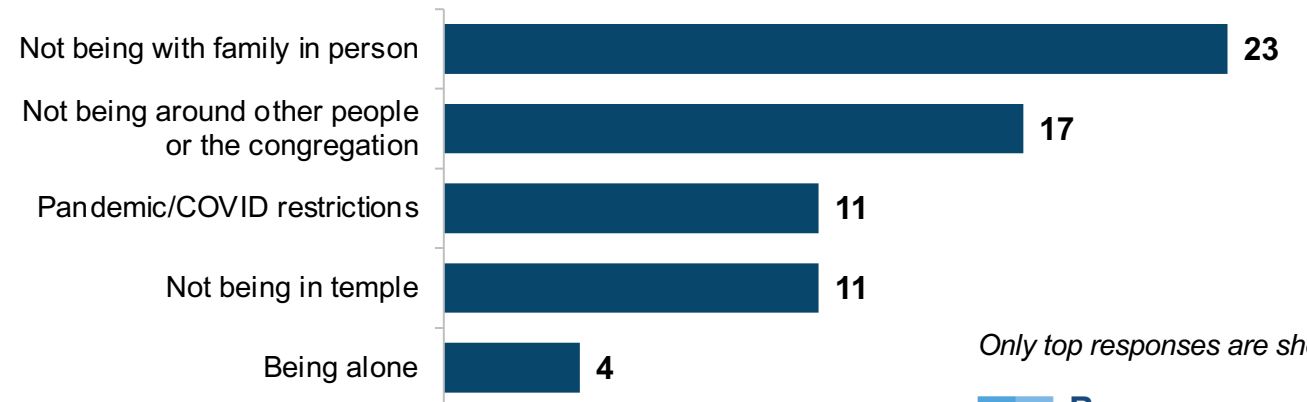
Best thing about the High Holidays this year

Open-ended, asked of those who observed the High Holidays in some way



Worst thing about the High Holidays this year

Open-ended, asked of those who observed the High Holidays in some way

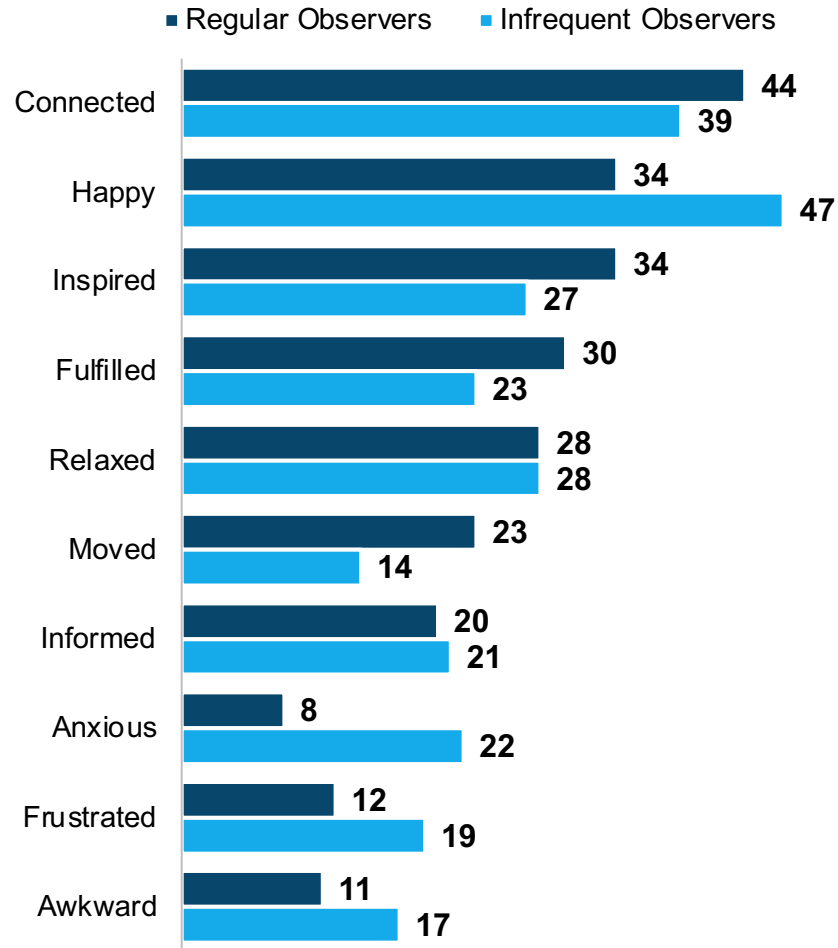


Only top responses are shown

Despite broad satisfaction, Infrequent Observers were less likely to give orgs the benefit of the doubt and more likely to feel awkward and uncomfortable

How did you feel during or after your High Holidays experience?

Asked of those who observed the High Holidays with an organization in some way

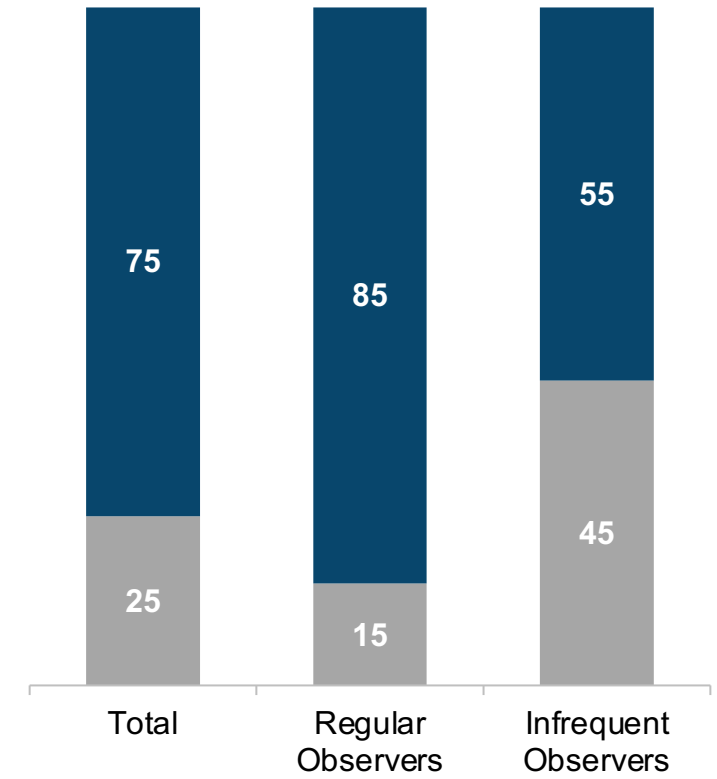


Which of the following comes closest to your view about the people and organizations hosting activities you participated in?

Asked of those who observed the High Holidays with an organization in some way

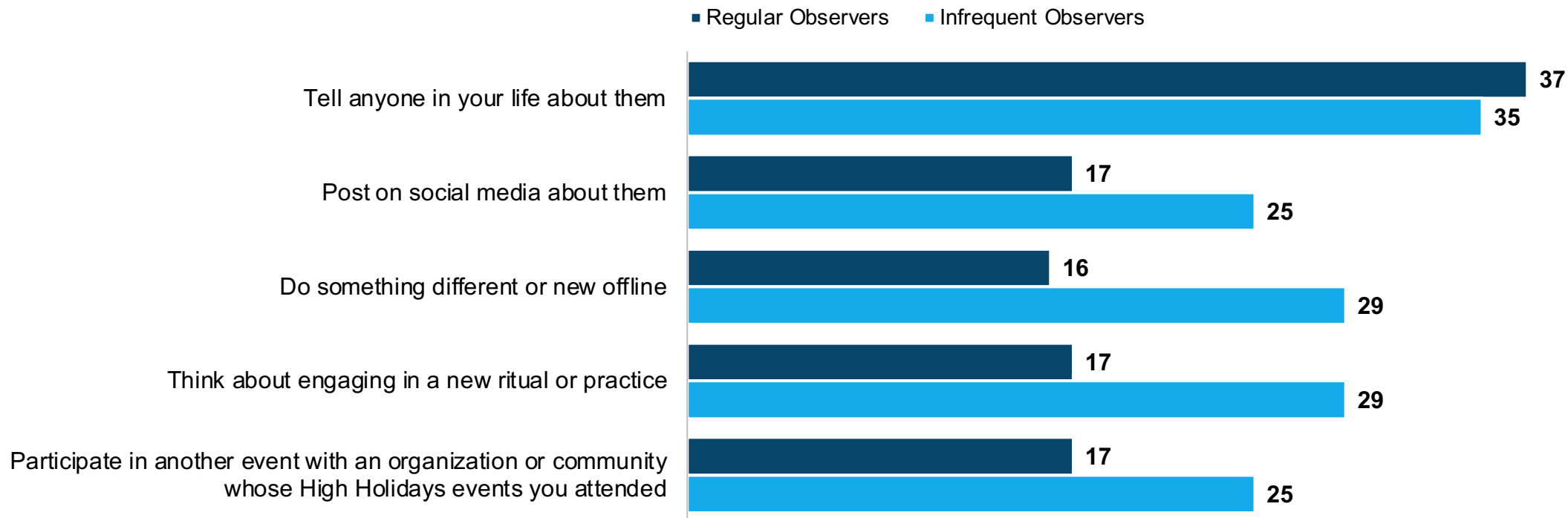
Given the circumstances, they did as good of a job as I could have expected.

Even given the circumstances, I would have expected them to do a better job.



Even if they weren't perfect, HH experiences left a greater mark on Infrequent Observers, who were more likely to consider new practices afterward

*After your experiences observing the High Holidays, did you...
Asked of those who observed the High Holidays with an organization in some way*



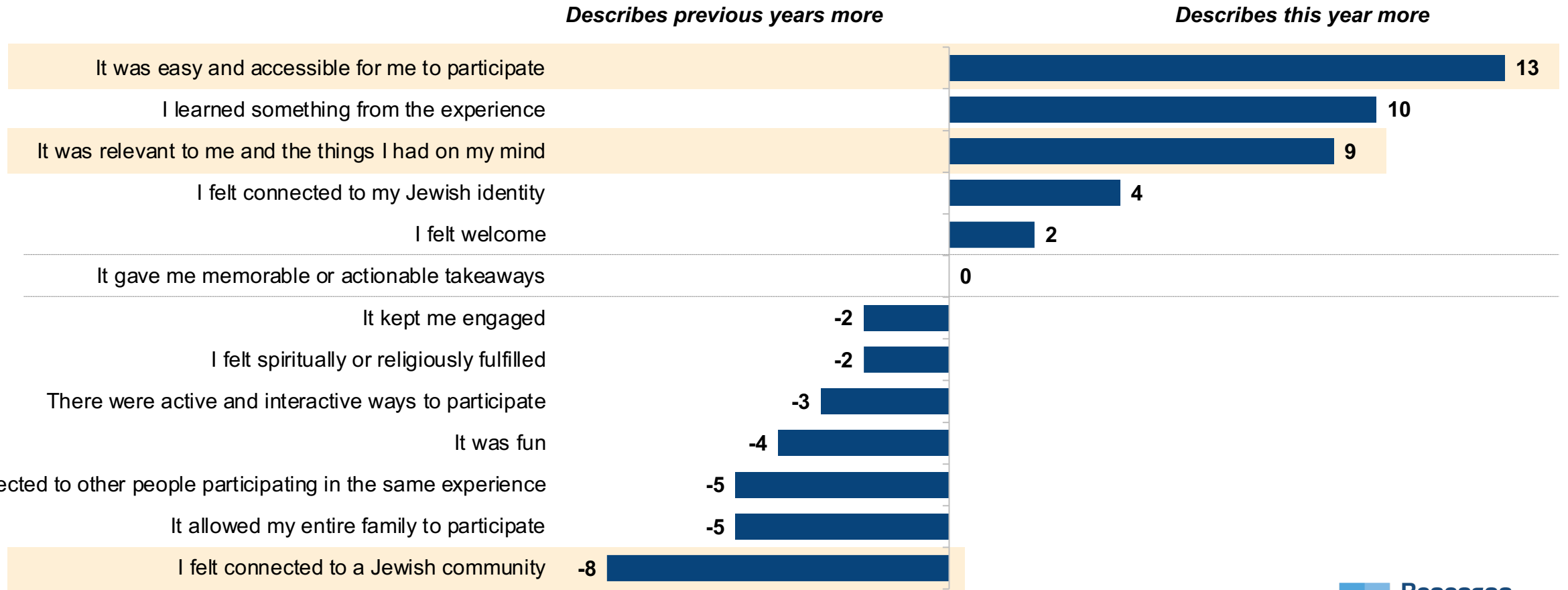
77%

of Infrequent Observers who observed the High Holidays this year shared their experience or engaged in some other new behavior after, compared to 58% of Regular Observers.

Compared to past years, 2020 outperformed on accessibility and relevance, though communal connection was clearly missing

How well does each statement describe your overall experience observing the High Holidays this year compared to your typical experience observing the High Holidays in previous years?

Asked of those who observed in some way, showing (% “this year more”) – (% “previous years more”)





High Holidays – Moving Forward

Many got some new ideas for future High Holidays—especially Infrequent Observers

Has your experience of the High Holidays this year made you consider trying different ways to observe Jewish holidays in the future than you have in the past?

Asked of those who observed the High Holidays in some way

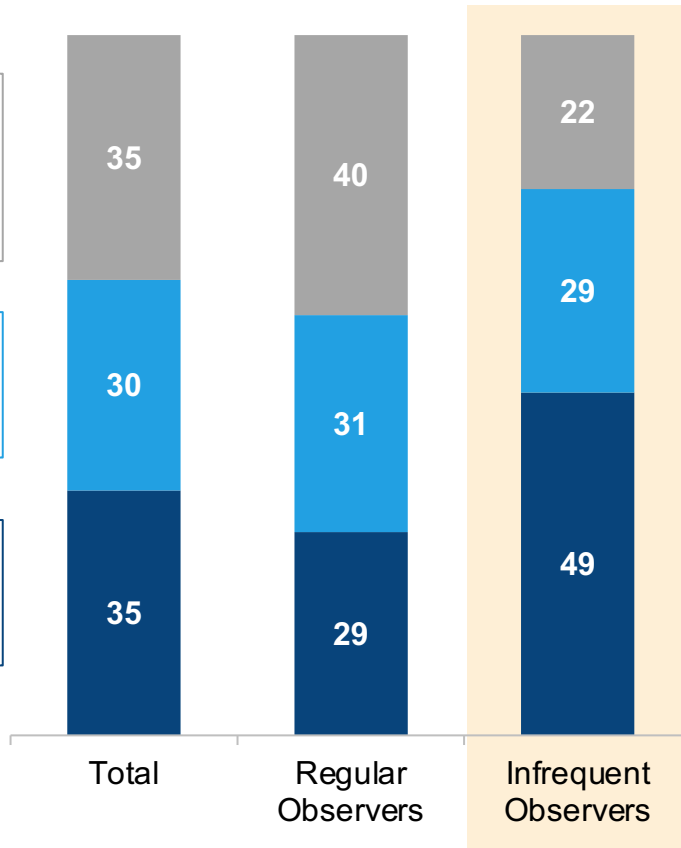
Is there anything specifically you did this year that you would consider doing in the future, after the pandemic ends?

Asked of those who observed the High Holidays in some way

No, nothing I did this year made me consider new ways to observe Jewish holidays in the future

Yes, I might consider new ways to observe Jewish holidays in the future

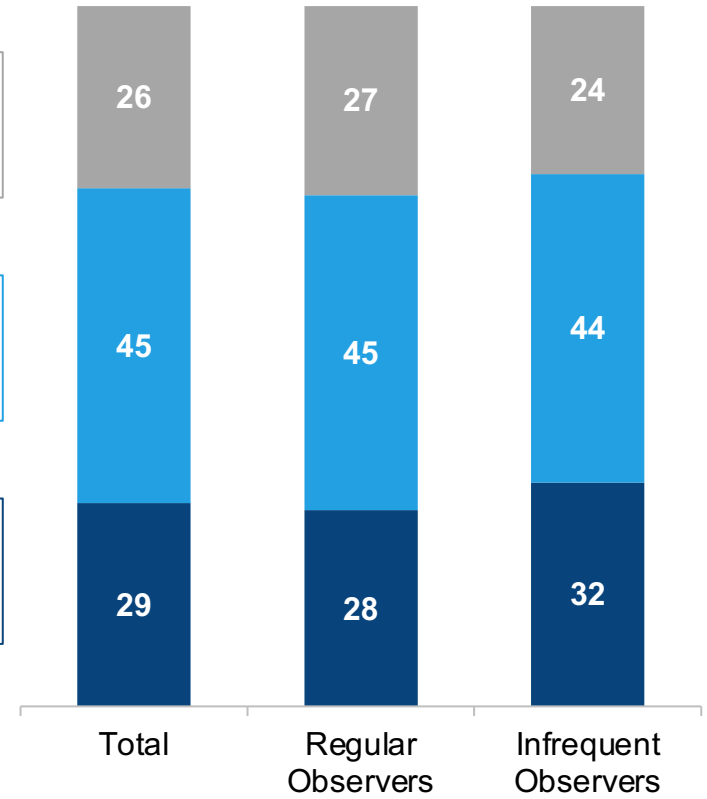
Yes, I will definitely try different ways to observe Jewish holidays in the future



No, I would not consider doing anything I did this year again

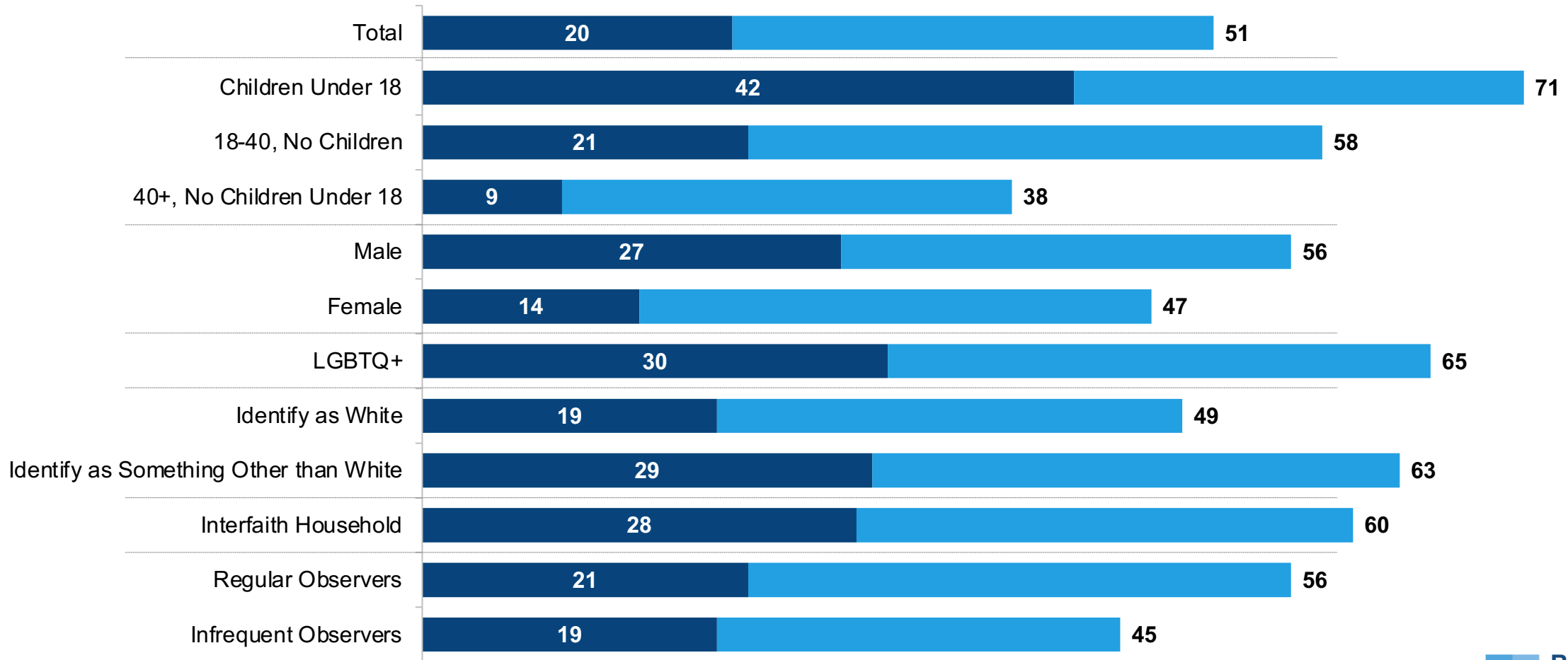
Yes, I would consider doing some of the things I did this year again

Yes, I would consider doing everything I did this year again



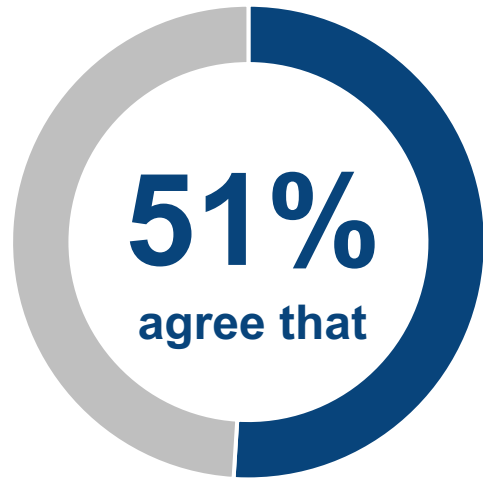
Many are looking at their Jewishness differently based on the experience of the pandemic, especially younger Jews and those with families

“The experience of the pandemic has made me think differently about what being Jewish means in my life.”
 % strongly agree / % total agree



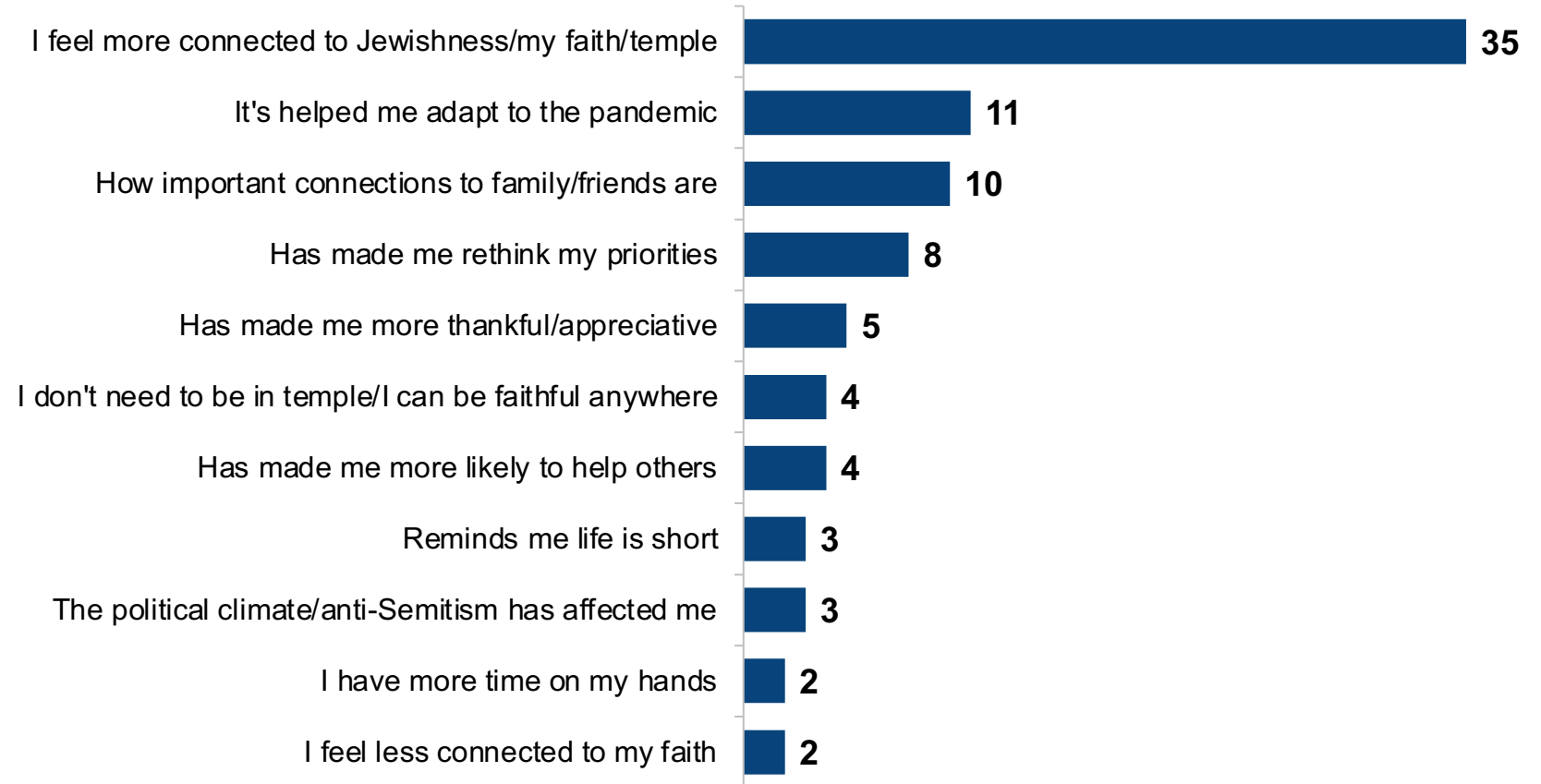
Among Infrequent Observers who observed this year: 34 / 66

For most of those thinking differently about Jewishness, that has meant a renewal of connection with their Jewish identity and community



*The experience of the pandemic has **made me think differently** about what being Jewish means in my life.*

*How has it made you think differently about what being Jewish means in your life?
Open-ended response, asked of those agreed with the statement*



Non-specific responses or responses with 1% or less are not shown.

Beneath the broad feeling that Jewishness has taken on new importance, Jews are open to many ideas about what being Jewish means post-pandemic

Attitudes toward being Jewish during the coronavirus pandemic

% strongly agree / % total agree – among those who said the pandemic has made them think differently about being Jewish

