

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)
about the [Survey of American Jewish Language and Identity](#)

Based on the comments people left at the end of the survey, we offer a list of Frequently Asked Questions with our answers (updated 10/19/09).

Sincerely,

[Prof. Sarah Bunin Benor](#)

[Prof. Steven M. Cohen](#)

[Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion](#)

Q: Who are you, and why are you doing this survey?

A: We are both professors at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. Steven M. Cohen is a sociologist of American Jewry, and Sarah Bunin Benor is a sociolinguist who specializes in Jewish language.

Q: Where did you get your funding?

A: We do not have funding for this study. It is part of our regular faculty research.

Q: How many responses did you get?

A: As of October 2009, 51,175 people began the survey, and 43,696 people completed it! We expected only 2,000-3,000 responses, and we were thrilled with the enthusiastic response.

Q: Will you keep my e-mail address confidential?

A: Absolutely. We are the only ones who will see your e-mail address, and we will keep it separate from the data. We will only e-mail you according to your requests (as you noted on the survey's last page) to learn about the results or to be contacted for further questions (or both).

Q: Why didn't you include English and other major immigrant languages in the list of ancestral languages?

A: Of course we realize that many immigrants to the US and Canada spoke English (as well as Italian, Mandarin, Japanese, Hindi, Fante, Khmer, Yoruba, etc.). And of course we realize that not all North Americans are descended from immigrants. For coding purposes, we only needed to know whether respondents' ancestors spoke languages related to the linguistic features we are investigating. We're glad you were able to make use of the "Other" category to note ancestral languages that are not on the list we provided.

Q: Why was the survey so New York-centric? There are Jews in other parts of the country.

A: According to previous research, some Jews in the Midwest and elsewhere have some New York regional features in their speech. We want to find out how extensive this phenomenon is and how it relates to their familial ties to New York.

Q: Why didn't you include my religious group?

A: We didn't think everyone would want to look through a list of over 3 dozen religious groups. We're glad you were able to make use of the Other category.

Q: Why would my non-Jewish friends be interested in taking the survey? It includes so many questions about Jewish observance and background.

A: Those who identify themselves as Jews got a longer version of the survey. We didn't think non-Jews would want to answer questions about Hebrew school, Sabbath observance, and how they pronounce Sukkot/Sukkos.

Q: I got this survey invitation from 4 people. Obviously, you don't have a random sample. How can you make any claims?

A: We are certainly aware of the limitations of the snowball "sampling" technique, and we discuss this in detail in our write-ups. We do not plan to make any grand claims about "all Jews" or "all North Americans," only about correlations among subgroups.

Q: Why didn't you ask about shlep, tshatshe, goyim, shiksa, putz, shmuck, shtup, shmegege, lox, blintzes, etc.?

A: It's a time issue. We didn't think everyone would want to spend 2 hours taking a survey...

Q: Why didn't you ask about whether I use these words seriously or comically, whether I translate them when I use them, or which types of Jews/non-Jews I use them with?

A: (same)

Q: Why didn't you include words from other Jewish communities, like Yemenites, Persians, Karaites, Romaniyotes, Beta Israel, etc.?

A: (same)

Q: I am a cantor / rabbinical student / very engaged Jewish lay leader / degree holder in Jewish education / etc. Why didn't you ask about that?

A: (same)

Q: Why did you include Arabic words like yallah and ahalan?

A: Because they're part of Israeli Hebrew and are used by some American Jews who have significant ties to Israel.

Q: Why didn't you respond to the comment I wrote at the end of the survey?

A: We have looked through the thousands of comments, but we do not have time to address them all.

Q: I just spent 15 minutes telling you whether I know Yiddish and Hebrew words. Now can you please tell me what they all mean?

A: Sure, here's a glossary:

Key to languages of origin that Jews have had contact with (note that some of the Yiddish words derive from Germanic, Slavic, and Romance languages):

Yid = Yiddish (language of Eastern European Jews)

Heb = Hebrew (either textual Hebrew or Modern Israeli Hebrew or both)

Aram = (Judeo-)Aramaic, especially of the Talmud

Lad = Ladino / Judeo-Spanish / Judezmo (from the Ottoman Empire)

J-Arab = Judeo-Arabic (from Arabic-speaking countries)

Words:

maven (Yid, Heb): expert, whiz

mazel tov (Yid, Heb): congratulations

shpiel (Yid): (lengthy) speech or pitch

klutz (Yid): clumsy person

kvetch (Yid): complain

macher (Yid): important person, big-shot, mover and shaker

naches (Yid, Heb): pride and joy

shmutz (Yid): dirt

heimish (Yid): homey, cozy, relaxed

mensch (Yid): good person

bashert (Yid): predestined match

keppie (Yid, Eng): head (in affectionate speech, usually directed to child)

nu? (Yid, Heb): well? (expresses impatience)

balagan (Yid, Heb): mess, bedlam

tachlis (Yid, Heb): practical details, serious business, bottom line

yofi (Heb): nice

yalla (Heb): come on, let's go (originally from Arabic)

ahalan (Heb): hi (originally from Arabic)

takeh (Yid): really

bar minan (J-Arab, Heb): God forbid; (Aram, Yid): corpse

chas v'shalom (Yid, Heb): God forbid

davka (Yid, Heb, Aram): specifically

These words were included in the part of the questionnaire given to those who identify themselves as Jewish:

goyish (Yid): associated with non-Jews, WASP-y (considered offensive by some)

leyn (Yid): read Torah

daven (Yid): pray

drash (Heb): interpretation of a biblical text, sermon

bentsh (Yid): bless, say Grace After Meals

yahrtzeit (Yid): anniversary of a death

meldado (Lad): anniversary of a death (from 'reading', as relatives commemorate the deceased by studying traditional texts)

moadim l'simcha (Heb): greeting used during intermediate days of a long festival (lit. 'occasions for joy')

kal vachomer (Heb): all the moreso

lav davka (Aram): not necessarily
l'chatchila (Aram): initially, before the fact
hameyvin yavin (Heb): those "in the know" will understand

Thank you again for your interest in the survey.