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# Religiosity, Fears of Personal Death, and the Acceptability of Suicide Within Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews

Lawrence B. Stein

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Religiosity, Fears of Personal Death, and the Acceptability of  
Suicide Within Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews  
(TITLE)

BY

Lawrence B. Stein

**THESIS**

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Religiosity, Fears of Personal Death, and the Acceptability of  
Suicide Within Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews

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Running Head: FEARS OF PERSONAL DEATH AND SUICIDE

## Abstract

One hundred and fifty adults completed the Gladding, Lewis, and Adkins Scale of Religiosity (GLASR), Fears of Personal Death Scale (FPDS), and the Suicide Acceptability Scale (SAS) to investigate the relationships between religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability within the Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox Jewish denominations. Differences between the Jewish denominations were detected such that Orthodox Jews were less fearful of transpersonal death than Conservative individuals. However, no differences existed between Jewish denominations for interpersonal or intrapersonal fears of death. Results also indicate that Reformed Jews were less religious and more accepting of suicide than Orthodox individuals with Conservative Jews being intermediate. It appears that Orthodox individuals' acceptance or rejection of suicide, as well as their concerns about personal death, are consistent and are centered around strong religious beliefs and practice. On the other hand, the acceptance or rejection of suicide among Reformed Jews are influenced by at least two independent factors: fears of personal death and religiosity. No relationships

between religiosity, suicide acceptability, and fears of death were observed among the Conservative Jews. Future directions, limitations, and practical applications of this study are discussed.

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## Purpose and Overview of the Problem to be Studied

### Statement of the Problem

Religion seeks to lend explanation and meaning to both life and death. Like all religions, the Jewish faith employs specific and detailed laws that govern the manner in which its members explore their own mortality. Within the religious constructs of Judaism are many scholarly writings that aid in accepting the unavoidable approach of personal death. For some practicing Jews these religious safeguards may not be sufficient in relieving existential anxiety, and for some this existential anxiety may culminate in suicide (Frankl,1975).

Although issues such as religiosity, fears of personal death and suicide acceptability are important in both Judaism and psychology, the relationship between these variables are still clouded. However, it is clear that Jewish doctrine strictly forbids the taking of one's own life (Spero, 1978). According to Kaplan and Schoeneberg (1988), Orthodox Jews often view suicide as being a greater crime than homicide,

since the killer of another has a chance to repent. Suicide denies this possibility. A Jew who terminates his or her own life is often denied full burial rites and other honors that are bestowed upon the deceased, yet suicide still occurs.

Judaic attitudes toward suicide can be viewed through the chronicles of the Old Testament which contains proscriptions against suicide. However, one of the most famous events in Jewish history is the mass suicide at Masada. Schwartz and Kaplin (1992) explain that the episode is now a model of Jewish martyrdom yet is never mentioned in rabbinical literature. The Jews who chose to take their own lives rather than face Roman slavery are often viewed in current Jewish thought as heroes. Although extreme, views such as these suggest that there is a quandary between Jewish religious dogma and what may be accepted and practiced within the various subgroups (Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox) inside the Hebraic culture. The existing research on the relation between fears of personal death and religiosity as

factors in suicide acceptability is inconclusive. The current study is designed to explore these factors within Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox individuals.

### Purpose of the Proposed Study

In describing the importance of suicide acceptability, Hoelter (1979) proposed a conflict/dissonance model of suicidal behavior. Suicide is thought to largely be the result of the inability to reduce painful dissonance and the acceptability of suicide is considered a key factor in this self-destructive behavior. In this theory of suicide, dissonance is described as a motivational state arising from discord or inconsistencies between an individual's self concept and his or her cognitions. Dissonance may arise out of interpersonal or intrapersonal difficulties such as depression or relationship difficulties. Hoelter identifies three modes of dissonance reduction: changing one's environment (threatening suicide or attempting suicide), changing one's perceptions of the environment (psychotherapy, drug use, or religious participation), and changing one's position in the environment (marriage, education, developing career expertise). When an individual is attempting to alleviate this type of cognitive

dissonance the availability, adequacy, and acceptability of the method under consideration are three noteworthy factors.

Hoelter (1979) theorizes that the specific method initially used to eliminate the dissonance will be the least drastic. However, repeated failures of these methods will lead to more extreme measures. A lethal problem may arise when an individual is unable to reduce the level of dissonance and accepts suicide as a viable option. Hoelter describes suicide acceptance as a critical factor because the *availability* of resources to commit suicide is rarely a problem.

Given the importance of suicide acceptability, it becomes imperative that social scientists investigate the variables that sway an individual's decision to accept or reject suicide as a potential option. Two such factors that have been shown to influence suicide acceptability are religiosity (Jacobs,1967) and fears of death (Hoelter,1979). By studying how these two factors influence suicide acceptability, new

and effective ways of helping a suicidal individual may be gained.

Therefore, the proposed investigation in part intends to gain new information pertaining to the acceptability of suicide within Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews. The majority of empirical research concerning American Jewry fails to discriminate between the three major modern Jewish traditions and religious beliefs. This consolidation of the three traditions may obscure important cultural and religious differences.

Along with the religious differences between Jews, what are some of the major nonreligious differences between religious and secular Jews? Strober (1974), explains that Orthodox Jews in America often live within their own subculture. In part, the ultrareligious Jews who immigrated to the United States may have felt safer living a separatist lifestyle because of past persecution. In order to maintain this separatism, Orthodox Jews developed their own parochial



school systems, community service centers, and health care facilitates. For Orthodox Jews, this support system resulted in a reduction in the exposure to mainstream American society.

However, not all American Jews took this approach. Reformed and Conservative Jews often made attempts to assimilate themselves into American culture. These Jewish immigrants often Americanized their names, changed the manner in which they dressed, and abandoned the traditional dietary laws. Therefore, the differences between nonsecular (those Jews who are entrenched in the strong subculture) and secular Jews (those living within mainstream society) may be attributed to other factors besides religiosity such as changes in the Jewish culture that may have facilitated assimilation. Therefore, differences between religious and secular Jews exist both in the Jewish *religion* and *culture*.

Oftentimes, assimilation to the predominant American culture required adopting a more secular outlook (Prager & Telushkin, 1975). Highly secular Jews, particularly Reformed

Jews, had to place greater emphasis on concerns involving the self, the self's relation to one's identity, work, creative endeavors, and material pursuits. These concerns may serve as deterrents to suicide among highly secular Jews. On the other hand, what may hinder more religious Jews, particularly Orthodox Jews, from accepting suicide are the specific religious beliefs and prohibitions against self-annihilation. Therefore, distinctions between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed Jews may fall not just along religious lines but also largely along cultural aspects. While the Orthodox world view or culture is more religiously based, the Reformed outlook is more secular in influence. What this implies is that the acceptance of suicide by Reformed or Conservative Jews may be determined not just by the extent to which they adhere to Jewish beliefs and practices but also by other secular or cultural factors such as the concern for the self, self-identity, and self-fulfillment.

Granted that there are both *religious* and *cultural* differences between Jews belonging to the different denominations, it is imperative that social scientists study how both religion and culture are related to suicide acceptability and fears of personal death. This may be accomplished by investigating both religious (i.e., the extent to which Jewish beliefs and practices are adhered to) and cultural differences between denominations (e.g., differences in concerns about death). The current investigation is designed to explore the relationships between religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability in the Jewish religious community and within each of the Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox denominations. The information gained through this investigation may be of benefit in both the applied and research settings. Results may be utilized to assist therapists who work directly with Jewish individuals who are preparing for their own personal death, contemplating suicide, or have recently been exposed to the suicide of a

friend or relative. Also, by exploring the differences in religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability for the different Jewish denominations, new and more detailed investigations may be carried out in the future.

## Definition of Terms

### Fears of Personal Death

Hoelter (1979) described the fear of personal death as, “...an emotional reaction involving subjective feelings of unpleasantness and concern based on contemplation or anticipation of any of several facets related to death” (p.996). In this particular investigation, fears of personal death will be measured on three broad dimensions: interpersonal, intrapersonal and transpersonal consequences of death. Interpersonal fears of death are described as the concerns regarding the detrimental effect of personal death on family, friends, and social identity. Intrapersonal fears of death include the loss of self-fulfillment and self-annihilation. Fears of the unknown reflect transpersonal fears of personal death. The Fear of Personal Death Scale (FPDS: Florian & Kravetz,1983) will be employed to investigate interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal death concerns.

### Religiosity

For the purpose of this study, the term “religiosity” is used to indicate the amount of religious effort, belief in a personalized deity, religious belief, and consistency of belief and action that an individual adheres to in his or her daily life. Religiosity will be measured by the Gladding, Lewis, and Adkins Scale of Religiosity (GLASR: Gladding, Lewis, & Adkins,1981).

### Suicide Acceptability

Suicide acceptability is often referred to as the degree that an individual considers suicide as a viable option in their life. The acceptability of suicidal behavior will be assessed by the Suicide Acceptability scale (SAS: Hoelter,1979).

### Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed Jewish Denominations

Orthodox Judaism is a Jewish movement that views itself as the only authentic continuation of traditional Judaism (Kertzer,1993). Although there are many different

types of Orthodox Jews (e.g., Babover, Bratslaver, and Bostoner), they all share the belief in strictly following the numerous Jewish laws. The basis of belief and practice for Orthodox Jews is the traditional body of Jewish doctrine found in the Talmud and coded in a series of laws called the Halachah.

The Reformed Jewish denomination is the largest movement among American-born Jews (Prager & Telushkin, 1981). It is a response to the *unchanging* laws of the Talmud. Dietary laws, observance of the Sabbath, and other customs were modified to keep up with the demands of modern life and to aid in assimilation with the rest of American society. Reformed Jews stress the need to interpret Jewish tradition from the perspective of individual conscience and informed choice. Although they consult the Halachah and study the same books that Orthodox Jews study, individual conscience is an important aspect of decision making among Reformed Jews.

Conservative Judaism was founded in the United States as an alternative to the polar extremes of the American Reformed movement and the tradition Orthodoxy imported from Europe. Like the Orthodox Jews, and in contrast to the Reformed Jews, Conservative individuals adhere to the Jewish law or the Halachah, and not individual conscience, as the primary base for decision making. Although Conservative Jews allow change, it comes about through consensus of scholars and the accepted practice of the community. Change is slower and more deliberate than in Reformed Judaism. Therefore, some Conservative individuals are closer to Reformed Jews, while others are more similar to Orthodox Jews.

Since the various Jewish denominations differ in the extent to which they have retained traditional Jewish beliefs and practices and the extent to which they have assimilated to the American secular view, the present study utilizes the denominations as a potential factor indicating differences in culture.



## Review of Related Material

### Religion in Psychotherapy

Recently, Grosuch (1988) has argued that many psychological analyses are often incomplete unless they include information about the religiosity of the individuals being studied and how it influences their behavior. This is especially true in instances where religious practice has been shown to be related to the reduction of behaviors such as illicit drug use, prejudicial attitudes, and nonmarital sex (Spilka, Hood, & Grosuch, 1985).

The need for an understanding of the religious beliefs, practices, and heritage of those seeking treatment is crucial within the therapeutic environment. Recently there have been several investigations that support the usefulness of exploring spiritual dimensions in enhancing change in therapy (Bradford & Spero, 1990; Sweet & Johnson, 1990) Bradford and Spero related the use of exploring the client's relationship with God,

grace, and personal inspiration to help Mormon clients utilize therapy more effectively. Sweet and Johnson (1990) suggested using Buddhist meditation techniques in therapy to increase empathy and prosocial attitudes and behaviors. Spero (1990) presented an object-relations model of psychotherapy that is designed to address two therapeutic dilemmas: (1) the identification between therapist and patient and (2) implications for the integrity of the client's religious values. Spero explains that when working with a religiously committed client, a therapist can enhance therapy through the use of religious metaphors, exploring identification with religious figures, and the assimilation of therapeutic experiences with religious beliefs.

Despite the apparent benefits of integrating spiritual and religious issues in psychotherapy, therapists have often failed to do so and thus are likely not to meet the needs of religiously committed clients (Bergin,1991). Some psychologist have stated that religious individuals are

irrational (Ellis,1980) or immature (Freud,1927). Beit-Hallahmi (1977) argued that this problem may stem from therapists being hesitant to explore religion in psychotherapy and conducted a study designed to investigate this problem. Results supported the hypothesis that psychologists are less likely to be actively involved in a religion than other social and natural scientists. Beit-Hallahmi explains that psychologists may find religion irrelevant to their own lives and assume that religion is not pertinent in other people's lives as well. A second possibility for the reluctance of exploring religion in therapy may be that many therapists are concerned that this sensitive topic may offend their clients, thus possibly hindering the therapeutic relationship. Finally, some psychologists may find exploring religiosity irrelevant to the presenting problem. For example, a cognitive-behavioral psychologist who is treating a simple phobia may not feel the need to explore their client's religious background. Regardless

of the reasons, religious issues may be cast aside in therapy, possibly to the detriment of the client.

### Religion and Suicide

Suicide, a behavior with many important moral and spiritual implications, has become a significant social concern in the United States. There are approximately 29,000 suicides each year in the United States and 8 to 10 times that many attempts (Adam,1985), and research has identified religion as a significant factor related to the rejection of suicide (e.g., Nelson,1977). Rates of suicide tend to vary by religious affiliations with Protestants making more attempts than both Catholics and Jews (Durkheim,1966). Similarly, a recent epidemiology study revealed that suicide rates in New York City were found to be highest among Protestants and lowest among Catholics with Jewish rates being intermediate (Cross & Hirschfeld,1985). Two separate investigations found a negative correlation between a state's proportionate Jewish

and Catholic populations and its suicide rates (Bailey & Stein,1995; Templer & Veblen,1980). Moreover, Levav, Magens, Aisenberg, Rosenblum, and Gil (1988) report that suicide attempts and completion rates in Israel are among the lowest in the world.

The ethics of suicide in the Jewish community has been contemplated by both rabbis and laypersons in theological and non-theological manners since ancient times. A pertinent non-theological reason against suicide is that this act violates one of Judaism's basic cultural tenants; do not separate yourself from the (Jewish) community. However, the Old Testament presents several instances of self-destructive behavior by several prominent figures such as Samson and Saul. Rabbinical writings often view these acts as romantic or courageous because they benefited the Jewish community (Hankoff,1979). These events are salient because they depict a contradiction between what Jewish statutes proscribed and what may have actually been acceptable behavior.

Jewish thought concerning self-annihilating behavior can be further understood by viewing attitudes toward the withdrawal of life-sustaining medical treatment. Kapp (1993) explains that Orthodox Judaism places an emphasis on obligation to life and that pain and suffering never constitute an excuse for shortening one's existence. There are no exceptions; suicide, assisted suicide, and euthanasia are not permissible for Orthodox Jews. The Conservative and especially the Reformed Judaic movements are less literal in interpreting the ancient laws and often condone at least passive euthanasia. However, suicide, assisted suicide, and active euthanasia are still condemned by the Reformed and Conservative movements as rigorously as the more fundamental Orthodox. Although to date there have been no empirical studies investigating the suicide rates between these three movements, it would seem reasonable to predict that the Orthodox Jews have lower rates than both the Conservative and Reformed Jews.

### Religiosity and Suicide

Religious practice is thought to influence the acceptance of suicide. Durkheim's (1952) theory of suicide describes religion as a deterrent because it enhances social integration. In an attempt to explore the relationship between religiosity (as determined by church attendance) and suicide rates, Martin (1984) attained archival data that asked individuals how often they attended church during the years 1974 through 1978. This was then compared to the suicide rates gathered from a separate government survey for the same years. Based on the findings of this investigation Martin concluded that religion acts as a deterrent to suicide. Holmes (1985), however, responded critically to Martin's findings, noting that church attendance alone does not define religiosity and correlations do not provide evidence of a cause and effect relationship.

However, church attendance typically involves repeated exposure to the teachings of a religious authority. Kirk and

Best (1982) had college participants complete the Religiosity Scale (RS: Putney and Middleton, 1961) and the SAS (Hoelter, 1979). Approximately eight weeks later participants were exposed to a videotape of a confederate who was introduced as either a minister, psychologist, or a minister/psychologist. Regardless of how the confederate was introduced, all participants were exposed to the same video which stressed the importance of accepting a suicidal person's feelings. The RS and SAS were then readministered to all participants. Those exposed to the psychologist and psychologist/minister condition became significantly more accepting of suicide than they had previously been. Those who viewed the videotape under the minister only condition became significantly less accepting of suicide than they had previously been. However, both highly and less religious individuals became more accepting of suicide after being exposed to a source whose orientation was psychological. Both groups also became less accepting of suicide after listening to a message that they



believed came from a religious authority. Kirk and Best conclude that the religious orientation of the presenter attempting to influence the acceptability of suicide is a salient factor. Thus, the acceptability of suicide is a dynamic attitude and can be readily influenced through sermons and other speeches given by religious authorities. However, one must also understand that in addition to religiosity, many other factors such as socioeconomic status (Boor,1980), age (McIntosh,1992), and history of psychopathology (Tsuang,1983) influence the acceptability of suicide.

Moreover, religiosity has many dimensions. Domino and Miller (1982) explain that since religion can be viewed not only as specific practices, but also as a set of values, beliefs, and or attitudes, it would seem useful to relate the latter to attitudes held towards suicide. In a separate study investigating religiosity and attitudes toward suicide, Domino and Miller (1992) presented college students the Suicide Opinion Questionnaire (SOQ; Domino et al.,1982) and the 5-D

Religiosity scale (Faulkner and DeJong,1966). The SOQ contains 107 items, 100 attitudinal questions measured on a 5 point Likert scale and 7 open ended demographic queries. Scoring on the SOQ was completed on eight subscales including: 1) Mental illness -that people who commit suicide are mentally ill; 2) Cry for help -that suicide is essentially a plea for help; 3) Right to die -that people who commit suicide have a right to die; 4) Religion -that suicide is inversely related to suicide; 5) Impulsivity -that suicide attempts are impulsive in nature rather than pre-planned; 6) Normality/Acceptability -that suicide is normal behavior and may be a personal option 7) Aggression -that suicide behavior reflects aggression and anger, and 8) Moral evil -that suicide is an evil act not be condoned. The 5-D Religiosity scale measured religiosity on 5 dimensions including: ideological (the nature of God and the Bible), intellectual (knowledge about the Bible, miracles, etc.), ritualistic (religious behavior such as church attendance), experiential (feelings and emotions about one's religious

involvement), and consequential (the effects in the secular world of the prior four dimensions).

Domino and Miller (1992) concluded that a substantial but complex relationship exists between religiosity and suicide acceptance/attitudes. In general, persons who describe themselves as religious tended to be unaccepting of suicide and perceived it as less of a cry for help than reflective of mental illness. Highly religious individuals also believed that suicide was related to a lack of religious influence. Those participants whose religiosity was higher in its intellectual form, in its ritualistic aspects, and in experiential awareness, judged suicide as an immoral act to be condemned. Results also suggest that most religious individuals believe that suicide is a reflection of the aggressiveness of human nature. Although the relationship between religiosity and suicide acceptability is still unclear, it appears that religiosity is indeed influential. Religiosity

alone, however, may not be sufficient in explaining an individual's acceptance of suicide.

### Religiosity and Fears of Personal Death

Fears of death must also be taken into consideration when investigating the acceptability of suicide. However, one must also examine the effects of religion on fears of death. Much of the past research attempting to measure death anxiety has been limited to measuring either the degree of preoccupation (Durlak,1972) or intensity (Templer,1970) of the fear of death. On the other hand, Collet and Lester (1969) examined the qualitative aspects of fears of death. They provided one of the first multidimensional typologies of fears pertaining to death. One dimension distinguished one's fear of being dead from fear of the process of dying. A second dimension was related to the object of fear: fear of one's own death versus fear of others dying.

Florian and Kravetz (1983) specifically focused on the individual's fear of his or her own death. They offered a

multidimensional approach designed to further explore and delineate the different aspects of fears of personal death. For this purpose, the 31 item FPDS was developed. Questions on the FPDS were designed to tap into six factors that were coalesced into three broad dimensions involving interpersonal, intrapersonal and transpersonal consequences of death.

Interpersonal fears of death are described as detrimental effects of personal death on family, friends, and loss of social identity. Intrapersonal fears of death include the loss of self-fulfillment and self-annihilation. Fears of the unknown and punishment in the hereafter reflect concerns of transpersonal fears of personal death. The six factors that make up the three broad dimensions included: (1) Fear of loss of opportunities (intrapersonal); (2) fear of self-annihilation (intrapersonal); (3) fear of consequences to family and friends (interpersonal); (4) fear of loss of social identity (interpersonal); (5) concerns regarding the state of existence

following death (transpersonal); (6) fear of punishment in the hereafter (transpersonal).

The FPDS was administered to 252 religious and nonreligious Israeli Jewish males along with the Jewish Religiosity Index (JRI; Ben-Meir & Kedem,1979). Participants were recruited from either religious schools or from the Israeli army. The JRI is a reliable and valid 26-item measure written in Hebrew and designed to assess the adherence to Jewish beliefs and practices. Results indicate that individuals who scored higher on the JRI reported more fear in the area of punishment in the hereafter (transpersonal) and significantly less fear of self annihilation (intrapersonal). Moderately religious individuals on the other hand, expressed more fear of the consequences of personal death on their family and friends (interpersonal) than those who scored higher on the JRI. Florian and Kravetz (1983) concluded that the moderately religious Jews are transferring the transpersonal aspects of

their death to the more obvious and clear interpersonal aspects of death.

Florian and Har-Even (1983) conducted a related investigation designed to examine the effects of gender and religious belief on the fears of personal death. The FPDS was administered to 225 high school Israeli Jewish participants. Groups of individuals were divided according to gender and type of school they attended (secular or religious). Religious persons indicated a greater fear of punishment in the hereafter (transpersonal) and harm to family and friends (interpersonal) than moderately religious Jews. Results also supported that highly religious Jews related significantly less intrapersonal fears of death than less religious individuals.

The finding that highly religious Jews express greater fears of punishment in the hereafter and less intrapersonal fears of death is consistent with Florian and Kravetz's (1983) results. However, Florian and Har-Even's (1983) results that highly religious individuals express more interpersonal fears

of death than moderately religious Jews was contrary to the relationships observed in Florian and Kravetz's (1983) study.

Florian and Har-Even's (1983) findings further suggest that young women express more concerns about fear of loss of identity (intrapersonal) and self-annihilation (transpersonal), while young men show more fear of the negative consequence on family and friends (interpersonal) as well as punishment in the hereafter (transpersonal). How do Florian and Har-Even (1983) explain differences in fears of personal death between Jewish men and women? The authors theorize that the differences between the gender's fear of personal death are directly related to the Judaic value system. Jewish men often highly value the responsibility for their family member's welfare (interpersonal). The concern for the family and fear of retribution following death (transpersonal) may be a primary concern for these men. Women, on the other hand, do not traditionally share the responsibility of the family system and shift their concerns to intrapersonal issues.



Lester (1971) conducted an investigation designed to clarify the association between religious behavior and attitudes toward death with several religious affiliations (e.g., Jewish, Christian, etc.). Students attending a Protestant university completed a religiosity scale developed by Josey (1950), Collett and Lester's (1969) fear of death scale, and Boyer's (1964) fear of death scale (as cited in Lester, 1979). Lester reasoned that individuals may resort to religious behavior in order to cope with death anxiety and for some this method of coping may work and for others it may be ineffective.

Results indicate that a relationship did not exist between religiosity and fears of death for Jews or Catholics. However, the Protestants scored lower on Lester's fears of death scale. Finally, those subjects who scored lower on religiosity had a greater concerns about themselves and less fear for others.

Lester's (1971) investigation makes it difficult to draw accurate conclusions concerning both the Catholic and Jewish denominations for two reasons. Firstly, Lester used a small sample size which may impede a significant relationship from emerging. Secondly, there may be differences in Jews and Catholics who attend a Protestant university and those who attend a Jewish, Catholic, or secular school.

To this date, it is still unclear whether religiosity lowers an individual's interpersonal fears of death. Even if it is known that religiosity reduces interpersonal, fears of death, one can not determine if religiosity shifts the concern from the self to others. Nor would one know if the difference is due to the attitudes and personality traits that determine if a person will hold strong religious beliefs.

#### Religiosity, Fears of Death, and Suicide Acceptability

Hoelter (1979) conducted a landmark investigation in which he hypothesized that religion and particular fears of death may buffer individuals from suicidal behavior. To test

this hypothesis, Hoelter administered The Religious Orthodoxy Scale (ROS; Putney and Middleton, 1961), a multidimensional fears of death scale (Hoelter, 1979) and a six-item Suicide Acceptability Scale (SAS) to 205 Christian participants. The ROS was designed to measure religiosity on six different factors including: current and childhood church attendance; self-perceived religiosity; belief in a supreme being; and religious orthodoxy. The multidimensional scale of death anxiety involved eight separate factors including fear of: the dying process; premature death; the welfare of others; conscious death; being destroyed; bodily concerns after death; fear of the unknown; and fear of the dead. Hoelter found that all measures of religiosity were inversely related to suicide acceptability. Findings also provided significant support that suicide acceptability is a decreasing function of certain fears of death. More specifically, fears of conscious death, fears of being destroyed, and fears of the dead are inversely related to

suicide acceptability Surprisingly, fears of the unknown were positively related to suicide acceptability.

How do Hoelter's (1979) findings concerning fears of death and suicide acceptability within the Christian population relate to Jews? Durkheim (1952) theorized that the fear of punishment in the hereafter should not be considered as a variable affecting suicide rates in the Jewish population because the belief in immortality plays a minor role in Judaism. However, Florian & Kravetz's (1983) and Florian and Har-Even (1983) found that religious Jews manifested a greater amount of fears of punishment in the hereafter than less religious Jews. Thus, for highly religious Jews, fears of punishment in the hereafter may be a relevant issue.

### Summary

In general, research strongly supports that religiosity is inversely related to the acceptability of suicide (e.g., Martin, 1984; Hoelter, 1979; Domino and Miller, 1992). In other

words, the more religious an individual is the less likely they are to accept suicide as a viable option. Also, one study has suggested that generally, speaking, fears of personal death are inversely related to suicide acceptability (Hoelter,1979). In short, the greater an individuals' fear of death, the less likely they are to accept suicide. However, some of the observations concerning the relationship between religiosity and fears of death are conflicting. Florian and Kravetz (1983) found that moderately religious individuals expressed more interpersonal fears of death than highly religious Jews. Florian and Har-Even (1983), on the other hand, concluded that highly religious Jews express more interpersonal fears of death than less religious individuals.

The current study is designed to explore the relationships between religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability in a novel manner. Similar to previous studies, the present study will also examine how religiosity (i.e., a Jewish individual's adherence to specific Jewish

beliefs and practices) and fears of personal death influence the acceptance of suicide. Moreover, the present study further examines the acceptance or rejection of suicide as a function of variations in the Jewish culture, as indicated by distinctions in Jewish denomination (i.e., Orthodox, Conservative, versus Reform).

## Hypotheses

Presented below are the hypotheses that were tested in the current study and the rationale for why they were chosen.

The first major goal of this investigation was to examine differences in religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability between Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews.

### Differences in Religiosity Across Jewish Denominations

1) Although there have been no scientific investigations to support the idea that there are differences in religiosity among the different Jewish denominations, it is widely assumed that Reformed Jews are the least religious and Orthodox individuals are the most with Conservative Jews being intermediate. Therefore, it was hypothesized that Orthodox Jews would manifest a higher degree of religiosity than Reformed individuals, with Conservative Jews being intermediate.

### Differences in Transpersonal Fears of Death Across Jewish Denominations

2) Florian and Kravetz (1983) along with Florian and Har-Even (1983) reported that highly religious Jews expressed a higher degree of transpersonal fears of death than less religiously inclined individuals. Therefore, it is hypothesized that Orthodox Jews would be expected to manifest less transpersonal fears of personal death than Conservative Jews. Furthermore, Reformed Jews are expected to manifest more transpersonal fears of death than Conservative individuals.

### Differences in Intrapersonal Fears of Personal Death Across Jewish Denominations

3) Past research (Florian & Kravetz, 1983; Florian & Har-Even, 1983) has supported the findings that highly religious individuals usually express less intrapersonal fears of death than less religious Jews. Thus, it was expected that Orthodox Jews would express less



intrapersonal fears of death than Conservative Jews.

Furthermore, Reformed Jews are expected to manifest a greater amount of intrapersonal fears of death than Conservative individuals.

#### Differences in Interpersonal Fears of Personal Death Across Jewish Denominations

4) Florian and Har-Even (1983) reported that highly religious Jews manifested more interpersonal fears of death than less religious individuals. On the other hand, Florian and Kravetz (1983) found that Highly religious Jews express less interpersonal fears of death than moderately religious individuals. Thus, differences in interpersonal fears of death are expected between Jewish denominations. However, it is difficult to predict whether the Reformed or Orthodox Jews will express more interpersonal fears of death.

### Differences in Suicide Acceptability Across Jewish Denominations

5) It has been strongly corroborated that highly religious individuals are less accepting of suicide than less religious individuals (Domino & Miller, 1992; Martin, 1982; Hoelter, 1979). Therefore, it was predicted that significant differences would exist between denominations in the acceptance of suicide. Specifically, Orthodox Jews would be less accepting of suicide than Reformed Jews with Conservative individuals being intermediate.

The second major goal of this study was to characterize the pattern of relationships between religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability across and within each Jewish denomination. Because of cultural differences between denominations, it is expected that the configuration

of relationships would differ from one denomination to another.

Relationships Between Religiosity, Fears of Personal Death and Suicide Acceptability Across Jewish Denominations

6) Regardless of Jewish denomination, it is predicted that an inverse relationship will exist between religiosity and suicide acceptability. Moreover, regardless of Jewish denomination, inverse relationships are expected between religiosity and intrapersonal fears of death. On the other hand, regardless of Jewish denomination, direct relationships are expected between religiosity and transpersonal fears of death. Lastly, regardless of religious denomination, a relationship between religiosity and intrapersonal fears of death is expected.

Relationships Between Religiosity and Transpersonal Fears of Death Within Jewish Denominations

7) Florian and Kravetz (1982) reported that highly religious individuals expressed a higher degree of transpersonal fears of death than less religious individuals. The present study predicted that a positive relationship would exist between these two factors for each Jewish denomination. Thus, within each denomination, a more religious individual would be more concerned about the transpersonal consequences of his or her own death than a less religious individual.

Relationships Between Religiosity and Interpersonal Fears of Death Within Jewish Denominations

8) A previous finding (Florian & Kravetz, 1983) has suggested that moderately religious individuals' express more concerns about how their passing will affect family and friends (interpersonal) than highly religious Jews. Florian and Har-Even (1983), on the other hand, concluded that highly religious Jews express more interpersonal fears of death than less religious

individuals. Therefore, although a relationship between religiosity and interpersonal fears of death can be predicted within each denomination, the direction of this relationship can not be accurately predicted.

#### Relationships Between Religiosity and Intrapersonal Fears of Death Within Jewish Denominations

9) Past research (Florian & Kravetz, 1983; Florian & Har-Even, 1983) has supported that highly religious Jews had significantly less fears of self-annihilation (intrapersonal). Thus, it is predicted that an inverse relationship between religiosity and intrapersonal fears of death would be manifest within each Jewish denomination. Given the anticipated restricted range in religiosity scores among the Orthodox Jews, these expected inverse relationships would again be more evident in Reformed and Conservative Jews than in Orthodox individuals.

Relationships Between Religiosity and Suicide  
Acceptability Within Jewish Denominations

10) Based on past findings (Hoelter,1979; Martin,1982) that a negative relationship exists between religiosity and suicide acceptability, it was predicted that an inverse relationship between religiosity and suicide acceptability would exist for each denomination. It is further predicted that the Orthodox Jews will exhibit a stronger inverse relationship between religiosity and suicide acceptability than Reformed individuals with Conservative Jews being intermediate. However, an anticipated restricted range in both religiosity and suicide acceptability scores among Orthodox individuals may inhibit such an inverse relationship from emerging. On the other hand, this relationship will be more evident among Reformed and Conservative Jews given their greater variability in religiosity and suicide acceptability.

Relationships Between Fears of Personal Death and Suicide Acceptability Within Jewish Denominations

11) Following Hoelter's (1979) finding that suicide acceptability is a decreasing function of the fear of death, inverse relationships were expected between interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal fears of personal death and suicide acceptability for each Jewish denomination. However, an anticipated restricted range in suicide acceptability scores among Orthodox individuals may inhibit such inverse relationships from emerging.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 150 adult Jewish individuals between the ages of 25 and 67 participated in the investigation. A third of the participants were Reformed Jews, another third were Conservative Jews, and the remaining were Orthodox Jews. Within each Jewish grouping or denomination, half of the participants were male and half were female. Participants were randomly selected from synagogue membership lists of several Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox synagogues in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. All participants regardless of Jewish denomination evidenced relatively high socioeconomic status: Reformed ( $M = 55.6$ ), Conservative ( $M = 57.0$ ), and Orthodox ( $M = 55.6$ ). Eighty-three percent of those recruited completed the study.

### Materials

Participants were asked to complete four paper and pencil measures: the GLASR (Gladding et al., 1981), FPDS



(Florian & Kravetz,1983), SAS (Hoelter,1979), and the Four Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, 1975).

The FPDS (Florian & Kravetz,1983) was constructed to explore fears of personal death through three broad dimensions: the interpersonal, intrapersonal and transpersonal consequences of death. Factor loading for items on the FPDS ranged from a low of .45 to a high of .86. Test-retest reliability across a six week period varied between a low of .50 and a high of .91 for each factor. Individuals are asked to respond to 31 questions. Answers range from a low of 1 ("Totally correct for me") to a high of 7 ("Totally incorrect for me"). Scores on each dimension are determined by summing the score of the items that make up each dimension and dividing by the respective number of items that compose the dimension. Thus, the scores on all three dimensions range from a 1 to 7. For convenience, scores were converted so that a higher score equals a greater amount of fears of death.

The SAS (Hoelter, 1979) is a six-item questionnaire designed to assess a participant's acceptability of suicide. The reliability coefficient (internal consistency) for the scale is .78. Respondents to the SAS were instructed to give their honest opinion to each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from a score of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) with 3 (neutral) being intermediate. All six items on the SAS are then summed and divided by 6. Therefore, a participant's score may vary from 1 to 6.

The GLASR (Gladding et al., 1981) is a 23-item scale designed to assess religiosity on four individual factors. Gladding et al. (as cited in Gladding & Lewis, 1979) reported a .84 test-retest reliability for the GLASR over a ten-week period. The factors that make up the GLASR are: (1) Belief in a personalized deity; (2) Amount of religious effort; (3) Religious belief; and (4) Consistency of belief and action. Respondents to the GLASR were instructed to give their honest opinion to each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from a

score of 1 (strongly disagree) to a high of 5 (strongly agree) with 3 (neutral) being intermediate. All scores on the GLASR are summed and divided by 23. Therefore, scores range from 1 to 5.

The Four Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, 1975) was constructed to assess an individual's socioeconomic status (SES). The SES score of an individual is assessed by combining information on gender, marital status, education, and occupation. The occupation of an individual is separated into groups which range from a low of 1 (menial task occupations) to a high of 9 (higher executives, proprietors of large businesses, etc.). The years of school an individual has completed are separated into groups which range from a low of 1 (less than seventh grade) to a high of 7 (graduate or professional training). SES is computed by obtaining a scale score for each factor and multiplying a weighted constant predetermined for each educational level and specific occupation. If the individual is married, the education and

occupation of the spouse are also obtained. The spouse's scores are added together and divided by two. SES scores may range from a low of 8 to a high of 66.

### Procedure

Prior to the administration of the surveys, participants were told that they were being asked to participate in an investigation that would explore the relationship between religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability. Informed consent was obtained from all participants (See Appendix A). Participants were also assured that they would remain anonymous and that they could terminate their participation at any time without any penalty or prejudice.

The survey was administered to participants in groups of 10-15 individuals at a time. The participants were given oral instructions to answer each item as honestly as possible. The GLASR instrument was administered first, followed by the FPDS, the SAS, and finally the Four Factor Index of Social Status. Subsequent to the completion of the questionnaires,

all participants were given a full debriefing explaining the research project and issues concerning the problem of suicide. Participants were also encouraged to take home documented information detailing the warning signs of suicide as well as a list of area locations where they could gain more information. Any questions concerning the investigation were answered at this time. Participants also had the opportunity to leave their home address so that a full description of the results of the study would be sent to them.

## Results

The group averages of each denomination for the FPDS, GLASR, and SAS are exhibited in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 About Here  
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The first set of hypotheses investigated the differences in religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability between the Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox denominations.

### Religiosity Within Jewish Denominations

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on religiosity with religious denomination as the predictor was conducted. Significant differences in religiosity were noted between Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews,  $F(2, 149) = 261.20, p < .001$ . Scheffe's tests subsequent to the ANOVA revealed that Orthodox Jews ( $M = 4.5$ ) were more religious than Conservative ( $M = 3.9$ ) and Reformed Jews ( $M = 1.6$ ).

Conservative Jews were found to be more religious than Reformed Jews,  $p < .05$ . Thus, the hypothesis that Orthodox Jews would exhibit a higher degree of religiosity than Reformed Jews, with Conservative Jews being intermediate, was supported.

#### Transpersonal Fears of Death Within Jewish Denominations

An Analysis of Variance was conducted on the degree of transpersonal fears of death with religious denomination as the predictor. There were no significant differences between the denominations,  $p > .05$ . Thus, the hypothesis that Conservative Jews would exhibit a higher degree of transpersonal fears of death than Reformed Jews, but less than Orthodox individuals, was not confirmed.

#### Interpersonal Fears of Death Within Jewish Denominations

An Analysis of Variance on the degree of interpersonal fears of death with religious denomination as the predictor was conducted. No differences in interpersonal fears of death were found between Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox

individuals,  $p > .05$ . Therefore, the hypothesis that differences between Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews would exist for interpersonal fears of death was not supported.

#### Intrapersonal Fears of Death Within Jewish Denominations

An analysis of variance on the degree of intrapersonal fears of death with religious denomination as the predictor was conducted. The denominations did differ in their concerns about intrapersonal fears of death,  $F(2, 149) = 8.11, p < .05$ .

Scheffe's test subsequent to the ANOVA indicated that Orthodox Jews ( $M = 2.8$ ) expressed less intrapersonal fears of death than Conservative individuals ( $M = 3.8$ ). However, Reformed Jews ( $M = 3.4$ ) were just as likely to express the same amount of intrapersonal fears as Orthodox and Conservative Jews. Thus, the hypothesis that Orthodox Jews would express less intrapersonal fears of death than Conservative individuals was supported. However, the hypothesis that Reformed Jews would express more



intrapersonal fears of death than Orthodox individuals was not supported.

### Suicide Acceptability Within Jewish Denominations

An Analysis of Variance on suicide acceptability with religious denomination as a predictor was conducted. Results show that the denominations differed in their acceptance of suicide,  $F(2, 149) = 109.99, p < .05$ . Scheffe's tests indicate that the Orthodox Jews ( $M = 1.3$ ) were less accepting of suicide than Conservative Jews ( $M = 2.4$ ), who were in turn, less accepting than Reformed individuals ( $M = 3.0$ ). This finding validates the hypothesis that Reformed Jews would be more accepting of suicide than Orthodox individuals, with Conservative Jews being intermediate.

The remaining set of hypotheses investigated the relationships between religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability using either one-tailed or two-tailed correlations. The results detailing these relationships across and within denominations are shown in Tables 2 to 5.

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Insert Tables 2 and 3 About Here

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Religiosity, Fears of Personal Death, and Suicide Acceptability  
Across the Jewish Denominations

Bivariate correlations were conducted to assess the relationships between religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability across all three Jewish denominations. No significant differences were exhibited between religiosity and intrapersonal, interpersonal, or transpersonal fears of death,  $p > .05$ . Moreover, no significant relationships were manifested between suicide acceptability and interpersonal, intrapersonal, or transpersonal fears of death,  $p > .05$ . Only the relationship between religiosity and suicide acceptability was found to be significant,  $r = -.76$ ,  $p < .05$ . Thus, the hypothesis that a relationship would exist between religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability regardless of Jewish

denomination was not supported. However, regardless of Jewish denomination, the hypothesis that a relationship between suicide acceptability and religiosity was supported.

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Insert Tables 4 and 5 About Here  
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#### Religiosity and Transpersonal Fears of Death Within Each Jewish Denomination

A one-tailed bivariate correlation was used to explore the relationship between religiosity and transpersonal fears of death within each Jewish denomination. No significant relationships were evident between religiosity and transpersonal fears of death among Reformed, Conservative or Orthodox Jews,  $p > .05$ . This finding deviates from the study's expectation that a positive relationship between religiosity and transpersonal fears of death would occur for each denomination.

### Religiosity and Intrapersonal Fears of Death Within Each Jewish Denomination

A significant inverse relationship between religiosity and intrapersonal fears of death was evident among Orthodox Jews,  $r = -.24$ ,  $p < .05$ . However, no significant relationship between religiosity and intrapersonal fears of death was detected among Conservative or Reformed Jews,  $p > .05$ .

Interestingly, a positive .30 correlation was found for Reformed individuals. Therefore, the hypothesis of an inverse relationship between religiosity and intrapersonal fears of death was upheld among the Orthodox Jews, but not confirmed among the Reformed and Conservative Jews.

### Religiosity and Interpersonal Fears of Death Within Each Jewish Denomination

The relationships between religiosity and interpersonal fears of death were examined within each denomination through bivariate correlations. No significant relationships were detected for Reformed, Conservative, or Orthodox Jews,

$p > .05$  Thus, the hypothesis that a relationship would exist between religiosity and interpersonal fears of death was not corroborated among any of the Jewish denominations.

### Religiosity and Suicide Acceptability Within Each Jewish Denomination

Significant inverse relationships between religiosity and suicide acceptability were noted among Orthodox,  $r = -.36$ ,  $p < .01$  and Reformed Jews,  $r = -.54$ ,  $p < .01$ . However, there was no relationship between these two factors among the Conservative Jews. Thus, the hypothesis that an inverse relationship would exist between religiosity and suicide acceptability was validated among the Orthodox and Reformed Jews, but not in Conservative individuals. A Z' test was conducted to determine whether the coefficient for Reformed Jews,  $r = -.54$ , was significantly greater than that for Orthodox individuals,  $r = -.36$ . They were not significantly different,  $p > .05$ .

### Suicide Acceptability and Fears of Death Within Each Jewish Denomination

No relationships between suicide acceptability and the different fears of death were evident among Conservative and Orthodox Jews,  $p > .05$ . However, among Reformed Jews, inverse relationships were found between suicide acceptability and interpersonal ( $r = -.47, p < .0001$ ), intrapersonal ( $r = -.47, p < .0001$ ), and transpersonal fears of death ( $r = -.24, p < .05$ ). Thus, the expectations of inverse relationships between suicide and the different fears of death were confirmed only among the Reformed individuals.

## Discussion

The results of this study indicate that differences in religiosity and suicide acceptability exist between Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews. Orthodox Jews were more religious and less accepting of suicide than Reformed individuals, with Conservative Jews being intermediate. However, there were no differences in the expression of transpersonal and interpersonal fears of death between the Jewish denominations. On the other hand, Conservative Jews had more intrapersonal fears of death than Orthodox Jews, with the Reformed Jews being intermediate.

When the relationships between religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability were assessed across Jewish denominations, a significant relationship only existed between religiosity and suicide acceptability. Results of the present study do indicate that the configuration or pattern of relationships between religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability differs from one Jewish denomination to

another. Thus, in order to understand the influence of religiosity and fears of personal death on the acceptability of suicide in Jews, one must consider an individual's Jewish denomination.

#### Differences in Religiosity and Suicide Within Each Jewish Denomination

Results support that Reformed Jews were found to be less religious than Conservative individuals, with Orthodox Jews being the most religious. Likewise, Orthodox Jews were the least accepting of suicide, while Reformed individuals were more accepting of suicide than Conservative Jews. How can one explain this? It would be reasonable to conclude that for Orthodox Jews, a strong adherence to both religious beliefs and practices lead them to consider the act of suicide as morally wrong and against God's will. In contrast, Reformed Jews who have weaker religious beliefs about the existence or supremacy of God in their lives may not consider suicide as a transgression.



However, overall scores for religiosity may mask important differences and similarities between and within Jewish denominations. Therefore, when exploring religiosity among Jews, it may be fruitful to include information about the various aspects of beliefs and practices as measured by the GLASR.

#### Interpersonal Fears of Death Within Jewish Denominations

No significant differences were found between denominations in interpersonal fears of death. Within each Jewish denomination individuals exhibited moderate concerns about the loss of contact with family, friends, and the community after death. This finding, however, is not consistent with the results of Florian and Kravetz (1983) or Florian and Har-Even (1983) which suggested that interpersonal fears of death would vary as a function of religiosity. This discrepancy in results may be accounted for by cross-cultural differences that may exist between highly

religious Jews in Israel and the American Orthodox Jews in the present study's sample. It seems plausible that in American culture, regardless of one's religious beliefs, most individuals consider the loss of contact with friends, family, and others as a basic concern following one's personal demise. Thus, in such a setting, it would not be surprising if Orthodox Jews (i.e., highly religious Jews) are just as likely as Conservative and Reformed Jews to report interpersonal fears of death. Finally, a relationship between religiosity and interpersonal fears of death may not exist for Reformed, Conservative, or Orthodox Jews.

#### Intrapersonal Fears of Death Across Jewish Denominations

With respect to intrapersonal fears of death, Orthodox Jews manifested significantly less concerns about the loss of self and identity (intrapersonal) after death than Conservative Jews. This result would seem to partially support Florian and Kravetz (1983) findings that highly religious Jews exhibit less intrapersonal fears of death than moderately and less religious

Jews. However, the present study further indicates that there were no significant differences between Reformed and Orthodox Jews although a trend toward greater intrapersonal fears of death was detected among Reformed Jews.

However, the Reformed Jews who were involved in the present study actually belong to a synagogue.

#### Transpersonal Fears of Death Across Jewish Denominations

No significant differences were found between denominations in reference to transpersonal fears of death. Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed individuals were all moderately concerned about the other worldly consequences of death. This is somewhat surprising given each denomination's apparent differences in religiosity. Therefore, transpersonal fears of personal death may not be strongly related to religiosity or individual's with different degrees of religiosity hold different views concerning the afterlife which influences an individual's fears of punishment. One possible reason for

this observation is that the Orthodox Jews' strong religious beliefs may serve to alleviate fears of transpersonal death. The Orthodox individual is more likely to believe that he or she will continue to live on in a spiritual sense after death, thus transpersonal fears of death are not a concern for these religious Jews. The Reformed Jew's more secular outlook, on the other hand, may lead the individual to doubt the reality of an afterlife. Thus, such a Reformed Jew may not be concerned about notions of self-annihilation after death. Finally, the Conservative Jews may vacillate in their beliefs concerning an after life as a consequence of their slightly higher than moderate level of religiosity. Although they may have fairly stronger religious beliefs than Reformed Jews, Conservative Jews may have uncertainties about and remain undecided about the possibility of existence following death. Thus, Jewish Americans may have moderate transpersonal fears of death for different reasons.

As stated earlier, comparing differences in religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability solely by religious denominations may obscure important findings. In order to gain a clearer understanding of religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability for American Jews, one must explore the relationships between these factors according to Jewish denomination.

#### Relationship Between Religiosity and Suicide Acceptability

Collapsing across all denominations, an inverse relationship existed between religiosity and suicide acceptability. This is consistent with previous findings (Hoelter,1979; Martin, 1982, Domino & Miller,1992) that the more religious an individual is, the less accepting of suicide they tend to be.

Within denominations, inverse relationships between religiosity and suicide acceptability were exhibited by the Reformed and Orthodox Jews. However, there was no relationship between religiosity and suicide acceptability

among the Conservative Jews. Perhaps no relationship between these two factors was detected for Conservative Jews because this denomination is too heterogeneous in their religious beliefs and acceptability of suicide. In other words, many Conservative Jews are very similar to Orthodox Jews, and many others are similar to Reformed Jews. Furthermore, even with slightly more than moderate levels of religiosity, Conservative Jews may depend less on the Talmud for guidance and base their decision on moral reasoning not related to religiosity.

Contrary to expectation, an inverse relationship between religiosity and suicide acceptability was not stronger among Orthodox Jews than in Reformed individuals. One possible reason for this observation is that there was minimal variability in both the religiosity and suicide acceptability scores obtained from the Orthodox Jews. Thus, a weaker relationship between the two variables was observed.

### Relationship Between Religiosity and Fears of Personal Death

How is religiosity related to intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal fears of death? Collapsing across all the denominations, no significant relationships existed between religiosity and any of the fears of personal death. This finding may be explained by observing the relationship between these factors within the Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews. Within Jewish denominations, no significant relationships were reported between religiosity and any of the fears of personal death for Reformed or Conservative Jews. Regarding the Orthodox Jews, only an inverse relationship between religiosity and intrapersonal fears of death was manifested. Judging from these findings, one can conclude that few relationships were observed when collapsing denominations because significant relationships were not detected for these factors within each Jewish denomination. In addition, no relationships were found across the denominations because the fear of death measure

was collapsed into the three broad categories (e.g., intrapersonal) instead of the more specific six factors. Although not statistically significant, the relationships were generally positive for Reformed Jews and negative for the Orthodox individuals. This may also help to explain why no significant relationships were detected across Jewish denominations.

No significant relationships were exhibited between religiosity and interpersonal or intrapersonal fears of death among Reformed Jews. Although these relationships are weak and do not provide direct evidence of causation, one can surmise that Reformed Jews may be seeking religion to find meaning in their personal death. Taking a more religious outlook may be attempts of Reformed individuals to alleviate their fears of death. Lester (1971) contended that individuals may resort to religious behavior in coping with anxieties about death.



Conservative Jews, on the other hand, manifested no significant relationships between religiosity and the various fears of death. The Conservative individuals slightly greater than moderate level of religiosity may be associated with more uncertain or conflicting beliefs within the denomination concerning the after life or even the existence of God. Some Conservative individuals a pattern evidenced by Reformed Jews while others may demonstrate a pattern expressed by Orthodox Jews.

Orthodox Jews exhibited an inverse relationship between intrapersonal fears of death and religiosity. In other words, the more religious an Orthodox Jew is the less likely they are to hold intrapersonal fears of death. As stated earlier, religion may shift the focus away from oneself. This in turn, may explain why the Orthodox denomination was the only group to manifest a inverse relationship between religiosity an intrapersonal fears of death.

Differences in the configurations or patterns of relationships between religiosity and interpersonal and intrapersonal fears of death among the Jewish denominations imply that such differences between the denominations are not simply a matter of degree. These differences indicate that religion may serve separate functions for the Reformed and Orthodox Jews. Specifically, the most religious of the Reformed Jews may turn to religion in hopes of allaying their fears of personal death or to find meaning in the stark reality of death. On the other hand, the most religious Orthodox Jews who possess strong religious beliefs in God and the afterlife have confidence and thus tend not to fear death.

#### Relationship Between Fears of Personal Death and Suicide Acceptability

Collapsing across Jewish denomination, no relationship was exhibited between fears of personal death and suicide acceptability. This may be explained by the findings that only among Reformed Jews were significant inverse relationships

between suicide acceptability and interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal fears of death manifested. The more interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal fears of death a Reformed Jew harbors, the less likely he or she would accept suicide as a viable option. Thus, such concerns may serve as deterrents to suicide among Reformed individuals. On the other hand, no significant relationships between suicide acceptance and any of the differential fears of personal death were found among the Conservative as well as the Orthodox Jews. Thus, fears of personal death is not a deterrent. A possible explanation for this finding among Orthodox Jews is that their extreme low levels of suicide acceptability coupled with the low range of variability in their non-acceptance of suicide may not be sufficient to establish an observed relationship between the differential fears of death and suicide acceptability. As for the Conservative Jews, the non-existence of relationships between suicide acceptance and fears of personal death may again be a consequence of

their moderate levels of religiosity. As mentioned earlier, conflicting or uncertain religious convictions and beliefs hinder distinct patterns in their views and concerns about suicide and death from emerging.

### Summary

What determines a Jew's acceptance or non-acceptance of suicide as an option in his or her life? What roles do religiosity and fears of death play in the Jewish individual's acceptance of suicide? Firstly, differences exist between Jewish denominations in both religiosity and suicide acceptability. Therefore, it would be misleading to make generalizations concerning Jewish individuals without knowing information about their amount of religiosity and denomination. Results of the present study suggest that Orthodox individuals' acceptance or rejection of suicide, as well as their concerns about personal death, appear to be consistent and are centered around the strength of their religious beliefs and practices. Moreover, for the most

religious of the Orthodox Jews, these religious beliefs not only allay their fears of death, but such beliefs may also dictate the rejection of suicide as a viable option. Even the least religious of the Orthodox Jews reject suicide although they may have slightly less fears of personal death than their less religious cohorts.

On the other hand, the acceptance or rejection of suicide among Reformed Jews may be determined by two independent factors: fears of personal death and religiosity. Regardless of religiosity, many Reformed Jews may be disqualifying suicide as an option in their lives because of their fears of personal death. Their concerns about a loss of self and identity as well as a loss of contact with family, friends, and others may serve as hindrances to suicide. Yet, it is also with these fears that Reformed Jews may be turning to and becoming more involved with religion to alleviate such fears or to provide answers to life and death issues. When Reformed individuals are more religious, however, their consequent adherence to these

religious beliefs and practices, in turn, may prevent them from accepting suicide. Thus, as Reformed Jews become more religious, they approximate the views of Orthodox Jews in their non-acceptance of suicide but not in their views of death. However, it is necessary to understand that the relationships between these variables no matter how strong, do not provide evidence of causation.

Since no relationships between religiosity, suicide acceptability, and fears of death were observed among the Conservative Jews, one cannot make definitive statements about the determinants of suicide acceptance among these individuals. Conservative individuals' views on suicide, concerns about their own death, and adherence to religious beliefs and practices may be more varied, uncertain, and complex than those of Orthodox and Reformed Jews that correlational tools are unable to capture these complexities. On the other hand, these factors may not be related to each other at all for this particular Jewish denomination. For

Conservative Jews, factors other than religiosity and fears of death may be more determinative of suicide acceptability.

### Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

When compared with previous research (Hoelter,1979; Lester 1971; Domino and Miller,1992) on religiosity, fears of personal death, and suicide acceptability, the results of the present study validate the notion that the relationships between these variables are multifaceted. This study demonstrates that religiosity and fears of personal death play critical roles in the acceptance of suicide among many but not necessarily all Jews. Yet, in examining these variables within the specific context of the three major Jewish denominations, the study has clearly illustrated that the complex relationships between these variables differ from one denomination to another. For instance, although religiosity was the sole determinant of the rejection of suicide found among Orthodox Jews, fears of personal death and religiosity among the Reformed may both be influential in their

acceptance or rejection of suicide. Thus, the present study highlights and stresses the importance of examining the specific cultural contexts that each Jewish denomination represents when investigating the issues of suicide, religion, and fears of death within the Jewish population.

Investigations that fail to take into account Jewish cultural (denominational) and religious differences may obscure critical relationships and determinants of suicide acceptance.

However, there are several limitations in this study.

Although the GLASR (1981) measure adopted for the study does not fully account for the Jewish religious experience, a more detailed analysis of its subscales on religiosity may provide a more precise understanding of the relationship between religiosity and suicide acceptance among the Jewish denominations. Because Judaism renders more importance to practice than conviction, perhaps certain subscales of the GLASR measure, such as the amount of effort spent on religious practice may be more predictive of suicide



acceptance than the subscale on religious beliefs or belief in a personal deity.

The Gladding, Lewis, and Adkins Scale of Religiosity (GLSAR) adopted for the study has seldom been used within the Jewish population. Thus, the measure may not capture the specific cultural and socio-moral nuances of what it actually means to be a religious Jew. This is particularly noteworthy because the Jewish religion is significantly different from other religions like Christianity with which the GLASR has been used. While the Christian religion is primarily concerned about beliefs and professions of faith, Jews place a stronger emphasis on religious practice than on convictions. The keeping of dietary laws, the observance of Shabbat, the amount of money and time given to tzedakah (charity), and such similar practices, are as much as or possibly more important in what defines religiosity among Jews than specific convictions concerning the existence of God and the afterlife.. Thus when studying the Jewish population, it may be beneficial

to employ a religiosity scale that explicitly taps not only religious beliefs but also specific Jewish customs and traditions.

Also, the GLASR is a limited instrument because it may be difficult to gain a full measure of an individual's religiosity from a paper and pencil questionnaire. One of the pitfalls of a religiosity scale is that it attempts to measure a broad concept in terms of degrees. Thus, a scale assumes that the meaning of a concept is the same for all individuals. A religiosity scale assumes that all individuals adhere to the same notion of religiosity. However, what it means to be religious may differ from one person to another.

Lastly, generalizations concerning Conservative, Orthodox, and especially Reformed Jews should be made with caution. The individuals who participated in this investigation all belong to synagogues and may be considered observant Jews. Thus, the study does not account for the full range of practicing and non-practicing Jews. This possibly

explains some of the discrepancies that had been found between the present study's results and findings from previous studies that had included non-practicing Jews. Moreover, the individuals in the study were chosen from synagogues in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Members of these synagogues may not be characteristic of those in New York City or Birmingham, Alabama. Past research has also shown that gender differences exist in fears of personal death (Florian & Har-Even, 1983). Therefore, this study is limited because gender differences were not analyzed. Finally, because there was no variability in socioeconomic status and all participants scored very high on this measure, generalizations concerning the findings of this study may be limited to Jews who are high in socioeconomic status

### Practical Implications

The observed differences between Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews in the patterns of relationships between religiosity, fears of personal death, and

suicide acceptability have several practical implications when working with a suicidal client. In the first place, the findings suggest that the acceptance or rejection of suicide among Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews is determined by different factors. An Orthodox client may reject suicide solely on the basis of his or her religious beliefs. Therefore, when working with an Orthodox individual who is suicidal, it may be useful to spend time exploring why religiosity is not working as an effective buffer against suicidal ideation. On the other hand, a Reformed individual's acceptance of suicide may depend on religious beliefs and practices as well as fears concerning his or her own death. Therefore, when working with a Reformed individual who is suicidal it may be useful to spend time exploring why fears of death and religiosity are not working as effective buffers in the reduction of suicide ideation. The present study's results do not provide an accurate picture of the factors that determine a Conservative Jew's acceptance or rejection of suicide. However, the

findings suggest that some Conservative individuals may hold views concerning suicide that are more similar to Reformed Jews, while some may approximate Orthodox Jews' views. Therefore, when working with a Conservative individual who is suicidal one should take a very broad approach in exploring fears of personal death, religiosity and other factors that may inhibit suicidal behavior. Further, with the Conservative individuals, one might want to assess more fully their precise sense of religion; that is go beyond the denominational label. In essence, to attend to the individual without recourse to preconceptions based on group memberships.

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Table 1

Religiosity, Fears of Personal Death, and Suicide Acceptability  
by Denomination

	<u>Reformed</u>		<u>Conservative</u>		<u>Orthodox</u>	
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Religiosity	2.85	.49	3.91	.34	4.56	.27
Suicide Acceptability	3.02	.58	2.40	.64	1.32	.49
Interpersonal Fears	3.20	1.04	3.35	1.10	3.05	1.17
Intrapersonal Fears	3.36	1.13	3.85	1.32	2.87	1.24
Transpersonal Fears	2.98	1.19	3.25	1.39	2.73	1.38

Table 2

Correlations Between Religiosity and Measures of Suicide Acceptability and Fears of Personal Death for All Jewish Denominations

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<u>Measure</u>	<u>r</u>
Suicide Acceptability	-.76*
Transpersonal Fears of Death	-.08
Interpersonal Fears of Death	-.04
Intrapersonal Fears of Death	-.10

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\*  $p < .05$

Table 3

Correlations of Suicide Acceptability with Fears of Personal  
Death Measures for All Denominations

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<u>Measure</u>	<u>r</u>
Interpersonal Fears of Death	-.05
Intrapersonal Fears of Death	.07
Transpersonal Fears of Death	.04

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\*  $p < .05$

Table 4

Correlations of Religiosity, and Measures of Suicide Acceptability and Fears of Personal Death by Jewish Denomination .

Measure	$r$		
	Reformed	Conservative	Orthodox
Suicide Acceptability	-.54*	-.17	-.36*
Transpersonal Fears of Death	.14	-.20	-.25
Interpersonal Fears of Death	.26	-.19	-.24
Intrapersonal Fears of Death	.30	-.17	-.24*

Note:  $r$  for Interpersonal and Transpersonal Fears of Death and religiosity involved a two tailed test. All other  $r$ 's were tested using a one-tailed test.

\*  $p < .05$

Table 5

Correlations of Suicide Acceptability and Measures of Fears of Personal Death by Jewish Denomination

Measure	<u>r</u>		
	Reformed	Conservative	Orthodox
Interpersonal Fears of Death	-.47*	-.19	-.01
Intrapersonal Fears of Death	-.47*	-.17	-.06
Transpersonal Fears of Death	-.24*	-.20	-.08

\*  $p < .05$



## Appendix A

I give permission for myself to participate in this project. I understand that I will be asked to complete questionnaires about my beliefs in the areas of religion, fears of death, and suicide. It has been made clear to me that throughout the entire project my name will not be associated with the results of this project and the information that I provide will remain anonymous. I have been assured that after the questionnaires are collected and analyzed they will be kept in a secure place to assure that all information will be kept confidential. I also understand that I may terminate my participation or request that that my answers be withdrawn from this project at any time without being penalized in any way.

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NAME

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DATE