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## A Heart of Many Rooms: Exploring Jewish Diversity

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The Jewish People is not (and never has been) monolithic. Explore the many ways of being Jewish and find where you fit in the Jewish story in this conversation about identity, pluralism, and the value of difference.



## CHAPTER 3

A Heart of Many Rooms: Exploring Jewish Diversity



**DRAW A JEW:**

# Jewish Geography

Jewish people come from all over the world — with ancient communities spread out from Western Europe to India and China. However, most contemporary Jews fit into one of the three major ethnic categories below:

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## Ashkenazi

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## Sephardi

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## Mizrachi

# Jewish Languages



# Yiddish for Beginners

Yiddish was the primary spoken language of Ashkenazi Jewry, formed from a blend of German and Hebrew. Many common Yiddish words continue to pepper the speech of American Jews. Below, you'll find some of the most common and colorful terms and phrases.

## BUBBE

Grandmother.

## BUBBELA

A term of endearment, darling.

## CHUTZPAH

Nerve, gall. The classic example of chutzpah is a person who kills their parents and then asks the court for mercy, because they are an orphan!

## FEH!

An expression of pure, unmitigated disgust.

## GEVALT!

A cry of fear. "Oy Gevalt!" is often used as an expression meaning "Oh, how terrible!"

## GORNISHT

Nothing. As in a bad poker hand, "I've got gornisht."

## HAYMISH

Friendly, warm, easy-going.

## KISHKES

Guts, belly. Can also mean "deep-down," as in "I feel in my kishkes that it isn't right."

## KVELL

To beam with pride, particularly the emotion a parent feels over their children's accomplishments.

## KVETCH

To complain, a Jewish art form.

## MAZAL TOV

Congratulations!

## MENSCH

A person of true character. An individual of worth because of their noble values or actions.

## MESHUGENA

A crazy person.

## NOSH

To snack.

## SHLEMIEL

An unfortunate, someone who is consistently taken advantage of, a born loser.

## SHLEP

To carry something heavy or to travel a long distance. To make a big effort.

## SHTIK

An act. Often refers to an individual's unique way of presenting themselves, as in "She is doing her shtik."

## ZAYDE

Grandfather.

# Jewish Denominations

	When and where did it originate?	Approach to Jewish law and practice?
<b>ORTHODOX</b>		
<b>CONSERVATIVE</b>		
<b>RECONSTRUCTIONIST</b>		
<b>REFORM</b>		

Approach to gender and LGBTQ issues?	Definition of who is a Jew?	Other notes

# Four Rabbis, Four Denominations



## Rabbi Zachary Shapiro

Temple Akiba, Culver City, CA

### REFORM

I am a Reform Jew because I believe that the historic, prophetic vision of our people should inform our religious, cultural, and spiritual paths. I believe that personal autonomy, grounded in Jewish knowledge, should focus our decisions. And, I believe that our sacred texts act as guidance rather than governance.

I am proud of the progressive arm of Reform Judaism. Our movement doesn't only give voice to civil rights issues, but we stand at the forefront of these struggles. We were pioneers in embracing women into the rabbinate and in LGBT causes.

I am a fourth-generation Reform Jew. My Russian born great-grandfather felt more at home in the local Reform congregation. My grandfather proudly went to Torah study on Shabbat — not because of religious observance, but, rather, because he liked to engage in intellectual discourse with the rabbi. My mother was always moved by the great liturgical music of the Reform Movement.

And me? I am a product of an incredible Reform congregation, its youth group, as well as the Union for Reform Judaism's camp system. My mission is to bring goodness into the world, and I am fortunate as a Reform Jew to lean on the treasures of Judaism to help light my path.



## Rabbi Amy Bernstein

Kehillat Israel, Pacific Palisades, CA

### RECONSTRUCTIONIST

I am a Reconstructionist because our denomination views Judaism as the entire cultural legacy of the Jewish people. Religion is central, but our creativity — as expressed through art, music, drama, languages, literature, and our relationship with Israel — is also an integral part of Jewish culture.

While Reconstructionists respect traditional Judaism, we also view ourselves as an evolving and egalitarian civilization. Our denomination considers Jewish law

as a guide, not as binding, and the Torah as a record of our ancestors' quest for moral, ethical, and spiritual guideposts, rather than as a literal document.

Belonging to a community leads us to take the patterns of observance within that community seriously; our choices are made in response to our community as part of our participation in it.

We are open to experiencing the Divine in ways that go beyond our tradition but that maintain our People's striving to bring goodness into the world.





## Rabbi Cheryl Peretz

American Jewish University, Los Angeles, CA

### CONSERVATIVE

I have always been a Conservative Jew. For my parents, this was the compromise, the middle-of-the-road where my father, who had grown up Orthodox, could experience traditional practice and where my mother, who had grown up unaffiliated, could find an accepting community where Jewish living was valued without judgment of individual choices. Having participated in Jewish day school, youth group, summer camp, and ultimately, our movement's undergraduate college program, there really was never another choice.

However, what truly made me, and continues to make me, a Conservative Jew is the unique approach to engaging the Jewish heart and intellect. To be a Conservative Jew means that I seek to embrace Torah as the best vision for living a life in relationship with God, seeking to fulfill the Divine will through traditional mitzvot that are informed and guided in equal parts by the precedent of ancient Jewish text and through continuous revelation that comes from new and modern avenues of knowledge, experience, and understanding. In so doing, I and we continue to make relevant in today's world the words and practices given to our ancestors thousands of years ago.



## Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz

Valley Bet Midrash, Phoenix, AZ

### ORTHODOX

I am proud to consider myself an “Open Orthodox” Jew, a commitment that challenges me to be both traditional and progressive.

For me, having a true faith in Torah means believing that it has a message for the world. That means that our commitments cannot be limited to services, classes, or special occasions. Rather, our core values must be manifest in many ways throughout our lives.

What I find so compelling in an Orthodox approach to *halakha* is that it strives to integrate our entire lives

— even those parts frequently labeled secular — into a life of Torah. *Halakha* literally translates as “progress.”

For me, *halakha* is not about blind, irrational submission, but about intentional transformation — of myself, my community, our nation and our world. While it's deeply rooted in the past and guided by core Torah values, it's primarily future-looking to help solve societal problems, bring holiness into our lives, and cultivate an ethical personality. Full observance of all of Jewish law (Shabbat, kashrut, laws of family relations, business transactions, tzedakah obligations, etc.) gives me wings to fly.

# Seventy Faces of Torah

Hillel and Shammai (30 BCE-20 CE) were the most prominent sages of the era before the destruction of the Temple. The schools of thought that they founded, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai, took opposing sides in more than 300 recorded debates on matters of ritual and belief. The House of Hillel was generally more lenient, while the House of Shammai took the stricter position.

## Talmud, Eruvin 13b

For three years, the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel debated each other. These said that the *halakha* follows their view, and these said that the *halakha* follows their view. A heavenly voice went forth and declared, “These and those are the words of the living God, but the *halakha* follows the House of Hillel!”

But, if it is so that “these and those are the words of the living God,” because of what merit did the House of Hillel get preference to their views? It is because they were gentle and patient and they would study their opinion and the opinion of the House of Shammai. And not only that, but they would mention the opinions of the House of Shammai before their own.

## Commentary on Eruvin 13b Rabbi Yom Tov ben Avraham Ishbili (d. 1330)

“These and those are the words of the living God (Eruvin 13b).” The Rabbis of France asked: “How can it be that both opinions are the words of the living God, since one says that a certain thing is prohibited and the other that it is permitted?”

They answered that when Moses went up to Sinai to receive the Torah, he was shown 49 ways of prohibiting each thing and 49 ways of permitting each thing. When he asked God about this, he was told that this is to be entrusted to the Sages of Israel in every generation and that the decision will be in their hands.

# Explore: 10 Ways to Experience Jewish Diversity

## ■ Visit a synagogue of another denomination

No two communities are the same — some services feature instruments, others are acapella, some are full of raucous singing, others are quiet and meditative. Get out of your comfort zone and try something new — you might discover a whole new level of spiritual experience.

## ■ Learn to cook a new Jewish cuisine

From Moroccan tagines to Ashkenazi briskets, and from Israeli falafel to Persian gondi, an adventurous cook, armed with a great Jewish cookbook (check out Joan Nathan's many excellent works) can create a whole new Jewish experience.

## ■ Listen to Jewish music from around the world

Israeli hip-hop or Eastern European klezmer? Jewish music spans many forms, old and new, across many continents. Fill up your iPod and explore.

## ■ Get involved with Be'chol Lashon

Meaning "From every tongue," this unique Jewish organization highlights the diversity of the Jewish community and even runs a camp for Jewish kids of every different ethnic background. Visit them online at [bechollashon.org](http://bechollashon.org)

## ■ While travelling, have Shabbat dinner with the local Chabad rabbi and his family

Chabad is an Orthodox Jewish group that has "emissaries" living in almost every city in the world. When you are on the road, whether you're in Des Moines or Dharamsala, they are glad to host you for a kosher meal and good conversation.

## ■ Experience Israel

Israel has gathered Jews from every corner of the globe — walk down the streets in Tel Aviv alongside Ethiopian soldiers, Polish rabbis, Russian computer scientists, and young native Israelis of every background on their way to the beach or the club.

## ■ Learn some basic vocabulary in a Jewish language

Learn a few words in Yiddish, Hebrew, Ladino, or Farsi; or, better yet, sign up for a language class at a local university and immerse yourself in the culture.

## ■ Visit Jewish sites when you travel

While on the road, make sure to check out the Jewish cultural landmarks wherever you are in the world, from ancient synagogues to modern museums.

## ■ Participate in Limmud in your community

Started in the UK and now spread across the Jewish world, this annual gathering is dedicated to pluralistic Jewish learning, bringing together scholars, artists, educators, and thinkers from all denominations for powerful conversations. Check it out at [limmudinternational.org](http://limmudinternational.org)

## ■ Challenge assumptions

Jews come from all races, nationalities, backgrounds, and sexual orientations. Be proud of your whole identity and let people learn from you to respect Jewish diversity in all its facets.

## Reflection on Chapter 3

**“The opposite of a plain truth, Niels Bohr liked to repeat, is a plain falsehood, but the opposite of a deep truth is another deep truth.”**

Rebecca Goldstein

*Properties of Light* (2001)



**Which denomination of Judaism is closest to my identity? Why?**

**Although I am not a \_\_\_\_\_ Jew, I appreciate that they:**

# Additional Readings

## Books

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- David Hartman, *A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices in Judaism*  
A collection of essays by a great theologian in praise of the variety of ways of being Jewish. Hartman gives particular attention to the diverse ways that Judaism is practiced in Israel.
- Elliot Dorff, *Conservative Judaism: From Our Ancestors to Our Descendants*  
This eminently readable introduction to the philosophy and theology of the Conservative Movement is helpful for anyone seeking to understand the middle stream of Jewish life.
- Sylvia Barack Fishman, *The Way Into the Varieties of Jewishness*  
After a brief historical introduction, this work describes the major American denominations, identifies and analyzes trends, and devotes a significant amount of time to the issues faced by converts to Judaism across the different branches of Judaism.
- Liz Harris, *Holy Days: The World of a Hasidic Family*  
A staff writer for The New Yorker spent a year with a Hasidic family and shares fascinating reflections on a piece of the Jewish world that most of us seldom encounter.
- Mordechai Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers*  
Written in an easy Q & A style, this book is a rare opportunity to learn about the thought of a Jewish denomination directly from its founder.

## Websites

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- *Jewish Values Online* ([jewishvaluesonline.org](http://jewishvaluesonline.org))  
You know the joke... two Jews, three opinions. Jewish Values Online poses wide ranging questions to panels of Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox rabbis and lets them say what they really think.

The websites of the major Jewish denominations are:

- [urj.org](http://urj.org) (Reform)
- [uscj.org](http://uscj.org) (Conservative)
- [jewishrecon.org](http://jewishrecon.org) (Reconstructionist)
- [ou.org](http://ou.org) (Orthodox)
- [aleph.org](http://aleph.org) (Renewal)