A Heart of Many Rooms: Exploring Jewish Diversity

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.
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:

Ashkenazi

Sephardi

Mizrahi
Jewish Languages

- HEBREW
- AMHARIC
- JUDEO-ARABIC
- LADINO
- JUDEO-FARSI
- YIDDISH

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CHAPTER 3
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.”

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 themself, as in “She is doing her shtik.”

ZAYDE
Grandfather.
Jewish Denominations

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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.

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 halakhah is that it strives to integrate our entire lives — even those parts frequently labeled secular — into a life of Torah. Halakhah literally translates as “progress.”

For me, halakhah 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 Shammayi (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 Shammayi, 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 Shammayi took the stricter position.

Talmud, Eruvin 13b

For three years, the House of Shammayi 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 Shammayi. And not only that, but they would mention the opinions of the House of Shammayi 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

- **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.

- **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
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

- 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

- *Jewish Values Online (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* (Reform)
- *uscj.org* (Conservative)
- *jewishrecon.org* (Reconstructionist)
- *ou.org* (Orthodox)
- *aleph.org* (Renewal)