

# **Jews and Judaism: A Primer**

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Talking with people in my American city, I discovered that many to most know little about Jews and Judaism, likely along with other cultures, religions, and peoples. I thus decided to make this concise, no-nonsense introduction to answer basic questions about Judaism and Jews for folks who know little to nothing about the topic.

## **What are Jews?**

Jews are an ethnoreligious group originating from the ancient Israelites and Hebrews of historical Israel and Judah. To be considered Jewish, one must have a Jewish parent, traditionally the mother, or have converted.

Some call Judaism and Jews a family, and it is often called a tribe.

## **What is Judaism?**

Judaism is a civilization that encompasses not just the Jewish religious beliefs and practices, but Jewish cultures, customs, history, literature, peoples, and “what Jews have done and thought and think and do.”

Judaism as a religion is just part of Judaism. Judaism predates the word religion, and just one in ten Jews say that Judaism is only a matter of religion. While there are religious Jews, there are also secular Jews including Jews who are atheists and agnostics. Secular Jewish thought and life are as much a part of Judaism as religious Jewish thought and life.

## **What is a very short history of Jews?**

As with many peoples, the origins and earliest years of Jews are shrouded in mystery with much information lost in time. Jews use the Hebrew Bible as a historical guide. However, modern historical and archeological findings conflict with the text, and the book is far from entirely accurate and reliable.

Jews originated thousands of years ago in Mesopotamia in what is mostly modern-day Iraq. They moved briefly into Israel, then into Egypt where they were enslaved. They escaped enslavement and moved back to Israel where they formed a commonwealth around 1000 BCE, with a major religious temple in the city of Jerusalem.

After invasions from outside countries, the Jews were driven from Israel, and the Jewish commonwealth and the temple in Israel were destroyed. After a short exile in Babylonia in present-day Iraq, the Jews returned to Israel, reestablished the Jewish commonwealth, and rebuilt the temple.

During this period Alexander the Great brought Greek or Hellenistic culture to Judaism. There was a civil war between the Hellenistic Jews and the traditional Jews, with the traditional Jews winning and establishing dominance.

This dynasty in Israel weakened over time. The Romans took over Israel, and Israel became a weak client state of the Roman Empire. This is when the Jewish reformer Jesus Christ lived, and Christianity was born. The early Christians were Jews who followed Jewish culture and spoke Hebrew. Christianity and Christians eventually developed their own non-Jewish identity.

The Jews rebelled against the Romans. The rebellion was crushed, the second temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and the Jews were expelled from Israel.

The Jews spread throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Europe. Following increasing antisemitism and political, social, and economic restrictions on Jews, including expulsion from England, France, Austria, Bavaria and Southern Italy, many Jews in Central Europe moved to Eastern Europe including Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland. After persecution, many Jews in Spain and Portugal moved to other parts of Europe and the Middle East.

Jews in Western Europe worked for social and political emancipation. This period led to the Jewish Enlightenment, with Jews assimilating into and thriving in European society. Jews were some of the most celebrated and influential secular minds in modern Western society, with great Jewish minds including Baruch Spinoza, Sigmund Freud, Marc Chagall, and Albert Einstein.

The Jews in Eastern Europe revived ultra-Orthodox Judaism, including Hasidism, and culturally isolated themselves from mainstream society. Though a small minority of Jews, the ultra-Orthodox movement is still influential today.

Six million or one-third of Jews were killed during the World War II holocaust. Following World War II and 2000 years after the fall of the second Jewish commonwealth in Israel, the State of Israel was reformed. Many Jews in Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere immigrated to the United States and Israel.

### **What are the different types of Jews?**

There is a wide variety of Jews. The common ways Jews are categorized is by their **belief categories** and by their **ethnicities**.

#### **Belief categories:**

There are many belief subgroups (branches, denominations, movements). The common ones are:

**Orthodox** which is the most traditional, observant and religious of the three groups

**Reform** which is the most progressive or liberal religious movement

**Conservative** is in between

There are also **secular Jews**, or those who are the least religious and least if at all follow the religious rules. There are Jews who are atheists and agnostics and do not follow any religious traditions. There are also atheists and agnostic Jews who do not believe the religious views but follow the culture and raise their children in the cultural traditions. This includes the **Humanist**

**Jewish Movement** that respects Jewish culture and heritage but sees Judaism as human-made for humans and removes God from the equation.

There are also **ultra-Orthodox** Jews, including Hassidic Jews, who are even more traditional and observant than the Orthodox. The Hassidim are fundamentalists about the Hebrew Bible, wear traditional, conservative clothes, do not use modern technology, and isolate themselves, including not socializing with other Jews. The Jews in long, dangling ‘sideburns’ and big black hats are ultra-Orthodox.

However, the basic four to remember are (from most religious to least) **Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Secular.**

### **Ethnic groups:**

There are many ethnic Jewish groups. As a diaspora expelled from Israel by the Romans over two thousand years ago, Jews immigrated to many places throughout the world, and their ethnicity and cultures are influenced by where they settled. The three most common ethnic groups are the **Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi.**

**Ashkenazi** (plural: Ashkenazim) is Hebrew for Germany, and the Ashkenazi originally moved to and settled primarily in Germany and Northern France, but also other parts of Central Europe. Many later moved to Eastern Europe, so most Jews from Russia, Ukraine and Poland are Ashkenazi. Roughly eighty percent of Jews are Ashkenazi. Most American Jews are Ashkenazi and most Ashkenazi live in the United States. Ashkenazi is a large minority in Israel.

When most Americans think of Jews, they think of Ashkenazi with their bagels, matzo ball soup, and Yiddish words (chutzpah, mazel tov, nosh, kvetch.). Famous Ashkenazim include Anne Frank, Albert Einstein, Golda Meir, Bob Dylan, Franz Kafka, Leon Trotsky and Natalie Portman.

**Sephardic** (plural: Sephardim) is Hebrew for Spain, and Sephardic Jews settled in Spain and Portugal. The Moors and Catholics expelled the Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal, with many moving to other parts of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Most Sephardic Jews today live in Israel and Sephardic culture is prominent in Israel. Famous Sephardic Jews include Peter Sellers, Marc Chagall, Baruch Spinoza, Maimonides, and Benjamin Disraeli.

**Mizrahi** (plural: Mizrahim) are the “Eastern Jews” who stayed in the Middle East. These include Jews from Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and those who did not leave Israel. When Israel became a Jewish country in 1948, most moved to Israel. Famous Mizrahi Jews include Sasha Baron Cohen, Yitzhak Rabin, and Jerry Seinfeld.

There are many subgroups within the above three groups. There are other, usually very small groups, including the Ethiopian Jews, Indian Jews, Inca Jews from Peru. and Chinese Jews.

### **What race are Jews?**

There is shared genetics among most Jews, but there is no Jewish “race” and race itself is a social not a biological construct. While most Jews are light-skinned Ashkenazim, Jews come in the full diversity of skin and hair colors.

Many Jews will cringe or worse at being called a race because the Nazis cataloged and persecuted Jews as a race.

### **Are Jews Middle Eastern?**

Yes. Jews have historical and cultural roots in the Middle East. Though, as Jews have lived throughout the world, many have also incorporated or adopted the cultures and languages of other places.

### **How many Jews are there?**

There are about 16 million Jews in the world, or 0.8 percent of the world's population.

### **Where do Jews live?**

As a diaspora, Jews have lived all throughout the world through the centuries. Today, over 80 percent live in the United States of America (41 percent) and Israel (41 percent). The largest remaining populations are in Canada, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia, and Argentina.

Israel is the only country with a Jewish majority.

### **What are the political and social views of Jews?**

Jews have a wide range of political, philosophical, social and religious views. They range from politically far left to far right, non-observant atheists to devoutly religious fundamentalists.

### **What is the Jewish language?**

**Hebrew** is the language of the Hebrew Bible and the official language of Israel. Most Jews have Hebrew names.

**Yiddish** is another prominent Jewish language. It is a fusion of Hebrew, German, and other European languages, and was developed by Ashkenazi Jews in Central and Eastern Europe.

**Ladino**, or **Judeo-Spanish**, is a traditional language of Sephardic Jews that combines Hebrew and Spanish but is rarely spoken anymore.

Jews speak the language of where they live: English in the United States and Britain, German in Germany, French in France, Russian in Russia, etc. Many American and British Jews speak only English and do not speak or read Hebrew.

### **What does Hebrew look like?**

The following is 'I am from Chicago, and I have a pet dog' in Hebrew:

אני משיקגו, ויש לי כלב מחמד

### **Why is Hebrew written and read right to left?**

Hebrew, Persian, Arabic, Kurdish, and other ancient Middle Eastern languages that originated before paper are written and read right to left. The text was chiseled into stone. Since most people were right-handed, the scribe held the hammer in his right hand and the chisel in his left hand, making it easier to write from right to left.

Languages introduced after the invention of paper are written and read left to right because writing left to right means you don't smear the ink with your right writing hand. When paper was invented, the Hebrew being right to left was already "set in stone," and it remains that way today.

### **What are the Jewish naming traditions?**

Jews in Jewish dominant societies and cultures, such as today's Israel, have Hebrew names.

A Hebrew name is the first name then the first name of the father, with 'ben' or 'bat' in between. Ben means son of and bat means daughter of.

An example Hebrew name is יעקב בן אברהם / Jacob Ben Elijah or Jacob the son of Elijah. Another example name is רחל בת אליהו / Sarah Bat Elijah or Sarah the daughter of Elijah.

Reform Hebrew names have both the father's and mother's name, such as רייצ'ל מדברת אליהו וגד / Rachel Bat Elija Vi Sarah, or Rachel the daughter of Elijah and Sarah. Vi or V' means 'and.'

Most Jews in non-Jewish societies have two names: a "local" name (English in the United States and Britain for example) and a Hebrew name. Some Jews in non-Jewish societies are completely secular and assimilated into the non-Jewish society and have no Hebrew name. Jewish family surnames, such as Cohen and Shapiro, are recent.

Note that there are no name laws, and this is a matter of custom and tradition.

## **What are the key beliefs of the religion Judaism?**

**Monotheism:** Judaism was the first monotheistic religion. Before Judaism, people believed in lots of gods. The gods had supernatural power but were not morally, ethically or behaviorally better than humans. Jewish theology emphasizes the belief in one God who is eternal and transcendent, ethical, and good. This is expressed in the daily Jewish prayer, the Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One."

Note that theistic Jews do not believe in an anthropomorphic God. God is not a 'person' or 'being' and has no sex. Biblical references such as 'the hand of God' and 'the face of God' are strictly metaphorical.

**Covenant:** Jews believe in a covenant, a sacred agreement between God and the Jewish people. This covenant was established with Abraham and was renewed later with Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai. It outlines the responsibilities and obligations of the Jewish people and the divine promise of protection and guidance.

Religious Jews believe that God appointed the Jews to be his chosen people to set an example of holiness and ethical behavior to the world. In exchange for all the good that God has done for the Jewish people, Jewish people are supposed to keep God's laws and try to bring holiness into every aspect of their lives.

**Belief in the Torah:** The Torah is the most sacred object of Judaism and is considered the foundation of Jewish law, ethics, teachings, and history. It contains the commandments (mitzvot) supposedly given to Moses by God. The Torah is a central part of synagogue services and Jewish studies.

**Commandments and Mitzvot:** Jews believe in the observance of commandments as a means of fulfilling their covenantal obligations. The Torah contains 613 commandments that cover a wide range of aspects, including religious rituals, moral conduct, and social justice. Observance of these commandments varies among different Jewish denominations and individuals.

**Tikkun Olam:** Judaism places a strong emphasis on the concept of Tikkun Olam, which means "repairing the world." Jews are encouraged to engage in acts of charity, justice, and kindness to make the world a better place and promote social justice.



## **What are the key texts of Judaism?**

The Torah, The Hebrew Bible, the Talmud and the Haggadah.

**The Torah** is the first five books of the **Hebrew Bible** and is also called the Book of Moses. This is the central book and object in Judaism.

Written between 1200 to 100 BCE, the **Hebrew Bible** is the Torah plus two other parts.

The **Talmud** is a record of rabbinic teachings spanning numerous centuries. The rabbinic teachings of the Talmud explain in detail how the commandments of the Torah are to be carried out.

**Haggadah** is a small book containing the story of the biblical Exodus and it is retold at the beginning of the seder dinner on Passover.

## **Who are the important people in The Torah?**

There are lots of important people in the Torah and Hebrew Bible, with these few amongst the most notable:

**Abraham** is considered the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, His son Isaac, with his wife Sarah, was the start of Judaism, and his other son, Ishmael, with his mistress or concubine Hagar, was the start of Islam. As Christianity developed out of Judaism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity are called Abrahamic religions.

**Sarah:** Sarah was Abraham's wife, the mother of Jacob and the matriarch of Judaism. She is remembered for her role in the miraculous birth of Isaac in her old age.

**Isaac:** The only son of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac is an important figure in the continuation of the Jewish lineage. He is often referred to as the second patriarch of Judaism.

**Jacob (Israel):** The son of Isaac, Jacob had twelve sons who became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. He is known for his transformative encounter with God and for wrestling with an angel. Jacob took the name Israel which means ‘wrestling with God.’

**Moses:** Perhaps the most prominent figure in the Hebrew Bible and the most important prophet in Judaism, Moses led the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery, received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, and guided the Israelites through the desert.

**King David:** King David was a shepherd who became the second king of Israel. He is celebrated for his bravery, leadership, and his role in establishing Jerusalem as the capital.

**Solomon:** The son of David, Solomon is known for his wisdom, wealth, and construction of the First Temple in Jerusalem.

### **Is the Jewish Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament the same thing?**

They are mostly the same. The sections are ordered differently, and, depending on the Christian denomination, the Christian Old Testament has more text.

### **What do Jews think of Jesus Christ?**

Jesus was entirely Jewish, attempting to make ethical reforms to Jewish practices. Most Jews consider Jesus an important historical figure, a good person and teacher, and even a prophet. However, they don't believe that he was the Messiah or the Son of God.

To Jewish thought, the idea of God in human form is illogical. It is more than improbable that, as a Jew, Jesus the man ever thought that or said things such as “I am the Son of God.” The Jesus of the New Testament was written by committee long after his death.

### **Do Jews take the Torah literally?**

Every religion has its fundamentalists, and ultra-Orthodox Jews are fundamentalists about the Torah and Hebrew Bible. However, most Jews and Judaism are not dogmatic or fundamentalist. Most rabbis readily acknowledge the historical inaccuracies and logical contradictions in the texts.

The Hebrew Bible is ancient mythology, like the mythologies and sacred texts of other ancient cultures and religions. It is often premised on real historical events and people, but is at times factually inaccurate, some of the characters are made up, and it was written by people thousands of years ago whose minds worked differently. It should not be taken literally but as an important work with important ideas and teachings written as stories, metaphors, and symbols.

### **Where do Jews worship?**

The building where Jews worship is called a synagogue, shul or temple.

### **Who are the key religious leaders at a synagogue?**

Most everyone has heard of **rabbis**. Rabbis aren't priests like in Christianity but teachers who, through much study, are more learned than the average Jew on the street.

**Cantors** or **chassans** lead the congregations in prayer and singing. Shabbat services are filled with singing. Professional cantors are ordained clergy, and some rabbis are also ordained as cantors.

**Gabbais** are lay people who perform various duties in connection with readings from the Torah during services. The title is bestowed on someone who is thoroughly versed in the Torah and Torah readings.

### **Is there a separation of the sexes in synagogues as there are in Muslim mosques?**

In Orthodox synagogues and schools males and females sit separately. In a Reform synagogue men and women sit together.

### **What are some other things I should know about Judaism?**

**Judaism is the flip reverse of Catholicism** in that the focus is on life and living not on any afterlife. Judaism and the Torah have little concept of Heaven or Hell. Judaism is focused on enjoying life and treating everyday life as holy and taking care of the earth and its inhabitants.

**Judaism has a strong ethical sense**, including treating others fairly, charity and doing good deeds. It believes that deeds are more important than words.

**Jews are not Evangelicals.** The goal of Christianity and Islam is to convert everybody, historically including by coercion and force, and they actively recruit members. To convert to Islam people merely have to say that they are converting. Judaism, however, not only does not recruit members, but they make it difficult to convert.

Becoming Jewish isn't merely a matter of adopting a religious faith but becoming a member of a new ethnicity and family. Conversion is comparable to becoming a citizen of a new country.

**Religious Jews believe non-Jews can lead holy, good lives** and can get into heaven. This is different than Catholicism and Islam which say one must be Christian or Muslim to go to Heaven. Jews believe that Christians, Muslims and Jews worship the same god.

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Contrary to popular belief, **Judaism does not believe Jews are better than other people.** Although they call themselves the chosen people, they do not believe that God chose them

because of any inherent superiority. According to the Talmud, God offered the Torah to all the nations of the earth, and the Jews were the only ones who accepted it.

**Judaism is family and community centric.** Many religious events are centered on the family. When one is converted one becomes a member of the Jewish family or “tribe.”

**Education and learning are central to Jewish culture.** The highest-ranked religious folks are valued because of their learning. With an average of 13.4 years of schooling, Jews are the most highly educated of the world's major religious groups.

**Judaism is not dogmatic.** Viewpoint diversity, debate and dissent are important in Judaism and Jewish culture. Debate has been an essential part of Judaism since its formation, reflected throughout the Torah. Moses, Jacob and Abraham argued with God, with Moses winning the debate and changing God’s mind! One of the key Jewish theologians and philosophers of the twentieth century, Abraham Joshua Hershel, wrote, “Dissent is indigenous to Judaism.”

Rabbis teach the laity, including children, that questioning is the path to deeper understanding. A tradition of Passover is that the children get to ask the adults questions and the adults must answer sincerely. Fundamentalist Christians and Muslims often find Judaism disconcerting because Jews are not taught to intellectually “submit” to a fundamentalist orthodoxy, the Torah or God.

This culture of debate, healthy skepticism and valuing education helps explain why Jews have become so prominent in science and academia.

### **What percentage of Jews are secular versus religious?**

There is much nuance to this answer, including how you define religious.

In Israel, it is about 50/50. However, realize that there is diversity in each group. Within the religion, there is a great difference between the progressive Reform Jews and the Ultra-Orthodox Jews. The secular include anti-theists who do not follow Jewish culture or religion, and secular who follow Jewish cultural traditions and attend synagogue on important holidays.

For most American Jews, religion is not a central part of their life. According to a Pew Research Poll, 26 percent of American Jews believe in the God of the Hebrew Bible, only 21 percent consider religion very important to their lives, 12 percent attend synagogue weekly, and half seldom to never attend a synagogue.

### **Are there schisms between the religious and secular Jews?**

As Jews contain a great diversity of political, social, philosophical and religious views, there will necessarily be strong differences of opinions on various topics. Ultra-Orthodox Jews and secular and Reform Jews see things very differently. Ultra-Orthodox separate themselves from other Jews, and a Secular Jewish friend calls the ultra-Orthodox a fringe cult.

As Israel is a Jewish state with a large majority Jewish population, these viewpoint differences are greatly magnified. ultra-Orthodox Jews want the country, government and law to follow Biblical law while Secular Jews strongly oppose this.

### **Are converts considered fully Jewish?**

Yes. Once converted, a convert is considered a full member of the tribe and given a Hebrew name. Abraham and Sara, the father and mother of Judaism, and Ruth, one of the key figures in the Hebrew Bible, were converts.

### **How is one converted to Judaism?**

Conversion is a lengthy and difficult process, taking six months to well over a year.

Under the direction of a rabbi, the process involves studying and taking classes on the history, customs and beliefs of Judaism. A potential convert must live as a Jew. There is a final interview with three Rabbis, who judge if the person is ready and worthy of becoming Jewish. If the rabbis feel the person is not ready, they will have to have another interview later.

Depending on the denomination, there are ceremonies, such as circumcision and/or ritual immersion in water (called mikvah). The convert is given a Hebrew name.

### **What is kabbalah?**

Kabbalah is the mystical tradition in Judaism. Originating in medieval times, it is a system of thought and practice that seeks to understand the nature of God, the universe, and the human soul on a mystical level. The key book for the Kabbalah is called the Zohar. Kabbalists often wear a simple red string bracelet.

As in other mystical traditions, such as Islamic Sufism, Buddhism and Hinduism, Judaism teaches that God is both beyond human minds and that humans can have a personal relationship with and understanding of God.

### **What are the Jewish cultural customs and traditions?**

The following are some important traditions:

**Observance of Shabbat:** Shabbat, the weekly day of rest, begins at sundown on Friday and ends at nightfall on Saturday. Going to Shabbat service at the synagogue every Friday evening is standard Jewish religious practice.

**Dietary Laws (Kashrut):** Kashrut encompasses a set of dietary laws that govern what Jews can and cannot eat. It includes the prohibition of consuming certain animals (e.g., pork and shellfish) and the requirement to prepare food in accordance with specific guidelines. The laws also dictate the separation of meat and dairy products.

Keeping Kosher refers to the observance of dietary laws as outlined in Jewish tradition. It involves consuming food products that are certified as Kosher and ensuring that kitchen utensils and cooking processes adhere to Kosher requirements.

**Prayer and Synagogue Attendance:** Regular prayer is a component of Jewish worship. Orthodox Jews recite daily prayers and blessings for various occasions. Synagogues serve as places of communal prayer and study, and Jews gather for worship, Torah readings, and holiday observances.

**Lifecycle Events:** Jewish tradition prescribes specific rituals and customs for significant life events. These include Brit Milah (ritual circumcision) for male infants, Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremonies marking the coming of age, Jewish weddings, and mourning practices such as sitting shiva (a week of mourning) after the loss of a loved one.

**Holiday Observance:** Jews celebrate a variety of holidays throughout the year, each with its own customs and practices. Holiday observances often involve special meals, liturgical readings, symbolic rituals, and family gatherings.

**Tzedakah (Charitable Giving):** Tzedakah, often translated as "charity" but more accurately meaning "righteousness" or "justice," is a fundamental practice in Judaism. Jews are encouraged to give to those in need, supporting social justice causes and community welfare through acts of generosity and philanthropy

### **How many Jews are Kosher?**

About sixty percent of Israeli Jews and seventeen percent of American Jews are Kosher.

### **What is the reason for being Kosher?**

Devoutly religious Jews follow Kosher dietary laws because they come from the Torah. For others, it's a matter of culture and tradition, like Italians, Russians, Mexicans and Scandinavians making and eating their traditional foods.



Eating Kosher is also about the Jewish tradition of treating every aspect of life mindfully and as holy, including the preparation of food.

Kosher is also something that unites Jews throughout the world. It is a way of feeling connected to Judaism and the Jewish people.

### **What is Jewish food like?**

All kosher meals have some similarities, including what meats are not included and that dairy and meat are not served together. However, as Jews settled long ago in different parts of the world, Jewish cuisine varies widely.

Ashkenazi cuisine is Northern European: pickles, pickled herring, brisket, bagels, and matzo ball soup. As most American Jews are Ashkenazi, this is what most Americans picture as Jewish food.

Sephardic cuisine is Mediterranean: light and colorful, olive oil, yogurt, etc.

Mizrahi cuisine is Middle Eastern: spicy, hummus, falafel, etc.

As Israel has all these and other groups, Israeli food often is a fusion of all three.

### **Why does Shabbat start in the evening?**

It starts in the evening and weekly Shabbat synagogue services are in the evening because, according to the Hebrew calendar, a day starts at sunset. The standard Friday evening to Saturday evening is the Hebrew Saturday.

### **What are the major Jewish holidays?**

**Rosh Hashanah:** The Jewish New Year, which usually falls in September or early October. It is a time of introspection, repentance, and prayer, marking the beginning of the High Holy Days.

**Yom Kippur:** The Day of Atonement is considered the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. It occurs ten days after Rosh Hashanah and is a day of fasting, prayer, and reflection, seeking forgiveness for sins and making amends.

**Sukkot:** The Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, a harvest festival that lasts for seven days or eight days in the Diaspora. It involves dwelling in temporary outdoor shelters called sukkahs and celebrating with meals and special rituals.

**Hanukkah:** The Festival of Lights, observed for eight days in December. It commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and the miracle of the oil that lasted eight days. Families light the menorah, play games, and exchange gifts.

**Purim:** Celebrated in late February or March, Purim commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people from a plot to annihilate them in ancient Persia. The holiday is marked by reading the Book of Esther, wearing costumes, giving gifts, and holding festive celebrations.

**Passover (Pesach):** A significant holiday in the spring, commemorating the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The central ritual is the Seder meal, where the story of the Exodus is retold. During Passover, Jews refrain from eating leavened bread and instead eat matzah (unleavened bread) for the duration of the holiday.

**Shavuot:** Also known as the Festival of Weeks, it takes place seven weeks after Passover, usually in May or June. Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai and marks the completion of the grain harvest. It is associated with studying the Torah and includes festive meals and the reading of the Book of Ruth.

### **Why are the Jewish holidays on different days each year?**

They are on the same days each year but on the Hebrew calendar not the Gregorian calendar. The Hebrew calendar is based on the cycles of the sun and moon, as opposed to the Gregorian solar calendar. It has different length months and has only 354 days, adjusted every 2 years.

## What clothing do Jews wear?

Most Jews you meet dress like most everyone else. However, there is special clothing for synagogues and religious events. The following are key items.



*Barbie in front of the Torah, wearing a tallit (robe), and tefillin (little black boxes, one on her head and one wrapped to her arm)*

The **tallit** is a prayer shawl with fringes (tzitzit). It is worn during prayer and special occasions such as Bar Mitzvahs and weddings and is usually white and blue. During weekly Shabbat services, the rabbi and cantor usually wear tallits.

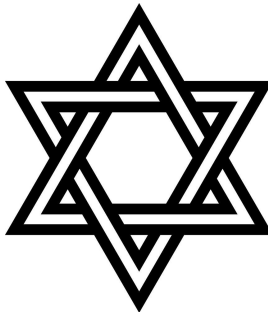
A **kippah or yarmulke** is a skullcap worn by Jewish men as a sign of respect and reverence before God. It is often worn during prayer, in synagogue, or throughout the day as a reminder of God's presence. Women often wear hats in the synagogue for similar reasons. Kippahs come in various styles and materials, including cloth, knit, or velvet.

The **Kittel** is a white robe worn by some Jewish men on special occasions, such as during the High Holy Days, weddings, or Passover Seder. It is also worn by some grooms during their wedding ceremony.

**Tefillin** are small black leather boxes (singular: 'tefillah') with straps which are put on by adult Jews for weekday morning prayers, and are worn on the forehead and upper arm. They are also called prayer boxes or phylacteries.

### What are other key Jewish items and symbols?

The **Star of David** is the symbol of Jewish identity and Judaism. The name originates from King David of ancient Israel. Its shape is that of a hexagram: the compound of two equilateral triangles. It is on the flag of the state of Israel.



*Star of David*

A **mezuzah** is a small parchment scroll containing verses from the Torah enclosed in a decorative case. It is affixed to the doorpost of the front entrance, as well as other doorways in the home, except for bathrooms. They are ornate and come in a wide variety of creative styles.



*A mezuzah is typically affixed to a doorway*

A **menorah** is a nine-branched candelabrum used during the holiday of Hanukkah. It holds eight candles, representing the eight nights of the holiday, and a ninth candle called the shamash, which is used to light the others. The menorah is often displayed prominently during Hanukkah celebrations.

The **lion of Judah** is a figure from the Hebrew Bible. The Jewish lion is shown in many designs and statues.

The **colors blue and white**. According to the Bible, the Israelites were told to dye a thread on their tassels with tekhelet, a blue ink from a sea snail, "so that they may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD, and do them." Thus, the Israeli flag is white and blue, and the Star of David and tallits are usually white and blue.

### **What is the significance of Israel in Judaism?**

Israel has profound meaning in Judaism. It is the historical homeland and promised land of the Jews, with important ancient Jewish history happening there. Following World War II and the Holocaust, Israel was established as a Jewish state as a safe haven for Jews.

### **What is Zionism?**

Zionism is a political and ideological movement that emerged in the late 19th century with the aim of establishing a self-determining Jewish homeland in Israel. It met its goals when Israel was established as a Jewish state in 1948.

### **How many Jews are Zionists?**

Most Jews are Zionists, meaning they believe there should be a country for Jews in Israel.

### **What is the reason behind antisemitism?**

Early on, bigotry and oppression of Jews were on the order of how many minority groups were treated. However, as Christianity became dominant, antisemitism developed into a particular and pervasive type of bigotry and persecution.

Christianity was originally considered a subdivision of Judaism, and Jews and Christians got along. However, when Christianity became the sole established religion of the Roman Empire, Judaism was depicted as an inferior religion, and Jews were persecuted and expelled from Israel.

To help cement Christianity's power and influence in Christian-dominated Europe, Jews were portrayed as "not one of us," killers of Jesus, followers of the Devil, and demons. Pervasive myths about Jews arose, including that they drank the blood of Christian babies (blood libel). Martin Luther wrote a pamphlet in 1545 entitled *The Jews and Their Lies*, claiming that Jews thirsted for Christian blood and urged the slaying of the Jews. The Nazis reprinted it in 1935.

Since Jews were not allowed to own land and the Christian Church did not allow Christians to loan money for profit, Jews had few alternatives but to become moneylenders. Once they became associated with the forbidden trade of usury—the practice of lending money and charging high interest—a new set of stereotypes evolved around the Jews as money-hungry and a secret cabal that dominated the economy and world banking systems. Whether that be the financial crash, the Black Death or the world wars, anti-Semites have found ways to blame the Jews

Racism and anti-Semitism were also facilitated by the development of Social Darwinism and pseudo-scientific notions based on theories of racial superiority and inferiority that led to Nazism.

Today, Antisemitism is found in both the extreme right and extreme left, often using stereotypes and myths about Jews that have existed for centuries.

### **What are the causes of strife in Israel?**

There are a variety of reasons for the strife between the Palestinians and Jews in Israel.

Both the Israelis and the Palestinians have strong religious and historical ties to the land, with both seeing themselves as the single rightful owners. There have been constant disputes over

borders, settlements and the control of the holy city of Jerusalem and sites that are prized by both Muslims and Jews.

The displacement of Palestinians during the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 resulted in a significant refugee population. This has led to ongoing issues of displacement, property rights, economic disparities, and the right of return for Palestinian refugees. The establishment and expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank have been a major point of contention.

Israel's experiences with conflicts and acts of terrorism and being surrounded by hostile Muslim countries have led to strong security policies regarding border controls, checkpoints and military operations. Palestinians often view these measures as oppressive and restrictive.