

Glossary

In this volume, the first time key terms appear in articles or lessons, they are highlighted in bold text with a gold background, like this: **glossary term**. To support readers, we provide a glossary with basic definitions of these terms. While not exhaustive of all terminology relevant to Jewish American history, the glossary includes many of the most frequently used terms found throughout the articles and lessons in this collection.

Acculturation: The process by which a person or group integrates their cultural identity with a new environment while still retaining unique cultural markers; see also: *Assimilation*.

Antisemitism: Hostility to or prejudice against Jewish people.

Ashkenazi (Ashkenazim, plural) Jews: A population of Jews who settled along the Rhine River and France during the medieval period, extended to Jews of Central and Eastern European origin; descendants of Jews who tended to live in Christian lands in Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe (areas that include present-day France, Germany, Poland, and Russia).

Ashkenormativity: A form of ethnocentrism that assumes that all Jews are Ashkenazic and White. This is particularly reinforced in the United States by the dominance of Ashkenazi culture in representations of Jews presented in literature, film, and television.

Assimilation: A generally outdated term for the process of adjusting to a new land after migration. The term *assimilation* assumes the loss of a person or group's cultural identity, adopting that of their new host country. Scholars of immigration prefer the term *acculturation*, which better acknowledges the process by which a person or group integrates their cultural identity with a new environment while still retaining unique cultural markers.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Language is always evolving. The words we use to describe people, events, and experiences can shift over time as societies change and as communities express their own identities. In this volume, we have chosen terms that reflect current historical scholarship and respectful usage. Be aware that you may also encounter older or different terms in primary sources or historical accounts. To better understand how and why these changes happen and why they matter, refer to historian Renee Romano's article "What's in a Word? Being Thoughtful about Terminology in Historical Writing" in the National History Day publication *Teaching African American History*. Her essay offers insight into how language shapes the way we remember and teach the past and encourages us to think carefully and critically about the way we use terms in the present.¹

¹ Find Romano's article here: <https://nhd.org/en/resources/whats-in-a-word-being-thoughtful-about-terminology-in-historical-writing/>.

Bar/bat mitzvah: Literally meaning “Sons/Daughters of the Covenant,” this term refers to an event celebrating a person’s thirteenth birthday. A ceremony and a celebration take place as a rite of passage to adulthood.

Blood Libel Myth: A false and harmful belief that Jewish people murder non-Jewish children to use their blood in religious rituals. This myth has been used for centuries to justify antisemitic violence, discrimination, and persecution.

Conservative Judaism: One of the three major denominations of American Judaism, Conservative Judaism seeks a middle path between Reform and Orthodox, viewing Jewish law as binding but subject to historical change.

Conversos: Jewish converts to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition.

Crypto-Jews: Those who converted to Catholicism to escape the Spanish Inquisition, but continued to practice Judaism in secret.

Diaspora: Refers to the scattering of Jewish people from their ancestral homeland, Israel, to other parts of the world, primarily through exile or persecution. More broadly, the term *diaspora* refers to a mass, forced mass migration of people from their homeland.

Emigrant: Someone who moves away from a country.

Hasidic Judaism: A movement within Judaism focusing on joyful worship, spiritual connection, and strict religious observance. Hasidic communities often follow a spiritual leader called a *Rebbe* and live in close-knit, religiously guided groups.

Hebrew: A Semitic language spoken by ancient Israelites, used as the liturgical language of Judaism, and revived as a spoken language in the nineteenth century. Hebrew is the official language of Israel.

Holocaust: The systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during World War II, between 1941 and 1945.

Immigrant: Someone who moves to a different country.

Kashrut: (Hebrew) Refers to the set of Jewish dietary laws that govern what can and cannot be eaten, how food should be prepared, and how it should be consumed. Foods that meet these standards are considered “kosher.”

Kosher: A term used to describe food that meets the dietary laws of *kashrut*, the traditional Jewish system of laws pertaining to food preparation and consumption. For example, kosher practices include not eating pork or shellfish, separating meat and dairy, and eating meat that comes from animals slaughtered only in a specific way.

Ladino: Otherwise known as Judeo-Spanish, Ladino is a Romance language spoken primarily by Sephardi Jews. It is derived from Castilian Spanish and incorporates elements of Hebrew, Turkish, and Aramaic.

Landsmanshaftn: (German) Mutual aid societies, or hometown societies, of Jewish immigrants from the same European town or region.

Matzah: Unleavened flatbread traditionally eaten by Jewish people during Passover to commemorate the haste with which the Israelites left Egypt, not having time to let their bread rise.

Migrant: Someone who moves from one place to another (can be temporary or even back and forth, such as in the case of migrant workers).

Mishnah: A written collection of Jewish laws and teachings that were passed down orally for many generations. It was compiled around the year 200 CE and is one of the earliest and most important texts in Judaism. Written in Hebrew, the Mishnah covers topics like religious practices, ethical behavior, and everyday life. It serves as the foundation for later discussions in the Talmud.

Mizrahi Jews: Middle Eastern and North African Jews who lived in these locations before the arrival of Sephardic Jews after their exile from Spain and Portugal in 1492.

Nativist/Nativism: Favoring the interests of native-born citizens over those of immigrants, often supporting policies that restrict immigration. Nativism is usually driven by fears of cultural, economic, or political change.

Olam ha-ba: (Hebrew) A phrase that means “the world to come,” referring either to the world after the arrival of the Messiah and the Messianic Age (as it is traditionally interpreted) or an afterlife.

Orthodox: A traditionalist branch of Judaism that strictly adheres to the Talmud. Orthodox Jews believe the Torah is the Word of God. **Modern Orthodoxy** is a variation of Jewish Orthodoxy that believes that it is possible to embrace modernity while still following God’s laws and commandments (particularly around gender issues).

Passover: Jewish holiday commemorating the Israelites’ liberation from slavery in Egypt, marked by a special service and meal called the **Seder** and the removal of leavened bread from the home.

Philosemitism: The admiration, support, or positive bias toward Jewish people, their culture, and their traditions.

Pogrom: A violent attack against a specific group of people, often with the goal of harming or killing them. The term is most commonly used to describe violent attacks against Jewish communities in eastern Europe, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it can apply to any group that is targeted because of their identity, beliefs, or ethnicity. During a pogrom, homes, businesses, and places of worship may be destroyed, and people may be injured or killed. Pogroms are typically fueled by prejudice, hatred, or political motives.

Purim: Jewish holiday celebrating the survival of the Jewish people from persecution in ancient Persia, marked by reading the Book of Esther.

Quota: A fixed number or limit set on how much of something is allowed, such as goods, people, or actions. Quotas are often used in trade, immigration, or hiring to control or ensure certain outcomes.

Rabbi: Teacher and leader in the Jewish community who is trained in Jewish law, tradition, and texts. Rabbis often lead religious services, offer guidance, and help people understand and practice Judaism.

Reconstructionist Judaism: Very religiously progressive, the Reconstructionist movement maintains that Judaism is the evolving civilization of the Jewish people. As such, adherents hold varied opinions about the extent to which Jewish laws are obligatory.

Reform Judaism: The largest Jewish denomination in the United States, the Reform movement emphasizes ethical values, social justice, and personal choice over strict adherence to Jewish law. Reform Judaism seeks to adapt tradition to modern life and progressive ideals.

Rosh Hashanah: The Jewish New Year, a holiday that marks the beginning of the High Holy Days. It is a time for reflection, prayer, and the sounding of the shofar (ram's horn), and it usually occurs in early fall.

Scientific Racism: The false belief that science can be used to prove that some races are better or worse than others. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some scientists used biased methods and incorrect data to try to show that White people were superior. These ideas were used to justify slavery, colonialism, and discrimination, even though they have been completely discredited by modern science.

Secular Humanist Judaism: A practice of Judaism that focuses on human knowledge, power, and responsibility in place of the divine, but maintains elements of Jewish culture, practice, and tradition.

Sephardic Jews: Jews of Spanish or Portuguese descent, cast out of Europe during the Spanish Inquisition, who tended to live in Western and Southern Europe, the Americas, as well as primarily in Muslim lands in North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Far East.

Shabbat: The Jewish day of rest and spiritual reflection, observed from Friday evening to Saturday evening with prayers, meals, and refraining from work.

Spanish Inquisition: A religious court established by the Catholic monarchy in Spain in 1478. Its goal was to find and punish people who were not practicing Christianity in the “correct” way, including Jews and Muslims who had converted to Christianity but were suspected of secretly keeping their old beliefs. The Inquisition used harsh methods, including torture, and lasted until 1834.

Stuyvesant Promise: A colonial contract dating to 1654, when Jews arrived in New Amsterdam. The governor and the West India Company permitted Jews to settle on the condition that they take responsibility for caring for the poor within their community. This contract influenced the trajectory of Jewish American charity, as over the following centuries, Jews in the United States grew their charitable actions and traditions from a requirement of American entry to a source of pride.

Sukkot: A weeklong Jewish festival that functions as a harvest festival and commemorates the Israelites’ journey through the desert after leaving Egypt. During biblical times, the holiday signified a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Families build and eat meals in temporary outdoor shelters called sukkahs to remember this time.

Synagogue: Jewish house of worship where people gather for prayer, learning, and community events. It often includes a space for reading from the Torah and is led by a rabbi or other community leaders.

Talmud: The central text of Judaism, consisting primarily of law and theology, was written and compiled between the first and sixth centuries.

Tikkun Olam: (Hebrew) The act of “repairing the world” that became a central aspect of religious engagement for many Jews. While perspectives are diverse on how one can repair the world, many American Jews see Tikkun Olam as an opportunity to engage with justice initiatives.

Torah: The scroll containing the first five books of the Jewish Bible, including Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy

Tzedakah: (Hebrew) The term for charity or righteousness. Its use is rooted in biblical teachings and reinforced by Jewish law and tradition; historically, it has led Jews to create philanthropic institutions over time.

Visa: An official document or stamp in a passport that allows a person to enter, stay in, or leave a country for a specific purpose and period of time, such as for travel, work, or study.

Yiddish: A language spoken primarily by Ashkenazi Jews, Yiddish is a Germanic hybrid language with Hebrew, French, Aramaic, and Slavic elements.

Yom Kippur: The Jewish Day of Atonement, considered the holiest day of the year. It is a time for fasting, prayer, and seeking forgiveness, focused on personal reflection and making amends.

Zionism: A movement to establish and support a Jewish national homeland in the territory of the historical Land of Israel.