

Jewish America: A Landscape of Diversity

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly eight million Jews reside in the United States.¹ Maybe you know some. Maybe you are one. Maybe you don't know you know any. Maybe you don't know you are one. This article is designed to help you learn more about Jewish people and the complexities of this ancient and diverse identity. Below, we provide a resource for understanding the various categories of ethnic, religious, and language groups. We also offer a timeline that traces the history of Jewish migration to the United States. At the end of this volume, you will also find a glossary. In the glossary, we offer basic definitions to assist readers. The terms included do not represent a complete list of terms relevant to Jewish American history, but are some of the most frequently used in this volume. In the first instance that they appear in the articles and lessons in this volume, readers will find the terms in bold text and with a gold background.

Two countries, Israel and the United States, account for about 82% of the global Jewish population. For most of their two-thousand-year history, the Jewish people have lived in **diaspora** communities, forced from their homeland due to circumstances beyond their control.² Jews have been forced to leave their homelands for reasons including ethnicity, religion, genocide, and war. From roughly 590 BCE to the mid-twentieth century, Jews did not belong anywhere, moving around trying to find safety and acceptance.

Until the formal establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, nowhere had become a more complete and safer home for its Jewish population than the United States. That does not mean that Jews were fully accepted into all aspects of American life and culture, but it means that the United States was a primary destination for oppressed Jewish populations abroad.

Given the long history of the Jewish people, and the multitude of identities contained within that group, we are providing this article as both a reference point for understanding the terms throughout this teaching resource, and a sort of tip-of-the-iceberg overview of the complexities of teaching and understanding who our subject is, when we talk about Jews.³

¹ Miriam S. Sobre, *Jewish-American Identity and Critical Intercultural Communication: Never Forget, Tikkun Olam, and Kindness to Strangers*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022). For more information about population estimates, see the American Jewish Population Project from Brandeis, ajpp.brandeis.edu/us_jewish_population_2020, or the Pew Research Center report titled "Jewish Americans in 2020," pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/the-size-of-the-u-s-jewish-population/.

² R. Brubaker, "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28 (2006): 1-19.

³ As this resource is focused on American Jewish history, there are global Jewish groups, languages, ethnicities, practices, foods, holidays, and more that are simply not discussed in this volume.

JEWISH DIVERSITY: THE BASICS

Jews are diverse in almost every way, especially in how they identify as being Jewish. It is hard to imagine just how diverse Jews are as they differ in appearance, language, tradition, and even in the ways they practice Judaism. Jewishness can be defined by ancestry and affiliation; there are Jews by birth and Jews by choice.

JEWISH RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS

Judaism is one of the oldest organized religions practiced today, tracing its roots over 2000 years. Like most organized religions, Judaism has different denominations, or groups within the religion, that follow different beliefs and practices. These Jewish denominations are often defined by how the Jewish scripture (including the Five Books of the Torah, the Talmud, and the rabbinic oral tradition) are translated into practice.⁴

- › **Orthodox:** Defined by strict adherence to traditional Jewish law as interpreted by centuries of rabbinic authority, Orthodox Jews maintain practices like strict Shabbat observance and keeping kosher as central elements of religious life. About 10 percent of American Jews identify as Orthodox, but the community tends to have larger families and higher rates of religious retention. Unlike Reform or Conservative Judaism, it lacks a centralized leadership structure and so includes several distinct subgroups, including Haredi, Hasidic, Modern Orthodox, and Open Orthodox.
- › **Conservative:** Positioning itself between Orthodox and Reform Judaism, the Conservative movement views Jewish law as binding but allows for a wide range of observance. The movement blends tradition with select modern adaptations, such as gender-egalitarian prayer and and flexible **Shabbat** driving, while maintaining more traditional stances on issues like **kashrut** and intermarriage.
- › **Reform:** 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.

⁴ Globally there are many other forms of Jewish tradition and interpretation, many following non-rabbinic Judaism, which can be largely unrecognizable from the more common Jewish practices in the United States.

JEWISH ETHNIC DIVISIONS

As Jewish populations developed across the world in diaspora communities, there are subgroups within what is generally considered Jewish ethnicity. While these groups are the three dominant and most numerous in the United States, 150,000 additional Jews in the U.S. have other ethnic and racial backgrounds, including Beta Israel (Ethiopian), Italquim Jews (Roman or Italian), and Bukhari Jews (Central Asian).⁵

- › **Ashkenazim:** (name derived from the biblical figure of Ashkenaz) Jews whose ancestors lived in Central and Eastern Europe (including France, Germany, Poland, and Russia). 85% of Jews living in the United States identify as Ashkenazi. Thus, the cultural and religious aspects of Judaism that most Americans tend to be familiar with come from Ashkenazim.
- › **Mizrahim:** (name derived from the Hebrew word for East) Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent, the largest communities being from Iraq (Babylonia), Iran (Persia), and Yemen. 250,000 Mizrahi Jews currently live in the United States.
- › **Sephardim:** (name derived from the Hebrew word for the Iberian Peninsula) Jews of Spanish or Portuguese descent, cast out of Europe during the **Spanish Inquisition**. They were the first Jews to settle in the United States. There are currently around 300,000 Sephardi Jews living in the United States.

THE IMPACT OF DNA TESTING

The growing popularity of at-home DNA testing has led to more people discovering Jewish ancestry (and at times converting to Judaism), because DNA tests can help people identify Jewish ancestors they were unaware of, increasing interest in Judaism. For converts, this fits a narrative that converts to Judaism are lost Jews “returning to the fold.” With this in mind, it is worth noting that there are more people with Jewish heritage than are recognized in global census data.⁶

JEWISH LANGUAGES IN THE UNITED STATES

Various languages have been spoken by Jews throughout the ages due to the many movements of a diaspora community. Often, these languages were created by combining multiple other languages, as Jews often needed to be able to identify one another but not be understood by non-Jews.⁷ Aside from the three languages identified below, there are many more glossed or hybrid languages (most of which are endangered) that may be spoken by ethnic Jews in the United States and around the world.⁸

- › **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.

⁵ Sergio DellaPergola, *Jewish Demographic Policies: Population Trends and Options in Israel and in the Diaspora*, (The Jewish People Policy Institute, 2011).

⁶ To learn more, see Sobre, *Jewish-American Identity*.

⁷ B. Spolsky and S.B. Benor, “Jewish Languages,” in *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, ed. Anne Anderson and E.K. Brown (Elsevier, 2006).

⁸ For a helpful map from the Jewish Language Project, visit jewishlanguages.org/map.

- › **Ladino:** Otherwise known as Judeo-Spanish, Ladino is a Romance language primarily spoken by Sephardi Jews. It is derived from Castilian Spanish, and incorporates elements of Hebrew, Turkish, and Aramaic.
- › **Yiddish:** A language spoken primarily by Ashkenazi Jews, which combines elements of Hebrew, Jewish-French, Jewish-Italian, and various German dialects. When Yiddish-speaking Jews settled in Eastern Europe, Slavic elements were also incorporated into Yiddish.

ADDRESSING JEWISH DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Why is this focus on diversity within Jewish life so important? Because when one group within the Jewish mosaic becomes the stand-in for all Jews, we end up with an incomplete and inaccurate idea of who Jews are. Given the dominance of Ashkenazi culture in the United States, some refer to this inaccurate representation as **Ashkenormativity**. Ashkenormativity is the bias that treats Ashkenazi culture as the default, often ignoring other Jewish traditions. Scholars and educators can combat this by telling a more expansive history.⁹

Educators should include content, lessons, and curricula that capture, or at least recognize, the vast diversity within and across Jewish communities. Indeed, this is a necessary practice for teaching and learning about any group of people in history.



Comic by Carol Isaacs, also known as The Surreal McCoy. In addition to her cartoon work, Isaacs is the author of *The Wolf of Baghdad*, a graphic memoir that traces her Iraqi-Jewish family's memories of their lost homeland.¹⁰

⁹ The editors thank Jason Guberman for his contributions to this article, especially for his explanation of Ashkenormativity.

¹⁰ Find out more about Carol Isaac's *The Wolf of Baghdad* at myriadeditions.com/books/the-wolf-of-baghdad/ and access a free reading and teaching guide at myriadeditions.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/WoB_Educators_Guide_UK_UPDATED.pdf. *The Cloak From Baghdad*, an adaptation of *The Wolf of Baghdad* for middle-grade readers, will be published by Kar-Ben Publishing in the fall of 2026.