



Diversity of Judaism

Diversity of Religious Interpretation and Practice

In addition to ethnic diversity, modern Jewish adherents are divided into several different branches or sects. In North America, the four main branches include Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist.

Orthodox Judaism

Orthodox Judaism is considered the most traditional form of modern Judaism. Orthodox Judaism views itself as the continuation of the beliefs and practices of normative Judaism, as accepted by the Jewish nation at Mt. Sinai and codified in successive generations in an ongoing process that continues to this day.



Figure 17: Colourful Kippah

According to Orthodox Judaism beliefs, both the Written Law and the Oral Law are of divine origin, and represent the word of God. The Orthodox movement holds that the information (except for scribal errors) is the exact word of God and does not represent any human creativity or influence. For the Orthodox, the term *Torah* refers to the Written Law as interpreted by the Oral Law. As practical questions arise, Orthodox authorities apply the Halakhic process (the system of legal reasoning and interpretation described in the *Oral Torah*) using the *Torah* (both Oral and Written) to determine how best to live in accordance with God's will. In this way, Orthodoxy evolves to meet the demands of the times.

Hasidic Judaism: Hasidic (or Chasidic) Judaism emerged in 12th-century Germany. The *Hasidim*, or pious ones in Hebrew, belong to a special movement within Orthodox Judaism. It is a mystical movement that stresses joy, faith, and ecstatic prayer, accompanied by song and dance. The Hasidic ideal is to live a pious life, in which even the most mundane actions are sanctified. *Hasidim* live in closely-knit communities (known as courts) that are spiritually centered on a dynastic leader known as a *rebbe*, who is both a political and religious authority.

Haredi Judaism: *Haredim* (members of Haredic communities) are one of the most visibly identifiable groups within Judaism today. This is in part due to their distinctive dress and appearance. Haredi men wear black suits and wide-brimmed black hats and Haredi women wear long skirts, thick stockings, and head coverings. *Haredi* is a general term, used either as an adjective or a noun, which refers to a broad array of theologically, politically, and socially conservative Orthodox Jews. Sometimes they will be referred to as being ultra-Orthodox Jews.

What unites *Haredim* is their absolute reverence for the *Torah* including both the written and oral laws as being the central and determining factor in all aspects of the adherent's life. Haredi Jews usually live in communities that are comprised primarily or exclusively of *Haredim*. To prevent external influences and erosion of values and practices, Haredim tend to limit their contact with the non-Haredi world thereby avoiding, as much as possible, interaction with both non-Haredi Jews and persons of other faiths.

The origins of the Haredi may be traced to 19th-century Europe as a response to the changes in Jewish societies and communities and the emergence of a more worldly Jewish life and culture. This reaction to these changes resulted in an extremely conservative, anti-secular, and isolationist expression of Judaism.



Figure 18: Orthodox Family in the Park

The *Holocaust* was also a fundamental factor in the development of Haredi Judaism. With the destruction of the major European Jewish communities and the deaths of millions of Jews throughout Europe, the ability to live a religious life as practiced in the *shtetls* (small towns and communities) seemed nearly impossible.

Thus, the surviving, highly observant, European Jews were inspired by a desire to preserve their lifestyle to move their communities and learning institutions to mother places, mainly Israel and the United States. While Haredi communities were established throughout the world after World War II, with the emergence of the State of Israel, it became the center of Haredi activity and institutions. In Israel, *Haredim* re-established their *yeshivot* (religious schools) and their communities.

Currently, it is estimated that over 800,000 Haredi live in Israel, which makes it the largest Haredi community in the world.

Reform Judaism

Reform Judaism may be considered the most liberal form of Judaism. While respecting traditional sources of wisdom and inspiration, it explicitly rejects the divine revelation of the oral law. Reform Jews observe practices such as dietary laws or *Sabbath* restrictions on an optional basis.

Reform Judaism was born at the time of the French Revolution, a time when European Jews were recognized for the first time as citizens of the countries in which they lived. *Ghettos* were being abolished; special badges were no more; and people could settle where they pleased, dress as they liked, and follow the occupations that they wanted.

Rabbi Abraham Geiger suggested that observance might also be changed to appeal to modern people. Geiger, a skilled scholar in both *Tanach* and German studies, investigated Jewish history. He discovered that Jewish life had continually changed. Every now and then, old practices were changed and new ones introduced, resulting in a Jewish life that was quite different from that lived 4,000 or even 2,000 years before. He noticed these changes often made it easier for Jews to live in accordance with Judaism. Geiger concluded

that this process of change needed to continue to make Judaism attractive to all Jews. American Reform Judaism began as these German “reformers” immigrated to the United States of America in the mid-1800s. The first Reform Judaism group was formed by a number of individuals in Charleston, South Carolina.

Reform Judaism differs from the other major movements in that it views both the oral and written laws as a product of human hands (specifically, it views the *Torah* as divinely inspired, but written in the language of the time in which it was given). The laws reflect their times, but contain many timeless truths. The Reform movement stresses retention of the key principles of Judaism. As for practice, it strongly recommends individual study of the traditional practices; however, adherents are free to follow only those practices that increase the sanctity of their relationship to God. Reform Judaism also stresses equality between the sexes.

Reform Judaism shares the universal Jewish emphasis on learning, duty, and obligation, rather than creed as the primary expression of a religious life. Reform stresses that ethical responsibilities, personal and social, are enjoined by God. Reform Jews also believe that ethical obligations are but a beginning and that these obligations extend to many other aspects of Jewish living, including



Figure 19: Jewish students from across North America participate in a *havdalah* ceremony, at the *Chabad* on campus, Crown Heights neighbourhood, Brooklyn, New York, 2014

creating a Jewish home centered on family devotion; lifelong study; private prayer and public worship; daily religious observance; keeping the *Sabbath* and the holy days; celebrating the major events of life; and being involved with the synagogue and community and other activities that promote the survival of the Jewish people and enhance its existence. Within each aspect of observance, Reform Judaism demands that Jews confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived, and exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating their holiness as people and as community. The requirement for commitment and knowledge is repeatedly emphasized. A Reform Jew who determines their practice based on convenience alone is not acting in accordance with the recommended position of Reform Judaism.

Conservative Judaism

Conservative Judaism may be seen to take a more centrist position between Orthodox and Reform Judaism. Conservative Judaism was developed in the United States at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and interprets the *Torah* from a different perspective, allowing its adherents to share in Canadian social, cultural, and educational institutions while still professing Jewish identity and religious practice. Zacharias Frankel's (1801–1875) teachings form the foundation of Conservative Judaism.

Conservative Judaism attempts to combine a positive attitude toward modern culture, acceptance of critical secular scholarship regarding Judaism's sacred texts, and commitment to Jewish observance.

Conservative Judaism believes that the scholarly study of Jewish texts indicates that Judaism has constantly been evolving to meet the needs of the Jewish people in varying circumstances, and that a central *halakhic* authority can continue the *halakhic* evolution today.

Conservative Judaism affirms that the *halakhic* process reflects the Divine will. In Conservative Judaism, the central *halakhic* authority of the movement, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS), will often set out more than one acceptable position. In such a case, the rabbi of the congregation is free to choose from the range of acceptable positions (or none of them), and his congregation is expected to abide by his choice. Although *rabbis* mostly adhere to the CJLS, they have the ability to make their own *halakhic* decisions when appropriate.



Figure 20: *Torah* Ark, Mishkan Yoseph Synagogue

Conservative Judaism holds that the laws of the *Torah* and *Talmud* are of divine origin, and thus mandates that halakha (Jewish law) be followed. At the same time, the Conservative movement recognizes the human element in the *Torah* and *Talmud*, and accepts modern scholarship that shows that Jewish writings also show the influence of other cultures and, in general, can be treated as historical documents. Conservative Judaism affirms the legitimacy of scientific biblical criticism.

The movement believes that God is real and that God's will is made known to humanity through revelation. The revelation at Sinai was the clearest and most public of such divine revelations, but revelation also took place with other people, called prophets, and, according to some, in a more subtle form can continue to take place even today.

Reconstructionist Judaism

This is the most recent branch to emerge from within Judaism. Reconstructionists see Judaism as an evolving religious civilisation. They do not believe that God chose the Jewish people or that a personified deity is active in history. This branch rejects the assertion that the *Torah* was given to Moses at Mount Sinai. For this branch, Judaism is in a continual process of evolution that incorporates the inherited Jewish beliefs and traditions with the needs of the contemporary world.



Figure 21: Raphael Hadane, the *Liqa Kahenat* (High Priest) of Beta Israel in Israel

Both the idea and the movement owe their inspiration to Mordecai Menahem Kaplan (1881–1983). Raised Orthodox in Eastern Europe, Kaplan came to North America at age eight. He saw his generation responding to this radically different setting in two ways: struggling to maintain Jewish identity while acclimating to North America, or abandoning Jewish identity altogether. Kaplan believed that with the breakdown of belief in the *Torah* as the revealed word of God, in the authority of *halakhah* (Jewish law), in a supernatural conception of God, and in the notion of the Jews as a separated and “chosen people,” a new rationale for maintenance of Jewish identity was needed. For Kaplan, belonging to the Jewish people came before behaving according to Jewish practice or believing according to Jewish religion.

Kaplan rejected supernaturalism in all of its manifestations. For Kaplan, the *Torah* was a human document recording the Jewish people's earliest record of their search for God and for the behaviours that would lead to human responsibility. What tradition called divine commandments were for Kaplan folkways that had been created by the Jewish people, and thus were subject

to adaptation, change, and/or rejection in response to the changing needs of the Jewish people. Many Jewish intellectuals were attracted to Kaplan's program for a Jewish life.

Kaplan was also a pioneer in conceiving of the synagogue as a Jewish centre, in which social, intellectual, and athletic activities would be as much a part of the institutional program as the synagogue and the religious school. This vision helped inspire the creation and development of the Jewish Community Centre movement.

Until the founding of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) in 1968, Reconstructionist ideology was essentially defined by Kaplan and his immediate circle of disciples and followers. Once the RRC began to ordain Reconstructionist *rabbis*, and as the number of Reconstructionist congregations began to grow in the 1980s and 1990s, Reconstructionism itself began to evolve, adapt, and change to meet new circumstances. As an independent movement, Reconstructionism had to grapple with creating positions and practices that, if not exactly couched as a return to *halakhah*, meant a serious engagement with *halakhah*. In the last quarter of the 20th century, the *Torah* and other biblical writings were reengaged as myth and poetry, and not only as historical documents.

The founding of the Reconstructionist movement may be dated from the establishment of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ) by Mordecai Menahem Kaplan in January 1922.

Reconstructionism in the 21st century remains firmly grounded in Kaplan's essential insight that Judaism is the product of the historical experience of the Jewish people, and is not the revealed word of God or an inspired reaction to revelation. The traditional sources and practices of Judaism still have, in Kaplan's famous formulation, a "vote but not a veto." The concept of values-based decision-making has become integral to Reconstructionism, as has inclusivity—the bringing into the Jewish community of intermarried Jews, single Jews, gay and lesbian Jews, single Jewish parents, and elderly Jews, among others. Kaplan's emphasis on belonging over behaving and believing remains central to Reconstructionism. What has changed is that it is as much the belonging to a Jewish community as to the Jewish people that is now central.

Cultural Diversity

Historically as well as in the present, Judaism encompasses a diversity of cultures, perspectives, and interpretations.

One aspect of this diversity is with respect to ethnicity. Jewish ethnic diversity is reflected in the distinctive communities within the world's ethnically Jewish population. Although considered one single self-identifying ethnicity, there are distinctive ethnic divisions among Jews. This ethnic diversity is the result of migration and geographic branching from an original Israelite population mixing with local populations, and subsequent independent evolutions.

Over a long time, and as a result of their dispersal, Jews formed distinct ethnic groups in several different geographic areas. These included larger groups such as the Ashkenazi Jews (of central and Eastern Europe), the Sephardi Jews (of Spain, Portugal, and North Africa), and the Beta Israel of Ethiopia. Smaller groups include

- the Teimanim from Yemen
- Indian Jews such as the Bene Israel, Bnei Menashe Cochin Jews, and Bene Ephraim
- the Romaniotes of Greece
- the Italian Jews (Italkim or Bené Roma)
- various African Jews
- Chinese Jews, most notably the Kaifeng Jews
- other distinct but now almost extinct communities

Many of these groups have developed differences in their prayers, traditions, and accepted canons; however, these distinctions are mainly the result of their being formed at some cultural distance from normative (*rabbinic*) Judaism, rather than based on any doctrinal disputes.

Historically, European Jews have been divided into two major groups: the Ashkenazim (Germanics) and the Sephardim (Hispanics). A third historic term, Mizrahim (Easterners), has been used to describe other non-European Jewish communities to the east, but the usage of this term has changed over time and geographical contexts. Today, Mizrahim includes both Middle Eastern and North African Jews.

At present, Ashkenazi Jews are the largest group, and represent an estimated 70% to 80% of all Jews worldwide. As a result of their massive emigration from Europe in search of better opportunities, and for asylum during periods of war and intense persecution, they became the overwhelming majority of Jews in the 'New World', including the United States, Mexico, Canada, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, and South Africa. Conversely, in Venezuela and Panama, Sephardim represent the majority of the Jewish communities. In France, more recent Sephardic immigration from North Africa and their descendants means they now outnumber the Ashkenazim.



Figure 22: Diversity of Jews

The Jewish community in Canada is composed predominantly of Ashkenazi Jews and their descendants. Other Jewish ethnic divisions are also represented, including Sephardi Jews, Mizrahi Jews, and a number of converts. The Jewish Canadian community manifests a wide range of Jewish cultural traditions, and encompasses the full spectrum of Jewish religious observance.