



# Modern Judaism: Issues and Challenges

Judaism, like many other religions, religious perspectives, and traditions is always evolving and responding to, as well as reacting to, social, political, legal, and other developments, incidents, and trends. Although many of the challenges faced by Judaism at this time are unique to Judaism, they are very relevant and constitute specific historical and contextual aspects that are important to understand and consider.

## Who Is a Jew? Multifaith, Multicultural, Multilingual, and Multiracial Diversity in Families

The question of who is a Jew is a complex and challenging one as it in part depends on one's definition of a Jew, one's sense of identity, and the perspective of a specific person or group. For some, it means someone who identifies with and is a follower or believer of Judaism and observes Judaic practices. For others, Jews are people who have a shared history and identify with the Jewish people regardless of what religion, if any, they may practice or follow. Yet for others still, it is a question of genetics and genealogy.



Figure 55: Kylie is an Afro Cuban-Danish-Spanish-Sephardi Jew.

Traditionally, to be considered a Jew one must have a mother who is a Jew; it is based on matrilineal descent. Today it may also include converts who have been accepted and gone through a formal conversion process.

Intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, and the immigration of Jews from secular and non-Orthodox Jewish groups from Europe, Africa, and other places to Israel is changing traditional definitions of Jewishness and who has the power to arbitrate such matters for marriage, divorce, conversions, and other purposes.

## A Question of Identity, Shared Culture, and History

For many persons of Jewish descent, being a Jew is a question of identity, culture, and of a sense of shared common history and experience. They identify as Jews regardless of whether it was their mother, their father, or another ancestor that was a Jew and regardless of their religious practice or beliefs (i.e., they do not follow the Jewish faith, or are secular Jews, or follow other faiths). One author points to this sense of shared culture, history, and experience in his description of secular Jewishness:

“The fact of the matter is that secular Jewishness calls on the same folk traditions and learns from the same traumas in Jewish history as does Judaism. If it doesn’t, it’s not Jewish.” (Rosenfeld)

Secular Jews are not a new or contemporary development. Rosenfeld states that the Lovers of Zion (Chov’vey Tsion), a group of young intellectuals living in Eastern Europe in the 1860s, were the first organized modern Jewish secularists. Since then, Secular Jews have formed networks, associations, organizations, and congresses to bring them together and support each other in North America and in other countries. For example, the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO—[www.csjo.org/](http://www.csjo.org/)) has 14 different affiliates across Canada and the United States. In Manitoba, there are secular Jewish organizations: the Sholem Aleichem Community and the United Jewish People’s Order—UJPO.

## A Question of Matrilineal or Patrilineal Descent?

As stated earlier, traditionally, to be considered a Jew one must have a mother who is/was a Jew. “Jewishness” from this perspective is based on matrilineal descent. Therefore, Orthodox Judaism will consider an individual with a Jewish mother to be Jewish, even if that person converted to or was raised in another religion. Today, persons who have gone through a formal conversion process, would also be considered Jews.

The tradition of matrilineal descent to determine one’s Jewishness contrasts with other traditional Judaic beliefs and practices which are based on patrilineal descent such as tribal affiliation, priestly status, noble status, and so forth. While the *Torah* does not specifically state that matrilineal descent should be used, Jewish scholars and *rabbis* believe there are passages in the *Torah* which clearly propose that the child of a Jewish woman and a non-Jewish man is a Jew, and other passages where it is understood that the child of a non-Jewish woman and a Jewish man is not a Jew.

As indicated earlier, the tradition of using matrilineal descent to determine one’s Jewishness is changing within Judaism. Some Jewish denominations will now accept patrilineal descent, as well as converts who have undergone a conversion with a non-Orthodox *rabbi*. Reform Judaism in the United States adopted such a position in 1983. (However, later Responsa were prepared to clarify the resolution and pointed out that it applied only to children

raised exclusively as Jews. Children who came from families with religiously diverse faiths, and were raised simultaneously in Judaism and another religious tradition, would not be presumed to be Jews and such children would be required to undergo formal conversion before observing *bar/bat mitzvah* in the synagogue.)

Today, all dominant forms of Judaism accept converts, although the process and requirements differ between groups and not all conversions are recognized by all branches/denominations of Judaism.

In *Rabbinic* Judaism, the laws of conversion are based on the classical sources of Jewish law (*halakha*). *Halakha* is regarded as authoritative by the Orthodox and Conservative movements. *Halakhic* requirements for conversion are

- instruction in the commandments
- male circumcision (if the male is already circumcised, a drop of blood is drawn)
- immersion in an appropriate body of water before valid witnesses
- acceptance of the commandments before a *rabbinical* court

Orthodox Judaism requires that conversions be performed in accordance with traditional Jewish law, as described above, and recognizes only those converts that have completed the conversion process under the guidance/supervision of an Orthodox *rabbi*. Conversions by *rabbis* in other movements are not generally accepted by Orthodox authorities.

Like Orthodox Judaism, Conservative Judaism requires that conversions be conducted according to traditional Jewish law. However, Conservative *rabbis* generally will recognize any conversion done in accord with the requirements of Jewish law, even if done outside the Conservative movement.

The Union for Reform Judaism requires converts to study Jewish theology, rituals, history, culture, and customs; and to begin incorporating Jewish practices into their lives. The length and format of the course of study will vary from congregation to congregation, but most require a course in basic Judaism and individual study with a *rabbi*, as well as participating in communal rituals, home practice, and synagogue life. The Central Conference of American *Rabbis* of the Union recommends that at least three *rabbis* be present for the conversion ceremony.

The *Rabbinical* Court of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism requires an average of one year of study to become conversant in Jewish life and tradition. Following this, converts are required to immerse in a ritual bath, be circumcised if male, and accept the commandments before the *rabbinical* court.

## The Challenge of Mixed Marriages

In North America and the Jewish Diaspora, intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews is becoming more common. In the United States, it is currently estimated that over 50 percent of Jews marry non-Jews. In Canada, based on the 2011 National Household survey, the intermarriage rate was 26 percent, a significant growth from 16 percent 20 years earlier. Some see the acceptance of Reform Judaism of patrilineal descent as being in part, at least, a response to this growing trend. However, other movements are increasingly under pressure to change their position and practices.

Conservative Judaism has acted to make it easier for children of intermarriages to join, subject to the condition that they convert to Judaism before their *bar/bat mitzvah*.



Figure 56: Collage Highlighting the Diversity of the Jewish Community

On the other side, there is increasing concern with respect to loss of Jewish identity that may occur as a result of interfaith marriages. As Jews are a small minority in North America and in countries other than Israel, if Jews keep marrying non-Jews, future generations will consist of a smaller number of Jews. And this will mean that Jews in the future will be less likely to find a partner from the 'tribe'. This has led to reform and movement still taking steps to make non-Jews feel comfortable and accepted in their congregations, while more aggressively promoting conversion.

## The Situation in Israel

As indicated earlier, Israel changed its laws concerning recognition of Jewish status for immigration purposes under the Law of Return after a challenge in the Israeli courts concerning recognition of only matrilineal descent. Israel now extends the right of immigration to Israel to those who can demonstrate either matrilineal or patrilineal descent.

As well, Israel recognizes non-Orthodox conversions done outside Israel; however, within Israel, only Orthodox conversions are accepted by the government and the *rabbinate*. This issue has been quite controversial and much debated in Israel for many years. This was especially true after the arrival of 800,000 Russian immigrants in the late 1980's. While they were allowed to immigrate under the Law of Return, about 200,000 to 300,000 were not considered to be Jews according to Jewish religious law, *halakhah*.

This issue also arose with Ethiopian Jewish immigrants who practiced a *pre-rabbinical* form of Judaism that was more in keeping with Biblical Judaism. In response, the Israeli *rabbinate* proposed a symbolic conversion of all Ethiopian Jews to be done before they could be married. This caused quite a negative reaction from Ethiopians who refused to do so as they saw it as a denial of their legitimate status as Jews. The issue was partially resolved when a *rabbi*, sympathetic to their cause, was able to register their marriages. However, Ethiopian *rabbis* in Israel still have difficulty having the marriages and divorces they perform in Israel recognized.

As well, there have been issues related to marriages, as only Orthodox *rabbis* are allowed to marry Jews and this forces many secular Israelis to travel to Cyprus and other foreign countries to have a civil ceremony, which they are not permitted in Israel. Orthodox *halachic* rules apply to converts who want to marry in Israel. Under these rules, a conversion to Judaism must strictly follow *halachic* standards to be recognized as valid.

For individuals born outside of Israel and wishing to marry in Israel, they must provide a letter from an Orthodox *rabbi* certifying that they are Jewish according to religious law (*halakha*). To qualify as Jewish *halakhically*, they must either have been born to Jewish mothers or have been converted by Orthodox *rabbis* approved by the *rabbinate*.

More recently, there have been tensions between the Israeli *rabbinate* and Orthodox *rabbis* in North America and the Diaspora concerning the determination of Jewish status for those that wish to marry in Israel but come from other countries. In

2017, the Israeli *rabbinate* published a list of 160 *rabbis* from around the world, including 62 from the United States, many of which were prominent *rabbis*, ordained by the Orthodox movement, that were considered to be ineligible to provide letters attesting to a person's Jewish status. If one's ancestral line of Jewishness is challenged or in doubt, then the person would need to go through a formal conversion process in Israel.

While Israel does recognize marriages performed by Conservative and Reform *rabbis* in other countries, divorces issued abroad by *rabbis* from these movements are not recognized by the *rabbinate* in Israel, which has sole jurisdiction with respect to divorce of Jews in that country. With respect to marriage, divorce, and burial, all of which are under the jurisdiction of the Israeli Interior Ministry, the *halakhic* definition of who is a Jew is applied. When there is any doubt, the matter is referred to the Israeli Chief *Rabbinate*.

Increasingly, in Israel, there is dissatisfaction with the role and power of the Israeli *rabbinate*. The Jerusalem Post reported that in a survey of Israelis in 2016, 75% of all respondents supported a move towards establishing an option for civil divorce. The survey revealed that the vast majority of non-Haredi Jews supported such a move, both on the right and left of the Israeli political spectrum.

## Antisemitism 2.0

There is evidence that antisemitism and hatred are on the rise in Europe, the Middle East, North America, and other places in the world. Unfortunately, antisemitism and hatred of Jews is not a thing of the past.

Antisemitism takes different forms such as bomb threats against Jewish community centres and schools, or vandalism at Jewish cemeteries and synagogues. It can also take the form of Holocaust denial, antisemitic rock groups and websites, and organizations such as the Klu Klux Klan, and neo-Nazi and anti-immigration/diversity groups.

As stated in a Washington Post opinion piece by Yair Rosenberg, annually, Jews in the United States are, according to the FBI, subjected to the most hate crimes of any religious group. This, in spite of the fact that they account for only 2 percent of the American population. In 2017, in Canada, B'nai Brith Canada, reported 1,728 anti-Semitic incidents took place across the country in 2016, a 26% increase from 2015 and the highest number since they began tracking such incidents 35 years ago.

In Europe, the picture is also alarming. In 2014, France reported Jews were the target of 51% of racist attacks, even though they make up less than 1% percent of the population. In the last decade, synagogues as well as Jewish schools and museums have been subject to terrorist attacks in France, Denmark, and Belgium. A 2013 European Union survey found that almost 40% of European Jews fear publicly identifying as Jewish, including 60 percent of Swedish Jews.

There are similar and more troubling developments in other regions of the world. For example, in the Middle East in Arab nations, where nearly 1 million Jews once lived, Jews now number only a few thousand as a result of persecution or flight from conflict and war in the past century.

According to a 2017 report by the Pew Research Center, Global Restrictions on Religion Rise Modestly in 2015, Reversing Downward Trend, in 2015, hostilities “against Jews in Europe remained common and increased slightly, from 32 (71%) countries in 2014 to 33 (73%) countries in 2015. Many of the incidents targeting these religious groups occurred in the form of mob violence.” As well, Jews faced harassment in 74 countries in 2015, down from 81 countries in 2014. However, the Pew Research Center pointed out that as Jews make up just 0.2% of the world’s population, they faced harassment in a large number of nations.

There are various theories or explanations as to the continuity of antisemitism, especially in the post-Holocaust, post-Declaration of Universal Human Rights era.

For some, it is a continuation of the long history of antisemitism in Europe and throughout the world that has deep roots which have never died and have shown new vigour recently. Anti-immigrant, xenophobic, and pro-Christian movements in Europe have raised hostility towards non-Christian groups such as Jews, Muslims, and Hindus in Europe and elsewhere. In fact, the Pew Research report cited earlier reported that, in 2015, nearly all Jews, Muslims, and Hindus lived in countries where their group was harassed.

However, some believe that a new form of antisemitism has developed in the late 20th and early 21st centuries that was stimulated by several influences, including the far left, Islamism, and the far right. From this perspective, such antisemitism tends to manifest itself as opposition to Zionism and the State of Israel. This perspective tends to see that much of what is purported today to be valid criticism of Israel by individuals, the media, and world bodies is really the demonization of Jews and Israel. They argue that this, together with an apparent international resurgence of attacks on Jews and Jewish symbols and what appears to be an increased acceptance of anti-Semitic beliefs and statements in public discourse, represents an evolution in the nature of anti-Semitic beliefs.

However, both Jewish and non-Jewish critics argue that seeing all criticism of Israel as having anti-Semitic roots blends anti-Zionism with antisemitism. They point out that the position limits legitimate criticism of Israel too narrowly and demonizes too broadly which, as a result, trivializes and exploits antisemitism in order to silence legitimate political debate.

Yair Rosenberg, in an article that he wrote for the *Washington Post*, “Five Myths about Anti-Semitism,” attempts to balance these two perspectives on Israel and antisemitism. He points out that criticism of Israeli policies and actions should not be construed as being generally anti-Semitic. For him, as for many other Jews, legitimate criticism of Israel’s actions concerning the Palestinians or other issues cannot all simply be labeled anti-Semitic. Within Israel and with Jews across the globe, there are many different perspectives and positions on different issues with respect to the modern State of Israel. For example, opposition to Jewish settlements and calls to boycott are debatable political positions, not anti-Semitic slurs. He argues that Israel, just like any other democracy or nation, should be held accountable for its actions.

On the other hand, he does acknowledge that criticism of Israel can mask hatred or prejudice toward Jews. He points out examples where critics of Israel were

Holocaust deniers; those who accused Israel of committing “Palestinian genocide,” in spite of the fact that the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reported a 400% population increase since Israel’s founding; and situations where Israel is subjected to criticism at a level not experienced by any non-Jewish country. He points to the United Nations, whose Human Rights Council has condemned Israel more often than all other countries combined, including Syria, North Korea, Iran, and Russia. He argues that such approaches share a common trait which is that they treat Israel in much the same way anti-Semites have historically unfairly treated and demonized Jews.

A third position is that the new antisemitism represents a third, or ideological, wave of anti-Semitism: one that is ‘Israel-derived anti-Semitism’ with the first two waves being religious and racial anti-Semitism. The first wave, religious anti-Semitism arose with the emergence of Christianity and resulted from the Jews’ rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. The second wave, racial anti-Semitism, emerged in Spain when large numbers of Jews were forced to convert. Doubts within the Christian-Spanish community about the sincerity of the converts led to idea of the importance of racial purity or purity of blood.

Third wave anti-Semitism is seen emerging from the Arab states and as being, in part, the result of the creation of the State of Israel. This perspective points to the fact that, until the 19th century, although Jews living in Arab and Muslim countries were not treated as equals, they were extended an amount of respect. Change in this view began to happen with colonialism and the spread of Christianity and Western anti-Semitism. This was exacerbated by the series of Israeli military victories beginning in 1948 followed by those in the 1956, 1967, and 1973 wars. The Jewish state not only managed to survive these wars, but even expanded its territory. Israel’s taking over of the Gaza Strip from Egypt and the West Bank from Jordan, which were home to large numbers of Palestinian Arabs, was and remains one of the most controversial outcomes.

Supporters of third wave anti-Semitism partly blame the United Nations for its emergence. They argue that the international public response and the United Nations’ handling of the 1948 refugee situation convinced the Arab world that discrimination against Jews was acceptable. They also point to the inaction by the international community when the ancient Jewish community in East Jerusalem was evicted (after the partition of Jerusalem) and Jewish historical and religious sites were desecrated. As well, Jewish refugees fleeing or driven out of Arab and Muslim countries were not offered help, in contrast to the support provided for Arabs or Muslims who fled or were driven out of the lands that became Israel. At that time, all the Arab governments involved in the conflict announced that they would not accept Israelis of any religion into their territories, and that they would not give visas to Jews, no matter what their citizenship. The failure of the United Nations and international community to protest these actions sent a clear message to the Arab world. This new anti-Semitism provides non-Jews license to criticize or attack Jews without feeling burdened by the crimes of the Nazis.

Israel’s military successes and its willingness to occupy Arab lands until a peace treaty can be negotiated, has resulted in Arab anti-Semitism hardening into official doctrine for several decades. While historically traditional Muslim views were sympathetic towards Jews, there has been tendency among some contemporary Muslim scholars in the Arab world to reread and reinterpret the *Quran* to provide



evidence of the Jews' devilish nature. This misuse of the *Quran* to legitimize anti-Jew and anti-Israeli hatred is seen by many Muslim and non-Muslim scholars as a particularly menacing form of anti-Semitism.

## Israel, Middle East Conflict, and the Arab World

There is no doubt that the creation of the State of Israel and the wars that followed have impacted and influenced contemporary understandings about Jews and the world. It is also true that the Arab-Israeli wars and continued conflicts in the Middle East and in many Muslim dominated countries have created a complex situation.

As well, there is widespread belief of media bias among all sides of the issues. Pro-Palestinians often see Western mainstream media to be biased and pro-Israel, while pro-Israeli see Arab media to be biased and pro-Palestinian. Consequently, one must critically read and digest media reports and materials.



Figure 57: 2016 UN Ambassador, Samantha Power Visits Max Rayne Bilingual Hand in Hand School in Jerusalem

Hand in Hand Center for Jewish-Arab Education in Israel operates 6 schools and communities throughout Israel. The schools provide thousands of Jewish and Arab students with an opportunity for a bilingual and bicultural education. See [www.handinhandk12.org/](http://www.handinhandk12.org/).



Figure 58: Jews for Palestine

Some Jews do not believe that a separate Jewish state is necessary and support Palestinians. This photo was taken at a rally in Montreal in support of the people of Gaza in July of 2012.

To that end, one must study and understand the issues related to Israel, the Middle East conflicts, and Palestinians from a well-informed and balanced perspective. Many of us may have limited knowledge of the history and facts related to these themes. Knowing the facts about the creation of Israel and the impact on Palestinians, as well as the conflict that grew out of this development is key to understanding the issues at hand.

Furthermore, there is a tendency to oversimplify and stereotype the perspectives and positions of Jews, Christians, Muslims, Arabs, Israelis, and Palestinians. In doing so, the diversity of opinions and positions that exist within each of these groups is lost. For example, on the Jewish side, Jews for Justice for Palestine advocates for a two-state solution to the conflict and, on the Muslim side, some Muslim clerics, such as

Sheikh professor Abdul Hadi Palazzi, Director of the Cultural Institute of the Italian Islamic Community, and Imam Dr Muhammad Al-Hussaini believe that the return of the Jews to the Holy Land, and the establishment of Israel, are in accordance with the teachings of Islam. Notable Muslims who publicly support Zionism

include former radical Islamist Ed Husain; Dr. Tawfik Hamid; Tashbih Sayyed, a Pakistani-American scholar, journalist, and author; and the Bangladeshi journalist Salah Choudhury. Additional Muslim people who voiced public support for Israel include figures such as

- Kasim Hafeez (British Muslim of Pakistani origin, now residing in Winnipeg)
- Irshad Manji (born in Uganda, Canadian citizen, now a Senior Fellow at the USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership and Policy, founder of the Moral Courage Project)
- Salim Mansur (born in India, professor, University of Western Ontario)
- Abdurrahman Wahid (deceased former President of Indonesia)
- Abdullah Saad Al-Hadlaq (Kuwaiti writer)
- Khaleel Mohammed (Guyanese-born professor, San Diego State University)
- Mithal al-Alusi (former member of parliament of Iraq)
- Mohamed "Ed" Husain (former Islamic activist and cofounder of Quilliam Foundation, a counter-extremism organization)
- Nadiya Al-Noor (a Muslim interfaith activist from New York)
- Noor Dahri (director of Pakistan Israel Alliance (PIA), an independent researcher based in London)

**Kasim Hafeez is a Manitoban of British Muslim Pakistani origins who is best known for founding "The Israel Campaign", a pro-Israel advocacy organization. Hafeez believes that much of the hatred and intolerance of Israel in the Arab and Islamic world is the result of misinformation and ignorance. In his video, "I Was Born to Hate Jews" for Praeger university, he explains his journey from hating Israel to becoming pro-Israel. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSrMCnuBz3k>.**

### Muslim and Zionist

#### **Qanta A. Ahmed, MD**

**Dr. Ahmed is a noted physician, author, journalist, and practicing Muslim. Ahmed is opposed to the boycott against Israel but is also opposed to the occupation of the Palestinian Territories. She has spoken for and defended Israel's right to exist.**

#### **Stephen Suleyman Schwartz**

**Stephen Schwartz is executive director of the Centre for Islamic Pluralism, an international network of moderate Muslims. He has authored two books on Islam. He has been a student of Sufism since the late 1960s and an adherent of the Hanafi school of Islam since 1997.**

- Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury (Bangladeshi author and founder of A-21 TV)
- Tawfik Hamid (Egyptian author who owns and runs the website IslamforPeace)
- Zuhdi Jasser (American M. D., founder and president of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy [AIFD])

Finally, multiple perspectives must be heard and considered while studying the issues.

## Countering Religious Extremism

Religious extremism leading to religion-related terrorism is a growing concern throughout the world. In 2014, a significant number of countries in the Middle East-North Africa region experienced religion-related terrorism. As well, the Asia-Pacific region saw a large increase in the countries experiencing such terrorism. Terrorist activities have been lethal in many counties in Europe and Israel in particular, where attacks resulted in over 50 casualties in 2014.

This type of terrorism also includes groups who engage in ethnic cleansing related to religion. In Iraq, in 2014, Islamic State militants were reported to have engaged in a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing that targeted religious and ethnic minorities, including the Yazidis.

Jewish extremist groups are a growing concern in Israel. These groups have both religious and political motivation for their position and actions; however, most recent Jewish extremist groups have tended to emphasize religious rather than secular motives for their actions. In the case of Jewish terrorism, most extremist networks have been associated with religious Zionists and ultra-Orthodox Jews living in relatively isolated Jewish communities.

## Impact on Manitoba and Canada

Jewish Canadians and Judaism have contributed to the shaping of contemporary Canadian society and communities. Like many other groups, they have added to the diversity of perspectives as well as to our cultural and social mosaic.

The following are questions for exploration and discussion with respect to Judaism in Manitoba and Canada.

1. In what ways has Judaism positively contributed to the development of Manitoba and Canadian society? Provide some examples.
2. Do Canadians in general have a good understanding of Judaism and Jewish cultures or do they hold stereotypical and mal-informed views and understandings about Judaism?
3. How have you benefited from the opportunity to explore Judaism?

