



What Is Judaism?

Level: Basic

- Judaism has been described as a religion, a race, a culture, and a nation
- All of these descriptions have some validity
- The Jewish people are best described as an extended family

What is Judaism? What does it mean to be a Jew? Most people, both Jewish and gentile, would instinctively say that Judaism is a religion. And yet, there are militant atheists who insist that they are Jews! Is Judaism a race? If you were to say so, most Jews would think you were an antisemite! So what is Judaism?

Is Judaism a Religion?

Clearly, there is a religion called Judaism, a set of ideas about the world and the way we should live our lives that is called "Judaism." It is studied in Religious Studies courses and taught to Jewish children in [Hebrew](#) schools. See [What do Jews Believe?](#) for details. There is a lot of flexibility about certain aspects of those beliefs, and a lot of disagreement about specifics, but that flexibility is built into the organized system of belief that is Judaism.

However, many people who call themselves Jews do not believe in that religion at all! More than half of all Jews in [Israel](#) today call themselves "secular," and don't believe in [G-d](#) or any of the religious beliefs of Judaism. Half of all Jews in the United States don't belong to any [synagogue](#). They may practice some of the rituals of Judaism and celebrate some of the [holidays](#), but they don't think of these actions as religious activities.

The most traditional Jews and the most liberal Jews and everyone in between would agree that these secular people are still Jews, regardless of their disbelief. See [Who is a Jew?](#) Clearly, then, there is more to being Jewish than just a religion.

Are Jews a Race?

In the 1980s, the United States Supreme Court ruled that Jews are a race, at least for purposes of certain anti-discrimination laws. Their reasoning: at the time these laws were passed, people routinely spoke of the "Jewish race" or the "Italian race" as well as the "Negro race," so that is what the legislators intended to protect.

But many Jews were deeply offended by that decision, offended by any hint that Jews could be considered a race. The idea of Jews as a race brings to mind nightmarish visions of Nazi Germany, where Jews were declared to be not just a race, but an inferior race that had to be rounded up into ghettos and exterminated like vermin.

But setting aside the emotional issues, Jews are clearly not a race.

Race is a genetic distinction, and refers to people with shared ancestry and shared genetic traits. You can't change your race; it's in your DNA. I could never become black or Asian no matter how much I might want to.

Common ancestry is not required to be a Jew. Many Jews worldwide share common ancestry, as shown by genetic research; however, you can be a Jew without sharing this common ancestry, for example, by [converting](#). Thus, although I could never become black or Asian, blacks and Asians have become Jews (Sammy Davis Jr. and Connie Chung).

Is It a Culture or Ethnic Group?

Most secular American Jews think of their Jewishness as a matter of culture or ethnicity. When they think of Jewish culture, they think of the [food](#), of the [Yiddish](#) language, of some limited [holiday](#) observances, and of cultural values like the emphasis on education.

Those secular American Jews would probably be surprised to learn that much of what they think of as Jewish culture is really just [Ashkenazic](#) Jewish culture, the culture of Jews whose ancestors come from one part of the world. Jews have lived in many parts of the world and have developed many different traditions. As a [Sephardic](#) friend likes to remind me, Yiddish is not part of his culture, nor are [bagels and lox](#), chopped liver, [latkes](#), [gefilte fish](#) or [matzah ball soup](#). His idea of Jewish cooking includes bourekas, phyllo dough pastries filled with cheese or spinach. His ancestors probably wouldn't know what to do with a [dreidel](#).

There are certainly cultural traits and behaviors that are shared by many Jews, that make us feel more comfortable with other Jews. Jews in many parts of the world share many of those cultural aspects. However, that culture is not shared by all Jews all over the world, and people who do not share that culture are no less Jews because of it. Thus, Judaism must be something more than a culture or an ethnic group.

Are the Jews a Nation?

The traditional explanation, and the one given in the [Torah](#), is that the Jews are a nation. The [Hebrew](#) word, believe it or not, is "[goy](#)." The Torah and the [rabbis](#) used this term not in the modern sense meaning a territorial and political entity, but in the ancient sense meaning a group of people with a common history, a common destiny, and a sense that we are all connected to each other.

Unfortunately, in modern times, the term "nation" has become too contaminated by ugly, jingoistic notions of a country obsessed with its own superiority and bent on world domination. Because of this notion of "nationhood," Jews are often falsely accused of being disloyal to their own country in favor of their loyalty to the Jewish "nation," of being more loyal to [Israel](#) than to their home country. Some have gone so far as to use this distorted interpretation of "nationhood" to prove that Jews do, or seek to, control the world. In fact, a surprising number of antisemitic websites and newsgroup postings linked to this page (in an earlier form) as proof of their antisemitic delusions that Jews are nationalistic, that Israel is a colonial power and so forth.

Because of the inaccurate connotations that have attached themselves to the term "nation," the term can no longer be used to accurately describe the Jewish people.

The Jewish People are a Family

It is clear from the discussion above that there is a certain amount of truth in the claims that it is a religion, a race, or an ethnic group, none of these descriptions is entirely adequate to describe what connects Jews to other Jews. And yet, almost all Jews feel a sense of connectedness to each other that many find hard to explain, define, or even understand. Traditionally, this interconnectedness was understood as "nationhood" or "peoplehood," but those terms have become so distorted over time that they are no longer accurate.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz has suggested a better analogy for the Jewish people: We are a family. See the third essay in his 2005 book, [We Jews: Who Are We and What Should We Do](#). But though this is a relatively new book, it is certainly not a new concept: throughout the Bible and Jewish literature, the Jewish people are referred to as "the Children of Israel," a reference to the fact that we are all the physical or spiritual descendants of the [Patriarch Jacob](#), who was later called [Israel](#). In other words, we are part of his extended family.

Like a family, we don't always agree with each other. We often argue and criticize each other. We hold each other to the very highest standards, knowing that the shortcomings of any member of the family will be held against all of us. But when someone outside of the family unfairly criticizes a family member or the family as a whole, we are quick to join together in opposition to that unfair criticism.

When members of our "family" suffer or are persecuted, we all feel their pain. For example, in the 1980s, when Africa was suffering from droughts and famines, many Jews around the world learned for the first time about the Beta Israel, the Jews of Ethiopia. Their religion, race and culture are quite different from ours, and we had not even known that they existed before the famine. And yet, our hearts went out to them as our fellow Jews during this period of famine, like distant cousins we had never met, and Jews from around the world helped them to emigrate to [Israel](#).

When a member of our "family" does something illegal, immoral or shameful, we all feel the shame, and we all feel that it reflects on us. As Jews, many of us were embarrassed by the scandals of Monica Lewinsky, Jack Abramoff and Bernie Madoff, because they are Jews and their actions reflect on us all, even though we disapprove. The Madoff scandal was all the more embarrassing, because so many of his victims were Jews and Jewish charities: a Jew robbing from our own "family"! We were shocked when Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin was killed by a Jew, unable to believe that one Jew would ever kill another member of the "family."

And when a member of our "family" accomplishes something significant, we all feel proud. A perfect example of Jews (even completely secular ones) delighting in the accomplishments of our fellow Jews is the perennial popularity of Adam Sandler's [Chanukkah](#) songs, listing famous people who are Jewish. We all take pride in scientists like Albert Einstein or political leaders like Joe Lieberman (we don't all agree with his politics or his religious views, but we were all proud to see him on a national ticket). And is there a Jew who doesn't know (or at least feel pride upon learning) that Sandy Koufax declined to pitch in a World Series game that fell on [Yom Kippur](#)?

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