

Who Are The Jewish People?

The Jewish people are often discussed in terms of religion alone, but Jewish identity is far more layered: encompassing religion, ancestry, peoplehood, culture, history, and ongoing connection to the Land of Israel. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks described it, “The Jewish people is an extended family. We argue, we differ... yet we are part of the same story [and] share the same memories.”¹

This AJC resource borrows the familiar image of a family tree, a symbol of shared ancestry and belonging, to illustrate that layered complexity at a glance.

Like a family tree, Jewish identity grows from roots planted in ancient origins; up through a trunk of shared history and texts; out into branches of diverse denominations, ethnicities, and practices; and finally to leaves: the millions of individual Jews today, each expressing this inherited identity in their own unique way.

Each part depends on the others: the same family story that runs through the roots still shapes every leaf, and yet no single leaf, branch, or root tells the whole story. Understanding the Jewish people means recognizing the whole family tree.

ABOUT AJC AND THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION ADVOCACY

American Jewish Committee² (AJC) is the global advocacy organization for the Jewish people. With more than 75 offices, institutes, and international Jewish community partnerships worldwide, AJC’s mission is to enhance the well-being of the Jewish people and Israel, and to advance human rights and democratic values in the United States and around the world.

AJC’s Center for Education Advocacy³ (CEA) fosters academic environments that are inclusive of Jews and Jewish identity and refuse to allow the normalization of antisemitism in any form. Our team of experienced educators provides strategic guidance and nuanced educational programming, and builds trusted relationships to work alongside K-12 and higher education institutions, educators, students, and parents.

To explore CEA’s full library of guidance documents and toolkits, including this resource’s companion, A Short Guide to Jewish Religion, Culture, Holiday Observances and 5-Year Planning Calendar⁴, visit [AJC.org/EducationResources](https://www.ajc.org/EducationResources). To learn more about CEA’s educational programming for administrators, faculty, students, or your school community, visit [AJC.org/CEA](https://www.ajc.org/CEA) or email education@ajc.org.

¹ The Koren Haggadah, The Young Israel Edition, with commentary by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, 2017. p. 49

² [AJC.org](https://www.ajc.org)

³ [AJC.org/CEA](https://www.ajc.org/CEA)

⁴ [AJC.org/5YearCalendar](https://www.ajc.org/5YearCalendar)



THE LEAVES | INDIVIDUAL JEWS TODAY

- ▼ Judaism and Jewish identity are expressed with great diversity
- ▼ Jews may be religiously observant, secular, culturally connected, or anywhere in between
- ▼ Jews carry a shared ancient history as well as evolving modern identities
- ▼ ~16 million Jews worldwide (0.2% of the global population)
- ▼ ~85% of all Jews today live in either the U.S. (~7.5M and ~2.4% of the population) or in Israel (~7.3M and ~74% of the population)



THE BRANCHES | DIVERSE EXPRESSIONS

Religious Denominations

- ▼ Haredi, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, Humanistic, Secular/Cultural

Geographic/Ethnic Diversity

- ▼ Ashkenazi* (European), Sephardi* (Spanish/Mediterranean), Mizrahi* (Middle Eastern), Persian, Beta Israel (Ethiopian), Indian, and more

*Within each of these ethnic groups, there is significant regional cultural diversity (owing to the infusion of local influences)

Key Practices (observed by many Jews, albeit in varying ways)

- ▼ Shabbat (weekly Sabbath)
- ▼ Kashrut (dietary laws)
- ▼ Holidays & Festivals (e.g., Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Sigd, Hanukkah, Tu B'Shvat, Purim, Passover, Shavuot, Tisha B'Av)
- ▼ Life Cycle Rituals (e.g., brit milah/simchat bat, bar/bat mitzvah, weddings, shiva (mourning))



THE TRUNK | WHAT BINDS THE FAMILY TOGETHER

- ▼ Ethno-religion: Bound by ancestry, history, belief, practices, culture, texts, and language (Hebrew)
- ▼ Lineage or conversion: Born Jewish through family descent, or become Jewish through study and commitment
- ▼ Continual learning and interpretation: A commitment to ongoing study of Jewish religious, philosophical, and historical texts, which includes modern additions and new interpretations
- ▼ Connection to the Land of Israel: Enduring ties through holidays, prayers, traditions, and culture
- ▼ Connection to Jews around the world



THE ROOTS | ANCIENT ORIGINS

- ▼ More than 3,000 years old, originating in Land of Israel
- ▼ Monotheism: Belief in one God
- ▼ Covenant: Sacred agreement between God and Jewish people
- ▼ Hebrew Bible (Tanakh): Comprising the Torah (Pentateuch), the Prophets, and the Writings; and containing the 613 Commandments, Morality/Wisdom Texts, and origin story of the Jewish people
- ▼ Hebrew language, which dates back 3,000 years to the origins of Judaism in the Land of Israel