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THE JEWISH PEOPLE

A Beautiful Mosaic

**UNDERSTANDING
THE PRESENT**

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Background About The Jewish People

Jews are a diverse ethnic and religious group. Jewish identity, language, religion, and culture go back over 3,000 years and come from the Land of Israel. Though Jews never built a vast empire, they had a deep influence on the rise of Christianity, Islam, and other key parts of human history. While some always remained in Israel, over the centuries, most Jews scattered across the world due to oppression by foreign empires and other factors. As a result, modern Jewish communities today are extremely diverse in culture, skin color, cuisine and more.

Historically, the glue that connected Jews around the world has been Judaism, the religion of the Jewish people. This included the study of the Torah, following a traditional lunar and solar calendar, and celebrating holidays tied to the seasons in the Land of Israel.

The common written and spoken language of the Jews is Hebrew, which is indigenous to the Land of Israel. While ancient, it has been revitalized in Israel as a modern language. An Israeli can fluently read a Hebrew text written thousands of years ago as well as a contemporary Hebrew essay discussing cutting-edge, high-tech developments.

On the eve of World War II and the Holocaust (1939), the world's Jewish population was about 16.6 million. Today, nearly 80 years later, there are still fewer Jews than before the Nazi genocide took the lives of six million. The current global Jewish population is estimated at 15.3 million, with about seven million of them living in Israel. Of the over eight million Jews living outside Israel, six million reside in the United States.

Jews represent less than 1/4 of 1% of the entire world's population.

Most of the world's Jews live in two places: the United States and Israel. Other large Jewish communities are in Europe, Russia, South America, Asia, and Africa.

Ashkenazi Jews

Ashkenaz (אַשכּנז) is the classical Hebrew word for Germany. Ashkenazi describes Jews from Western and Eastern Europe, including Russia. Though large communities still live across Europe, Ashkenazi Jews were devastated by the Holocaust and antisemitic persecution in Russia. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, about one million Jews left and resettled in Israel. About eighty percent of American Jews and about 45 percent of Israeli Jews are considered Ashkenazi.



Golda Meir

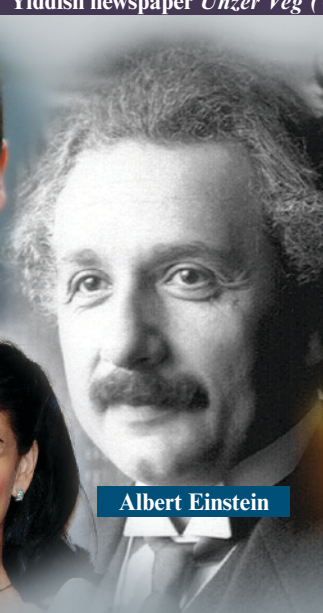
One of the most unique aspects of Ashkenazi culture is the language Yiddish. Written in Hebrew, it is a fusion of German, Hebrew, Aramaic, and some local dialects. Most Ashkenazi Jews no longer speak Yiddish, but Yiddish words and expressions are still used in many Ashkenazi Jewish homes.



Yiddish newspaper *Unzer Veg* (*Our Way*)



Adam Sandler



Albert Einstein



Anne Frank



Sarah Silverman



Natan Sharansky

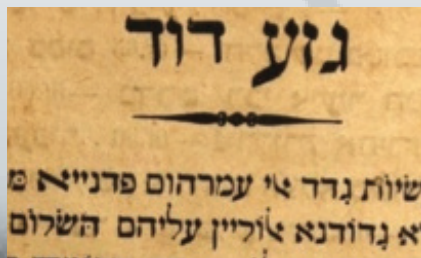
Mizrahi Jews

The word *mizrah* (מזרח) means “east” in Hebrew. Mizrahi describes Jews who lived across the Middle East and North Africa. Though they faced systemic discrimination, Mizrahi Jews built many thriving communities, including some that existed for thousands of years. They also developed unique languages, including Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Aramaic, and Judeo-Persian—all written in Hebrew.

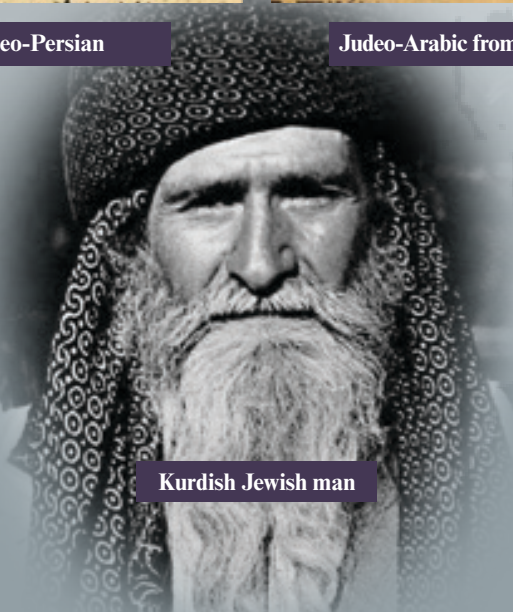
Tragically, due to oppression, murder, and expulsion in the 20th century, 99.8 percent of Mizrahi communities across the Middle East and North Africa no longer exist. Between 1948 and 1970, about 850,000 Jews were pushed out of their homes in ten Arab countries.



Judeo-Persian



Judeo-Arabic from Algeria



Kurdish Jewish man

Israel conducted an emergency airlift (Operation Wings of Eagles) of some 50,000 Yemenite Jews between 1949 and 1950. In 1951, Israel carried out another emergency airlift (Operation Ezra and Nehemiah) that rescued about 130,000 Iraqi Jews and brought them to Israel. Indeed, most Mizrahi Jews resettled in Israel, where, today, they make up about 51 percent of Israel's Jewish population. The rest live in Europe, North America, and South America.



Avshalom Elitzur
*Israeli scientist,
Iranian descent*

Dalia Itzik
*former Speaker
of Knesset,
Iraqi descent*

**Brig. Gen.
Avigdor Kahalani**
*1973 war hero,
Yemenite descent*

Sephardic Jews

Sepharad (ספרד) is the Hebrew word for Spain. Sephardic is used today to describe Jews whose ancestors lived in Spain and Portugal.

The language most Sephardic Jews spoke is called Ladino. It is written in Hebrew and is a fusion of Spanish, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Some Sephardic Jews still speak Ladino as their mother tongue.

In 1492, during the Spanish Inquisition, Spanish King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella expelled all the Jews from their kingdom, and those who stayed were forced to choose between death and converting to Catholicism.

Most sought refuge in North Africa and the Middle East, while others went elsewhere in Europe.

The first Jews who came to America were Sephardic. They were among the founders of New Amsterdam, which eventually became New York.



Sephardic Jewish couple from Sarajevo

Romaniote Jews

While most Greek Jews are Sephardic, there is an older community called Romaniote Jews who trace their roots in Greece back over 2,000 years. They spoke a Judeo-Greek dialect and had their own unique traditions. A huge percentage of Jews in Greece were murdered in the Holocaust, and most of those who survived ended up in Israel and the U.S.



Emma Lazarus

Maimonides

Emmanuelle Chriqui

Bernard-Henri Lévy

Asian Jews

India

Indian Jews are made up of five communities, each with their own distinct history.

The oldest Jewish community lived in Cochin. They came to India from the Land of Israel about 2,500 years ago. The Bene Yisrael migrated from the Land of Israel to India approximately 2,100 years ago and live in what is now the state of Maharashtra.

Baghdadi Jews emigrated from Iraq and Iran some 250 years ago, settling in Mumbai. The Bene Menasha Jews claim descent from the ancient Israelite tribe of Menashe. Lastly, the Bene Ephraim are from the state of Andhra Pradesh and began observing Judaism in 1981.

Although they have never been persecuted in India, today, most Indian Jews live in Israel.

Central Asia

Bukharan Jews are part of Mizrahi Jewry, living in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. Most are in Israel today.

Kazakhstani Jews are an ancient community made up of Bukharan and Juhuro Mountain Jews. In addition, the Soviet dictator Stalin forced thousands of Ashkenazi Jews to move there.



Bukharan Jews



Bene Yisrael in India

Chinese Jews

The Jews of China are mostly Sephardic but also Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, and local converts. The earliest record of Jews in China goes back to the eighth century CE, when the Kaifeng Jewish community was established. There is little history of antisemitism in China. During World War II, Shanghai was occupied by Imperial Japan and became a refuge city for Jews fleeing the Holocaust. Nonetheless, under pressure from their Nazi German allies, the Japanese forced the Jews to live in an overcrowded ghetto. Additionally, a thriving Russian Jewish community in Harbin, China, rose in the early 1900s, only to fall apart a few decades later, mainly due to persecution under Japanese rule before and during WWII.



Kaifeng Jews of China

Jews of Sub-Saharan Africa

Ethiopian Jews

Ethiopian Jews, also known as Beta Yisrael (House of Israel), are believed to be descended from the Israelite tribe of Dan. They lived in northern and northwestern Ethiopia, in more than 500 small villages spread over a wide territory. They were cut off from mainstream Judaism until the 19th century, when their existence began to be known among the Jews of the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe.



Hagit Yaso

Today, most Ethiopian Jews live in Israel. Thousands were airlifted by the Israeli government in Operation Moses (1984–85) and Operation Solomon (1991). Since the 1980s, over 80,000 Ethiopian Jews immigrated to Israel, many of them escaping war and persecution. Over 160,000 live there today. While they face challenges with discrimination and integration into Israeli society as newer immigrants, Ethiopian Jews are advancing rapidly in education, employment, and other areas of Israeli life.

Abayudaya Jews of Uganda

The Abayudaya (People of Judah) are descendants of 20th-century converts to Judaism. Today, they number around 2,500 and live in nine villages in the Pallisa District of Uganda. They have established contact with Jewish communities, particularly in the U.S. and Israel, and received support for the building of hospitals, synagogues, and schools. Members of their community study in Israeli religious seminaries and are recognized by Conservative and Reform Judaism.



Ugandan Jew

Igbo Jews of Nigeria

The Igbo Jews are members of the Igbo people in Nigeria who practice Judaism. They receive assistance from Israeli and Jewish American individuals and groups, including African American Jewish communities. Some have migrated to Israel in recent years. As an emerging Jewish community, they are seeking broader recognition from the Jewish world.

Other African Jewish Communities

Madagascar: A small number of people began practicing Judaism in 2010. Today, they form three communities.

Côte d'Ivoire: A Jewish community began to form in 2000, practicing Orthodox Judaism. Another group called Danites claims descent from the Tribe of Dan. Most are Christians and Muslims, but a small number are considering formal conversion to Judaism.

Cameroon: Some estimate there were once hundreds of thousands of Jews in Cameroon before they converted to Christianity and Islam. American actor Yaphet Kotto's father (Avraham Kotto) is from Cameroon and is Jewish.

Zimbabwe: Members of the Lemba tribe claim Jewish heritage. Many traditional Lemba beliefs and practices follow Jewish and Muslim traditions. Lemba tradition tells of its male ancestors leaving Judea about 2,500 years ago and settling in Yemen. Eventually, they migrated to Africa.



American Jews

While most American Jews are of Ashkenazi descent, the American Jewish community is very diverse. This includes Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, as well as Black, Latino, Asian, and Native Americans who belong to every stream of Judaism, including Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist.

Because of this diversity, discussions about race in America at large are mirrored among Jews. Jews of color are raising awareness of their role and presence in American Jewish communities, many of which are striving to become more inclusive.



Ruth Bader Ginsburg



Scarlett Johansson





Lenny Kravitz

African American Jews

The first black rabbi in the United States was Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford, a civil rights activist in the early 20th century. Prominent African American Jews include academic and civil rights activist Julius Lester, Rabbi Georgette Kennebrae, and musician Lenny Kravitz.

Latino American Jews

Latino Jews live across the U.S. and South America. Additionally, many non-Jewish Latinos are descended from Jews who were forced to convert to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition.



Jamie-Lynn Sigler

Asian American Jews

Asian American Jews are a growing portion of the vibrant Jewish American community.



Rabbi Jacqueline Mates-Muchin
—Senior Rabbi of
Temple Sinai, Oakland

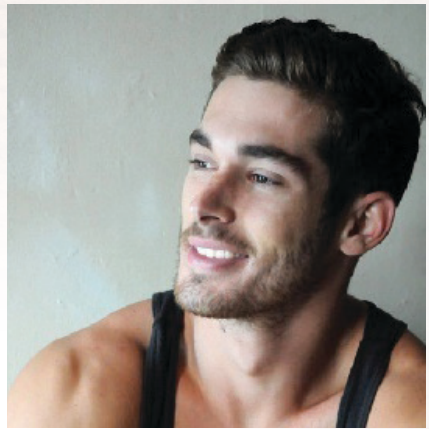


Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl
—Senior Rabbi of the Central
Synagogue, Manhattan

Israeli Jews

Diverse Jewish communities are thriving in Israel. Just under half of Israel's Jewish citizens are Ashkenazi Jews. Most Israeli Jews are people of color. Their immediate ancestors came to Israel from North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa, often escaping persecution.

Israel is a mosaic of Jewish and non-Jewish cultures, with Jews from over 70 countries living alongside non-Jewish minorities (Arab Muslims, Christians, Druze, Bedouins, and others) who make up about 20 percent of the population.



Despite disagreements and historic tensions between many of these communities, together they have built one of the most diverse and vibrant nations in the world.

A portrait of actress Gal Gadot, smiling and wearing red lipstick.

Gal Gadot

A portrait of violinist Itzhak Perlman, smiling and holding his violin.

Itzhak Perlman

A portrait of Gene Simmons in his Kiss band persona, wearing his signature black and white face paint and playing a guitar.

Gene Simmons

A portrait of basketball player Omri Casspi, wearing a white jersey with the number 18 and the name "CASSPI" on the back, jumping for a shot.

Omri Casspi

A portrait of astronaut Ilan Ramon, wearing an orange NASA flight suit with an Israeli flag patch, holding his helmet.

Ilan Ramon

StandWithUs

Through a generous partnership with Evelyn and Dr. Shmuel Katz, StandWithUs has been able to produce cutting-edge print materials for over two decades. Students, community members, and activists worldwide have used our popular booklets and brochures to educate the public about Israel and antisemitism.



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