

# CIS BULLETIN: JUDAISM

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## INTRODUCTION

### Statistics:

Worldwide: 13,000,000 Jews  
United States: 5,800,000 Jews  
(The Council of Jewish Federations reports only  
4,300,000 Americans identify themselves as Jews.)  
Israel: 3,500,000 Jews

New York City, with 1,750,000 Jews, has the largest Jewish population of any city in the world, including Jerusalem. Other American cities with large Jewish populations: Los Angeles: 500,000; Miami-Ft. Lauderdale: 313,000; Philadelphia: 248,000; and Boston: 240,000. Atlanta had a Jewish population of 72,000 in 1990, up from 32,000 in 1980, a 132% increase.

The first Jewish immigrants to the United States arrived from Brazil in 1654. These Jews had left Spain and Portugal to settle in Recife, a Dutch city in Brazil, after Jews were ordered to convert to Christianity or leave. The anti-Jewish persecution eventually reached Brazil when the Portuguese captured Recife banned Judaism forcing the Jews to move again. Some 20 Jews emigrated to New York City, where they started the first Jewish community in the United States. By 1919, more Jews lived in the United States than any other country in the world.

The first Jewish synagogue in the Americas was built in Recife. Remains of the synagogue were found in a building housing a Catholic charity hospital in 2000, when archeologists unearthed a *mikvah*, a spiritual purification bath fed by running rain or river water.

Brazil has the second biggest Jewish community in Latin America after Argentina, with some 200,000 people, most of whom live in Sao Paulo.

### Famous American Jews:

Ann Landers	Jack Benny	Barbra Streisand
Milton Berle	Henry Kissinger	George Burns
Jonas Salk	Kirk Douglas	Peter Sellers
Sandy Koufax	Mike Wallace	George Gershwin

## MAJOR JEWISH BELIEFS

**1) Monotheism:** Monotheism is the belief in one God. This belief, which is at the heart of Judaism, is summed up in Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" This confession of faith, called the Shema (meaning "hear") has been chanted in Jewish worship services for twenty-six centuries. Jews believe God is personal, holy, and just. He is the Creator who has revealed Himself to the prophets as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament.

**2) The Centrality of the Law (Torah):** The Hebrew Scriptures are divided into three sections: the Law (Torah), the Prophets, and the Writings. The Torah, the first five books or Pentateuch, is the most important section of the Hebrew Scriptures. Rabbis, Jewish religious teachers, have made oral interpretations and written commentaries of the Torah to give additional guidance for daily living. These interpretations and

commentaries form the Jewish Talmud.

**3) The Covenant:** Jews believe God has made covenants with Israel through the centuries: with Noah (Gen. 9:8-17), Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), and Moses (Ex. 19-20). Jews believe God maintains these covenants in spite of Israel's failures.

**4) The Sabbath:** The Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, is the day God rested from the work of creation (Gen. 2:2-3). The fourth commandment says, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8). The Sabbath begins with sundown on Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday. Synagogue and temple services are held on Friday evening. Sabbath school may be held on Saturday morning.

**5) Festivals and Feasts:** Jewish festivals and feasts remind Jews of God's goodness to them. Passover (*Pesach*) reminds Jews of the exodus from Egypt and is the most important of the Jewish feasts (Deut. 16:16:1-8). Pentecost (*Shavout*), or the Feasts of Weeks, reminds Jews of the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. It is also associated with the wheat harvest (Deut. 16:9-12). The Feast of Tabernacles (*Succot*), or Booths, is associated with the fruit harvest in the early fall (Deut. 16:13-17).

Jews also observe several holy days in addition to the Sabbath. *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, begins the secular calendar in the fall. In 1996, the Jewish year 5756 will begin on September 14. *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement or Day of Coverings, is the holiest day of the year for Jews. It comes ten days after *Rosh Hashanah*. In ancient Israel, it included the sacrifice of an animal to cover or atone for the sins of the people (Lev. 16:1-34). *Purim* celebrates the deliverance of the Jews in Persia, as described in the Book of Esther. *Hanukkah*, celebrated in December, commemorates the victory of Judas Maccabeus over the Syrians and the rededication of the second temple in 164 B.C.

**6) Emphasis on Deeds Rather than Creeds:** Proper observance of ritual or ceremonial law, dietary (*kosher*) laws, marriage ceremonies, mourning rites, *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, and other customs are more important than what a Jew believes. Sin is an act of disobedience and rebellion against God. Atonement for sin is received by works of righteousness.

## BRANCHES OF AMERICAN JUDAISM

There are three major branches of American Judaism: Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism.

(Reconstructionism is a movement within Judaism that does not establish separate congregations, and so is not usually referred to as a separate branch. Reconstructionism holds that Judaism is not just a religion, but an evolving religious civilization combining Jewish culture and religion.)

**1) Reform Judaism:** Reform (not Reformed) Judaism developed in 19th century Germany in an attempt to adapt Judaism to the modern world. Today, twenty-nine percent of American Jews call themselves Reform. Reform Jews emphasize reason, ethics, and social action over the strict codes of Jewish law.

Reform Jews who had dropped ritual laws, such as circumcision for male converts to Judaism, dress codes and head coverings, have begun to emphasize these rituals again

as they have come to realize they needed these rituals to be Jewish. They are encouraged to rest on the Sabbath. Men and women sit together in worship services. The first woman was ordained as a rabbi in 1972. Services are held in both English and Hebrew. Dietary (*kosher*) laws are not observed.

Reform Jews often call their places of worship temples instead of synagogues, sometimes to show they no longer pray for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. However, they strongly support the nation of Israel.

Reform Jews reject the idea of a bodily resurrection, hell, or heaven but generally accept the immortality of the soul. One survey found only 25% of all American Jews believe in an afterlife. The theory of evolution is generally accepted by Reform Jews. A messianic age, rather than a personal Messiah, is expected. Reform Jews allow considerable freedom of belief and opinion in the search for "truth."

**2) Conservative Judaism:** Conservative Judaism arose in Europe in response to Reform Judaism. Conservative Judaism attempts to modernize the Jewish faith without giving up Jewish tradition. Thirty-four percent of American Jews identify themselves as Conservative.

Although many Conservative Jews are not strict in their observance, they are expected to live according to the Torah and to observe the Sabbath. Men and women sit together in worship services, but men still wear skullcaps called *yarmulkes*. Prayers are said in English, but Hebrew is the predominant language in the worship services. Conservative Jews ordained their first female rabbi in 1985.

Most Conservative Jews also accept the belief in a messianic age rather than in a personal Messiah. Both Reform and Conservative Jews have been active in Christian-Jewish dialogues.

**3) Orthodox Judaism:** Orthodox Judaism is the most conservative of the three major branches. Eleven percent of American Jews call themselves Orthodox.

Orthodox Judaism arose at the end of the 18th century in opposition to the influence of Western culture on the Jewish faith. Orthodox Jews are known for keeping the dietary (*kosher*) laws, their use of Hebrew in worship, and their strict observance of ceremonial laws and moral conduct.

Upon waking in the morning, Orthodox Jews are required to thank God for another day and study the Torah before breakfast. This ritual is also performed prior to going to bed at night. Male Orthodox Jews customarily use the *mikvah* (ritual pool of water) before major Jewish holidays (and particularly before Yom Kippur), in order to achieve spiritual cleanliness.

Orthodox Jews emphasize the Laws of Ethics written by Moses Maimonides (1135-1204):

- (1) Follow in God's path.
- (2) Cling to His works of mercy.
- (3) Love your neighbors.
- (4) Love strangers.
- (5) Don't hate your brothers.
- (6) Correct those who make mistakes.
- (7) Don't shame anyone.
- (8) Don't oppress the weak.
- (9) Don't backbite.
- (10) Don't seek revenge.
- (11) Don't cherish hatred.

Orthodox Jews carefully observe the Sabbath and Jewish festivals. They do not work, ride, write, watch television, listen

to the radio or even turn on a light switch on the Sabbath. Men wear *yarmulkes* on the Sabbath. Women have almost no leadership roles in Orthodox synagogue services. Men and women do not worship together in an Orthodox synagogue.

Orthodox Jews maintain a hope for a personal Messiah, a descendant of David, who will rebuild the temple, reign in Jerusalem and begin temple sacrifices again. Belief in bodily resurrection and in the judgment of God are accepted, but not emphasized.

A movement, called Hasidic Judaism or Hasidism, arose in Eastern Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century among more orthodox Jews. Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (1700 - 1760), the founder of Hasidic Judaism who had gained a following as a prophet and healer, and many other Jews felt that Jewish life had become too "academic," and that spirituality and joy was missing from the faith. There was also a feeling of alienation from rabbinic Judaism and a desire for a more mystical faith. Many Hasidic Jews are opposed to the nation of Israel, believing it too secular.

Hasidic Judaism came to the United States in the 1880s.

The movement is concentrated in New York City, particularly in Brooklyn, where their distinctive attire — long black robes and black hats — are familiar sights.

The teachings of Hasidism are founded on two theoretical conceptions: (1) religious pantheism, that God permeates all things, and (2) the idea of a mystical communion between God and man.

## JEWISH CONCERNS

Jewish concerns center around the threat of annihilation and assimilation.

**1) Annihilation:** (A) Jews have experienced anti-Semitic persecution as a minority faith for centuries, often because they were allegedly "Christ-killers." Christians often forced Jews to live in *ghettos*.

(B) Beginning in 1938, Adolf Hitler began a campaign to kill all of the 8-9 million European Jews in what has become known as the Holocaust (meaning *widespread destruction*). At least 11 million Polish Catholics, gypsies and other minorities were killed, including 6 million Jews, two-thirds of all Jews in Europe. Jews today do not want the world to forget the Holocaust.

(C) The survival of the state of Israel is paramount among Jews worldwide. Many American Jews send money regularly to the government of Israel.

**2) Assimilation:** Most American Jews do not maintain a strict Jewish identity. They are culturally Jewish rather than religiously Jewish. Only about 20% of American Jews (half of them Orthodox) are seriously religious.

Since 1985, 52% of Jewish men and women who have married have taken gentiles for spouses. Seventy-two percent of the children of interfaith marriages are not raised as Jews; 41% are raised in other faiths, usually Christianity; 31% are raised in non-religious homes. A 1990 survey estimated that 739,000 Jews had married someone outside their faith.

Sixty percent of Reform Jews, 50% of Conservatives and 25% of those raised Orthodox are inter-married with non-Jews.

The Jewish community has lost more members (210,000) through conversion than it has gained (185,000).