

# The Jewish Denominations

A quick look at Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist Judaism — and at other Jewish streams.

By [MJL](#)

Jewish denominations — also sometimes referred to as streams, movements or branches — are the principal categories of religious affiliation among American Jews. The denominations are mainly distinguished from one another on the basis of their philosophical approaches to Jewish tradition, and their degree of fidelity to and interpretation of [traditional Jewish law](#), or halacha.

Outside North America, the non-Orthodox streams of Judaism play a less significant role, and in Israel the vast majority of synagogues and other Jewish religious institutions are Orthodox, even though most Israeli Jews do not identify as Orthodox.

Even within North America, the role of the movements has diminished somewhat in recent years, with growing numbers of American Jews and Jewish institutions identifying as “just Jewish,” nondenominational or [transdenominational](#).

## The 3 Largest Jewish Movements

### [Reform Judaism](#)



A participant marching with the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in the Women’s March in Washington, Jan. 21, 2017. (Jason Dixson Photography/Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism via Flickr)

The largest affiliation of American Jews, some 35 percent of Jews identify as Reform. The movement emphasizes the primacy of the

Jewish ethical tradition over the obligations of Jewish law. The movement has traditionally sought to adapt Jewish tradition to modern sensibilities and sees itself as politically progressive and social-justice oriented while emphasizing personal choice in matters of ritual observance.

**Major institutions:** Union for Reform Judaism, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institution of Religion, Religious Action Center, Central Conference of American Rabbis.

## Conservative Judaism



Raising the Torah scroll during morning services at Camp Solomon Schechter, a Conservative Jewish overnight camp in Tumwater, Washington, 2002. ([Zion Ozeri/Jewish Lens](#))

Known as Masorti (traditional) Judaism outside of North America, Conservative Judaism sees Jewish law as obligatory, though in practice there is an enormous range of observance among Conservative Jews.

The movement has historically represented a midpoint on the spectrum of observance between Orthodox and Reform, adopting certain innovations like driving to synagogue (but nowhere else) on Shabbat and gender-egalitarian prayer (in most Conservative synagogues), but maintaining the traditional line on other matters, like keeping kosher and [intermarriage](#). (While it continues to bar its rabbis from [officiating at interfaith weddings](#), the movement has liberalized its approach to intermarriage somewhat in recent years.) About [18 percent of American Jews identify as Conservative](#). **Major institutions:** Jewish Theological Seminary, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Rabbinical Assembly, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies.

## Orthodox Judaism

Orthodox Jews are defined by their adherence to a traditional understanding of Jewish law as interpreted by rabbinic authorities over the centuries. Hallmarks of Orthodox religious life include strict observance of Shabbat (no driving, working, [turning electricity on or off](#), or handling money) and of kosher laws. Though numerically the smallest of the big three — some 10 percent of American Jews identify as Orthodox— [Orthodox Jews have larger than average families](#) and their offspring are statistically more likely to remain observant Jews.

Unlike the Reform and Conservative movements, which have a recognized leadership that sets policy for movement-affiliated institutions, Orthodox Judaism is a looser category that can be further subdivided as follows:

### **Modern Orthodox**

Also known as centrist Orthodoxy, this movement was an effort to harmonize traditional observance of Jewish law with secular modernity. Its ideal is summed up in the motto of its flagship institution, New York's

University: Torah Umadda (literally, Torah and secular knowledge). **Major institutions:** Yeshiva University, Rabbinical Council of America, Orthodox Union.

## Haredi (or Ultra) Orthodox



Chabad-Lubavitch Rabbi Mendel Alperowitz, right, Mussie Alperowitz, left, and their two daughters walk in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, 2016. (Eliyahu Parypa/Chabad.org)

Typically marked by their distinctive black hats (for men) and modest attire (for women),

Orthodox Jews are the most stringent in their commitment to Jewish law and tend to have the lowest levels of interaction with the wider

non-Jewish society. One major exception is

Judaism's [Chabad-Lubavitch sect](#), which is known for its outreach to the wider Jewish community. Haredi Orthodox Jews, who are represented in the United States by Agudath Israel of America, can be further subdivided into two principal groups:

### Hasidic

[Hasidic Jews](#) are heirs of the spiritual revivalist movement that began in Eastern Europe in the 18th century and, drawing on the Jewish mystical tradition, emphasized direct communion with the divine through ecstatic prayer and joy in worship. There are a number of distinct sects, most headed by a charismatic rabbi, or rebbe, including Chabad, Satmar, Ger and Skver.

### [Yeshivish](#)

Sometimes also known as Litvish, these haredi Jews are heirs of the mitnagdim (literally "opponents") who rejected the the rise of Hasidic Judaism in Europe. These Jews traditionally emphasized the intellectual aspects of Jewish life, particularly rigorous Talmud study for men. Yeshivish derives from the word yeshiva, or religious seminary.

### [Open Orthodox](#)

The newest subset of Orthodoxy, Open Orthodox was founded in the 1990s by the New York Rabbi Avi Weiss. Its adherents, who consider the movement a reaction to a perceived shift to the right among the Modern Orthodox, generally support expanded roles for women in spiritual leadership and more openness to non-Orthodox Jews. Major Institutions: Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, Yeshivat Maharat

## **Smaller Denominations**

### **Reconstructionist Judaism**

Following the thinking of its founder, [Mordecai Kaplan](#), Reconstructionism holds that Judaism is the evolving civilization of the Jewish people. Its adherents hold varying opinions about the extent to which Jewish law, particularly the mitzvot, are obligatory. The movement is quite religiously progressive: Kaplan was the first American rabbi to preside over a public bat mitzvah celebration — for his daughter, Judith, in 1922 — and the movement’s rabbinical seminary was the first to accept [openly gay students](#). The movement’s major institution is the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, based outside Philadelphia.

### **Jewish Renewal**

Jewish Renewal combines the ecstatic prayer of Hasidic Judaism with a contemporary ethos of gender egalitarianism, environmental consciousness, progressive politics and appreciation of religious diversity. Its spiritual father was the late [Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi](#), who was born into a Hasidic family in Europe but dabbled freely in the 1960s counterculture.

### **Humanistic Judaism**

Founded in 1963 by Rabbi Sherwin Wine, this movement offers a “nontheistic” Judaism that is not based on divine revelation. Humanistic Jews celebrate Jewish culture, history and holidays without reference to God and emphasize a rationalist, human-centered ethics.

## THE THREE BRANCHES OF JUDAISM

If you want to bring the gospel to your Jewish friends, it is important that you have some understanding of modern Judaism, its tenets and modes of worship. Your Jewish friends will appreciate your awareness of the many distinctives, and you will find your knowledge of the correct terminology helpful in any religious discussion.

The three divisions mentioned in this chart are not denominations. They are more like associations, with classifications according to cultural and doctrinal formulas. Within each branch you will find adherents with varying degrees of observance. Many Jewish people formulate their own informal version of Judaism, and do not fit strictly into any one of these categories. Nevertheless, the information in the chart below should be helpful in most witnessing situations.

Category	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
<b>History</b>	Orthodoxy dates back to the days of the Talmud (2nd to 5th centuries). It was the only form of Jewish practice prior to the 18th century and the emergence of Reform Judaism. Orthodoxy today seeks to preserve classical or traditional Judaism.	Conservative Judaism emerged in 19th century Germany as a reaction to the extreme assimilationist tendencies of Reform Judaism. It tried to be a middle ground, attempting to maintain basic traditions while adapting to modern life.	Reform Judaism emerged following the emancipation from ghetto life in the late 18th century. It sought to modernize Judaism and thus stem the tide of assimilation threatening German Jewry.
<b>Other Terms</b>	<b>Traditional or Torah Judaism</b>	<b>Historical Judaism</b>	<b>Liberal or Progressive Judaism</b>
<b>Formative Personalities</b>	Samson Raphael Hirsch Moses Sofer Bernard Revel	Solomon Schechter Louis Ginzberg Zachariah Frankel Isaac Leeser	Moses Mendelsohn Isaac Mayer Wise Abraham Geiger Samuel Holdheim
<b>U.S. Membership</b> (*about 10% Jews not affiliated—1% other)	820,500 (14%)*	2,340,000 (40%)*	2,050,000 (35%)*
<b>View of Scripture</b>	Torah is truth, and man must have faith in its essential, revealed character. A true Jew believes in revelation and the divine origin of the oral and written Torah.	The Bible is the word of God and man. It is not inspired in the traditional sense, but rather dynamically inspired. Revelation is an ongoing process in the evolutionary sense.	Revelation is a continuous process. Torah is a human document preserving the history, culture, legends and hope of a people. It is valuable for deriving moral and ethical insights.
<b>View of God</b>	God is spirit rather than form. He is a personal God: omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal and compassionate.	The concept of God is nondogmatic and flexible. There is less atheism in Conservative Judaism than in Reform, but most often God is considered impersonal and ineffable.	Reform Judaism allows a varied interpretation of the "God concept" with wide latitude for naturalists, mystics, supernaturalists or religious humanists. It holds that "The truth is that we do not know the truth."
<b>View of Man</b>	Man is morally neutral, with good and evil inclinations. He can overcome his evil bent and be perfected by his own efforts in observance of the Law.	This group tends toward the Reform view, though it is not as likely to espouse humanism. Perfectibility can come through enlightenment. Man is "in partnership" with God.	Man's nature is basically good. Through education, encouragement and evolution he can actualize the potential already existing within him. Mankind may be God.
<b>View of Sin</b>	Orthodox Jews do not believe in "original sin." Rather one commits sin by breaking the commandments of the Law.	Conservative Jews do not believe in a sin nature. The individual can sin in moral or social actions.	Reform Jews do not believe in "original sin." Sin is reinterpreted as the ills of society.
<b>View of Salvation</b>	Repentance (belief in God's mercy), prayer, and obedience to the Law are necessary for salvation.	Conservative Jews tend toward the Reform view, but include the necessity of maintaining Jewish identity.	Salvation is obtained through the betterment of self and society.

# What is Jewish Renewal?

By [Tikkun](#) | March 1, 2011

Jewish Renewal is a new movement within Judaism. It is a kind of neo-Hasidism, in that it seeks the spiritual renewal of Judaism, but “neo” because it insists on full equality for women and a creative return to the process of transforming Halakhah (Jewish law) so that it continues to be a living path to connection to God. The philosophy of Jewish Renewal is articulated best in the theological writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel (see particularly *Shalomi* ([Paradigm Shift](#)), Arthur Waskow ([Down To Earth Judaism](#), [GodWrestling](#)) and Michael Lerner ([Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation](#)).

*Judaism is a distinctive blending of spirituality and a liberatory political vision. But when Judaism abandoned its liberatory message, the Judaism that survived was unable to command the respect and adherence of many Jews. Those who sought spiritual vitality often found themselves attracted to other traditions. Others became disillusioned with all forms of spirituality, assuming that it would necessarily be associated with patriarchal and repressive social realities.*

*So Jewish Renewal seeks a revolutionary transformation of the world: away from the ethos of selfishness and materialism and toward an ethos of love and caring. Its political vision is spelled out in three books by Rabbi Michael Lerner: [The Politics of Meaning](#), [Spirit Matters: Global Healing and the Wisdom of the Soul](#), and [The Left Hand of God](#). One of its central ideas is that we need a new definition of productivity, efficiency and rationality. Institutions and social practices should be judged efficient or productive not only to the extent that they maximize wealth and power, but also to the extent that they maximize our capacities to be loving and*

*caring, ethically/spiritually/ecologically sensitive, and capable of transcending a narrow utilitarian attitude toward other human beings and toward the universe so that we can respond to them with awe, wonder and radical amazement at the grandeur of Creation.*

*Jewish Renewal is an attempt to take God seriously at every level of our being. That requires more than adding a few phrases about social justice to an existing liturgy or ritual. It is an attempt to make us more fully alive to God's presence the world, to build a life that is God-centered, and to provide us with a way of reclaiming the unique spirituality of Judaism, deeply embedded in political consciousness but not only political.*

*Jewish Renewal energy is flowing through all the various denominations of Jewish life — and it will eventually help to transform all of them.*

*There's even an organization which has become the coordinator of some Jewish Renewal activities. It is called [Aleph](#) and you can go their website to get a list of Jewish Renewal synagogues or to find other valuable Jewish Renewal activities. And when you are in the San Francisco Bay Area please do visit our congregation, [Beyt Tikkun](#).*

*And there are many people in the Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Orthodox movements of Judaism who are actually embodying aspects of Jewish Renewal and making it happen in their respective movements. So it would be a mistake to think that any one organization is “the” Jewish Renewal movement. Rather, you will find elements of Jewish Renewal consciousness in a*

*wide variety of institutions and movements in Jewish life today, and it our intention at Tikkun to support and nurture that consciousness.*

*So, at the present moment the promise of Jewish Renewal is only a promissory note to be filled in by you. A set of ideas have been developed, and there are some inspired teachers and spiritually alive communities. But the full vision is yet to be instantiated in the world.*

*Tikkun magazine is committed to supporting the development of a Jewish Renewal*

*movement wherever it occurs. Our Jewish writers are Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Conservative, Reform — not to mention many who are not part of any particular religious movement or those who are adamantly secular. In Tikkun you'll find our attempts to clarify and deepen a Jewish Renewal consciousness, but you'll also find that many of our articles are not written from that perspective. We provide a place for secular Jews as well as for those seeking Jewish Renewal, as we do for spiritual progressives in all faiths and none.*

## **What are the differences among Reform, Reconstructionism, and Jewish Renewal?**

3 Answers

[Andy Isaacson](#)  
[Answered Mar 25, 2011](#)

In many ways, these movements are similar, in that they are a break from tradition, hence the popular appeal you mention among non-traditionalists. However, like anything in Judaism, simple questions can get a bit complicated, with lots of three-handed answers (on one hand .... , but on the other hand, ... but on the other hand), and most certainly will not apply to all adherents of these movements and all worship groups. I'll try to give my general understanding, though I may fall short. I encourage others to fill in any gaps or correct my misconceptions!

It is easier to start with a comparison of the Reform and Reconstructionist movements. The Reform Movement has its roots in 19th century European efforts to make Judaism more about faith and personal morality and less about Halacha (the

traditional body of law). This included an effort to make Jewish practice more compatible with the prevailing gentile religious practices of the day (reform!), though the movement has since swung back a little from that extreme. Reconstructionism began as an offshoot of the Conservative movement in the mid 20th century, aiming to preserve the culture and laws of traditional Judaism, but without an anthropomorphic supernatural deity.

Worship style:

- Reform - Synagogue services make heavy use of English, and usually modify, abbreviate, or omit traditional prayers. The service may be somewhat shortened, compared to other movements. The main service may also be changed from Saturday mornings to Friday nights.

- Reconstructionist - Generally, the whole traditional, Hebrew prayer service is used, though the language referring to a deity is often changed to reflect the core beliefs of the movement. This may mean referring to a naturalistic entity, or employing feminine forms of the traditional language. Some references may be removed entirely.

Both services may make use of amplified musical instruments, something traditionally excluded from Shabbat and holiday services, and are egalitarian, allowing both men and women to fully participate.

Jewish legal authority:

- Reform - Each individual is their own autonomous authority, deciding questions of observance and commandments for themselves. In practice, this often means a much greater focus on cultural and social aspects of Jewish life, and somewhat less on halachic observances and regular worship.
- Reconstructionist - The legal authority is the chavurah, or communal group. Since the laws are not viewed as divine, traditional Halacha can be changed to reflect modern, egalitarian sensibilities. Generally, the Halacha is preserved more than it is relinquished.

Though I don't have as much personal experience with Jewish Renewal, my understanding is that it is an attempt to connect with one's faith and spirituality through means that have often been neglected by traditional practice. This may include meditation, dance, mysticism, and other rituals not originally included in the worship service. In this way, it can play a part in any Jewish movement,

though the people who gravitate towards the other R movements you mention may be more open to this kind of departure from tradition.

[Rishona Campbell](#), MBA, Social Media Lover, Jew, Geek Wannabe

[Answered Sep 27, 2014](#)

Andy's answer was great. I just want to add a bit of historical information and personal experience to the responses here :-).

**Reform Judaism** began as an attempt to take Jewish worship out of the archaic zone, and modernize it; turning it into something more akin with their Christian neighbors. Therefore early on, they introduced services in the vernacular (local) language, organ accompaniment, communal singing and responsive reading, and a sermon from the rabbi (which is interesting...because today, even Orthodox Jewish congregations follow this practice), and mixed seating. So essentially, "classic" Reform Judaism was a Jewish church so to speak.

Over the generations however, Reform congregations have started to adopt more uniquely Jewish practices. For example, most men and many women wear kippot during the services....where 50 or so years ago, this wasn't the case. What I found is that it varies a lot from congregation to congregation, what the "spirit" of a Reform Jewish congregation is.

**Reconstructionist Judaism** from the start has put a high importance on Jewish culture and folkways. The first time I ever saw tefillin laid was in a Reconstructionist service. Also, I was very surprised with just how much Hebrew the service included. Singing songs in Hebrew was also a big part of the worship experience. Reconstructionist Jews themselves (that I've met) tend to be very liberal and inclusive. But they are proud to be Jews, and proud of Israel (generally speaking).



**Renewal Judaism** is like a New Age movement that has blended the tenets of Eastern religions and Judaism. I don't have a lot of experience with it outside of a seminar or two that were given by a Renewal/Humanistic rabbi. On a theological basis, I feel that Renewal gives you the largest amount of room to believe what you want about God (or any deity or lack thereof). While the doubt of a supernatural God is a core tenet of Reconstructionism, it doesn't seem that most Reconstructionist Jews put this discussion on the forefront; rather it is just assumed.

[Elke Weiss](#), Degree in Jewish Studies, Feminist, Zionist, Scientist  
[Answered Sep 3, 2017](#)

While similar, I think the key difference where the emphasis in. For Reform, it's being God's partner in renewing the world.

Reform Judaism affirms the central tenets of Judaism - God, Torah and Israel - even as it acknowledges the diversity of Reform Jewish beliefs and practices. We believe that all human beings are created in the image of God, and that we are God's partners in improving the world. *Tikkun olam* — repairing the world — is a hallmark of Reform Judaism as we strive to bring peace, freedom, and justice to all people.

Reform Jews accept the Torah as the foundation of Jewish life containing God's ongoing revelation to our people and the record of our people's ongoing relationship with God. We see the Torah as God inspired, a living document that enables us to confront the timeless and timely challenges of our everyday lives. [What is Reform Judaism?](#)

Jewish renewal sees itself as a Neo-Hassidic movement, to infuse spirituality into the mundane.

*“Jewish Renewal is a phenomenon, not a denomination.”*

*“Renewal resembles Reform Judaism in some ways, Reconstructionism in other ways, and even Orthodoxy — especially Hasidism — in some ways. But it is not a denomination with a formal hierarchy or structure.”*

*“Renewal is the ongoing creative project of a generation of Jews who are seeking to renew Judaism and bring its spiritual and ethical vitality into our lives and communities, and at the same time embrace a global vision of the role of all human beings and spiritual paths in the transformation of life on this precious planet.”*

—from **Jewish Renewal** by Rabbi Marcia Prager [Mission & History](#)

Reconstructionist is more about Judaism as a civilization and has a more historical bent.

*Reconstructionist Judaism sees Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people in its ongoing relationship with God. Our rituals, customs, laws, sacred texts and practices reflect that evolution.*

*We seek ways of living that reveal holiness and godliness in the world, and see the tradition as having a vote, not a veto in that quest.*

*Seeing innovation and adaptation as deeply traditional, we cultivate and support Jewish living, learning, and leadership for a changing world.*