

Sephardic, Ashkenazic, Mizrahi Jews - Jewish Ethnic Diversity

Jewish culture: The true melting pot.

For most Americans, traditional Jewish culture summons up images of Passover seders with steaming bowls of matzah ball soup, black-hatted, pale-skinned Hasidic men, and Yiddish-speaking bubbes (grandmothers) and zeydes (grandfathers).

In reality, these snapshots represent only one Jewish ethnic group of many.

Shared Jewish history, rituals, laws, and values unify an international Jewish community. However, the divergent histories of Jewish communities and their contacts with other cultural influences distinguish Jewish ethnic groups from one another, giving each a unique way of being Jewish.

Worldwide, Jews from distinct geographic regions vary greatly in their diet, language, dress, and folk customs. Most pre-modern Diaspora communities are categorized into three major ethnic groups (in Hebrew, sometimes called eidot, "communities"):



- Ashkenazim, the Jews of Germany and Northern France (in Hebrew, Ashkenaz)
- Sephardim, the Jews of Iberia (in Hebrew, Sepharad) and the Spanish diaspora
- Mizrahim, or Oriental Jews

Ashkenazim

The Jewish ethnic identity most readily recognized by North Americans--the culture of matzah balls, black-hatted Hasidim, and Yiddish--originated in medieval Germany. Although strictly speaking, "Ashkenazim" refers to Jews of Germany, the term has come to refer more broadly to Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. Jews first reached the interior of Europe by following trade routes along waterways during the eighth and ninth centuries.

Eventually, the vast majority of Ashkenazim relocated to the Polish Commonwealth (today's Poland,

Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, and Belarus), where princes welcomed their skilled and educated workforce. The small preexistent Polish Jewish community's customs were displaced by the Ashkenazic prayer order, customs, and Yiddish language.

Jewish life and learning thrived in northeastern Europe. The yeshiva culture of Poland, Russia, and Lithuania produced a constant stream of new talmudic scholarship. In 18th century Germany, the Haskalah movement advocated for modernization, introducing the modern denominations and institutions of secular Jewish culture.

Although the first American Jews were Sephardic, today Ashkenazim are the most populous ethnic group in North America. The modern religious denominations developed in Ashkenazic countries, and therefore most North American synagogues use the Ashkenazic liturgy.

Sephardim

Many historical documents recount a large population of Jews in Spain during the early years of the Common Era. Their cultural distinctiveness is characterized in Roman writings as a "corrupting" influence. Later, with the arrival of Christianity, Jewish legal authorities became worried about assimilation and maintaining Jewish identity. Despite these concerns, by the seventh century Sephardim had flourished, beginning a time known as the "Golden Age of Spain."

During this period, Sephardic Jews reached the highest echelons of secular government and the military. Many Jews gained renown in non-Jewish circles as poets, scholars, and physicians. New forms of Hebrew poetry arose, and talmudic and halakhic study took on great sophistication.

Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language, unified Jews throughout the peninsula in daily life, ritual, and song. Ladino, a blend of medieval Spanish with significant loan words from Hebrew, Arabic, and Portuguese, had both a formal, literary dialect, and numerous daily, spoken dialects which evolved during the immigrations of Sephardic Jews to new lands.

The Sephardic Golden Age ended when Christian princes consolidated their kingdoms and reestablished Christian rule throughout Spain and Portugal. In 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella expelled all Jews from Spain; soon after, a similar law exiled Jews from Portugal. Sephardim immigrated to Amsterdam, North Africa, and the Middle East.

Others established new communities in the Americas or converted publicly to Christianity, sometimes secretly maintaining a Jewish life. These converts (known in Ladino as conversos and in Hebrew as anusim, forced converts) often maintained their Judaism in secret. In the 21st century, there are still people in both Europe and the Americas who are discovering and reclaiming their Jewish ancestry.

Wherever Sephardim traveled, they brought with them their unique ritual customs (minhagim), language, arts, and architecture. Sephardic synagogues often retain the influence of Islam in their architecture by favoring geometric, calligraphic, and floral decorative motifs. Although they may align with the Ashkenazic religious denominations (usually Orthodoxy), the denominational identity of Sephardic synagogues is, in most cases, less strong than their ethnic identity.

At home, Ladino songs convey family traditions at the Shabbat table, although Ladino is rapidly disappearing from daily use. Sephardic Jews often maintain unique holiday customs, such as a seder for Rosh Hashanah that includes a series of special foods eaten as omens for a good new Year and the eating of rice and legumes on Passover.

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