

Jewish Americans: Identity, History, and Experience Fact Sheet

- The first Jews to arrive in 1654 to what became the United States were Sephardic Portuguese Jews from Brazil, who fled the Portuguese expulsion and Inquisition. The American Jewish community was predominantly Sephardic through the first decades of the U.S.
- From 1840 to 1880, Jewish immigrants were primarily from Central Europe and Germany, fleeing poverty, persecution, anti-Jewish violence, and revolution. During this time, the Reform Movement transformed Jewish practice in America, created the first prayer book for Americans, and established a rabbinical school. By 1880, the majority of U.S. synagogues were Reform congregations.
- Between 1880 and 1924, 2 million Jewish immigrants came to the U.S. from Eastern Europe, pushed by persecution, pogroms, war, and poverty. White supremacist prejudice against Jews and Catholics from Eastern and Southern Europe motivated the passing of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924, greatly restricting Jewish immigration through 1965.
- In official U.S. immigration and naturalization law from 1898 to 1941, Jews were categorized as part of the "Hebrew race." This racialization deemed Jews non-white.
 - Racialization is when a group becomes categorized as a stigmatized group, and that group is seen as a separate lower race by another dominant group.
- Yiddish became a major language of Jewish newspapers, theatre, and culture, while at the same time public schools became the vehicle for acculturation, Americanization, and learning English, with many Jews entering teaching.
- American Judaism was changed by the large wave of Ashkenazi immigrants 1880-1924 from Eastern Europe, and in the next three decades, by the growth of the Orthodox (1920s-50s) and Conservative (1950s) movements. These movements established synagogues, rabbinical schools, seminaries, and universities. For many decades, American Judaism was defined by the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox denominations.
- In addition to targeting African Americans, the white supremacist racism of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) deemed Jews as non-white, a separate and lesser race that was a threat to American "racial purity," and targeted Jews with exclusionary immigration legislation and intimidation in large marches on Washington, D.C.
 - White supremacy is the belief that white people are a superior race and should dominate society. White supremacists target other racial and ethnic groups, such as African Americans and Jews, who they view as inferior.
- In the first half of the 20th century, Jews were usually not considered white in American society and, as a result, experienced discrimination in employment, housing, education, and social acceptance.
- From the 1880s through the 1960s, antisemitic employment discrimination with overt and covert "no Jews allowed" notices often led Jews to enter new industries

with less discrimination. Housing covenants prohibited Jews or “Hebrews” from purchasing houses in many areas. Elite universities also had quotas, limiting the number of Jews who could attend them until the early 1960s.

- Jewish American allies to the African American community played a significant role in the founding and funding of the NAACP, Rosenwald Schools, and the Southern Poverty Law Center. Julius Rosenwald partnered with Booker T. Washington to build over 5,000 schools for African American students between 1917 and 1932, and by 1928, one-third of the South’s rural Black school children and teachers were served by Rosenwald Schools. In 1931, lawyer Samuel Leibowitz defended the Scottsboro boys.
- Motivated by Jewish tradition’s concern for the worker, and oppressive working conditions for Jewish immigrants, the U.S. labor movement included many Jewish labor organizers, such as Samuel Gompers (founder of American Federation of Labor (AFL) and president 1886-1924); Rose Schneiderman (active 1904-1940s in the Women’s Trade Union League); and Pauline M. Newman (active 1907-1983), Clara Lemlich (active 1909-1951), and David Dubinsky (active 1932-1966 as president) in the International Ladies Garment Worker Union (ILGWU).
- Jews were pioneers in the new film industry in California in the early decades of the 20th century. This included studio heads Harry Cohn (Columbia Pictures 1919-1958), Samuel Goldwyn (active 1913-1959), Louis B. Mayer (active MGM 1915-1951), Carl Laemmle (Universal Pictures active 1909-1939), the Warner Brothers (active 1918-1973), and Adolph Zukor (Paramount Pictures active 1903-1959). Though there was less overt discrimination in California, anti-Jewish prejudice in the U.S. led many studio heads and producers to shy away from Jewish themes in movies for many decades.
- Jewish songwriters enthusiastically embraced American music and contributed to the Great American songbook (1911-1960), Tin Pan Alley (1885-1940), Broadway musicals (1949-2018), and folk and protest music (1930s-1970s). Among these were: George and Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Aaron Copland, Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, Bob Dylan, Arlo Guthrie, Phil Ochs, Art Garfunkel, Paul Simon, Peter Yarrow, Carole King, Country Joe McDonald, and Ramblin’ Jack Elliott.
- In the 1920s and 1930s, anti-Jewish conspiracy theories (later used in Nazi propaganda) were openly distributed in the U.S., for example by Henry Ford’s newspaper (*The Dearborn Independent*) and Father Edward Coughlin’s radio show.
- Drawing upon white supremacist ideas about Jews and pseudoscientific eugenics “theories,” Nazi racial theories deemed Jews a separate non-white race (racialization), and the lowest race in their racial hierarchy, leading to the genocide of the Holocaust.
- In the 1930s, growing anti-Jewish prejudice in the U.S. led to the U.S. government’s refusal of entry to Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany until 1944, after millions of Jews were already murdered.
 - Refugees are people with a history of persecution or a well-founded fear of future persecution on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.
 - Immigrants are people who have left their country of origin and arrived in

another country.

- Some Jews changed their Jewish sounding names to avoid discrimination, be more accepted by American society, not feel different or other, or because they had internalized other people's negative attitudes about Jews. Starting with immigrants, and common with actors, this practice of name-changing continues to the present day. At the same time, today, many Jewish Americans proudly select Jewish ethnic names, as an expression of pride in their heritage.
- In the decades after the Holocaust, American attitudes toward Jews gradually changed, and overt anti-Jewish discrimination decreased. Descendants of light-skinned Jewish immigrants were able to acculturate or assimilate which brought gains and losses.
 - Acculturation refers to the adoption of many of the practices and values of the majority or dominant culture while still retaining a connection to one's culture of origin, or a balance between cultures.
 - Assimilation is a process by which a minority group or culture comes to resemble that of the majority culture.
- Assimilation allowed the children of light-skinned Jewish immigrants to change their position on the racial hierarchy from their immigrant parents, though they remained vulnerable to antisemitism. Assimilation also brought loss of community, identity, cultural traditions, and practices.
- During the civil rights movement, a large percentage of allies were Jewish activists, disproportionate to their small percentage in the U.S. population. Nearly half the country's civil rights lawyers were Jewish, and more than half of the non-African American civil rights workers were Jewish, including two of the three men murdered during the 1964 Freedom Summer.
- Jewish women played critical roles in the second wave feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s: Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg when she worked for the ACLU.
- Jews have also been at the forefront of the LGBTQ rights movement, contributing to major milestones such as the advancement of marriage equality and the fight for HIV/AIDS recognition: Evan Wolfson, Edie Windsor, Roberta Kaplan, and Larry Kramer. Pioneering LGBTQ Jewish elected officials include Harvey Milk in California, and Barney Frank from Massachusetts.
- While anti-Jewish prejudice became less socially accepted over time, antisemitism persisted and persists in various forms today.
 - Antisemitism is hatred, discrimination, fear, and prejudice against Jews based on stereotypes and myths that target their ethnicity, culture, religion, traditions, right to self-determination, or connection to the State of Israel.
- Today, white supremacists continue to racialize Jews as non-white. This was evident when the Unite the Right March in Charlottesville chanted "The Jews will not replace us" with "us" referring to white Americans. See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/14/jews-will-not-replace-us-why-white-supremacists-go-after-jews/>.
- Antisemitism is found across the political spectrum, and manifests differently. In

schools, it often shows up through Holocaust or Nazi imagery that is used to intimidate or threaten Jewish students. It also shows up with Jewish students being excluded from diversity discussions or allyship, or for not disassociating themselves from Israel.

- Jews and Jewish institutions continue to be targets of anti-Jewish hate, which can include vandalism, bomb threats, harassment and bullying, physical assaults and violent attacks such as bombings and shootings. For example, in Pittsburgh, PA in 2018, and in Poway, CA in 2019, there were two synagogue shootings with a total of 12 fatalities.
- In different contexts, Jewish Americans may have very different experiences.
 - Light-skinned Jews may experience the benefits of conditional whiteness on the basis of their appearance, for example, in safer encounters with law enforcement. At the same time, they may experience antisemitic prejudice and discrimination on the basis of their Jewishness from people on both extremes of the political spectrum.
 - Jews of color, like all communities of color, face systemic racism, and also face antisemitic prejudice and discrimination on the basis of their Jewishness.
- Jews of all skin colors who are visibly Jewish, from their appearance, name, self-identification, or religious clothing or symbols, e.g., a Star of David necklace or kippah, experience more overt antisemitism.
- Reflecting Jewish tradition's fondness for the written word, Jewish Americans have contributed extensively to American literature. Among these literary figures are:
 - poets Emma Lazarus, Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, and Louise Glück.
 - playwrights Ben Hecht, Lillian Hellman, Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, Neil Simon, David Mamet, and Tony Kushner.
 - writers Mary Antin, Anzia Yezierska, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Isaac Asimov, Saul Bellow, Herman Wouk, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, Elie Wiesel, Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick, Judy Blume, Art Spiegelman, Anita Diamant, Faye Kellerman, Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Dara Horn.
- Jewish comedians have also played an important role in shaping American popular culture, drawing on their experiences as outsiders looking in on American society. Examples include: Groucho Marx and the Marx brothers, Three Stooges, Jack Benny, Sid Cesar, Mel Brooks, Joan Rivers, Jerry Seinfeld, Sarah Silverman, and Jon Stewart.
- Jewish Americans have made significant contributions to life saving medical advances that have saved millions of American lives including: chlorination of drinking water (Abel Wolman in 1918); polio vaccine (Jonas Salk in 1955, and Albert Sabin in 1961-64); measles vaccine (Samuel Katz in 1958); heart pacemaker and defibrillator (Paul Zoll 1956 and 1960); the mammogram (Jacob Gershon-Cohen in 1964); the Heimlich maneuver (Henry Heimlich in 1974); and identifying that virus genes can cause cancer (Harold Varmus in the 1970s).