

Fact Sheet: A Spotlight on the Orthodox Jewish American Community

- American Judaism has a range of religious denominations, including Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Orthodox, with a range of observances and practices within and across denominations. At the same time, Jews are united by shared sacred texts, like the Torah, by celebrations, traditions, and a deep sense of peoplehood, which is a feeling of connection to other Jews across time and place.
- A 2020 Pew Research Center survey found that 9% of American Jewish adults identify as Orthodox, 17% identify as Conservative, and 37% identify as Reform. The rest either identify with a different denomination or no particular branch of Judaism.¹
- Orthodox Jews make up about 20% of the Jewish population in New York City, Long Island, and Westchester.²
- The main difference between the denominations within Judaism is their approach to Jewish law. The foundation of Jewish law are the *mitzvot* (mitz-VOTE), or commandments, which are found in the Hebrew Bible.
 - Some commandments deal with relationships between people. For example, commandments about being honest, not stealing, and promoting justice in the world.
 - Other commandments deal with the relationship between people and God, for example, commandments about what Jews can eat or what they should do or avoid on the Sabbath (a weekly day of rest).
- Orthodox Jews find meaning in following the traditional interpretation of *all* of these commandments. While they are committed to following Jewish law, Orthodox Jews continuously grapple with questions of how to apply Jewish law to contemporary realities, like new technologies.
- There is a great deal of diversity within the Orthodox Jewish community³
 - About one-third of Orthodox Jews in the United States consider themselves Modern Orthodox.
 - About two-thirds of Orthodox Jews in the United States consider themselves Haredi.
- Modern Orthodoxy combines Jewish values and following all aspects of Jewish law with life in the modern world. Within Modern Orthodoxy, there is also a spectrum of belief and practice. The more liberal end of the spectrum seeks to maximize women's participation and leadership, including with female clergy, while following Jewish law.
- Haredi (pronounced "ha-RAY-dee") means "one who trembles" [before God]. It describes Jews who follow a very strict interpretation of Jewish law and often avoid interaction with aspects of

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>

² <https://www.ujafedny.org/news/uja-federation-of-new-yorks-2023-jewish-community-study-of-new-york>

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/08/26/a-portrait-of-american-orthodox-jews/>

life in the modern world in order to preserve their values and traditions. They prioritize a lifestyle centered around their sacred texts, which they believe requires separation from outside influences that could compromise their values. This desire to safeguard their way of life leads to a focus on the internal community; engaging with the broader society is less important.

- The high visibility of Orthodox Jews in our region can be attributed to the concentration of these communities in New York State and the often distinctive styles of dress worn by different groups of Haredi Jews.
 - Many consider the term “ultra-Orthodox” to be inaccurate or offensive; Haredi is the preferred term.
 - Hasidic Judaism is a subgroup within Haredi Judaism. Hasidic Judaism emerged as a spiritual revival movement in Ukraine in the 1700s.
 - Today, each Hasidic community follows the teaching of a single rabbi as to how to observe Jewish laws (for instance, dietary laws) and customs and traditions (for instance, particular styles of dress, like long black coats and hats).
- Judaism, like many religions, has rules and customs relating to food. Most Orthodox Jews will ensure that all of the food they eat follows these rules. Food that follows these rules is called kosher food.
 - Kosher food does not contain pork or shellfish like shrimp.
 - Jews who keep kosher will not eat meat and milk products at the same meal.
 - Kosher meat must be prepared according to certain standards and have all the blood removed.
 - Kosher food and kosher restaurants are overseen by Jewish religious authorities, and kosher food products have special symbols that demonstrate that they are kosher.

Remember...

All Jews are part of the same religion, but within the denominations, there are a variety of approaches to Jewish practice

While there is diversity within Judaism, there are no fundamental splits between denominations of Judaism as there are, for example, between Sunni and Shia Muslims or Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians. So all denominations of Jews follow the same calendar, recognize the same holidays, Jewish texts.

Despite differences in interpretation of sacred texts, beliefs, and practices, most Jews today are united by a sense of shared peoplehood and pride in their culture and heritage.