

Are Jews a Religious Group or an Ethnic Group?

One of the most common questions that students ask during lessons that address Jews or Judaism is whether Jews are a religious group or an ethnic group. Jews themselves have a wide range of opinions and beliefs about what it means to be a Jew and what defines being Jewish. Nevertheless, there are areas of general consensus.

The essential point to convey to students is that Jews do not fit neatly into predefined categories, but they do form a distinct and unique community that is connected by rich traditions and thousands of years of history.

The following facts provide additional information:

- Categories are human constructs that help us talk about and make sense of the world. However, some things, such as the Jewish people, do not fit neatly into our preexisting categories (such as religious group or ethnic group). It is like being asked whether a round peg goes into a square hole or into a triangular hole; it does not quite fit either one.
- Jews, even the most traditionally religious Jews, consider someone with Jewish parents who does not practice any element of Judaism to be Jewish. Conversely, Jews also consider a convert with no Jewish ancestry whatsoever to be as Jewish as any other Jew. This dichotomy illustrates how Jews don't fit into our usual categories and have elements of both religious and ethnic groups.
- Jewish life encompasses more than religion. For example, expressions of peoplehood, remembrances of historical experiences, connections to the Land of Israel, and cultural elements such as music, art, language, and food are also parts of Jewish life.
- There are Jews of almost every background including Jews of African descent, Indian descent, European descent, Middle Eastern descent, Southeast Asian descent, and Hispanic descent.
- Most Jews object to describing Jews as a racial group not only because of the diverse backgrounds of the Jewish community, but also because the language of race conjures memories of the Holocaust when the Nazis used racial terminology to justify their attempt to annihilate the Jewish people.
- In traditional Judaism, a Jew is a child of a Jewish mother or is someone who converted to Judaism; anyone with a Jewish mother, regardless of whether they practice Judaism, is a Jew and anyone who converts to Judaism, regardless of their ancestry, is a Jew. Today, some branches of Judaism teach that a person can also be a Jew if he or she has a Jewish father and identifies as a Jew.
- Most Jews feel connected through Jewish history, traditions, family ties, and the religion of their ancestors - even if they are not religiously observant themselves.

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