

Branches of Judaism

Judaism is a diverse religion; its adherents hold a variety of beliefs and interpretations of Jewish law and practice. Different branches within Judaism reflect this diversity. According to the American Jewish Committee's 2008 Annual Survey of Jewish Opinion, American Jews identify as follows: Orthodox 8%, Conservative 28%, Reconstructionist 1%, Reform 30%, Just Jewish 31%, Not Sure 2%.

The most easily categorizable difference between these branches is their approach to traditional Jewish law. Traditional Jewish law includes both moral requirements (such as giving charity and pursuing justice) and ritual obligations (such as dietary restrictions and holiday observances). Different branches of Judaism have different positions on the requirements these traditional laws place on modern Jews. The basic positions of the four largest branches are outlined below.

It is important to remember that there are a range of practices and beliefs even within a single branch. Despite differences in belief and practice, most Jews today are united by a sense of peoplehood and pride in their culture and heritage. An overview of Judaism, titled *What is Judaism?*, is available on the ICS website at www.icsresources.org/curricula.

Orthodox Judaism is the most traditional branch of Judaism and emphasizes observance of both the moral and ritual obligations of traditional Jewish law. There is great diversity within Orthodoxy and it contains many philosophical movements. These range from Modern Orthodoxy, which teaches that Jews should embrace Western culture while adhering to Jewish law, to Charedi Judaism, which teaches that Jewish life should focus on Jewish culture.

Reform Judaism teaches that Judaism's ethical laws are binding while ritual laws can be adapted to fit modern society. It views Judaism's essence as ideals of morality and social justice while encouraging individuals to maintain traditional practices that they find meaningful. The branch favors individual choice over obligatory beliefs and practices.

Conservative Judaism occupies a middle ground between Reform Judaism and Orthodox Judaism. Institutionally, it seeks to preserve the structure and content of traditional Jewish observance, while allowing for adaptations to fit modern circumstances. Conservative Judaism emphasizes the importance of studying traditional Jewish texts to guide ethics and practice.

Reconstructionist Judaism began as a movement within Conservative Judaism before emerging as a distinct branch. It teaches that Judaism is not simply a religion, but an evolving civilization that includes important religious elements. In Reconstructionist thought, Jewish law is not binding but should be followed when possible because it strengthens the community.

