

Ashkenazi Jews

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This article is about Ashkenazi Jews. For people with Ashkenazi as a surname, see Ashkenazi (surname).

Ashkenazi Jews, also known as **Ashkenazic Jews** or **Ashkenazim** (Standard Hebrew: sing. , pl. ; pronounced sing. [.afkəˈnazi] pl. [.afkəˈnazim], with [z] rather than with [ts] as in Tzar; also *Yehudei Ashkenaz*, "the Jews of Ashkenaz"), are descended from the medieval Jewish communities of the Rhineland, "Ashkenaz" being the Medieval Hebrew name for Germany.

Many later migrated, largely eastward, forming communities in Germany, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Eastern Europe and elsewhere between the 10th and 19th centuries. From medieval times until the mid-20th century, the lingua franca among Ashkenazi Jews was Yiddish or, to a much lesser extent, the Judæo-French language Zarphtic, the Slavic-based Knaanic (Judæo-Czech), and to some speakers of the recently-extinct (since 1971) Judæo-Provençal language, Shuadit, (all three no longer spoken). The Ashkenazi Jews developed a distinct culture and liturgy influenced, to varying degrees, by interaction with surrounding peoples, predominantly Germans, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Kashubians, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Letts, Belarusians, and Russians.

Although in the 11th century they comprised only 3% of the world's Jewish population, Ashkenazi Jews accounted for (at their highest) 92% of the world's Jews in 1931 and today make up approximately 80% of Jews worldwide.^[4] Most Jewish communities with

extended histories in Europe are Ashkenazim, with the exception of those associated with the Mediterranean region. A significant portion of the Jews who migrated from Europe to other continents in the past two centuries are Eastern Ashkenazim, particularly in the United States.

Ashkenazi Jews (<i>Yehudei Ashkenaz</i>)	
Total population	
8 ^[1] - 11.2 ^[2] million	
Regions with significant populations	
 United States	5-6 million ^[3]
 Israel	3-4 million ^[3]
 European Union	1,000,000
 Russia	400,000
 Canada	approx. 240,000
 Argentina	200,000
 Germany	100,000
 South Africa	80,000
 Belgium	30,000
Languages	
Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, English	
Religions	
Judaism	
Related ethnic groups	
Sephardi Jews, Mizrahi Jews, and other Jewish ethnic divisions	

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Who is an Ashkenazi Jew?

There is currently a debate regarding "Who is a Jew?". This makes it especially difficult to define who is an Ashkenazi Jew, because an Ashkenazi Jew can be defined religiously, culturally, or ethnically. Since the overwhelming majority of Ashkenazi Jews no longer live in Eastern Europe, the isolation that once favored a distinct religious tradition and culture has vanished. Furthermore, the word "Ashkenazi" is itself evolving and taking on new meanings, especially in Israel where it is frequently used in ways that do not fit any of the traditional definitions.

Religious definition

In a religious sense, an Ashkenazi Jew is any Jew whose family tradition and ritual follows Ashkenazi practice. When the Ashkenazi community first began to develop in the Early Middle Ages and until the 9th century, the centers of Jewish religious authority were in the Islamic world, at Baghdad and in Islamic

Spain. Ashkenaz (Germany) was so distant geographically that it developed a *minhag* of its own, and Ashkenazi Hebrew came to be pronounced in ways distinct from other forms of Hebrew.

In this respect, the counterpart of Ashkenazi is Sephardic, since most non-Ashkenazi Orthodox Jews follow Sephardic rabbinical authorities, whether or not they are ethnically Sephardic. By tradition, a Sephardic or Mizrahi woman who marries into an Orthodox or Haredi Ashkenazi Jewish family raises her children to be Ashkenazi Jews, and a gentile who converts to Judaism and takes on Ashkenazi religious practices becomes an Ashkenazi Jew.

Jewish law or Halacha does not define who is a Jew confessionally, by faith. No central authority or ruling body in Judaism determines who is a Jew. Nor does membership in a synagogue or local Jewish community make one a Jew. Furthermore, a person who no longer wishes to be a Jew is still considered to be Jewish.

By tradition, Jewish status is inherited and follows the maternal lineage. Therefore, someone who is maternally descended from a Jew, even if totally unaware of their Jewish heritage, or even if a practitioner of another religion, is from a traditional Jewish legal perspective still a Jew.

The following examples illustrate this aspect of Jewish identity.

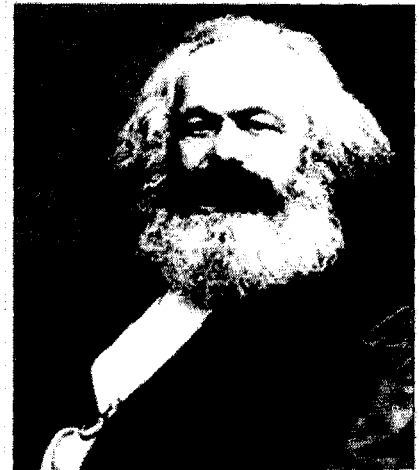
- **Apostasy.** A Jew who converts to another religion, though an apostate, is still considered a Jew. Felix Mendelssohn, who converted to Protestantism and dedicated a symphony to the Reformation was, by halachic definition, an Ashkenazi Jew.
- **Atheism.** A Jew who becomes an atheist is still considered a Jew. Karl Marx, an atheist whose Jewish mother and father had converted to Christianity before he was born, was by a traditional halachic definition, an Ashkenazi Jew.
- **Hidden Identity.** A Jew whose identity was hidden, who was raised in another religion, is still considered a Jew. Madeleine Albright, the former US Secretary of State whose Jewish parents converted to Catholicism to escape persecution in the Holocaust and then hid their ancestry, is an Ashkenazi Jew by a traditional halachic definition, even though she did not know of her "identity" until she became an adult, and was a professing Catholic. Later in life, she joined the Episcopal Church in the USA.
- **Renunciation.** A Jew who renounces and even condemns Judaism is still considered a Jew. Bobby Fischer, the international chess star who has claimed that the Holocaust was a Jewish invention and a lie, had a Hungarian Jewish mother and is by halachic definition, still considered to be an Ashkenazi Jew.

With the reintegration of Jews from around the world in Israel, North America, and other places, the religious definition of an Ashkenazi Jew



Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy

is blurring, especially outside of Orthodox Judaism. Many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews have joined liberal movements that originally developed within Ashkenazi Judaism. At least in recent decades, the congregations they have joined have often embraced them, and absorbed new traditions into their minhag. Rabbis and Cantors in all non-Orthodox movements study Hebrew in Israel, learning Sephardic rather than Ashkenazi Hebrew pronunciation. Ashkenazi congregations are adopting Sephardic or modern Israeli melodies for many prayers and traditional songs. Since the middle of the 20th century there has been a gradual syncretism and fusion of traditions, and this is affecting the minhag of all but the most traditional congregations.



Karl Marx

New developments in Judaism often transcend differences in religious practice between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews. In North American cities, social trends such as the chavurah movement, and the emergence of post-denominational Judaism^[5] ^[6] often bring together younger Jews of diverse ethnic backgrounds. In recent years, there has been increased interest in Kabbalah, which many Ashkenazi Jews study outside of the yeshiva framework. Another trend is the new popularity of ecstatic worship in the Jewish Renewal movement and the Carlebach style minyan, both of which are nominally of Ashkenazi origin.^[7]

Cultural definition

In a cultural sense, an Ashkenazi Jew can be identified by the concept of *Yiddishkeit*, a word that literally means "Jewishness" in the Yiddish language. Of course, there are other kinds of Jewishness. *Yiddishkeit* is simply the Jewishness of Ashkenazi Jews.

Before the Haskalah and the emancipation of Jews in Europe, this meant the study of Torah and Talmud for men, and a family and communal life governed by the observance of Jewish Law for men and women. From the Rhineland to Riga to Romania, most Jews prayed in liturgical Ashkenazi Hebrew, and spoke some dialect of Yiddish in their secular lives.

But with modernization, *Yiddishkeit* now encompasses not just Orthodoxy and Hasidism, but a broad range of movements, ideologies, practices, and traditions in which Ashkenazi Jews have participated and somehow retained a sense of Jewishness. Although few Jews still speak Yiddish, *Yiddishkeit* can be identified in manners of speech, in styles of humor, in patterns of association. Broadly speaking, a Jew is one who associates culturally with Jews, supports Jewish institutions, reads Jewish books and periodicals, attends Jewish movies and theater, travels to Israel, visits ancient synagogues in Prague, and so forth. It is a definition that applies to Jewish culture in general, and to Ashkenazi *Yiddishkeit* in particular.

Contemporary population migrations have contributed to a reconfigured Jewishness among Jews of Ashkenazi descent that transcends *Yiddishkeit* and other traditional articulations of Ashkenazi Jewishness. As Ashkenazi Jews moved away from Eastern Europe, settling mostly in Israel, North America, and other English speaking countries, the geographic isolation which gave rise to Ashkenazim has given way to mixing with other cultures, and with non-Ashkenazi Jews who, similarly, are no longer isolated in distinct geographic locales. For Ashkenazi Jews living in Eastern Europe, chopped liver and gefiltefish were

archetypal Jewish foods. To contemporary Ashkenazi Jews living both in Israel and in the diaspora, Middle Eastern foods such as hummus and falafel, neither traditional to the historic Ashkenazi experience, have become central to their lives as Ashkenazi Jews in the current era. Hebrew has replaced Yiddish as the primary Jewish language for the vast majority of Ashkenazi Jews.

France's blended Jewish community is typical of the cultural recombination that is going on among Jews throughout the world. Although France expelled its original Jewish population in the Middle Ages, by the time of the French Revolution, there were two distinct Jewish populations. One consisted of Sephardic Jews, originally refugees from the Inquisition and concentrated in the southwest, while the other community was Ashkenazi, concentrated in Alsace, and spoke mainly Yiddish. The two communities were so separate and so different that the National Assembly emancipated them separately in 1791 . But after emancipation, a sense of a unified French Jewry emerged, especially when France was wracked by the Dreyfuss affair in the 1890s. In the 1920s and 1930s, Ashkenazi Jews arrived in large numbers as refugees from antisemitism, the Russian revolution, and the economic turmoil of the Great Depression. By the 1930s, Paris had a vibrant Yiddish culture, and many Jews were involved in radical political movements. After the Vichy years and the Holocaust, the French Jewish population was augmented once again, first by refugees from Eastern Europe, and later by immigrants and refugees from North Africa, many of them francophone. Then, in the 1990s, yet another Ashkenazi Jewish wave began to arrive from countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The result is a pluralistic Jewish community that still has some distinct elements of both Ashkenazi and Sephardic culture. But in France, it is becoming much more difficult to sort out the two, and a distinctly French Jewishness has emerged.^[8]

Ethnic definition

In an ethnic sense, an Ashkenazi Jew is one whose ancestry can be traced to the Jews of central and Eastern Europe. For roughly a thousand years, the Ashkenazi Jews were a reproductively isolated population in Europe, despite living in many countries, with little inflow or outflow from migration, conversion, or intermarriage with other groups, including other Jews. Human geneticists have identified genetic variations that have high frequencies among Ashkenazi Jews, but not in the general European population. This is more true for patrilineal markers (Y-chromosome haplotypes) than for matrilineal markers (mitochondrial haplotypes).

But since the middle of the 20th century, many Ashkenazi Jews have intermarried, both with members of other Jewish communities and with people of other nations and faiths, while some Jews have also adopted children from other ethnic groups or parts of the world and raised them as Jews. Conversion to Judaism, rare for nearly 1500 years, has once again become common. Jewish women and families who choose artificial insemination often choose a biological father who is not Jewish, to avoid common autosomal recessive genetic diseases. Orthodox religious authorities actually encourage this, because of the danger that a Jewish donor could be a mamzer. Thus, the concept of Ashkenazi Jews as a distinct ethnic people, especially in ways that can be defined ancestrally and therefore traced genetically, has also blurred considerably.



An Ashkenazi Jewish man with a Persian Jewish woman, whose ancestors lived in Iran, in San

Realignment in Israel

In Israel the term *Ashkenazi* is now used in ways that have nothing to do with its original meaning. In practice, the label Ashkenazi is often applied to all Jews of European background living in Israel, including those whose ethnic background is actually Sephardic. Jews of any non-Ashkenazi background, including Mizrahi, Yemenite, Kurdish, and others having no connection at all with the Iberian Peninsula, have similarly come to be lumped together as Sephardic. Jews of mixed background are increasingly common, partly because of intermarriage between Ashkenazi and non-Ashkenazi partners, and partly because some do not identify with such historic markers as relevant to their life experiences as Jews.

Religious Ashkenazi Jews living in Israel are obliged to follow the authority of the chief Ashkenazi rabbi in halakhic matters. In this respect, a religiously Ashkenazi Jew is an Israeli who is more likely to support certain religious interests in Israel, including certain political parties. These political parties result from the fact that a portion of the Israeli electorate votes for Jewish religious parties: although the electoral map changes from one election to another, there are generally several small parties associated with the interests of religious Ashkenazi Jews. The role of religious parties, including small religious parties which play important roles as coalition members, results in turn from Israel's composition as a complex society in which competing social, economic, and religious interests stand for election to the Knesset, a unicameral legislature with 120 seats. Each political party in Israel produces a list, and members stand for election as a party. Since Israel is a democracy, all citizens have the right to vote, whether they are Jewish or not (i.e. Muslim, Christian, Druze, or Samaritan). After an election is held, the party with the most seats negotiates with other parties to create a majority coalition.

Origins of Ashkenazim

Although the historical record itself is very limited, there is a consensus of cultural, linguistic, and genetic evidence that the Ashkenazi Jewish population originated in the Middle East. When they arrived in northern France and the Rhineland sometime around 800-1000 CE, the Ashkenazi Jews brought with them both Rabbinic Judaism and the Babylonian Talmudic culture that underlies it. Yiddish, once spoken by the vast majority of Ashkenazi Jewry, is a Jewish language which developed from the Middle High German vernacular, heavily influenced by Hebrew and Aramaic. (By comparison, the Greek or Latin influence on Yiddish was much less significant). Recent research in human genetics has also demonstrated that a significant component of Ashkenazi ancestry is Middle Eastern.

Francisco (2003). As Jews from different ethnic backgrounds marry one another, the ethnic differences in Judaism are blurring.



An Ashkenazi Jewish man with a Sephardic Jewish woman, whose ancestors lived in Morocco, in the Meron Forest in Israel (2003). Cultural and religious differences that separated the older generations in Israel are disappearing in the younger generations, creating a new Israeli identity.

European Jews became called "Ashkenaz" because the main centers of Jewish learning were located in Germany. "Ashkenaz" is a Medieval Hebrew name for Germany. (See Usage of the name for the term's etymology.)

Background in the Roman Empire

After the forced Jewish exile from Jerusalem in 70 CE and the complete Roman takeover of Judea following the Bar Kochba rebellion of 132-135 CE, Jews continued to be a majority of the population in Palestine for several hundred years. However, the Romans no longer recognized the authority of the Sanhedrin or any other Jewish body, and Jews were prohibited from living in Jerusalem. Outside the Roman Empire, a large Jewish community remained in Mesopotamia. Other Jewish populations could be found dispersed around the Mediterranean region, with the largest concentrations in the Levant, Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy, including Rome itself. Smaller communities are recorded in southern Gaul (France), Spain, and North Africa.^[9]

Jews were denied full Roman citizenship until 212 CE, when Emperor Caracalla granted all free peoples this privilege. However as a penalty for the first Jewish Revolt, Jews were still required to pay a poll tax until the reign of Emperor Julian in 363 CE. In the late Roman Empire, Jews were still free to form networks of cultural and religious ties and enter into various local occupations. But after Christianity became the official religion of Rome and Constantinople, Jews were increasingly marginalized.

In Palestine and Mesopotamia, where Jewish religious scholarship was centered, the majority of Jews were still engaged in farming, as demonstrated by the preoccupation of early Talmudic writings with agriculture. In diaspora communities, trade was a common occupation, facilitated by the easy mobility of traders through the dispersed Jewish communities.

Throughout this period and into the early Middle Ages, many Jews assimilated into the dominant Greek and Latin cultures, mostly through conversion to Christianity.^[10] In Palestine and Mesopotamia, the spoken language of Jews continued to be Aramaic, but elsewhere in the diaspora, most Jews spoke Greek. Conversion and assimilation were especially common within the Hellenized or Greek-speaking Jewish communities, amongst whom the Septuagint and Aquila of Sinope (Greek translations and adaptations of the Tanakh or Hebrew Bible) were the source of scripture. A remnant of this Greek-speaking Jewish population (the Romaniotes) survives to this day.

The Germanic invasions of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century by tribes such as the Visigoths, Franks, Lombards, and Vandals caused massive economic and social instability within the western Empire, contributing to its decline. In the late Roman Empire, Jews are known to have lived in Cologne and Trier, as well as in what is now France. However, it is unclear whether there is any continuity between these late Roman communities and the distinct Ashkenazi Jewish culture that began to emerge about 500 years later. King Dagobert of the Franks expelled the Jews from his Merovingian kingdom in 629. Jews in former Roman territories now faced new challenges as harsher anti-Jewish Church rulings were enforced.

Rabbinic Judaism moves to Ashkenaz

In Mesopotamia, and in Persian lands free of Roman imperial domination, Jewish life fared much better. Since the conquest of Judea by Nebuchadrezzar II, this community had always been the leading diaspora

community, a rival to the leadership of Palestine. After conditions for Jews began to deteriorate in Roman controlled lands, many of the religious leaders of Judea and the Galilee fled to the east. At the academies of Pumbeditha and Sura near Babylon, Rabbinic Judaism based on Talmudic learning began to emerge and assert its authority over Jewish life throughout the diaspora. Rabbinic Judaism created a religious mandate for literacy, requiring all Jewish males to learn Hebrew and read from the Torah. This emphasis on literacy and learning a second language would eventually be of great benefit to the Jews, allowing them to take on commercial and financial roles within Gentile societies where literacy was often quite low.

After the Islamic conquest of the Middle East and North Africa, new opportunities for trade and commerce opened between the Middle East and Western Europe. The vast majority of Jews in the world now lived in Islamic lands. Urbanization, trade, and commerce within the Islamic world allowed Jews, as a highly literate people, to abandon farming and live in cities, engaging in occupations where they could use their skills.^[11] The influential, sophisticated, and well organized Jewish community of Mesopotamia, now centered in Baghdad, became the center of the Jewish world. In the Caliphate of Baghdad, Jews took on many of the financial occupations that they would later hold in the cities of Ashkenaz. Jewish traders from Baghdad began to travel to the west, renewing Jewish life in the western Mediterranean region. They brought with them Rabbinic Judaism and Babylonian Talmudic scholarship.

After 800 CE, Charlemagne's unification of former Frankish lands with northern Italy and Rome brought on a brief period of stability and unity in Western Europe. This created opportunities for Jewish merchants to settle once again north of the Alps. Charlemagne granted the Jews in his lands freedoms similar to those once enjoyed under the Roman Empire. Returning once again to Frankish lands, many Jewish merchants took on occupations in finance and commerce, including moneylending or usury. (Church legislation banned Christians from lending money in exchange for interest.) From Charlemagne's time on to the present, there is a well documented record of Jewish life in northern Europe, and by the 11th century, when Rashi of Troyes wrote his commentaries, Ashkenazi Jews had emerged also as interpreters and commentators on the Torah and Talmud.

DNA clues

Efforts to identify the origins of Ashkenazi Jews through DNA analysis began in the 1990s. Like most DNA studies of human migration patterns, these studies have focused on two segments of the human genome, the Y chromosome (inherited only by males), and the mitochondrial genome (DNA which passes from mother to child). Both segments are unaffected by recombination. Thus, they provide an indicator of paternal and maternal origins, respectively.

A study of haplotypes of the Y chromosome, published in 2000, addressed the paternal origins of Ashkenazi Jews. Hammer *et al*^[12] found that the Y chromosome of some Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews contained mutations that are also common among Middle Eastern peoples, but uncommon in the general European population. This suggested that the male ancestors of the Ashkenazi Jews could be traced mostly to the Middle East.

The first research on Ashkenazi maternal ancestry was less conclusive. A 2002 study by Goldstein *et al*^[13] found that "the women's origins cannot be genetically determined", but that "his own speculation" was that "most Jewish communities were formed by unions between Jewish men and local women."

More recent research indicates that a significant portion of Ashkenazi maternal ancestry is also of Middle Eastern origin. A 2006 study by Behar *et al*^[1], based on haplotype analysis of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA), suggested that about 40% of the current Ashkenazi population is descended matrilineally from just four women. These four "founder lineages" were "likely from a Hebrew/Levantine mtDNA pool" originating in the Near East in the first and second centuries CE. According to the authors, "The observed global pattern of distribution renders very unlikely the possibility that the four aforementioned founder lineages entered the Ashkenazi mtDNA pool via gene flow from a European host population."

Both the extent and location of the maternal ancestral deme from which the Ashkenazi Jewry arose remain obscure. Here, using complete sequences of the maternally inherited mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA), we show that close to one-half of Ashkenazi Jews, estimated at 8,000,000 people, can be traced back to only four women carrying distinct mtDNAs that are virtually absent in other populations, with the important exception of low frequencies among non-Ashkenazi Jews. We conclude that four founding mtDNAs, likely of Near Eastern ancestry, underwent major expansion(s) in Europe within the past millennium.^{[1][14][15]}

Ashkenazi migrations throughout the High and Late Middle Ages

Historical records show evidence of Jewish communities north of the Alps and Pyrenees as early as the 8th and 9th Century. By the early 900s, Jewish populations were well-established in Northern Europe, and later followed the Norman Conquest into England in 1066, also settling in the Rhineland. With the onset of the Crusades, and the expulsions from England (1290), France (1394), and parts of Germany (1400s), Jewish migration pushed eastward into Poland, Lithuania, and Russia. Over this period of several hundred years, some have suggested, Jewish economic activity was focused on trade, business management, and financial services, due to Christian European prohibitions restricting certain activities by Jews, and preventing certain financial activities (such as "usurious" loans) between Christians.^[16]

By the 1400s, the Ashkenazi Jewish communities in Poland were the largest Jewish communities of the Diaspora.^[17] Poland in this time was a decentralized medieval monarchy, incorporating lands from Latvia to Rumania, including much of modern Lithuania and Ukraine. This area, which eventually fell under the domination of Russia, Austria, and Prussia (Germany), would remain the main center of Ashkenazi Jewry until the Holocaust.

Usage of the name

In reference to the Jewish peoples of Northern Europe and particularly the Rhineland, the word *Ashkenazi* is often found in medieval rabbinic literature. References to Ashkenaz in Yosippon and Hasdai ibn



The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at its greatest extent.

Shaprut's letter to the king of the Khazars would date the term as far back as the tenth century, as would also Saadia Gaon's commentary on Daniel 7:8.

The word "Ashkenaz" first appears in the genealogy in the Tanakh (Genesis 10) as a son of Gomer and grandson of Japheth. It is thought that the name originally applied to the Scythians (Ishkuz), who were called *Ashkuza* in Assyrian inscriptions, and lake Ascanius and the region Ascania in Anatolia derive their names from this group. The "Ashkuza" have also been linked to the Oghuz branch of Turks including nearly all Turkic peoples today from Turkey to Turkmenistan.

Ashkenaz in later Hebrew tradition became identified with the peoples of Germany, and in particular to the area along the Rhine where the *Alamanni* tribe once lived (compare the French and Spanish words *Allemagne* and *Alemania*, respectively, for Germany).

The autonym was usually *Yidn*, however.

Medieval references

In the first half of the eleventh century, Hai Gaon refers to questions that had been addressed to him from "Ashkenaz", by which he undoubtedly means Germany. Rashi in the latter half of the eleventh century refers to both the language of Ashkenaz^[18] and the country of Ashkenaz.^[19] During the twelfth century the word appears quite frequently. In the Mahzor Vitry, the kingdom of Ashkenaz is referred to chiefly in regard to the ritual of the synagogue there, but occasionally also with regard to certain other observances.^[20]

In the literature of the thirteenth century references to the land and the language of Ashkenaz often occur. See especially Solomon ben Aderet's Responsa (vol. i., No. 395); the Responsa of Asher ben Jehiel (pp. 4, 6); his *Halakot* (Berakot i. 12, ed. Wilna, p. 10); the work of his son Jacob ben Asher, *Tur Orach Chayim* (chapter 59); the Responsa of Isaac ben Sheshet (numbers 193, 268, 270).

In the *Midrash* compilation *Genesis Rabbah*, Rabbi Berechiah mentions "Ashkenaz, Riphath, and Togarmah" as German tribes or as German lands. It may correspond to a Greek word that may have existed in the Greek dialect of the Palestinian Jews, or the text is corrupted from "Germanica." This view of Berechiah is based on the Talmud (Yoma 10a; Jerusalem Talmud Megillah 71b), where Gomer, the father of Ashkenaz, is translated by *Germamia*, which evidently stands for Germany, and which was suggested by the similarity of the sound.

In later times the word Ashkenaz is used to designate southern and Western Germany, the ritual of which sections differs somewhat from that of Eastern Germany and Poland. Thus the prayer-book of Isaiah Horowitz, and many others, give the piyyutim according to the Minhag of Ashkenaz and Poland.

According to 16th century mystic Rabbi Elijah of Chelm, Ashkenazi Jews lived in Jerusalem during the 11th century. The story is told that a German-speaking Palestinian Jew saved the life of a young German man surnamed Dolberger. So when the knights of the First Crusade came to siege Jerusalem, one of Dolberger's family members who was among them rescued Jews in Palestine and carried them back to Worms to repay the favor.^[21] Further evidence of German communities in the holy city comes in the form of halakic questions sent from Germany to Jerusalem during the second half of the eleventh century.^[22]

Customs, laws and traditions

The *Halakhic* practices of Ashkenazi Jews may differ from those of Sephardi Jews, particularly in matters of custom. Differences are noted in the *Shulkhan Arukh* itself, in the gloss of Moses Isserles. Well known differences in practice include:

- Observance of *Pesach* (Passover): Ashkenazi Jews traditionally refrain from eating legumes, corn, millet, and rice (Quinoa, however, has become accepted as foodgrain in the North American communities), whereas Sephardi Jews typically do not prohibit these foods.
- Ashkenazi Jews freely mix and eat fish and milk products; some Sephardic Jews refrain from doing so.
- Ashkenazim are more permissive toward the usage of wigs as a hair covering for married and widowed women.
- In the case of *kashrut* for meat, conversely, Sephardi Jews have stricter requirements—this level is commonly referred to as *Beth Yosef*. Meat products which are acceptable to Ashkenazi Jews as kosher may therefore be rejected by Sephardi Jews. Notwithstanding stricter requirements for the actual slaughter, Sephardi Jews permit the rear portions of an animal after proper Halakhic removal of the sciatic nerve, while many Ashkenazi Jews do not. This is not because of different interpretations of the law; rather, slaughterhouses could not find adequate skills for correct removal of the sciatic nerve and found it more economical to separate the hindquarters and sell them as non-kosher meat.
- Ashkenazi Jews frequently name newborn children after deceased family members, but not after living relatives. Sephardi Jews, on the other hand, often name their children after the children's grandparents, even if those grandparents are still living. (See Sephardi Names). A notable exception to this generally reliable rule is among Dutch Jews, where Ashkenazim for centuries used the naming conventions otherwise attributed exclusively to Sephardim. (See Chuts.)
- Ashkenazi Jews have a custom for the bride and groom to refrain from meeting one week prior to their wedding.
- Ashkenazi tefillin bear some differences from Sephardic tefillin. In the traditional Ashkenazic rite the tefillin are wound towards the body, not away from it. Ashkenazim traditionally don tefillin while standing whereas other Jews generally do so while sitting down.
- Ashkenazic traditional pronunciations of Hebrew differ from those of other groups. The most prominent consonantal difference from Sephardic and Mizrahic Hebrew dialects is the pronunciation of the Hebrew letter tav at the end of many Hebrew words as an "s" and not a "t" or "th" sound.

Relationship to other Jews

The term *Ashkenazi* also refers to the *nusach Ashkenaz* (Hebrew, "liturgical tradition", or rite) used by Ashkenazi Jews in their *Siddur* (prayer book). A *nusach* is defined by a liturgical tradition's choice of prayers, order of prayers, text of prayers and melodies used in the singing of prayers. Two other major forms of nusach among Ashkenazic Jews are Nusach Sphard (not to be confused with Sephardi), which is the same as the general Polish (Hasidic) Nusach; and Nusach Chabad,

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otherwise known as Lubavitch Chasidic, Nusach Arizal or Nusach he'Ari.

This phrase is often used in contrast with Sephardi Jews, also called Sephardim, who are descendants of Jews from Spain and Portugal. There are some differences in how the two groups pronounce Hebrew and in points of ritual.

Several famous people have this as a surname, such as Vladimir Ashkenazi. Ironically, most people with this surname are in fact Sephardi, and usually of Syrian Jewish background. This family name was adopted by the families who lived in Sephardi countries and were of Ashkenazic origins, after being nicknamed Ashkenazi by their respective communities. Some have shortened the name to Ash. Other spellings exist, such as Eskenazi by the Syrian Jews who relocated to Panama and other South-American Jewish communities.

Literature about the alleged Turkic origin of the Ashkenazi population, as descendants of the Jewish population, converts or otherwise, appeared mainly after 1950. Although it has speculated that the peaceful life lived by the Jews of Khazaria was contrived or exaggerated, and publicized primarily in an effort to shame European leaders into treating their Jewish populations better, the Jewish-Khazar thesis is used today primarily as a whipping horse for antisemites claiming that they are not antisemites. This dubious theory holds that Ashkenazi Jews should be hated for pretending to be Jews, instead of because they actually are Jews. In any case, most scholarship on the subject dismisses the Khazar-Ashkenazi relationship, if not rejecting the portrayed Jewish golden age of Khazaria altogether.

See also: Jew, Judaism, Rabbenu Gershom

Population genetics

There are many references to Ashkenazi Jews in the literature of medical and population genetics. Indeed, much awareness of "Ashkenazi Jews" as an ethnic group or category stems from the large number of genetic studies of disease, including many that are well reported in the media, that have been conducted among Jews. According to Daphna Birenbaum Carmeli at the University of Haifa, Jewish populations have been studied more thoroughly than most other human populations, for a variety of reasons:

- Jewish populations, and particularly the large Ashkenazi Jewish population, are ideal for such research studies, because they exhibit a high degree of endogamy, yet they are sizable.

Judaism · Core principles

God · Tanakh (Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim)
Mitzvot (613) · Talmud · Halakha
Holidays · Prayer · Tzedakah
Ethics · Kabbalah · Customs · Midrash

Jewish ethnic divisions

Ashkenazi · Sephardi · Mizrahi

Population (historical) · By country

Israel · Iran · Australia · USA
Russia/USSR · Poland · Canada
Germany · France · England · Scotland
India · Spain · Portugal · Latin America
Under Muslim rule · Turkey · Iraq ·
Lebanon · Syria
Lists of Jews · Crypto-Judaism

Jewish denominations · Rabbis

Orthodox · Conservative · Reform
Reconstructionist · Liberal · Karaite
Alternative · Renewal

Jewish languages

Hebrew · Yiddish · Judeo-Persian
Ladino · Judeo-Aramaic · Judeo-Arabic

History · Timeline · Leaders

Ancient · Temple · Babylonian exile
Jerusalem (in Judaism · Timeline)
Hasmoneans · Sanhedrin · Schisms
Pharisees · Jewish-Roman wars
Relationship with Christianity; with Islam
Diaspora · Middle Ages · Sabbateans
Hasidism · Haskalah · Emancipation
Holocaust · Aliyah · Israel (History)
Arab conflict · Land of Israel

Persecution · Antisemitism

History of antisemitism
New antisemitism

Political movements · Zionism

Labor Zionism · Revisionist Zionism
Religious Zionism · General Zionism
The Bund · World Agudath Israel
Jewish feminism · Israeli politics

- Geneticists are intrinsically interested in Jewish populations, and a disproportionate percentage of genetics researchers are Jewish. Israel in particular has become an international center of such research.
- Jewish populations are overwhelmingly urban, and are concentrated near biomedical centers where such research has been carried out. Such research is especially easy to carry out in Israel, where cradle-to-grave medical insurance is available, together with universal screening for genetic disease.
- Jewish communities are comparatively well informed about genetics research, and have been supportive of community efforts to study and prevent genetic diseases.
- Participation of Jewish scientists and support from the Jewish community alleviates ethical concerns that sometimes hinder such genetic studies in other ethnic groups.

The result is a form of ascertainment bias. This has sometimes created an impression that Jews are more susceptible to genetic disease than other populations. Carmeli writes, "Jews are over-represented in human genetic literature, particularly in mutation-related contexts." [23]

Specific diseases

Diseases that are inherited in an autosomal recessive pattern often occur in endogamous populations. Among Ashkenazi Jews, a higher incidence of specific hereditary diseases has been reported:

- Bloom syndrome
- Breast cancer and ovarian cancer (due to higher distribution of BRCA1 and BRCA2).
- Canavan disease
- Colorectal cancer due to hereditary nonpolyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC).
- Congenital adrenal hyperplasia (non-classical form)
- Crohn's disease (the *NOD2/CARD15* locus appears to be implicated)
- Cystic fibrosis
- Familial dysautonomia (Riley-Day Syndrome)
- Fanconi anemia
- Gaucher's disease
- Hemophilia C
- Mucopolysaccharidosis IV
- Niemann-Pick disease
- Pemphigus vulgaris
- Tay-Sachs disease
- Torsion dystonia
- Von Gierke disease

Genetic counseling and genetic testing are recommended for couples where both partners are of Ashkenazi ancestry. Some organizations, most notably Dor Yeshorim, organize screening programs to prevent homozygosity for the genes that cause these diseases. See Jewish Genetics Center (<http://www.jewishgeneticscenter.org>) for more information on testing programmes.

Modern history

In an essay on Sephardi Jewry, Daniel Elazar at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs^[4] summarized the demographic history of Ashkenazi Jews in the last thousand years, noting that at the end of the 11th Century, 97% of world Jewry was Sephardic and 3% Ashkenazic; in the mid-seventeenth century, "Sephardim still outnumbered Ashkenazim three to two," but by the end of the 18th Century "Ashkenazim outnumbered Sephardim three to two, the result of improved living conditions in Christian Europe versus the Muslim world."^[4] By 1931, Ashkenazi Jews accounted for nearly 92 percent of world Jewry.^[4]

Ashkenazi Jews developed the Hasidic movement as well as major Jewish academic centers across Poland, Russia, and Lithuania in the generations after emigration from the west. After two centuries of comparative tolerance in the new nations, massive westward emigration occurred in the 1800s and 1900s in response to pogroms and the economic opportunities offered in other parts of the world. Ashkenazi Jews have made up the majority of the American Jewish community since 1750.^[17]

Ashkenazi cultural growth led to the *Haskalah* or Jewish Enlightenment, and the development of Zionism in modern Europe.

Ashkenazi Jewry and the Holocaust

Of the estimated 8.8 million Jews living in Europe at the beginning of World War II, the majority of whom were Ashkenazi, about 6 million — more than two-thirds — were systematically murdered in the Holocaust. These included 3 million of 3.3 million Polish Jews (91%); 900,000 of 1.1 million in Ukraine (82%); and 50-90% of the Jews of other Slavic nations, Germany, France, Hungary, and the Baltic states.

The only non-Ashkenazi community to have suffered similar depletions were the Jews of Greece.^[24] Many of the surviving Ashkenazi Jews emigrated to countries such as Israel, Australia, and the United States after the war.

Today, Ashkenazi Jews constitute approximately 80% of world Jewry,^[4] but probably less than half of Israeli Jews (see Demographics of Israel). Nevertheless they have traditionally played a prominent role in the media, economy and politics of Israel. Tensions have sometimes arisen between the mostly Ashkenazi elite whose families founded the state, and later migrants from various non-Ashkenazi groups, who argue that they are discriminated against.

Achievement

Jews have a noted history of achievement in western societies. They have won a disproportionate share of major academic prizes such as the Nobel awards and the Fields Medal in mathematics. In those societies where they have been free to enter any profession, they have a record of high occupational achievement, entering professions and fields of commerce where higher education is required. Discussion about the source or cause of high Jewish achievement, and the issue of whether it can be attributed to cultural, social, or genetic factors, is ongoing.

Ashkenazi Chief Rabbis in the Yishuv and Israel


- Abraham Isaac Kook : (23 Feb 1921 - 1 Sep 1935)

- Isaac Halevi Herzog : (1937 - 25 Jul 1959)
- Isser Yehuda Unterman : (1964 - 1972)
- Shlomo Goren : (1972 - 1983)
- Avraham Shapira : (1983 - 1993)
- Israel Meir Lau : (1993 - 3 Apr 2003)
- She'ar-Yashuv Cohen (acting): (3 Apr 2003 - 14 Apr 2003)
- Yona Metzger : (14 Apr 2003 - present)

See also

- History of the Jews in Germany
- Jewish ethnic divisions
- List of Ashkenazi Jews
- Oberlander Jews

Notes

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External links

- Ashkenazi history at the Jewish Virtual Library (<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/Ashkenazim.html>)
- A Mosaic of a People: The Jewish Story and a Reassessment of the DNA Evidence (<http://jogg.info/11/coffman.htm>) by Ellen Levy-Coffman