

Who Are Jews? Video Transcript

So, who are Jews?

You might have heard of some Jews from both biblical and modern times: Jews like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah; Moses; King David; Larry David; Albert Einstein; Ruth Bader Ginsburg; Sammy Davis Jr.; all three Stooges; all three Beastie Boys; Tiffany Haddish; Seth Rogen; Sarah Silverman; Seinfeld; and so on.

Jews have contributed greatly to the entire world through Nobel Prize-winning accomplishments in literature, economics, chemistry, physics, medicine, and peace. Jewish inventors were behind breakthrough innovations, including blue jeans, video games, shopping carts, the Barbie doll, televisions, barcodes, walkie-talkies, mobile phones, antibiotics, and more.

Maybe you've heard about, or even been to, a bar mitzvah or a bat mitzvah—a ceremony in which a Jewish person, typically at age 12 or 13 (but it's never too late!), is recognized for starting to take on the rights and responsibilities of the Jewish community. The parties can be cool, too.

But is it a religion to be Jewish, or is it a culture, or an ethnicity? It's all of these things, but no two Jews are alike. Around the world, and even within the same neighborhood, Jews find different ways to be Jewish.

There are many different ways to practice the Jewish religion, each with its own interpretations of Jewish prayers and customs and its own spiritual leaders, known as rabbis. Culturally and ethnically, there are even more ways to identify as Jewish.

What's certain is that Judaism began in the Middle East, where Abraham, the first Jew in recorded history, lived roughly 3,800 years ago. Abraham and his followers believed there was only one God—a radical belief at a time when most everyone worshiped a god of the sun, a god of the moon, a god of war, and so on.

This is why Judaism is generally considered the world's oldest monotheistic religion. The story of Abraham is contained in the core text of Judaism, the Torah, also known as the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible. The Torah contains many famous stories and teachings, almost like a biblical greatest-hits record, including Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, the Ten Commandments, and Moses leading the Jewish people from slavery to the Promised Land, also known as the Land of Israel. There, for thousands of years, the city of Jerusalem stood at the center of the Jewish people's national and spiritual life, beginning when King David made it the capital of his kingdom in the year 1003 BC.

But in the year 70 AD, the armies of the Roman Empire destroyed Jerusalem, which marked the beginning of the Diaspora, a Greek word meaning "scattering," because it was a period in which most Jews were scattered around the globe.

Wherever Jews went, they were now a religious and ethnic minority without a homeland. Across continents and centuries, Jewish communities gathered in houses of worship called synagogues. And based on the biblical story of God creating the world in six days and resting on the seventh day, Jews also did not work on the seventh day, giving rise to the seven-day week that everyone still uses today.

Wherever Jews prayed, they always faced Jerusalem and expressed hope for a peaceful return to the Land of Israel.

Jews coexisted peacefully with many other populations for centuries in some countries that were predominantly Christian and others that were predominantly Muslim. Sometimes, however, being a minority meant that Jews were unfairly blamed for other people's troubles and were subjected to persecution and violence.

For example, while Jesus was killed by the Roman Empire, the false belief that Jews were responsible for his death led to hatred and suspicion of Jews by their non-Jewish neighbors. And when a pandemic known as the Black Death emerged in the 14th century, another falsehood—that Jews were responsible—took hold, and thousands of Jews were massacred by mobs who were convinced that these lies were true. Even during the much more recent COVID-19 pandemic, similar lies surfaced in the form of conspiracy theories that Jews were responsible for the spread of the disease and were profiting from it.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves here, because even as Jews resettled in various corners of the globe, they improved the societies in which they lived, not only through active participation in trade and innovation but also by advocating for the rights of others. For example, the famed words that appear on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty—"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free"—were written by Emma Lazarus, a 19th-century Jewish poet whose moving plea for compassion for all immigrants was rooted in her understanding of the prejudice and violence Jews faced around the globe.

But persecution remained a problem for Jews, and by the end of the 19th century, many Jews had had enough of being blamed, picked on, and killed. Some chose to emigrate from country to country in search of a more welcoming place, while others tried harder to assimilate, or blend in, with the dominant culture. Still others joined socialist and nationalist movements founded on the idea that a diverse society could include Jews. And finally, some Jews founded a new movement called Zionism that said Jews needed a nation of their own. This movement envisioned a home for Jews in Israel—a return to the land where most Jews lived before the Diaspora began.

Around the same time in history, European intellectuals were increasingly using a new concept, race, to categorize people. Some self-claimed scientists identified a white, or Aryan, race that they said was superior to other groups. They incorrectly applied Darwinian evolutionary theory to society, saying that "survival of the fittest" meant some races were more fit for survival than others. While Jews can, in fact, have any skin color and be of any nationality, Jews were categorized as an inferior race, as were people who descended from Africa, Asia, the Indigenous Americas, and some parts of Europe.

These ideas were wrong. Humans are humans, and no ethnic group or race is smarter, or stronger, or better than any other.

But in the 20th century these racist concepts were taken to an extreme by Nazi Germany, led by Adolf Hitler. The Nazis believed that in order for Germans to become the "master race" that would dominate every other race, they first needed to destroy all Jews. This racism led to the Holocaust, the mass murder of six million Jews from 1938 to 1945, executed by the Nazis and their collaborators.

To kill so many people—about two-thirds of all the Jews in Europe and about 90% of the Jews in Poland, which had been a center of Jewish life in Europe before the Holocaust—the Nazis used not only guns and gas chambers but propaganda.

Propaganda is information that is biased, misleading, or simply not true. The words and images of propaganda can tell you to hate another group of people, that they are to blame for all of your problems. When this hate is directed at Jews, it's called antisemitism.

Antisemitic tropes, or recurring myths and stereotypes, were a major part of how Nazi Germany created a culture in which it was normal to hate Jews. One of the most commonly used tropes, then and now, is that Jews control the world in one way or another—its finances, the media, its political leaders, or perhaps all of these things. While it's not true, this trope, along with many others, is still common today. You can see these ideas on social media and in comments made by individuals on all sides of the political spectrum.

But contrary to what antisemitic stereotypes would have you believe, in reality, Jews have never been one type of person. Jews have different skin colors and speak various languages. Jews range across the political spectrum, too, because Jews freely disagree with one another about anything—from the best way to observe a holiday, to where you can find the best bagels, to the best way forward for the State of Israel.

Like everyone, Jews have their own stories, cultures, backgrounds, and opinions. Taken all together, Jews form a vibrant tapestry of culture and tradition that's part of the larger fabric of our entire world.

So, if you don't know a Jew, get to know one or two. You'll be glad that you did.