

LANGUAGE, LEARNING, AND THOUGHT

Masorti Judaism and the Denominations

Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and “traditional”: how Jews organize religious life, and why many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews never divided into movements at all.

THE MOVEMENTS

Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaism took shape mostly among Ashkenazi Jews in Europe and America, starting in the 1800s.

A DIFFERENT PATTERN

Historians describe many Sephardic and Mizrahi communities where one congregation included Jews of every level of observance.

MASORTI IDENTITY

In Israel, 29% of Jews call themselves *masorti*, “traditional,” including a plurality of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews (Pew, 2016).

TWO MEANINGS

The Masorti Movement is Israel's Conservative movement. A *masorti* Jew is anyone who claims the broad traditional identity.

Ask an American Jew “What are you?” and you may hear “Reform,” “Conservative,” or “Orthodox.” Ask many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews the same question and the answer may simply be “traditional,” or another term that is not a denomination at all. These different answers reflect different histories. This explainer introduces the American denominations, the communal synagogue model common in Sephardic and Mizrahi life, and the *masorti* (traditional) identity shared by many Israelis. Each is a meaningful way of living Jewish life, and none is presented here as more authentic than another.

Where the movements came from

Europe meets modernity. In the late 1700s and 1800s, Jews in Central and Western Europe began to gain equal rights as citizens, a process called emancipation. Equal rights raised new questions about how to be both Jewish and modern. In Germany, reformers opened the first permanent Reform temple in Hamburg in 1818. Other rabbis answered differently. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who led an observant community in Frankfurt from 1851, joined strict observance with modern education and culture, and became known as the father of neo-Orthodoxy. Rabbi Zacharias Frankel broke with the reformers in 1845 and called for a “positive historical” Judaism, an approach that later shaped the Conservative movement.

Growth in America. These approaches crossed the ocean with Central and Eastern European immigrants. Reform built national institutions in Cincinnati in the 1870s; the Jewish Theological Seminary opened in New York in 1887; and Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's idea of Judaism as an evolving civilization grew into the Reconstructionist movement, which opened its own rabbinical college in 1968.

A different path. Most Jews in the Middle East and North Africa met modernity under different conditions, and their communities generally did not divide into rival movements. To learn more about the rabbinic tradition behind this, see the companion explainer *Classical Sephardic Judaism* in this series.

Two meanings of “masorti”

Masorti is Hebrew for “traditional,” from *masoret*, tradition. It is used in two very different ways.

- **The Masorti Movement** is the name of Conservative Judaism in Israel and in many countries outside North America. It is an organized movement with rabbis, congregations, and institutions, and it describes itself as pluralistic, democratic, Zionist, halakhic, and egalitarian.
- **Masorti identity** (*masortiyut*) is a broad way many Israelis describe themselves. It is not a denomination, has no membership, and is especially common among Mizrahi Jews.

Pew found that 29% of Israeli Jews call themselves *masorti*, while only 2% identify with Conservative Judaism and 3% with Reform. These numbers suggest that most Israelis who call themselves *masorti* are not part of the Masorti Movement.

Movements and community patterns

Orthodox Judaism

Holds that Jewish law (*halakha*), as interpreted by rabbinic authorities over the centuries, is binding. It is a broad family rather than a single organization, ranging from Modern Orthodox Jews, who combine observance with engagement in modern life, to Haredi communities. In Israel, most synagogues and religious institutions are Orthodox.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Britannica

Reform Judaism

Began in nineteenth century Germany and was built into national institutions in America by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise and others, including Hebrew Union College (1875). Reform emphasizes Judaism's ethical teachings, sees the tradition as evolving, and treats ritual observance as a matter of informed personal choice. It is the largest movement among American Jews.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Pew Research Center

Conservative Judaism

Traces its roots to Frankel's seminary in Breslau (1854) and the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. The United Synagogue followed in 1913. It treats *halakha* as binding, while observance among members varies. Outside North America, and in Israel, it is called Masorti.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Judaica via Jewish Virtual Library; My Jewish Learning

Reconstructionist Judaism

Grew from the thought of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, who presided over the first public bat mitzvah in America, for his daughter Judith, in 1922. It understands Judaism as the evolving civilization of the Jewish people, and its members hold varied views on how binding Jewish law is.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Jewish Virtual Library

The communal synagogue

In many Sephardic and Mizrahi communities, a single congregation included Jews from the strictly observant to the moderately traditional. Political scientist Daniel Elazar argued that because Sephardic Jews never went through a reformation, they stayed “within a common fold.” Scholar Zvi Zohar notes that breakaway communities tended not to form in Islamic lands.

Sources: Daniel Elazar, JCPA; Zvi Zohar, Shalom Hartman Institute

Masortim in Israel

Israelis who call themselves *masorti* respect tradition and Jewish law while observing in very different ways. Pew describes them as occupying “a broad middle ground between Orthodoxy and secularism.” Observers often call this a middle path between religious and secular life.

Source: Pew Research Center, 2016

The Masorti Movement in Israel

Israel's Conservative movement grew from two congregations, Emet V'Emunah in Jerusalem (1936) and Moriah in Haifa (1955). An umbrella organization was founded in 1979, and today the movement counts nearly 100 congregations and prayer groups across Israel.

Sources: Masorti Movement in Israel; Jewish Virtual Library

Sephardic and Mizrahi Americans

JIMENA's national study found that many do not identify as Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox and use nondenominational terms. Many Sephardic institutions have aligned with Ashkenazi Orthodoxy, while some Sephardic Jews in largely Ashkenazi communities take part in Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist life. Persian Jews in Los Angeles engage with all of these.

Source: JIMENA national study (NYU team led by Dr. Mijal Bitton, 2025)

Masorti identity in Israel

Four categories. Israeli Jews often describe themselves using four Hebrew words: *haredi* (ultra Orthodox), *dati* (religious), *masorti* (traditional), and *hiloni* (secular). In Pew's survey of 3,789 Israeli Jews, conducted from 2014 to 2015, nearly three in ten chose *masorti*. Pew found that 42% of Sephardic and Mizrahi Israeli Jews identify as *masorti*, more than any other category, compared with about two thirds of Ashkenazi Israeli Jews who identify as secular.

A middle path. *Masortim* are often described as walking a middle path between *dati* and *hiloni*, with respect for tradition, Jewish law, and earlier generations. Pew found them the most diverse of the four groups: 21% pray daily, while 31% never do, and 53% travel by car, bus, or train on Shabbat while 41% do not.

Counting depends on the question. A 2023 study by Gabriel Abensour for the Jewish People Policy Institute found that only 19% of Israeli Jews call themselves simply *masorti*, but 45% use combined labels such as "masorti secular" or "masorti religious." Abensour describes *masortiyut* as a "soft identity" built on ties to earlier generations.

Israeli Jews by self description

GROUP	SHARE
<i>Hiloni</i> (secular)	49%
<i>Masorti</i> (traditional)	29%
<i>Dati</i> (religious)	13%
<i>Haredi</i> (ultra Orthodox)	9%

Source: Pew Research Center, *Israel's Religiously Divided Society* (2016). Figures are for Jewish adults only.

Views and voices

Scholars. Yaacov Yadgar of the University of Oxford interviewed 102 Israelis who call themselves *masortim*. He argues that their selective observance follows its own coherent logic and should not be dismissed as convenience or weak faith. He offers the English word "traditionism" for *masortiyut*. Zvi Zohar describes Sephardic rabbis who weighed the needs of everyone in the community, while Ariel Picard cautions against sharp Sephardic versus Ashkenazi generalizations. Like Daniel Elazar's essay, these are interpretations that other scholars debate.

Community voices. In *Distinctions*, writer Tamar Zaken describes Sephardic rabbis who "lived in communities without denominations, where every Jew was an essential part." JIMENA's national study heard a range of views: some interviewees felt Orthodox institutions had narrowed the tolerance of earlier Sephardic life, while others felt traditional practice needs those institutions to thrive in America.

Common misconceptions

- **"Masorti Israelis are Conservative Jews."** The Masorti Movement is Conservative, but survey numbers suggest most Israelis who call themselves *masorti* are not part of it.
- **"Traditional means less serious."** Researchers such as Yadgar find many *masortim* deeply committed to tradition, even as their observance varies.
- **"Sephardic is a denomination."** It is a heritage. Sephardic Jews belong to every kind of synagogue, or none.
- **"Every Jewish community has the same four movements."** The movements grew from specific European and American histories.

Words to know

Denomination (movement)

An organized stream of Judaism with its own institutions, such as Reform or Orthodox.

Halakha *Hebrew*

Jewish law, as studied and applied in daily life.

Masorti *Hebrew*

"Traditional." Also the name of the Conservative movement in Israel.

Masortiyut *Hebrew*

The broad *masorti* outlook and way of life.

Dati *Hebrew*

"Religious," usually meaning Orthodox but not Haredi.

Hiloni *Hebrew*

"Secular."

Haredi *Hebrew*

Ultra Orthodox. Pew counts 9% of Israeli Jews as Haredi.

Kehilla *Hebrew*

A community or congregation.

Emancipation

The granting of equal civil rights to European Jews, beginning in the late 1700s.

Traditionism

Yaacov Yadgar's English term for *masortiyut*: a selective, reflective way of holding to tradition.

Bringing the topic to life

In the public school classroom

- Use the Pew and JPPI figures as a data literacy lesson: how do the categories offered change the answers people give?
- Compare how other religions have formed denominations or stayed united, and what historical forces shaped each path.
- Present every movement respectfully, without ranking them as more or less authentic.
- Teach about religious practice; do not ask students to perform rituals or recite prayers.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Map the different kinds of synagogues your students' families attend, and the labels they use or do not use.
- Explore the two meanings of *masorti* with older students.
- Draw on Elana Riback Rand's case for teaching Sephardic customs as valid for every student.
- Use the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit for lessons on Sephardic and Mizrahi life.

At home and with family

- Ask elders what synagogue they attended in their country of origin, and who prayed there.
- Talk about the words your family uses for its Jewish identity, and why.
- Record a grandparent's memories of Shabbat or holidays and share them with JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why might Jewish movements have formed in nineteenth century Europe, but not in most communities of the Middle East and North Africa?
- What are the benefits and challenges of one synagogue that welcomes Jews of every level of observance?
- Can a person be both "traditional" and "secular"? How do the labels we are offered shape the way we see ourselves?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States: Identities, Experiences, and Communities (JIMENA, 2025)

youtube.com/watch?v=PvDb3cK4TDw

Sephardic and Mizrahi Perspectives on the American Jewish Experience (Hadassah Magazine program)

youtube.com/watch?v=hGaMeVRgoxU

Read

American Judaism: A History, by Jonathan D. Sarna (Yale University Press, 2004). How the American movements developed.

libcat.scu.edu/Record/b3287421

Secularism and Religion in Jewish Israeli Politics: Traditionists and Modernity, by Yaacov Yadgar (Routledge, 2011). Scholarly study of *masortim*.

routledge.com/products/9780203847244

Rabbinic Creativity in the Modern Middle East, by Zvi Zohar (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). Scholarly.

jewishbookcouncil.org/book/rabbinic-creativity-in-the-modern-middle-east

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"Residents and Strangers," by Elana Riback Rand Sephardic heritage in American Modern Orthodox schools.

distinctionsjournal.org/residents-and-strangers-sephardi-education-and-the-future-of-american-modern-orthodoxy

"A Library of Sages," by Tamar Zaken Sephardic rabbis from communities without denominations.

distinctionsjournal.org/a-library-of-sages-bringing-sephardi-wisdom-to-jewish-day-schools-2

Explore online

Israel's Religiously Divided Society (Pew Research Center, 2016)
pewresearch.org/religion/2016/03/08/israels-religiously-divided-society

Masortim and Masortiyut in Israel (Jewish People Policy Institute, 2023)

jppe.org.il/en/%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%A1%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%9D/s/1

The Jewish Denominations (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/the-jewish-denominations

History of Conservative Judaism (Jewish Virtual Library)
jewishvirtuallibrary.org/conservative-judaism-2

About the Masorti Movement (Masorti Movement in Israel)
masorti.org.il/about-the-masorti-foundation

Sephardic Halachic Rulings: From Moderation and Inclusion to Extremism and Separatism? (Shalom Hartman Institute)
hartman.org.il/sephardic-halachic-rulings-from-moderation-and-inclusion-to-extremism-and-separatism

The Special Character of Sephardi Tolerance, by Daniel J. Elazar (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs)
dje.jcpa.org/articles2/sephtol.htm

From JIMENA

Understanding Sephardic and Mizrahi Identity (national study: religion, denomination, and *masortiyut*)
sephardicstudy.org/5-demographic-study_understanding-sephardic-and-mizrahi-identity

National Demographic Profile (national study: observance and synagogue membership)
sephardicstudy.org/6-demographic-study_national-demographic-profile

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)
sepharditoolkit.org

JIMENA Oral History
jimena.org/oral-history



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include Pew Research Center; Jewish People Policy Institute; My Jewish Learning; Britannica; Encyclopaedia Judaica via Jewish Virtual Library; Masorti Movement in Israel; Shalom Hartman Institute; Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs; the work of Yaacov Yadgar; JIMENA's national study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States; and Distinctions. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.