

# The Struggle to Understand What It Means to Be Jewish in America Today

[Laura Dimon](#)



Source: AP

**I am Jewish ... ish.** I can recite the Hannukah prayer by heart, but I don't know what it means. I confuse Rosh Hashanah with Yom Kippur, and I don't know the difference between Sabbath and Shabbat. When Rabbi Menachem Katz from the [Aleph Institute](#) told me he hoped young Jews would "feel a part of the chosen nation," I had to ask him what it was exactly that we were "chosen" to do.

Admittedly, it's pathetic.

**But I am not religious, nor are my parents.** Technically, if my father were

religious, he'd be Greek Orthodox, and my mother is Jewish. Unlike Islam, which passes down religion through the father, **Judaism is inherited through the mother's lineage. So, I'm Jewish — according to the Jewish doctrine, that is.**

**Like many Jews today, I identify as Jewish, but do not observe Judaism.** So I struggle to make sense of my Jewish identity. If I'm Jewish but not religious, what does my Judaism mean?

Thus began my quest. I started with the question: What does it mean to be Jewish? But I quickly realized the complexity of the possible answer, and scaled it back: Who is a Jew? As it turns out, even this is utterly complex and arguably subjective. *Oy vey*. So I narrowed it again to focus on questions with more quantifiable answers: How many Jews are there? Where do they live?

In the process of seeking seemingly simple answers, I learned more than I had anticipated — most importantly, that my assumptions about my own "people" were wrong.

First, I am not unique. Like other groups, American Jews are moving away from religion. **While an estimated 2% of Americans identify as Jewish, only .5% identify as both Jewish and religious.** On average, religious Jews are older than non-religious Jews. Secularism has long been a tradition in Jewish-American life, and the numbers show it. According to Pew, **62% say that being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture**, while just 15% say it is mainly a matter of religion. Even among practicing Jews, 55% said that being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture. **Two-thirds claim it is not necessary to believe in God to be Jewish.**

I'm a good illustration of those statistics. On the religious side, I did not have a bat mitzvah, a Jewish rite of passage into adulthood. I've never been to Israel, I don't speak Hebrew and during Yom Kippur, I only fast between

meals.

Culture, however, is a different story. I am accustomed to sitting shiva when somebody dies and dancing the Hora at weddings. I happily eat whitefish, lox and brisket. (I stop at cow's tongue, but my grandma loves it.) If I'm uncomfortably hot, I'll *kvetch* that I'm *schvitzin'* (sweating) like a *haza* (pig). I was thrilled to learn that "schlep," "schmooze," "glitch," "shtick," "klutz" and "spiel" are all Yiddish words. I'll often declare that someone is a *schmuck*, in a bad way, or has *chutzpah*, in a good way.

My extra phlegmy "*chh*" sound leaves my Jewish mother in hysterical laughter and my *goy* father confused, at best. I'm used to the dynamic, which I thought was an unusual one. But in fact, half-Jewish households are becoming increasingly common.

In a Pew [study](#), 44% of currently married Jewish respondents and 58% of those who have married since 2005 indicated they are married to a non-Jewish spouse. While some might denounce interfaith marriage as harmful to the unity of the Jewish people, others [believe](#) that educating children about multiple religions and giving them the choice to practice what they want could actually help Jews in the long run; children and teenagers discover their faith on their own rather than feel it was forced upon them.

Matthew Rozsa is a Jewish writer for *PolicyMic*. The 28-year-old Bethlehem, Penn. native said it is not important to him to marry a Jewish woman. He wrote in an email, "We need to have enough confidence in the perennial nature of our heritage to believe that it will endure even among children who are of only partial Jewish parentage."

I was wrong in thinking that marrying within the Jewish faith was a priority for most Jews. It was a belief I held because of two other assumptions I made: that Jews are dying out, and that most Jews believe that Jews are dying out.

The Jewish population in 1933 was estimated at 15.3 million. Katz said, "Hitler wiped out 6 million Jews, and look where we are now." The Jewish people are definitely "not disappearing," he said. According to the Jewish Virtual Library, there are about 13.75 million Jews in the world today. Forty-three percent of them are in Israel and 40% are in the U.S. The U.S. is home to an estimated 6 million Jews, though it's impossible to know exact numbers, as the census does not inquire about one's religion.

Within the U.S., states where Jews comprise over 4% of the state's total population include Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey and New York. New York has the largest population of Jews outside of Israel, and it's growing.

My mental picture of a New York Jew — a person living comfortably on Manhattan's Upper West Side — was uninformed and incomplete. In reality, about one in four of the state's Jews lives in poverty with incomes under 150% of the federal poverty guideline, according to the UJA Federation. In New York City, where there are high concentrations of very religious Jews, 24% of Jewish households are poor. The highest rate of poverty is among Orthodox Jews. Hasidism is a particularly impoverished branch of Orthodoxy: 43% of Hasidic households are living in poverty.

I was surprised to learn that just an hour outside of New York City is Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic town where Yiddish is the main language, about 60% of residents live below the poverty line and the per capita income is less than \$7,000. The *New York Times* wrote, "The poorest place in the United States is not a dusty Texas border town, a hollow in Appalachia, a remote Indian reservation or a blighted urban neighborhood. It has no slums or homeless people. No one who lives there is shabbily dressed or has to go hungry. Crime is virtually nonexistent."

*Image Credit: AP*

It sounds like an oddly utopian society. But Kiryas Joel is not far from Pine Bush, NY, where the *New York Times* [reported](#) on a series of anti-Semitic bullying incidents late last year. It was a reminder to me that **anti-Semitism is very real, and not an abstract historical concept as I'd drifted into thinking.**

On the other hand, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which measures anti-Semitic beliefs using an "agree or disagree" index using statements such as "Jews hold too much power in the U.S. today" and "Jews are more likely than others to use shady business practices," found that anti-Semitic propensities are at the lowest rate recorded in ADL research.

Interestingly, they found that one number has remained unchanged since 1964, despite the makeup of the American population changing dramatically since then. Roughly 30% of Americans have consistently believed that Jews are more loyal to Israel than to the United States. According to [Peter Beinart](#), among American Jews, Zionists and secular liberals are growing increasingly distinct. "Particularly in the younger generations," he writes, **"Fewer and fewer American Jewish liberals are Zionists; fewer and fewer American Jewish Zionists are liberal."** I was aware of the former movement, but not the latter.

Beyond the facts and figures, **what does it really mean to be Jewish?**

Unfortunately, **my quest did not produce an answer, a tangible understanding of Jewish identity. It's a tremendously complex question, whose answers are largely based on individual experience and interpretation.**

I did, however, learn that I'd made several false assumptions about a people — not even a foreign, unfamiliar people. But my own. And that is, in my opinion, a far more valuable takeaway.

\*\*\*

*Tweet [me](#) with questions or thoughts [@lauradimon](#).*

***READ: [16 Celebrities You Probably Didn't Know Were Jewish](#)***