

# What Does It Mean to Be Jewish?

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Everything else comes after.

[Harvey Rachlin](#) 2 Elul 5773 – August 8, 2013

The question “What does it mean to be Jewish?” has often been asked. I suppose you could invoke the old joke “Ask two Jews a question and you’ll get three opinions” to better comprehend how different Jews would respond to this question, so when I weigh in here, I hope readers will forgive me if my opinions don’t always accord with theirs.

But the question is legitimate and should be asked. Jewish people share a common heritage and are affected by many of the same issues today. They face a world in which their religion is part of their identity; no matter how far apart they are on the religious and political spectrums (not to mention any others), they share a common bond that unites them in terms of how they relate to each other and to the outside world.

So what does it mean to be Jewish? To me, it means the following:

- To believe in God. Divine affirmation is the foundation of Judaism. Everything else comes after.
- To observe Shabbat and the various *yom tovim*. What could be more meaningful, spiritual, and fulfilling – more Jewish – than practicing the religious aspects of Judaism?
- To lead an honorable life. Shouldn’t we all aspire to become *tzaddikim*, righteous people?
- To keep kosher. Certain things just seem to go together, like lox and bagels, gefilte fish and horseradish – and being Jewish and keeping kosher.

- To do *mitzvot*. There are 613 *mitzvot* in the Torah, including the above. Carrying out *mitzvot* is part of our code.
- To carry on Jewish traditions. There's life after *davening*, and it's called Jewish culture. Chanukah gifts, *hamantaschen*, and singing *niggunim* on *Shabbat* are just a few of the wonderful customs that have evolved from the religion and its people.
- To be proud of your Jewish heritage. Wear it on your sleeve – you're a member of a tribe that has nearly 6,000 years of history.
- To feel an immediate bond with fellow Jews. Have you ever felt like you can be anywhere in the world and if you find a fellow Jew, you feel an immediate kinship?
- To involve yourself in a community of Jews. As birds of a feather flock together, it's only natural for Jews to be immersed in a Jewish world – having Jewish friends, engaging in Jewish activities, living in Jewish neighborhoods.
- To feel a Jewish identity. Even if you're not as religious as you could or should be, what could possibly make you more Jewish than feeling Judaism is an indelible part of your soul, or that being Jewish is simply who you are?
- To feel a special connection to Jewish history. Who can feel the pain of Jewish persecutions, expulsions, and genocides more than a Jew? Who can feel the catastrophe of the Holocaust more deeply than a Jew?
- To take great pride in Israel. Do you get the chills when you hear “Hatikvah”? After 2,000 years of Jews living in the Diaspora as a weak, defenseless, persecuted people, what greater modern miracle could there be than the resurrection of the Jewish homeland?
- To place an emphasis on education. Jewish parents may be the original “tiger moms and dads.” Perhaps that is why some professions are disproportionately populated by Jews.

- To feel empathy for the poor, oppressed, and downtrodden. You only have to consider how much we've suffered as a people to understand how this got into our DNA.
- To have a Jewish funny bone. You can relate to Jewish humor because you're laughing at yourself and other Jewish people you know – and, nu, do you think there's any shortage of Jewish foibles?
- To think in “Jewish ways.” How do Jews think? *Oy vey iz mir*. We think the number 18 brings good luck, so we sometimes give gifts in denominations of 18, like \$36 or \$180. We try to ward off the evil eye after hearing compliments or wonderful news by saying “*kenohora*” or mimicking spitting by going “pooh-pooh-pooh.” Oh, and there's the proverbial Jewish guilt, as well as our inimitable designation of “*mishagas*” to explain a panoply of crazy behavior with a Jewish edge. Is there such a thing as a *Yiddishe kop*? Suffice it to say that when you do something stupid, you're not using it.

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