

SPECIAL TOPIC 8.4

JEWISH MOVEMENTS IN THE UNITED STATES: INSTITUTIONS, SIZE, AND KEY BELIEFS

| Movements | Orthodox | Reform | Conservative |
|--|---|--|---|
| Institutions | 1886: Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) 1898: Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (OU) 1902: <i>Agudat ha-Rabbanim</i> (Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada) 1928: Yeshiva College 1935: Rabbinical Council of America 1937: Ramaz School | 1873: Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC); now called Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) 1875: Hebrew Union College (HUC) 1889: Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) | 1901: Rabbinical Assembly (RA) 1902: Founded in 1886, only at this time did the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) begin an explicit transformation from Orthodoxy to what eventually became called Conservative Judaism 1913: United Synagogue of America; now called United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism |
| What percentage of American Jews affiliate with you? | 1800: 100%* 1880: 6% of all U.S. synagogues‡ 1950: 10% 1971: 11% 1990: 6% 2000: 10% 2013: 10% | 1800: 0%* 1880: 94% of U.S. synagogues‡ 1950: 25% 1971: 33% 1990: 38% 2000: 35% 2013: 35% | 1880: 0%† 1950: 60% 1971: 42% 1990: 35% 2000: 27% 2013: 18% |
| What is your definition of a Jew? (And can one convert to Judaism?) | Someone born to a <i>halakhically</i> Jewish woman or who converts to Judaism according to an Orthodox (or perhaps Conservative) understanding of <i>halakhah</i> . | Someone who has at least one parent who is Jewish (i.e., both patrilineal and matrilineal descent are recognized) or converts to Judaism according to Reform standards. | Someone born to a <i>halakhically</i> Jewish woman or who converts to Judaism according to a Conservative (or Orthodox) understanding of <i>halakhah</i> . |
| What is the Torah's authority? | The Written Torah is the word of God, letter for letter. The Oral Torah is also the word of God, though some believe it is the rabbinic interpretation of the Written Torah, which the Talmudic rabbis had the authority to dictate and which continues to have a divine status. | The Written Torah embodies the relationship between the Jewish people and God. There is a range of official beliefs regarding whether the Written Torah was given by God to humans or was written by humans. Unofficially, most in this movement believe the latter. As for the Oral Torah, it was not divinely given by God but is the rabbinic interpretation of the Written Torah through the ages. | Some believe the Written Torah comes directly from God; others believe it was written by humans. Most contend that the Oral Torah is a manifestation of human interpretation. |

* Not all Jews at this time identified as “Orthodox” or attended synagogue. But for those who did, Orthodoxy was the only denomination around, even though it was not yet called Orthodoxy nor did any American synagogue identify as such.

† Did not yet exist as a formalized movement.

‡ Not all Jews at this time identified as “Reform” or attended synagogue. But for those who did, Orthodoxy did not yet have a significant synagogue presence. Immediately thereafter, between 1880 and 1910, one million-plus Ashkenazi European Jews arrived in the United States from Russia and Eastern Europe, most of whom would have identified as Orthodox in terms of today’s denominational terms.

| Reconstructionist | Humanistic | Renewal |
|---|---|--|
| <p>1922: Society for the Advancement of Judaism</p> <p>1955: Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (synagogue arm of movement); now part of RRC</p> <p>1968: Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC)</p> | <p>1967: Association of Humanistic Rabbis</p> <p>1969: Society for Humanistic Judaism</p> <p>1985: International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ)</p> <p>1992: IISHJ rabbinical school</p> | <p>1962: B’nai Or Religious Fellowship</p> <p>1993: Alliance for Jewish Renewal (ALEPH)</p> <p>1997: ALEPH rabbinical program §</p> <p>1998: Ohalah (Association of Rabbis for Jewish Renewal)</p> |
| <p>1950: 0%†</p> <p>1971: <1%</p> <p>1990: 1.3%</p> <p>2000: 2%</p> <p>2013: 2–3%</p> | <p>1950: 0%†</p> <p>1971: <1%</p> <p>1990: <1%</p> <p>2000: <1%</p> <p>2013: <1%</p> | <p>1950: 0%†</p> <p>1971: <1%†</p> <p>1990: <1%†</p> <p>2000: <1%</p> <p>2013: 2–3%</p> |
| <p>No official position. Since 1968, this movement has accepted both patrilineal and matrilineal descent. As for those choosing to become Jewish, unofficially a ritual conversion is encouraged but not required.</p> | <p>“A Jew is a person of Jewish descent or any person who declares himself or herself to be a Jew and who identifies with the history, ethical values, culture, civilization, community, and fate of the Jewish people. . . . [As for becoming part of the Jewish community,] Humanistic Jews use the term ‘adopted’ rather than ‘converted’ because we believe that the person wishing to be Jewish is adopting both Judaism and our community and that the community adopts those desiring to be part of the Jewish people.”</p> <p>Further, “we welcome into the Jewish people all men and women who sincerely desire to share the Jewish experience regardless of their ancestry. We challenge the assumption that the Jews are primarily or exclusively a religious community and that religious convictions or behavior are essential to full membership in the Jewish people.”</p> | <p>No official position.</p> |
| <p>“We consider our sacred texts to be the product of inspired experience in the human search for God and holiness in our world. To us, they are neither literal transcriptions from a supernatural being nor anachronisms that are mere constructs and fictions.”</p> | <p>“Each Jew has the right to create a meaningful Jewish lifestyle free from supernatural authority and imposed tradition. Humanistic philosophy affirms that knowledge and power come from people and from the natural world in which they live. Jewish continuity needs reconciliation between science, personal autonomy, and Jewish loyalty.... Judaism is an ethnic culture. It did not fall from heaven. It was not invented by a divine spokesperson. It was created by the Jewish people. It was molded by Jewish experience.”</p> | <p>No official position. Considers the Torah to be the Jewish community’s core sacred text.</p> |
| (continued) | | |
| <p>§ Although the Renewal movement did not have a formalized rabbinical school until 1997, between 1974 and 2007, “112 Renewal spiritual leaders [were] ordained—98 rabbis, three cantors and 11 rabbinic pastors,” 60 of whom graduated from the ALEPH rabbinical program.</p> | | |

SPECIAL TOPIC 8.4 (continued)

Movements

What should a Jew's relationship to *halakhah* be?

Orthodox

Jews are obligated to observe *halakhah*.

Reform

Jews should make decisions that take *halakhah* into account, but ultimately each Jew has autonomy regarding whether or not to follow *halakhah*. In other words, it is not an obligation.

The Union for Reform Judaism states that a common thread between Reform Jews is that they all “share the assertion of the legitimacy of change in Judaism and the denial of eternal validity to any given formulation of Jewish belief or codification of Jewish law. Apart from that, there is little unanimity among Reform Jews either in matters of belief or in practical observance. Conservative and radical positions coexist and enjoy mutual respect.”

Conservative

Reflected in the Conservative motto—“Tradition and Change”—Jews are obligated to observe *halakhah*, though from an Orthodox perspective Conservative Judaism is much more liberal in its interpretation of *halakhah* than is Orthodox Judaism.

Another perspective is that Conservative *halakhic* authorities look directly to biblical and Talmudic passages to interpret *halakhah*, whereas Orthodox authorities look to more recent responsa from other Orthodox rabbis.

What is your position on women becoming rabbis?

Prohibited.

This said, Yeshivat Maharat, established in New York City in 2009, is the first Modern Orthodox institution in the contemporary world to formally ordain women to be “spiritual leaders and halakhic authorities,” who are sometimes referred to as “rabbinic leaders.” One’s official ordination title is “Maharat,” not “Rabbi.” (Female graduates of this ordination program have also been called “Rabba.”) A handful of other Orthodox seminaries have created similar programs since that time, but none, as of yet, are using the titled “Rabbi.” Note: In January 2016, Lila Kagedan became the first ordained graduate of Yeshivat Maharat to use the title “rabbi” in a professional setting.

As of 2013, if not earlier, some in the Orthodox American community, in particular those who are socially accepting of women as halakhic authorities, began referring to themselves as part of “Open Orthodoxy.”

Permitted. The German Reform movement ordained its first female rabbi, Regina Jonas, in 1935. The American Reform movement ordained its first female rabbi, Sally Priesand, in 1972.

Permitted. JTS began admitting women to its rabbinical school in 1984; one year later, Amy Eilberg graduated as its first ordained rabbi.

Reconstructionist

Halakhah has a “vote not veto,” and is to be relied upon as a “guide” regarding religious practice. It is not obligatory. Each community and individual decides what the norms are, using *halakhah* as a guide.

Humanistic

Halakhah is not obligatory; this movement believes in personal autonomy. They also formally maintain that many Jewish rituals, especially related to Jewish holidays and life cycle events, have great meaning. This movement “create[s] and use[s] non-theistic Jewish rituals, services, and celebrations that invoke the ethical core of Jewish history, literature, and culture. [Its] aim is to foster a positive Jewish identity, intellectual integrity, and ethical behavior among celebrants.”

Renewal

“Jewish Renewal is a transdenominational approach to revitalizing Judaism. . . . We shape *halacha* (Jewish law) into a living way of walking in the world. . . . Renewal is an attitude, not a denomination, and offers tools to all branches of Judaism.”

“Jewish Renewal is neither ‘halakhic’ nor ‘anti-halakhic’ but ‘neo-halakhic.’ Just as Rabbinic Judaism involved transcending the *halakhah* of Temple sacrifice, so Jewish Renewal seeks to go beyond the limitations of traditional Rabbinic Judaism to forge a new *halakhah* in which Judaism is conscious of its place in an interconnected world. This new *halakhah*, for instance, includes expansion of the practice of kashrut to include ecological and ethical criteria, a new exploration of the concept of work as it applies to both the personal and societal Shabbat, and reexamination of intimacy and intimate relationships.”

Permitted. RRC has always accepted women, ordaining its first female rabbi, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, in 1974. On January 1, 2014, Rabbi Deborah Waxman, Ph.D., became the new president of this movement (i.e., of their seminary and congregational affiliate institution), the first woman to serve as president of any Jewish denomination.

Permitted. The IISHJ has always accepted women into their rabbinical school.

Permitted. ALEPH has always accepted women into its rabbinical program. “Jewish Renewal has long been committed to a fully egalitarian approach to Jewish life and welcomes the public and creative input of those who were traditionally excluded from the process of forming the Jewish tradition.”

SPECIAL TOPIC 8.4 (continued)

| Movements | Orthodox | Reform | Conservative |
|---|---|---|--|
| What is your position on queer-identified Jews becoming rabbis? | <p>Prohibited.</p> <p>Openly queer (see special topic 0.2) Jews <i>may</i> be accepted as members in some liberal Modern Orthodox communities. However, aside from exceptions such as Rabbi Steven Greenberg, an openly gay man ordained through an Orthodox rabbinical school (he came out many years after receiving rabbinic ordination), the normative Orthodox interpretation of <i>halakhah</i> does not permit same-sex sexual relations and thus does not permit openly queer students to study to become rabbis.</p> <p>Similar to positions regarding female rabbis, in 2013, if not earlier, some in the Orthodox community who are socially accepting of queer Jews, though not in terms of halakhically sanctioning same-sex relations, began referring to themselves as part of “Open Orthodoxy.”</p> | <p>Permitted. The American Reform movement began accepting openly gay and lesbian rabbinical students to its seminaries in 1990, and openly bisexual and transgender students in 2003. In 2000, rabbis were permitted to officiate in the weddings of gays and lesbians.</p> | <p>Permitted. JTS began accepting openly gay and lesbian rabbinical students in 2007. In 2012, it sanctioned same-sex marriage.</p> |
| What is your position on Jews marrying non-Jews? | <p>Prohibited. Non-Jews interested in converting to Judaism may be welcomed by Orthodox communities. However, couples made up of one Jew and one non-Jew are often shunned altogether.</p> | <p>Permitted. Historically, in 1909, the CCAR passed a resolution rejecting intermarriage, later changing its official position to embrace families with one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish parent. Today, Reform rabbis are allowed to decide individually whether to perform intermarriages, even though the movement has not passed a resolution formally permitting this practice. As for welcoming non-Jews into the community, as this movement approves patrilineal and matrilineal descent, it is not uncommon for Jewish congregants to have non-Jews in their families.</p> | <p>Prohibited. If rabbis ordained by JTS perform an intermarriage, their rabbinical ordination may be revoked (though no institution in this movement has ever officially taken this action). Halakhic considerations aside, generally it has been assumed that children born to intermarried couples will not be raised as Jews. In 2010, JTS began having public workshops on intermarriage, leading some to speculate that their official position on welcoming intermarried couples into Conservative synagogues may change.</p> |

Reconstructionist

Permitted. RRC began accepting openly gay and lesbian applicants in 1984.

“The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College was the first Jewish seminary to accept openly gay and lesbian students. We retain an unwavering commitment to forming inclusive communities, welcoming to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Jews as well as multicultural families, Jews of color, and other groups traditionally excluded from full participation in Jewish communal life. Material about gay and lesbian families is included in religious school curricula. Our rabbis are free to perform same-sex commitment or marriage ceremonies if it is their practice to do so.”

Humanistic

Permitted. The IISHJ has always accepted queer Jews into their rabbinical school. Likewise, they formally accept queer Jews into all Humanistic Jewish communities. In October 2004, the movement officially resolved: “We support the legal recognition of marriage and divorce between adults of the same sex [and] we affirm the value of marriage between any two committed adults with the sense of obligations, responsibilities, and consequences thereof.”

Renewal

Permitted. Queer Jews have always been accepted into ALEPH and into Jewish Renewal communities.

Permitted. Since 1968 this movement has accepted intermarried couples into their communities. Although they don’t encourage intermarriage, each rabbi decides individually whether or not to perform an intermarriage ceremony. It is unclear whether this movement officially allows rabbis to perform an intermarriage with non-Jewish clergy (i.e., it is not uncommon for clergy from different religions to be co-officiating at an intermarriage ceremony). Note: In September 2015, RRC officially changed its policy to accept rabbinical school applicants who have a non-Jewish partner. This decision will no doubt shape other movement policies.

Permitted. “Intermarriage is the positive consequence of a free and open society. If the Jewish community is open, welcoming, embracing, and pluralistic, we will encourage more people to identify with the Jewish people rather than fewer. Intermarriage could contribute to the continuity of the Jewish people.”

(See also the movement’s statement, found above under “What is your definition of a Jew?”)

No official position.

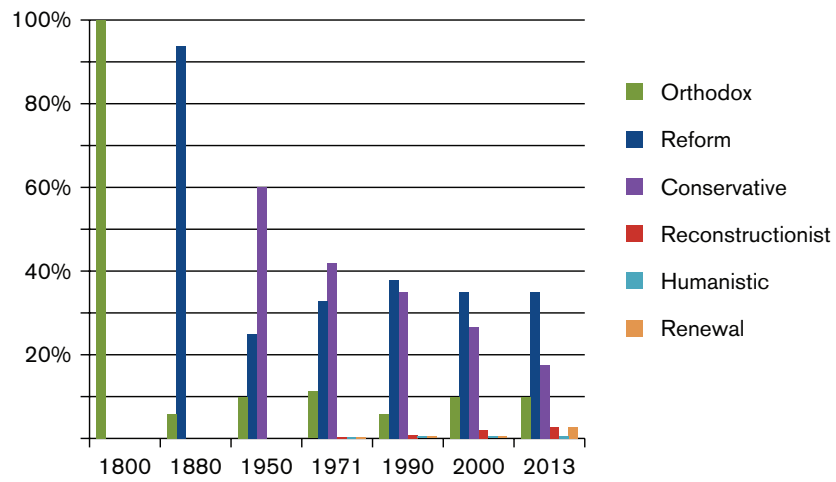


FIGURE 8.7. Percentage of American Jews who affiliate with each movement as listed in special topic 8.4.

SPECIAL TOPIC 8.4 Institutions: Renewal: Regarding the ALEPH rabbinical program, see Jewish Telegraphic Agency, “Renewal Wants to Keep Same Spirit While Standardizing Rabbis’ Training,” January 16, 2007, www.jta.org/2007/01/16/archive/renewal-wants-to-keep-same-spirit-while-standardizing-rabbis-training. Regarding Ohalah, see Sholom Groesberg, *Jewish Renewal: A Journey, The Movement’s History, Ideology, and Future* (New York: iUniverse, 2009), 69. See also Cohen, “Jewish Renewal.”

What percentage of American Jews affiliate with you? Jonathan Ament, “National Jewish Population Survey, 2000–01: American Jewish Religious Denominations,” United Jewish Communities, New York, February 2005; Hasia Diner, *Jews of the United States, 1654–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 122; Goldstein and Goldstein, “Conservative Jewry,” 295–316; Abraham J. Karp, “A Century of Conservative Judaism in the United States,” *American Jewish Year Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1986), 3–61; Barry A. Kosmin, Sidney Goldstein, Joseph Waksberg, Nava Lerer, Ariela Keysar, and Jeffrey Scheckner, *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey* (New York: Council of Jewish Federations, 1991); Bernard Lazewitz, J. Alan Winter, Arnold Dashefsky, and Ephraim Tabory, “A Study of Jewish Denominational Preferences: Summary Findings,” *American Jewish Year Book* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1997), 115–137; Pew Research Center, “Portrait of Jewish Americans.”

What is your definition of a Jew? Reform: CCAR, “38. Patrilineal and Matrilineal Descent.” Reconstructionist: Based on conversations the author had with both pulpit rabbis and RRC administrators and rabbis. According to the following article, however, the Reconstructionist movement has a required conversion process: Lena Romanoff, “Cross-Denominational Differences Regarding Conversion,” *Your People, My People: Finding Acceptance and Fulfillment as a Jew by Choice*, available at www.myjewishlearning.com/article/cross-denominational-differences-regarding-conversion/#. Humanistic: “Becoming a Humanistic Jew,” Society for Humanistic Judaism, www.shj.org/humanistic-jewish-life/life-cycles/becoming-a-humanistic-jew; “Society for Humanistic Supports IFSHJ Statement: Who Is a Jew?,” Society for Humanistic Judaism, www.shj.org/humanistic-jewish-life/issues-and-resolutions/who-is. Renewal: see, e.g., how one Renewal synagogue in Berkeley, CA, Beyt Tikkun, responds to the notion of conversion, in “Conversion,” www.beyttikkun.org/article.php/conversation.

What is the Torah’s authority? Reform: “What Is Reform Judaism?,” Union for Reform Judaism, www.urj.org/what-we-believe/what-reform-judaism. Conservative: *Emet ve’Emunah*, 19. Reconstructionist: “FAQs on Reconstructionist Approaches to Jewish Ideas and Practices,” Jewish Reconstructionist Communities, <http://jewishrecon.org/resource/faqs-reconstructionist-approaches-jewish-ideas-and-practices>. Humanistic: Society for Humanistic Judaism, “What Is Humanistic Judaism?,” www.shj.org/humanistic-judaism/what-is-humanistic-judaism. Renewal: “Whether considered

the literal Word of God or the words of God-inspired human beings, The Torah's words possess unsurpassed authority" (Groesberg, *Jewish Renewal*, 77; see also 77–79).

What should a Jew's relationship to halakhah be? Reform: Mark Washofsky, "Reform Judaism and Halakhah," www.myjewishlearning.com/article/reform-judaism-halakhah. Reconstructionist: "FAQs on Reconstructionist Approaches." Humanistic: "Society for Humanistic Mission Statement," www.shj.org/humanistic-jewish-life/issues-and-resolutions/core-principles. Renewal: ALEPH, "What Is Jewish Renewal?," <http://aleph.org/what-is-jewish-renewal>; Marcia Prager, "KOL ALEPH: The Voice of ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal," <http://kolaleph.org/about/what-is-jewish-renewal/>.

What is your position on women becoming rabbis? Orthodox: Ben Harris, "For Graduates of Avi Weiss' Academy, Ordination Comes with Controversy," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, June 18, 2013, www.jta.org/2013/06/18/life-religion/for-graduates-of-avi-weiss-academy-ordination-comes-with-controversy; Batya Ungar-Sargon, "Orthodox Yeshiva Set to Ordain Three Women. Just Don't Call Them 'Rabbi,'" *Tablet Magazine*, June 10, 2013, www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/134369/orthodox-women-ordained. Reform: "What Is Reform Judaism?" Renewal: Prager, "KOL ALEPH."

What is your position on queer-identified Jews becoming rabbis? Regarding term *queer*, see special topic o.2. Reform: "Judaism and Sexual Orientation"; "What Is Reform Judaism?" Conservative: "Judaism and Sexual Orientation"; Jewish Telegraphic Agency, "Conservative Rabbis Approve Same-Sex Marriage." Reconstructionist: "FAQs on Reconstructionist Approaches." Humanistic: "Society for Humanistic Judaism Supports Rights of Same-Sex Couples," www.shj.org/humanistic-jewish-life/issues-and-resolutions/marriage-equality.

What is your position on Jews marrying non-Jews? Reform: "A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism," Central Conference of American Rabbis, May 1999, <http://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/statement-principles-reform-judaism>. See also Central Conference of American Rabbis, Contemporary American Reform Responsa, "149. Rabbi Officiating at a Mixed Marriage," 1982, <http://ccarnet.org/response/arr-467-470>. Humanistic: Society for Humanistic Judaism, "13 Tough Questions."