

Lesson Guide: Class Three

Two Jews... Three Opinions



Miller Introduction to
Judaism Program

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY



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Lesson Guide for Class #3: Two Jews... Three Opinions

Class Summary:

Understanding the varieties of Jewish-ness — including exploration of geographic, linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity. Development and ideology of the modern Jewish denominations. Introduction of the concept of mitzvah and halakha as a lens to examine the philosophical underpinnings of Jewish religious diversity.

Objectives:

Students will:

- Explore some of the basic groupings within the Jewish People — including by geographic, linguistic, and cultural background.
- Understand the major contemporary Jewish denominations, their philosophical and historical underpinnings, and the practical differences between them in practice.
- Gain an appreciation for religious pluralism as a key Jewish religious value.
- Reflect personally on where they fit in the diverse Jewish People.

Key Vocabulary:

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| ▪ Ashkenazi | ▪ Reconstructionist |
| ▪ Sephardic | ▪ Renewal |
| ▪ Mizrahi | ▪ Non-denominational/Post-denominational |
| ▪ Conservative | ▪ Halakha |
| ▪ Reform | ▪ Minhag |
| ▪ Orthodox | |

In-Person Teaching Materials:

- Room and door signs
- Name tags and pens
- Chalkboard, white-board, or large flip chart
- Colored markers or chalk
- On One Foot course books or printed PDFs
- Projector, computer & screen if showing The Hebrew Mamita, and/or using Class Slide Decks, On One Foot videos

- *Recommended:* Drawing supplies for students — markers, colored pens/pencils

Online Teaching Materials:

- Zoom Pro Account
- PDF of On One Foot chapter
- PowerPoint Class Slide Deck
- Appropriate background, lighting, and sound setup.

Set Induction: “What Does Jewish Look Like?”

In-Person: As an opening exercise, ask students to use the space provided in their coursebook to “Draw a Jew.” (This will elicit nervous laughter but insist that they do it anyway.) After a few minutes, ask them to share their drawings with the class, noting what features demonstrate that their drawings are “Jewish.”

You’ll note that most of them will likely draw Haredi-looking men and women and almost always will draw people with light skin. Point out to them that our collective internalized image of what a Jew looks like doesn’t match the reality that Jews come from a wide variety of ethnicities and backgrounds and keep different levels of observance. Keep the tone light so it doesn’t feel like you’re criticizing, just pointing out a common vision of what a Jew is in our culture that ought to be questioned.

The instructor may combine this activity with the online option presented below, but that requires that you have a computer, projector, screen, and speaker.

Online: This activity may be done in addition to the first activity, or instead of it if the instructor is not comfortable with the “Draw a Jew” exercise. Please note that this recording does include one profane word, so use judgment if there are younger/more sensitive students in the class.

Show “The Hebrew Mamita,” a spoken word poem by Vanessa Hidary, available streaming on www.hebrewmamita.com and YouTube. The words are included in this lesson guide and may be distributed to students to enable them to better follow along with the video.

Open breakout groups to discuss some of the questions raised by her performance.

Suggested discussion questions:

- Who do you consider to be “your people?”
- Have you ever been challenged that you don’t look like, act like, or belong to your people?
- How have you responded to that challenge, and what have you learned from it?

Bring groups together and debrief, noting common themes, including experiences with discrimination, anti-Semitism, and internalized forms of prejudice. Tackling these questions in small groups allows the class to build trust by speaking about more sensitive topics and exploring the dynamic nature of their own identities, particularly concerning Judaism.

Lecture: “Jewish Cultures”

Brainstorm as a class – what are some of the features that make up a culture?
(Examples include Cuisine, Dress, Language, Music, Custom, Dance, etc.)

While Jews all have their origins in the Land of Israel, over many centuries of Diaspora, distinct Jewish cultural groups have emerged that have their own food, dress, language, etc. Thus, there is certainly no such thing as a singular “Jewish culture” – instead, there are many Jewish cultures!

The three largest Jewish cultural groupings are:

1. **Ashkenazi** (Central/Eastern European)
2. **Sephardi** (Spanish/North African/Mediterranean)
3. **Mizrachi** (Iran/Iraq/Yemen)

These groups also do not cover the entire Jewish cultural world. Other Jewish groups include Jews from Sub-Saharan Africa (Ethiopia, Uganda), Jews from India (Cochin), Jews from China (Kaifeng), and others.

Define the terms: minhag (custom) and halakha (law) and explain that many Jewish practices are based not only on law, but also on regional customs. Jews from different ethnic backgrounds will have different minhagim about celebrating holidays, observing lifecycle moments, and praying in synagogue.

Establishing clarity around this language will allow the instructor to refer to different groups' customs later in the class (i.e., in the session on Passover).

In-Person/Online: There are many ways to bring culture to life. Some lend themselves more easily to the in-person space vs. online. For an in-person class, you could consider bringing in a few regional Jewish foods to sample (not all Jewish food is gefilte fish!) An online class could listen to a few different examples of different types of Jewish music (look on YouTube for examples Klezmer, Sephardic/Ladino music, etc.)

Break

Lecture “Denominations”

Students tend to come with lots of questions about Jewish denominations, so take your time with this and make sure to take questions (for those teaching online, it may be helpful to collect student questions in the chat and answer them all together at the end.)

Please also refer to the filled-out chart at the end of this lesson guide.

Begin with the history of the emergence of modern denominations:

The modern Jewish denominations are responses to the blessing and challenge of the Enlightenment/Emancipation, which began in Europe and America in the late 18th/early 19th century. When the Jewish community was segregated from Western culture, Jews did not have the option to adopt secular lifestyles or values. However, when the ghetto walls were lowered (sometimes metaphorically and sometimes literally), there was a major shift in how Jews were forced to confront their identities:

Reform Judaism emerged in Germany as the first modern denomination, rooted in an embrace of previously forbidden Western culture and values. Reform Judaism adopted practices based on Protestant Christianity (clerical robes, services in the

vernacular, organ music, etc.) and dropped practices that emphasized cultural differences between Jews and non-Jews (kashrut, Shabbat, distinctive clothing, etc.) in order to try to achieve greater integration. They emphasized prophetic ethics as a more universal and "modern" approach to religion in place of ritual observance.

Orthodoxy emerges as a reactionary response to the perceived excesses of Reform and generally forms a much more philosophically and religiously conservative approach than was the previous norm among Ashkenazi Jewish communities. For example, the famous Hungarian Orthodox rabbi, the Hatam Sofer (d. 1839), stated: *Hiddush asur min ha-Torah*, meaning, "Anything new is forbidden by the Torah." Nevertheless, orthodoxy is not monolithic, and there is significant variation even within Orthodox settings.

Conservative Judaism is historically the third denomination to develop to moderate a balance between tradition and change. Conservative Judaism develops along parallel tracks in both Central Europe and the United States.

Reconstructionist Judaism, developed by Mordechai Kaplan in the 1920s, was the first American born denomination that adopted a unique, progressive approach to Judaism — treating it as an "evolving civilization" and removing most of the "supernatural" elements, including the belief in a personal God and the idea of Jewish chosenness.

Renewal Judaism is also a 20th-century denomination founded by Rabbi Zalman Schachter and rooted in a reimagining of Jewish spiritual practices without the framework of halakha and adapting practices most often associated with "Eastern" traditions like meditation and chant.

Note that denominations are not static and have shifted significantly over the last 150 years (i.e., increasing traditionalism in Reform Judaism, the birth of both Modern & Haredi Orthodoxy, the "shrinking center" of Conservative Judaism, etc.). Also, note the emergence of non-denominational or trans-denominational Judaism that rejects what they perceive to be the overly narrow "buckets" of the contemporary denominations.

After addressing history, transition to discussing ideology, tracing how it is reflected in its treatment of significant contemporary issues (women's roles, LGBTQ, etc.). These summaries may be helpful:

Reform: Jewish law (halakha) is advisory, not binding. It can change or even disappear with changing times, though ethical mitzvot are treated with greater weight than ritual mitzvot. Reform Jews are encouraged to make "choice through knowledge," meaning that all Jewish religious decisions are left to personal autonomy.

Orthodox: Jewish law (halakha) represents the word and will of God; therefore, it is eternally binding and basically unchanging. However, within Orthodoxy there are significant rifts between those who permit engagement with the secular world (Modern Orthodoxy) and those who forbid it entirely (Haredi Orthodoxy).

Conservative: Jewish law (halakha) is binding, but it can change (slowly) in response to a significant shift in social values and drawing from Jewish law's own internal structures for making change.

Reconstructionist: Believes in a naturalistic view of God, rejects the idea of "chosen people" Judaism is an "evolving civilization." It is closer to Conservative Judaism in practice, but it is more radical than Reform in theology.

It may be helpful to read the "Four Rabbis, Four Denominations" statements in the coursebook (either all together or in breakout groups) and to give the students a chance to reflect on the ideological choices being reflected in each response in the actual words of a leader in that denomination.

Text Study: "Seventy Faces of Torah"

Close this class with a discussion of Jewish pluralism as a value. Diversity can be unsettling — there aren't as many clear answers. You can almost never just say "Judaism believes" or "Judaism says" because there are almost always multiple perspectives on any given question. However, our Tradition values this form of diversity.

In chavruta/breakouts or as a whole class, read both the text from Eruvin and Tosefta Sotah in the PowerPoint. Then, discuss: "How is it possible that both opinions can be "the words of the Living God?" What are the advantages of such a system, and what are the potential pitfalls?"

Wrap Up and Reflection

Journal Prompt: "Which denomination is closest to my identity...? Why..." & "Although I am not... I appreciate that they..."

Instructors should be checking for understanding throughout the lesson and regularly pausing for questions. However, it is essential to do so at the close of each class. In addition to using the journal prompts included in coursebook, the instructor may wish to do a group check for understanding using one of the following methods:

- As a whole class, have students go around and briefly state/write in chat one thing they learned/that surprised them/that interested them in class.
- Have students divide into pairs and share with their partner something they learned/that surprised them/that particularly interested them.

If you want to check that the students understand primary content, at the end of this class, students should be able to name the major Jewish cultural groupings and contemporary denominations, and be able to share 1-2 sentences about the origins and beliefs of each.

At Home Work

Ensure that students are registered for the On One Foot Video Companion. Students should be told to watch the "2 Jews... 3 Opinions" video and answer the review questions and journal prompt.

Denominations in Judaism

	When and where did it originate?	Approach to Jewish law and practice?
ORTHODOX	Orthodoxy emerges in Central and Eastern Europe in the mid-1800s as a response to the perceived excesses of Reform Judaism. Modern Orthodoxy is associated with the German Sampson Rafael Hirsch, while ultra-Orthodoxy is associated with the Hungarian Hatam Sofer.	Jewish law (halakha) represents the word and will of God, therefore is eternally binding and basically unchanging.
CONSERVATIVE	Conservative Judaism emerges as a moderating response between Orthodoxy and Reform in the late-1800s. Its first major institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary, was founded in 1887 in New York. Its major founder is Solomon Schechter.	Jewish law (halakha) is binding, but it can change (slowly) in response to a significant shift in social values and drawing from Jewish law's own internal structures for making change.
RECONSTRUCTIONIST	Reconstructionist Judaism is the product of the thought of Mordechai Kaplan (1881-1983), and emerges in the United States beginning in the 1920s, though the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College is not founded until 1968.	Jewish practices, including Shabbat and kashrut, constitute the "folkways" of the Jewish People, and should be preserved not because they are "commanded," but because they are important aspects of our cultural heritage.
REFORM	Reform Judaism appears in the early 1800s in Germany, as a response to the Emancipation. The first Reform temple is established in 1818 in Hamburg. Reform's founding figures include Abraham Geiger and Isaac Mayer Wise.	Jewish law (halakha) is advisory, not binding. With regard to Jewish practice, Reform Jews are encouraged to make "choices through knowledge," meaning that all Jewish religious decisions are left to personal autonomy.

Approach to gender and LGBTQ issues?	Definition of who is a Jew?	Other notes
<p>In general, Orthodoxy maintains traditional roles for men and women and does not recognize LGBT unions as legitimate under Jewish law. However, in the past several decades a few women have been given private, Orthodox rabbinic ordination and the Orthodox community is beginning to open up to gay and lesbian Jews.</p>	<p>A Jew is defined as someone who was born to a Jewish mother or who went through a conversion process under Orthodox supervision.</p>	
<p>The Conservative Movement is fully egalitarian, and began ordaining women rabbis in 1985. In 2007, the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards approved the ordination of LGBT Jews as rabbis and permitted the celebration of gay marriages.</p>	<p>A Jew is defined as someone who was born to a Jewish mother or who went through a conversion process.</p>	
<p>The Reconstructionist Movement is fully egalitarian since its inception, and ordained its first female rabbi in 1974. Mordechai Kaplan's daughter was the first woman to celebrate a bat mitzvah in 1922. It was the first denomination to ordain an openly gay rabbi, in 1985.</p>	<p>A Jew is defined as someone born to either a Jewish mother or father (patrilineal descent) or a convert to Judaism.</p>	
<p>The Reform Movement ordained its first female rabbi, Sally Priesand, in 1972. It began accepting LGBT candidate for ordination in 1990.</p>	<p>A Jew is defined as someone born to either a Jewish mother or father (patrilineal descent) or a convert to Judaism.</p>	

THE HEBREW MAMITA

BY VANESSA HIDARY

I meet a guy in a bar that's cute. He wears LL Bean duck boots and guards my barstool when I have to go pee. He asks me out to dinner for the following Tuesday. I decline. "Tuesday is Yom Kippur. I will be fasting." "You're Jewish? Wow, you don't look Jewish. You don't act Jewish." And he says it in this tone that sounds like he's complimenting me.

And I say... and I say... nothing. I say nothing, which combined with a flirty smile translates to "thank you." I say nothing, 'cause I got a contact high of someone's anti-Semitic crack pipe. I say nothing, because somewhere along my life's graph, I've been swayed to believe that being Jewish is not too cool, not too sexy. I say nothing, 'cause I'm in a deep sleep, a Snow White coma, destined to meet my prince five years later in the form of stone in Jerusalem named the Wailing Wall. I place folded paper with written prayers for the dead in a nook, in a nook in the wall next to a woman with concentration camp numbers tattooed on her forearm. Surrounded by fervent praying and bodies swaying, I am far more awake than I ever thought possible.



I suddenly remember the Exodus of the Israelites and I walk barefoot from the Wall in the desert to the bar and look for the guy with the duck boots. He's not there, but I have something to say to him. He's not there, so I make a soapbox and reenact the scene. "Bartender, tell me I don't look Jewish. Tell me I don't act Jewish." 'Cause I'm thinking, I'm saying:

What does Jewish look like to you? Should I fiddle on a freaking roof for you? Should I humor you with *oy veys* and refuse to pay? Oh, 'cause you know how we like to "Jew you down." "Jew you down," I'd like to throw you down. 'Cause I walked here long miles on hot sand to publicly repent my sins. 'Cause I almost forgot, six million died without having the option of giggling on bar stools. Almost forgot that concentration camp survivors are now a dying generation that my children may never have the sensation of seeing in person. And if you must see me as that blood-sucking Jew, see me as that pesky mosquito that bites and sucks the prejudice right out of you. Just feel the need to say I can't be the only exception to the rule, just the one right now using my poetry as a tool, to follow KRS1 I will use my gift to only uplift, and maybe change just one heart tonight.

I'm the Hebrew Mamita, long lost daughter of Abraham and Sarah, the sexy, *oy veying*, chutzpah-having, non-cheaping, non-conspirasizing, always-questioning, hip-hop listening, Torah-scroll reading, all-people loving, pride-filled Jewish girl. Bigging up all people who are a little miffed 'cause someone tells you don't look like or act like your people. Impossible. 'Cause you are your people. **You just tell them they don't look, period.**

Available for download at
www.hebrewmamita.com