

Understanding the Multifaceted Identity of the Jewish People through the Lens of History

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to highlight the development of the various aspects of Jewish identity through time. A six-factor model of Jewish identity is proposed. The first aspect of Jewish identity is reflected in our ancestral heritage connecting us to our biblical patriarchs and matriarchs. However, Judaism as a formal religion is only developed with the acceptance of the commandments of faith on Mount Sinai. The return to Israel in the times of Joshua and the building of the temple in Jerusalem adds a nationalistic identity. With the destruction of the temple and exile of Jews, ethnic differences in Judaism based on areas of migration.

Nevertheless, religious practice remained consistent until the last 200 years, which have been met with differences in religious practice ranging from Orthodox to Unaffiliated. More recently, there are individuals whom identify with the Jewish faith (“culturally Jewish” or “just Jewish”), but do not subscribe to a specific denominational category.

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The question of who or what characteristics make a person Jewish has been discussed at great length? However, there is not a single definition that adequately explains the wholeness of Jewish identity. Rather, the research on Jewish identity will focus certain aspects of Jewish identity such as religious affiliation or cultural identity. The purpose of this article is to highlight the development of the various aspects of Jewish identity through time. To do this, I will chronicle Jewish history from the creation of the world to the present day and highlight how different time periods led to more complexity within Jewish identity. A preview of this model is attached as figure 1.

Biblical Eras

From Creation to Noah. The Bible begins with a discussion on the creation of the world, mankind, and delineates the genealogy from Adam to Noah (Genesis 1:1-5:32). It notes that each generation deviated further and further from G-d's purpose (Genesis 6:11-12). As a result of this deterioration in human nature, G-d commanded Noah to build an ark and announce an impending flood to inspire the people to ultimately ask questions and repent (Genesis 6:14). However, despite these warnings, the people continued to behave in an immoral fashion (ex). Thus, G-d commanded Noah to gather pairs of animals and board this ark prior to bringing the flood waters (Genesis 6:14-7:5). The Bible indicates that Noah, his wife, Noah's three sons, and their wives were the sole survivors of the flood (Genesis 8:14-18).

From Noah to Abraham. After the flood, Noah and his family begin to repopulate the earth. Noah's three children were named Sham, Ham, and Yafes. Each of these children dispersed throughout the land (Genesis 10:1-32). The descendants of Ham migrate to Africa, Yafes to Europe, and Sham to the Middle East. The Jewish people come from the lineage of Sham. Abraham, which serves as the first forefather of the Jewish people, was the 10th generation from Sham (Genesis 11:10-26).

Forefathers and Foremothers. Judaism as a formal religion begins with our patriarchs and matriarchs. The Patriarchs of the Jewish faith are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the Matriarchs are Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. These unions serve as the foundation of the Jewish faith and continue to play a central role as evidenced by the frequency that they are mentioned in Jewish liturgy (Rabinowitz, 2000). Below, I will discuss their marriages, notable offspring, and the religions and traditions that emerge from these relationships.

Abraham and Sarah are the first pairing of forbearers of the Jewish faith (Genesis 11:29). This relationship led to the birth of Isaac (Genesis 21:1-3). However, the Bible notes that Abraham had several other wives and children. Abraham married a woman named Hagar (Genesis 16:1-3). This union led to the birth of Ismael (Genesis 16:15). The Muslim and the Babi faith trace their lineage back to the union between Abraham and Hagar (Amos, 2009; Worthington, 2011). After the death of Sarah, Abraham remarries to a woman named Keturah (Genesis 25:1). Followers of the Baha'i tradition, identify themselves to be descendants of this marriage (Worthington, 2011).

The second pairing of forbearers of the Jewish faith are Isaac and Rebecca (Genesis 25:20). They bore Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25:25-26). Jacob becomes the third Jewish

Patriarch. Some scholars have credited Esau as the forefather of Christianity (Boyarin, 1999; Worthington, 2011). Jacob also had several wives and children. He is the father of the 12 tribes of Israel as will be delineated below.

Development of Tribes. The Bible recounts Jacob's marriage and children as follows. Jacob asks to marry Rachel, the daughter of Laban, and agrees to work for him for seven years as part of their marriage arrangement (Genesis 29:18; Genesis 32:29). However, Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah and explains that it was inappropriate to marry off the younger daughter prior to the older one (Genesis 29:23-26). So, Jacob agrees to another seven years of servitude in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage (Genesis 29:28). Laban agrees to this arrangement and provides each of his daughters a maidservant to help with their responsibilities. Their names were Zilpah and Bilhah (Genesis 29:22; Genesis 29:24). These maidservants eventually become Jacob's wives as well (Genesis 30:1-13). The reason for this explanation is that through these marriages, Jacob becomes the father of the 12 tribes of Israel as will be delineated below.

Jacob has six sons and one daughter from Leah: (a) Reuben (b) Simon (b) Levi (d) Judah (e) Issachar (f) Zebulun and (g) Dinah. Rachel gives birth to Joseph and Benjamin. Zilpah gives birth to Gad and Asher. Bilhah gives birth to Dan and Naftali (Genesis 34:1; Genesis 35:23-26). In total, Jacob and his wives produce 12 sons (the "Twelve Tribes of Israel") and one daughter. Thus, the ancestral heritage serves as the first aspect of Jewish identity.

Development of a Nation. A pivotal point of history is when Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers due to perceived favoritism and sibling rivalry by their father (Genesis 37:27-28; Leung, 1991). This event changes the course of history because it leads to the results in going

down to Egypt and emerging as a nation. Joseph goes from being sold into slavery to becoming the Viceroy, which was the second most powerful man in Egypt behind the Pharaoh (Genesis 41:40). Joseph was reunited with his family as a result of a famine in Israel, which forces the brothers to buy grain from Egypt. He recognizes his brothers and asks them to bring their father down to Egypt to settle in the land of Goshen (Genesis 45:13). The Bible notes that the brothers follow this directive bringing their father and their families (a total of 70 people) down to Egypt (Genesis 46:8-27). The Jews lived relatively comfortably during this time.

However, after the death of Joseph and his brothers, there was a dramatic change in the treatment of the Jewish people (Exodus 1:6-8). The Pharaoh becomes concerned that the Jews would rebel and escape from Egypt due to their rapid development into a nation (Rabinowitz, 2000; Exodus 1:9-10). As a solution, he recommends that the Jews be enslaved and forced to do back-breaking labor (Exodus 1:13).

This appears to work as a strategy. The Bible states that the conditions were so severe that they did not even recognize the intensity of their servitude until they had time to reflect when the Pharaoh of Egypt died. Only at this point, did the Jewish people cry out to G-d for deliverance and this begins the process of redemption (Exodus 2:23-24). After a series of 10 plagues, Moses leads the Jewish nation out of Egypt (Exodus 12:29-35; Rabinowitz, 2000). The Torah suggests that there were roughly 600,000 males between the ages of 20 to 60 (Numbers 1:46). This is in addition to the women, children and other individuals that were not within the criteria (Exodus 12:37-38). As a whole, it is estimated that there were 2,000,000 people in total when the Jewish people left Egypt (Kantor, 2005). The exodus of the Jewish people is estimated to have occurred at roughly 1312/3 B.C.E. (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Kantor, 2005).

The Jewish people were offered and accepted the Torah at Mount Sinai (Kantor, 2005). Although the Bible puts an emphasis on the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), the oral tradition notes that the complete Torah, Prophets, Writings, Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, and Kabbalah were all given to Moses at Mount Sinai (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brochos 5a). This position continues to be maintained by Orthodox Jewry as will be discussed below.

The firstborn was viewed as the revered child. However, a caste system developed in the desert. At this point, the descendants of Levi were selected to have an exalted status within the nation (in place of the firstborn). Namely, the descendants of Aaron were selected to be the priests (“kohanim”) and the rest of the tribe of Levi would serve support roles in the temple (Exodus 28:1-4). This was a reward bestowed upon them as a result of their zeal in defending G-d’s honor during the incident of the golden calf (Exodus 32:25). The custom remains today to provide the highest honor to the Kohen, followed by the Levite, followed by the rest of the Jewish nation.

In sum, the descent to Egypt began with 70 people from the house of Jacob. However, Jacob’s offspring grew rapidly into a people with shared cultural identity. The watershed moment of the exodus was when this nation collectively accepts the Torah on Mount Sinai. The acceptance of the Torah makes Judaism a formal religion and serves as the second characteristic of Jewish identity. The exodus from Egypt also resulted in the development of a three-class system of Kohen, Levi, and Israelite.

Development in the Land of Israel. After sojourning for 40 years in the desert, the Jewish people begin their conquest of the land of Israel under the leadership of Joshua in the year of 1272 B.C.E (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Rabinowitz, 2000). The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and

half of the tribe of Manashe settle on the east of the Jordan River because of their large amount of livestock (Joshua 13:15-31; Numbers 34:14-15). The tribes of Simon, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Benjamin, Dan, Naftali, Asher, Ephraim, and the other half of Manashe settle in Israel proper (Numbers 34:16-28). The tribe of Levi was not given a land mass, but were given 48 cities throughout the land and supported by the community (Deuteronomy 18:2; Joshua 14:3; Numbers 35:6-7). The conquest of the land of Israel and building the temple in Jerusalem result in national identity serving as a third component of Jewish identity.

The period of the Judges (or “Elders”) came after Joshua (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Kantor, 2005; Mishnah, Tractate Avos 1:1). The period of the Judges lasts from Osnial ben Kenaz until Eli the Cohen and was followed by the period of the prophets (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). The period of the prophets spans from Samuel until Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995).

During the period of the prophets, the Jewish people request to have a king. The first king is Saul, which is succeeded by David (Samuel I 11:14-12:2; Samuel II 5:3). David selects Solomon as his successor to reign after his death (Kings I 1:43-46). The temple in Jerusalem is built during Solomon’s reign in roughly the year 930 B.C.E (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). This solidifies Jerusalem as the holiest of all cities and becomes its capital. Pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem became part of Jewish life, which fortifies the identification with the land of Israel (“national identity”). The custom of going to Israel during the major festivals continues to this very day.

However, the kingdom divides into the southern kingdom (also known as the kingdom of Judah) and the northern kingdom (also known as the kingdom of Israel) when Solomon’s sons

fight over the throne (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Kings I 12:18-20; Miller & Lovinger, 2000). The Jewish kings oscillate between righteousness and wickedness. The ultimate consequence of the transgression of G-d's word was the captivity of the 10 tribes of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria, the destruction of the first temple in the year of 586 B.C.E., and a 70 year Babylonian exile (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Edelman, 2003; Kings II 17:5-6; Rabinowitz, 2000). These 10 tribes are referred to as the "lost tribes of Israel." The prophets promise that during the days of redemption the identity of these tribes will be revealed and the nation will return to its original state of 12 tribes.

Rabbinical Eras

The Jewish people return to the land of Israel and build the second temple in the year of 516 B.C.E (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Kantor, 2005). The second temple era, however, ushers in several noteworthy changes to the practice of Judaism. The Jewish tradition is that prophesy ends and this connection is replaced with the Anshei Kenesses HaGadolah, or the Men of the Great Assembly (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Mishnah Avos 1:1; Wein, 1995). The greatest 120 scribes, sages, and the last of the prophets gathered to adjust to the changes in Jewish life (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Wein, 1995). The Tanach (an acronym for Torah [Pentateuch], Neviim [Prophets], and Kesuvim [Writings]), which is frequently referred to as the "Old Testament" was concluded, and prayer and blessings were instituted by the Men of the Great Assembly (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Talmud Bavli, Tractate Brachos 33a; Talmud Bavli, Tractate Megillah 17b). This spans from the time of Ezra the scribe until the time Shimon HaTzaddik ("The Righteous") and Antigonus from Socho, which ushers in the period of the

“pairs” (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Wein, 1995). In total, the Men of the Great Assembly lasted roughly 200 years and came to an end in 260 B.C.E (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995).

The term “Pairs” refers to a *Nassi* or “Prince” and *Av Bais Din* or “Head of the Rabbinical Court” (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Wein, 1995). These figures served as the head of the high court. This period begins with Shimon HaTzaddik and Antigonus until Hillel and Shammai. The pairs spans for roughly 250 years. These rabbis are referenced occasionally in the Mishnah and other writings of the day (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995).

The period of Pairs is followed by the time of the Tannaim, which refers to teachers. This period spans from 10 C.E. until 220 C.E. and includes the Great Revolt, destruction of the second temple, Rebellion of the Exile (also referred to as the Kitos War), and Bar Kochba’s rebellion (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Wein, 1995). The transition created by the destruction of the second temple led to a series of enactments that were meant to remind the Jewish people of the temple service (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Wein, 1995). A classic example of a remembrance is that we all wash our hands prior to eating bread as a way of reminding us how the Kohanim would do this before eating sanctified bread. Of noteworthy importance was the codification of the Mishnah and Midrash. The Mishnah was written down by Yehudah HaNassi (“Judah the Prince”) in the year of 220 C.E. to prevent the Oral law from being forgotten under Roman rule (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Wein, 1995).

The Midrash, which expounds laws and stories from verses, can be subdivided into the Michilta (Exodus), Sifra (Leviticus), and Sifri (Numbers and Deuteronomy) was compiled from the academies of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). Other teachings of the Tannaim include the Tosefta and Baraisos, which was compiled by Rebbi Chiya

and Oshiah and Rabbi Oshiah and Bar Kapara respectively (Rashi on Sanhedrin 33a; Mishnah Torah).

The period of the Amoraim (“Spokesmen”) spans from the 220 C.E. until 500 C.E (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). The major learning academies in Israel were in Tiberias, Tzipori, Caesarea, Lod, and others. In Babylon, the prominent learning academies were in Nehardea, Sura, and later of Pumbedisa (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). This period leads to the writing of the Talmud Yerushalmi (“Jerusalem Talmud”) in 395 C.E., Midrash Aggados, and Talmud Bavli (“Babylonian Talmud”) in 500 C.E. (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). The Rambam, in his introduction to the Mishnah, notes that the Talmud function as an explanation of the Mishnah, the final law for topics debated in the Mishnah, new concepts and rationales that emerged during each generation, and general exegesis.

There was a great deal of oppression in the land of Israel by the Roman, and later, Byzantine Empires (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). The Jewish people in Babylon, on the other hand, were under the Persian rule which was much more peaceful. This intellectual and religious freedom led to far more precision and depth in the Talmud Bavli than the Talmud Yerushalmi (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). Consequently, the Talmud Bavli is viewed as a more authoritative source when there is conflict between the Bavli and Yerushalmi in Jewish law (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995).

The time period of the Sevoraim (“Reasoners”) commences with the writing of the Talmud Bavli (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Wein, 1995). There is a dispute about the length of this period. One opinion is that it was only forty years from 500 C.E. to 540 C.E. (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). An alternative suggestion was that it lasted until the 700s and ended with the

death of R. Sheshna, the chief Rabbi of Sura (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). The role of the Savoraim was to clarify the words of the Amoraim. Thus, there are very few new texts written in this era (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). .

The period of the Gaonim (“Excellency”) follows the Severaim (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Wein, 1993). This title was given to the leaders of the academies of Sura and Pumpedisa in Babylon. In the land of Israel, the third major academy was in Tiberias (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Wein, 1993). This academy remained in Tiberias from the Second Temple era until the mid-900s when they relocated to Jerusalem. The length of this time period is dependent on the aforementioned debate as to when the period of the Savoraim ended (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). The Jewish communities sent questions on theology and practice to the Gaonim to which the community would receive a written response (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). This process is referred to as *Shailos U'Teshuvos*, or questions and answers (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). There were differences in practice between the academies in Israel and Babylon, but by the twelfth century deference was given to the Babylonian rabbinic authorities as noted above (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). One view suggests that the period of the Gaonim ends with the death of Rav Hai Gaon in 1038 C.E. (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Wein, 1993). The other opinions state that the end of the Gaonim period ends with R' Chananel Ben Chushial in the 1100s (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995).

Diaspora

The period of the Rishonim spans from the 10-11th century through the 15th century (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Goldwurm & Teich, 2009). During this time, there was a monumental change to Jewish life. Until this time, there were several epicenters of Torah

scholarship. However, the period of the Rishonim is marked with exiles and dispersions throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). Communities can be found in China, India, and even Japan (Miller & Lovinger, 2000). Each community developed scholars that were responsible for addressing the spiritual and material needs of their community. These Rabbis had 3 major foci (a) writing explanations and novel approaches to the Mishnah, Talmud and their predecessors (b) writings on Jewish law and (c) various questions and responses that emerged throughout the ages (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). The dispersions during the period of the Rishonim led to the development of ethnic differences within the Jewish community. This is the fourth component of Jewish identity.

Ethnic Differences

Sefardic. Traditionally Sefard referred to the Jewish communities of the Iberian Peninsula, which include Spain and Portugal (Baaskin & Seeskin, 2010; Miller & Lovinger, 2000). After the expulsion of Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1497, Sefardic Jews migrated through the Mediterranean countries, Northern Africa and the Muslim world (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Wein, 1993). Rabbi Yaakov Al-Fasi, also known as the *Rif*, was one of the first Rishonim (Goldwurm & Teich, 2009). He was born in Morocco near the town of Fes (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Goldwurm & Teich, 2009). The *Rif*'s most notable contribution was the *Safer Hahalachos*, which is one of the 3 primary sources used by Sefardim to decide a ruling in Jewish law (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995).

Maimonides (also known as the Rambam) is another key figure in Sefardic Jewry (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Goldwurm & Teich, 2009; Shulman, 1994; Wein, 1993). He was born in Cordova, Spain. The Rambam was a prolific writer of Jewish law,

philosophy and medicine. He served the king of Egypt and was revered by the general Egyptian community. The Rambam wrote so extensively that it is difficult to single out one text because it devalues his other works. His most notable contribution to philosophy was his *Guide to the Perplexed*, which explored the relationship between Aristotle's philosophy and the Jewish perspective (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). The Rambam was responsible for codifying Jewish law in the *Mishnah Torah* (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). The *Mishnah Torah* is also used by Sefardim in deciding a law. The Rambam was also physician and wrote several medicinal guides.

Nachmanides (also known as the Ramban) was a central force in Spanish Jewry prior to the expulsion (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Goldwurm & Teich, 2009; Shulman, 1993a). Similar to the Rambam, he was a rabbi, physician, commentator on the written and oral law, and a philosopher (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995). Some of his writings include *Parush al HaTorah* (explanation of the Old Testament), *Chidushai HaRamban* (explanation on the Oral Law) and the *Iggeres HaRamban* (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Shulman, 1993a). Other significant Sefardic Rabbis during the Rishonim include the Ri Megash, Rashba, Ritva, and the Meiri (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995).

The last of the Sephardic Rabbis during the Rishonim period was Rabbi Yosef (Joseph) Caro (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Wein 1993). Rabbi Yosef Caro was born in Spain in 1488. He was a prolific writer in Jewish law. His major commentaries were the *Kesef Mishnah*, *Bais Yosef*, and the *Shulchan Aruch*. The *Kesef Mishnah* was a commentary on the Rambam's *Mishnah Torah*. The *Bais Yosef* and the *Shulchan Aruch* are related insofar as the *Bais Yosef* was the in-depth explanation of the diverging viewpoints of Jewish Law and the *Shulchan Aruch*

was the more abridged version where he only presented his final legal rulings. These rulings are viewed as the way of practice by Sephardic Jewry today.

Ashkenazic. Traditionally, Ashkenazic communities referred to individual living in Germany and France (Miller & Lovinger, 2000). However, it can also refer to individuals from Poland, Lithuania, and many other Eastern European communities (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, referred to by his acronym *Rashi*, is viewed as one of the key pillars of the Ashkenazic world (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Shulman, 1993b; Wein, 1993). He wrote a commentary to virtually all of the written Torah and Talmud Bavli (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Shulman, 1993b).

Rashi was also very influential in the development of the *Baali Tosefos*, which added commentary on the Talmud. One of the most notable Tosefos was Rabbainu Tam. Rabbainu Tam was the grandson of Rashi, but is known for challenging his grandfather's view of the Talmud. He became the dean of the rabbinical academy after the death of his father and had over 80 disciples. The Rashbam, which was the brother of Rabbainu Tam, was also a very talented Torah scholar. Other notable Ashkenazi scholars during the period of the Rishonim include R' Chananel, the Ralbag, the Mordechai, and many others (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995).

The final Rishon for Ashkenazic Jewry is Rabbi Moshe Isserles, which is referred to as the Rema (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995; Wein 1993). His two notable contributions were *Darchai Moshe* and the *Mapeh*. Similar to R' Yosef Caro, the Rema wrote an extensive commentary on the on the Tur, which was the most extensive commentary (*Darchai Moshe*) for Askenazic Jewry. When the *Shulchan Aruch* was written, the Rema wrote his abridged

commentary (*HaMapeh*) to identify the areas of Jewish law where the practice was different for Ashkenazim. These rulings are viewed as the way of practice by Ashkenazic Jewry today.

Mizrachim. The term Mizrahi (sometimes called “Adus Mizrach”) refers to Jewish people from the “East.” This would include people from Northern Africa, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and other Asian countries (Abu, 2008; Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). While, there is much overlap in religious practice between Sefardim and Mizrachim, there is conflicting views whether they reflect two separate groups (Goldberg, 2008; Zohar, 2005). The Mizrachim can be traced back to the original Jews that remained in Middle Eastern countries after the exile from Israel to Babylonia, which is modern Iraq (Zohar, 2005). The waves of immigration to Israel have led to increased research on the history and treatment of these ethnic groups (Abu, 2008; Goldberg, 2008).

In sum, the period of the Rishonim led to the development of differences in the ethnic identity of Jews. More specifically, the three primary ethnic groups were: (a) Sephardim (b) Ashkenazim and (c) Mizrachim (Abu, 2008; Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). The period of the Rishonim was approximately 500 years in length and concluded in the 1500s (Eisenberg & Dumovits, 1995).

Acharonim

The period of the Acharonim extends from the 1500s until the present day. In this time, there has been variations of Judaism that emerged. These groups include: (a) Chassidim (b) Reform Judaism (c) Conservative Judaism (d) Unaffiliated/Secular Judaism.

The 1500s led to reformation in the European countries due to the influence of Martin Luther (Katz, 2011). Martin Luther (1543) wrote a pamphlet called “The Jews and their lies,”

which triggered a wave of anti-Semitism. Martin Luther encouraged the following solution to the Jewish problem: (a) Jewish schools and synagogues were to be burned (b) houses owned by Jews are to be razed (c) religious writings be confiscated (d) Rabbinical sermons were banned with a consequence of death (e) safe conduct on the road was abolished for Jews (f) money lending was banned and (g) the Jews were to do slave labor (Part XI). This led to anti-Semitism and Jews started to emigrate to Poland and Russia as a means of finding security (Katz, 2011). This is responsible for the further dispersion of Ashkenazic Jewry.

The 1600s came with it a false Messiah, named Shabbasai Tzvi. He started to claim that he was having messianic visions. Subsequently, Nathan of Gaza started to “prophesize” and publically claim that Shabbasai Tzvi was the Messiah (Wein, 2004). Shabbasai Tzvi claimed that the redemption was imminent and that the Jews should sell their worldly possessions and return to the land of Israel (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Wein, 2004). Many Jews followed his directive only to find later that he converted to Islam (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010).

A second controversial figure in the 1600s is Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza, both a philosopher and rationalist, attempted to address the relationship between G-d and nature. He resolved that contrary to the prevailing opinion in his day that G-d (supernatural) and nature factors are intertwined and that G-d is reveal through nature (Wein, 2004). Therefore, to suggest the presence of miracles would be to contradict the existence of G-d (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Smith, 2003). His most controversial statements related to challenging the veracity of the Bible and its relevance to current society (Preus, 2001; Wein, 2004). Due to his strong and public deviations in Jewish traditions, he was excommunicated for heresy for these statements (Preus,

2001; Smith, 2003; Wein, 2004). The false Messiah of Shabbasai Tzvi and Spinoza's theology sent shockwaves of suspicion about any deviation from Rabbinical Judaism.

Chassidim. The term "Chassidim" refers to a diverse group of ultraorthodox Jews emerging out of Eastern Europe in the 1700s. The spiritual father of this movement is Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer, which is referred to as the "Baal Shem Tov (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Dokter, 2011). The Baal Shem Tov expressed an emphasis on the spirit and acts of loving kindness and the mystical side of Judaism (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Miller & Lovinger, 2000). This was an attempt minimize what was viewed as an overemphasis on Talmud and Jewish law. While the early proponents of Chassidim were strongly opposed because of the experience of Shabbasai Tzvi and their mystic approach to serving the Creator, today there is little conflict and are classified within the Orthodox group (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). However, it is significant to note that the Baal Shem Tov was not opposed to adherence to Jewish law. Thus, Chassidism has flourished into several dozen groups with devotion to their religious leaders.

Development of Religious Movements

While there were tribal divisions, ethnic divisions, and differences in ways one could serve G-d, all people that identified as Jewish were fully-practicing, Orthodox Jews. The cultural climate began to change 18th century. The period of the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, began to flourish at this time. The *haskalah* led to an integration of cultural and non-Rabbinic thought processes into Judaism (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Wein, 2004). As a result, several competing factions within Judaism started to emerge.

Moses Mendelssohn is viewed as a polarizing figure within Judaism. He is praised for his work for emancipation of Jews, but is highly criticized for his involvement in secular

endeavors (Wein, 2004). Mendelssohn is viewed as extraordinary intellectual, as evidenced by his ability to teach himself several foreign languages, mathematical and analytical abilities, and his philosophical prowess (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). Moses Mendelssohn received strong support from both secular and rabbinical authorities in his early years (Wein, 2004). He would go on to found several publications, translate the Torah into German, and support the *haskalah* movement (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). These events would lead to Mendelssohn losing rabbinical support (Wein, 2004). While still argued, many scholars view Mendelssohn as the spiritual father of the Reform movement (Freudenthal, 2007; Plaut, 1987; Wein, 2004).

Orthodox. The origin of the word “Orthodox” as it pertains to the Jewish people developed in the early 1800s both as a response to the Reform movement and Napoleon’s attempt to free the Jews from their Ghettos (Schnall, 2006). It was also used by the Reform movement to suggest the rigidity and primitive nature of traditional Jewry. For operationalization purposes, Schnall (2006) wrote that Orthodoxy refers to individuals that “accept the fullness of Jewish law and tradition.” This can be broken down into faith and practice.

The Rambam wrote 13 principles of faith as follows: (a) the existence of G-d and that He is the creator of all (b) the oneness of G-d (c) G-d is non-corporeal (d) G-d is first and last (e) one should only pray to G-d and no others (f) all of the words of the prophets are true (g) Moses is the greatest prophet in relation to those whom preceded and came after him (h) the Torah is of divine origin and that it is the same as was given on Mt. Sinai (i) the will never be exchanged for another bible (j) G-d knows our thoughts and actions (k) the concept of reward and punishment for observance and transgression respectively (l) the coming of the Messiah and (m) the resurrection of the dead.

In addition to the main principles of faith, Orthodox Jews adhere to the 613 Biblical commandments and the rabbinical explanations and safeguards (Exodus 20:12; Tractate Brochos 5a; Tractate Makkos, 23b). While it is outside the purview of this dissertation to list or evaluate differences across all of these commandments (see the Rambam's *Safer HaMitzvos*, *Safer HaChinuch*, and the *Safer Mitzvos HaGadol* [SM'G] for a complete listing), Sabbath and holiday observance, family purity laws, dietary laws and intermarriage serve as common points of divergence between Orthodoxy and other approaches to Judaism (Miller & Lovinger, 2000; Rabinowitz, 2000). The latest census data suggests that 13 percent of American Jewry (including adult and children) identify as Orthodox (National Jewish Population Survey, 2002).

Reform. The reform movement started to develop with the desire to assimilate into the larger European societies and the Jewish Enlightenment (Langton, 2004). The new movement aspired to adhere to the ethical principles, but denied the veracity of the Bible and modified many customs associated to the religion (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Miller & Lovinger, 2000; Rabinowitz, 2000; Wein, 2004). This was the most significant change in Jewish identity up to that point.

Reform synagogues started to emerge between the decades of 1810-1820s (Sharot, 1979; Wein, 2004). The prayer service was shortened, the *bimah* (table to read the Torah on) was moved, the liturgy was changed, an organ and choir was added, and the process of receiving an *aliyah* (being called up to the Torah) was removed (Miller & Lovinger, 2000; Rabinowitz, 2000; Sharot, 1979).

While Moses Mendelssohn is a forerunner of the Reform movement, Abraham Geiger is viewed as the founder of Reform Judaism (Wein, 2004). Abraham Geiger and Samuel Holdheim

molded the reform movement in Germany (Meyer, 2003). Whereas Geiger was viewed as a traditionalist relative to his peer reformer, Holdheim was much more radical (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Meyer, 2003). Holdheim sought to remove the requirement for Jews to follow Jewish law, dietary laws, circumcision, etc. (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010).

Isaac Meyer Wise was the developer was viewed as the founder of reform movement and inspiration for the creation of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now called the Union for Reform Judaism), Hebrew Union College, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis in the in the United States (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Meyer, 1998). Wise encouraged the abolition of the second day of holidays, minimized the requirement for following the Torah, fasting, Sabbath restrictions, circumcision, family purity laws, and supported mixed seating in synagogue (Rubenstein, 1977).

This liberal version of Judaism continued to develop and thrive in England, Germany, and the United States (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Langton, 2004; Sharot, 1979). Many individuals that adopted these principles did so because it afforded them more upward motility within the larger European society. This was their response to the existing restrictions on what a Jewish person could do (Sharot, 1979). The latest census data suggests that 34 percent of American Jewry (including adult and children) identify as Reform (National Jewish Population Survey, 2002).

The Orthodox community's perspective on the developing changes proposed by the Reform movement was a distortion of faith and wrote a caution about mingling with congregants and praying in their temples (Shalot, 1979; Wein, 2004). The purpose of this "caution" was to protect Orthodox congregants from being swayed by the radical nature of the reform movement

(Shalot, 1979). Samson Raphael Hirsch was responsible for defending Jewish traditions in Germany (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Wein, 2004). He wrote a series of letters as refutations to the Reform Movement (Wein, 2004). The conservative movement, which will be discussed below, was also a direct response to the Reform movement.

Conservative. Zacharias Frankel is viewed as the father of the Conservative movement in Germany. Frankel felt that the reform movement was too progressive and removed the essence of the faith (Schorsch, 1981). Frankel protested the other reformers by walking out of the Frankfurt Rabbinical Conference (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Schorsch, 1981). He spearheaded a movement that was based on the traditions of Jewish thought and history, but did not strictly adhere to Jewish law as firmly as the Orthodox communities (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Schorsch, 1981). Frankel and his colleagues created the Jewish Theological Seminary as a means of accomplishing their goals.

In the United States, Solomon Schechter was a central figure for the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Schechter was raised from parents that were committed to Chabad Chassidism (Idel, 2010). He was brought from England to mold conservative Jewry (Starr, 2004). Schechter put an emphasis on the historical and traditional aspects of Judaism (Starr, 2005). He desired to create a “Catholic Judaism,” which would interpret their Judaism based on culture and tradition (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010; Starr, 2005). The Conservative movement would develop their own rabbinical court, divorce documents, conversion, rabbinical ordination of women, and many other decrees that were inconsistent with Orthodox values (Spitzer, 2005; Wein, 2004). The latest census data suggests that 26 percent of American Jewry (including adult and children) identify as Conservative (National Jewish Population Survey, 2002).

Unaffiliated. Since the time of the Reform and Conservative movements, there has been a sharp increase in the number of Jews that have become disenfranchised with religious movements. Researchers have found that lower levels of religious involvement and social contact leads to decreased Jewish identity (Amyot & Sigelman, 1996; Klaff, 2006; Lazerwitz & Harrison, 1979). Many of these individuals identify as being Jewish, but do not affiliate with a synagogue. They also do not practice most, if not all, of the rituals that are affiliated with Judaism (Lazerwitz & Harrison, 1979). Rather, they are connected to the ethnic identity of Judaism (Amyot & Sigelman, 1996; Lazerwitz & Harrison, 1979). The latest census data suggests that 27 percent of American Jewry (including adult and children) identify as Reconstructionist or Unaffiliated (National Jewish Population Survey, 2002). The various levels of religious practice are the fifth component of Jewish identity. However, there are many Jews that do not subscribe to a house of worship. Being “culturally” Jewish is the sixth aspect of Jewish identity.

Conclusion

The identity of a Jew is directly linked to history. It is most accurately described as multidimensional. As has been noted above, the foundations of Jewry come from our shared ancestral heritage connecting us to our biblical patriarchs and matriarchs. However, the Jewish religious identity is crystalized with the acceptance of the commandments of faith on Mount Sinai. The return to Israel in the times of Joshua and the building of the temple in Jerusalem adds a nationalistic identity. The destruction of the temple and exile of Jews led to the development of ethnic differences in Judaism. However, the past 200 years have led to differences in religious practice ranging from Orthodox to Unaffiliated, but culturally Jewish. A

summary of the major historical periods and related milestones are listed in figure 2.

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