Social Groupings of Orthodox Jews

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Introduction: Ashkenazim, Sephardim, and Others

One way to think about diverse Orthodox communities is to focus on ideological distinctions: What does a Chasidic Jew, or a Modern Orthodox Jew, or a Yeshivish Jew, believe? How do they practice their Judaism?

Another perspective on the diversity of Orthodox communities is to focus on social groupings and origins. This sketch provides basic guidance on the social groupings and origins that can help colleagues better understand Orthodox Jewish communities and better service Orthodox clients.

The following prominent groupings are described here:

- "Ashkenazim" - Ashkenazi Orthodox Jews, especially those from the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth
    - Litvaks / "Lithuanians"
    - Chasidim
- "Sephardim" ('Spanish') or "Mizrachi" (Eastern) Jews – from many lands, especially from the lands of the Umayyad and later Muslim caliphates, including:
    - Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Persia/Iran, Turkey, Yemen

- These Jews included unique communities tracing their roots to the expelled Jewish communities of Spain and Portugal

There are ancient Jewish communities whose descendants include Orthodox Jews who proudly preserve their traditions, including from Germany, Austria, Italy, and Greece.

North American Orthodox Jews from these places rarely live in large enough numbers to establish unique social groupings. Rather, they tend to join communities of other groups.

Ashkenazim

In the Middle Ages, prominent Italian Jewish families migrated north into areas around the Rhine River. Those who lived on the East side of the Rhine identified their new home with the Biblical placename "Ashkenaz." They adopted the Middle High German language, but developed their own dialect, including many nouns and verbs based on Hebrew. This dialect became known as "Yiddish-Taytsh" (Judeo-German) or, as we are more familiar with it, "Yiddish" ("Jewish").

The significance of Ashkenazi Yiddish-speaking Jewry within world Jewry is hard to exaggerate: At its height (the year 1939), 11 million spoke the Yiddish language. (At the time, there were ~15 million Jews worldwide.) Yiddish almost died because of the Holocaust, migration, and the rise of English and Hebrew as tongues spoken by Jews.

The majority culture in which Ashkenazi Jewry lived was predominantly Christian (Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and, later, Protestant in parts of Europe). Their pronunciation of Hebrew was influenced by the Indo-European languages they heard around them (especially Polish and German).

Although Ashkenazi Jewry began in what is now France and Germany, the largest population lived in eastern Europe. This was the result not only of expulsions from central Europe but also of the kind welcome of the Kingdom of Poland.

The vast majority of Orthodox Jews in North America—like the vast majority of North American Jews in general—harken back to Eastern European Jewish communities in areas now included in the countries of Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Lithuania, and Latvia. Before the end of the 18th century, most of these communities were in a single political entity, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Just before the Holocaust, most of the Jews in the world either lived in the territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (see the map below) or traced their roots back to them.

This map reflects the Commonwealth and its Fiefs in 1618. Note that the country names and boundaries in black approximately reflect the current political situation. The boundaries in red reflect different areas of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The



southern areas in coral represent the Kingdom of Poland. The pink areas represent the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rzeczpospolita2nar.png.

The Jews of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had a powerful council governing Jewish communal affairs, known for long as "The Council of the Four Lands." In 1623, the Jews of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania formed their own Council.

The Jews of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: Lithuanian and Polish

The term Lithuanian Jewry applies to Jews who lived in the territory of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, including most of current day Belarus--not just those who lived in the territory of present-day Lithuania. These Jews looked to the rabbinic and mercantile elites of Vilna and other Lithuanian cities for leadership. They had their own dialect of Yiddish.

The term Polish Jewry can be applied to Jews who lived in the Kingdom of Poland, including most of current-day Ukraine. These Jews looked to the rabbinic and mercantile elites of the Council of Four (or Three) Lands, based in the city of Lublin. They also had their own dialect of Yiddish.

With the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth among Prussia, Austria, and Russia in the last decades of the 1700s, the Jews of different parts of what had been a single country were now living in different countries without a central Jewish organization to govern their communities.

Chasidim and Litvaks (adjectival forms: Chassidish, Litvish)

'Chasidim', literally 'pious ones,' is an ideological term that, in effect, is sociological as well. Chasidim are Jews loyal to the charismatic leadership of the Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760 in Medzhybozh, Ukraine) and of his disciples. For Chasidim, to be close to the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples – the Tzaddikim ('righteous ones') – is part of being close to G-d. In the late 1700s and 1800s, Chasidism attracted the masses of Jews in what is now Ukraine and Poland -- lands that had been part of the Kingdom of Poland – as well as in other places.

Chasidic groups (or 'courts') preserve unique customs affecting dress, prayer, and pattern of life. Some of the most prominent Chasidic groups are Belz, Bobov, Chabad Lubavitch, Ger, Satmar, Skver, and Vizhnitz. Some of these groups have large centers in North America (especially New York City). Chabad has an approach to engagement with an influence all over North America and beyond.

'Litvaks,' literally 'Lithuanians,' is a sociological term that, in effect, is ideological as well. Litvaks are Jews whose ancestors lived in areas that were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (including lands that are now in Lithuania, Latvia, and Belarus). When 'Litvak' is used to describe Orthodox Jews, it refers to Jews who remained loyal to the Talmudic elite based in cities such as Vilna, including such luminaries as the Gaon of Vilna (d. 1797). Another term that was initially used pejoratively to describe Litvaks was "Misnagdim," meaning opponents of Chasidism.

In the 19th centuries, followers of the Gaon of Vilna established the great Lithuanian Yeshivas (Talmudic academies) in Volozhin, Slobodka, Mir, Telz, etc., antecedents of some of the most prominent Yeshivas now functioning in Israel and the U.S. In recent decades, Beth Medrash Govoha ('Lakewood Yeshiva'), Ner Israel, and other Yeshivas have established Kollels (advanced Talmud centers) that also provide community engagement in many North American cities. The term "Yeshivish," meaning "associated with the world of Yeshivas," can also be used to describe Jews of Lithuanian/Litvak origin.

What about Russian Jews?

Until the Russian Revolution, very few Jews in the Russian Empire were permitted to take up residence in Russia itself. When we speak about 'Russian Jews' in North America today, we are speaking of Jews who came from the Former Soviet Union (especially from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova). These Jews were raised to speak Russian and were strongly discouraged from learning about or practicing Jewish tradition. Their Jewish identity was preserved in part due to the Soviet practice of identifying Jews as such in their required internal passports--they were legally required to know that they were Jews. When Russian Jews emigrated in large numbers in the late 20th century, many of them found their way to Orthodox Jewish life. Many of those are Modern Orthodox, many are affiliated with Chabad, and many are Yeshivish.

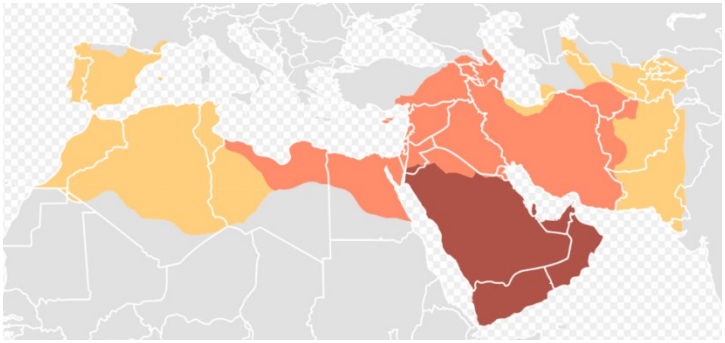
Sephardim/Mizrachi

The term 'Sephardim' is not precise. "Sepharad" is a biblical place name that was later identified with Spain. Most Jews who are referred to as "Sephardic" do not harken back to Spain. This term groups together communities with roots in Spain, Portugal, North Africa (especially Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt), and the Middle East (especially current day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Yemen). Another term, "Mizrachi" (Eastern) or

“Edot HaMizrach” (Eastern Communities) is more general, although a country like Morocco is not properly “Eastern" in comparison to Poland!

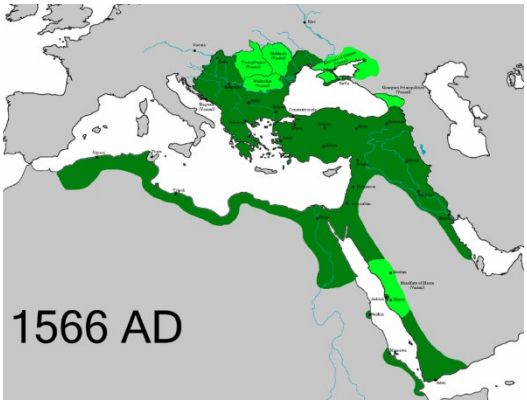
Like Ashkenazi Jews, Sephardim crafted Jewish dialects from the local languages of their dispersion: Judeo-Spanish (Ladino), Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, etc.

The majority culture in which Sephardic Jewry lived was predominantly Muslim (mostly Sunni and sometimes Shia). Their Hebrew was influenced by the languages they heard around them, including Arabic (which, like Hebrew, is a Semitic language). In recent centuries, Jews in North Africa, Syria, and Turkey often adopted the French language.



Extent of the Umayyad Caliphate (all colored areas), 661-750. The Jews who lived in these lands were part of a single Muslim empire stretching from Iberia to present-day Pakistan.

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The Ottoman Empire upon the death of Suleiman the Magnificent, 1566.

After the expulsion of Jews from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1496-7), many Iberian Jews were welcomed into lands of the Ottoman Empire. There, they often preserved their own traditions

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Sephardi/Mizrachi Jews have preserved local customs, including prayer traditions. A Sephardi synagogue may be Syrian, Moroccan, Persian/Iranian, Egyptian, Bukharian, Spanish-Portuguese, etc.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, many Sephardi/Mizrachi communities emigrated or were expelled, with large numbers moving to Israel.

In Israel today, the Jewish population is essentially half Sephardi/Mizrachi and half Ashkenazi. In North America, most Jews are of Ashkenazi origin.

Where did they end up?

Orthodox Jews in North America may identify with communities distinct from their places of origin. People of Sephardic origin may associate with the Litvak ``Yeshiva world"; people of Litvak origin may identify as Chasidim, people of Chasidic origin may identify as Modern Orthodox, and so forth.

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