

# **The Jewish Culture**

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Spring 2003

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## I. Description of Culture

### Demographics in Maine

- According to the 2000 census, 9,300 Jewish individuals (.7% of total population) lived in Maine.
- Portland, ME is the largest Jewish community followed by Bangor, Augusta, Bath, and Lewiston/Auburn.
- There are 9 synagogues in Portland.

### Jewish History

- The Tribal Era (2000-1000 BC): Jewish ancestors were polytheistic nomadic shepherds and farmers.
- The Royal Era (1000-586 BC): Increasing urbanization, period of revolt against centralization.
- The Priestly Era (520-100 BC): Rise of the priestly class and priestly authority.
- The Rabbinic Era (100 BC- 1800): Jewish life centered around prayer and rituals in the home and synagogue.
- The Modern Era (1790- Present): Introduction of new forms of Judaism and secularization of Jewish life.

### Jewish Language

- Hebrew: The original language of the Torah.  
Revived as a living language by Ben Yehuda 100 years ago.  
Spoken in Israel today.
- Yiddish: Mix of German and Hebrew  
Spoken by the Jews of Eastern Europe.  
Almost dead but there has been a recent revival.
- Liddeno: Mix of Spanish and Hebrew.  
Spoken by the Jews of the Mediterranean.  
Rarely spoken today.
- Aramaic: Language of the Talmud.  
Spoken 2000 years ago.

### Jewish Religion

- The Maine Jewish community consists of Reconstructionists, Orthodox, Hasidic, Conservative, and Reform.

- Reconstructionists: Believe that basic tenets of Judaism need to be reexamined and restated for the current time period. Reconstructionists love tradition and celebration of Jewish lifecycle events, but believe that the Jewish community is changing and individuals have the right to adapt Jewish tradition to new circumstances.
- Orthodox: Continuation of the beliefs and practices of normative Judaism. Believe that the written and oral torah are exact word of God.
- Hasidic: Differentiated from Orthodox Jews by their devotion to a leader (referred to as “Rebbe”), their wearing of distinctive clothing, and a greater than average study of the Torah.
- Conservative: Have a positive attitude toward modern culture, but are committed to leading an authentic Jewish lifestyle.
- Reform: One of the guiding principles of Reform Judaism is the autonomy of the individual. A Reform Jew has the right to decide whether to accept a particular Jewish belief or practice. Reform Jews recognize that Jewish heritage has evolved and adapted over the centuries and must continue to do so. Obligated to study and observe Jewish traditions.
- In Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, a person is considered Jewish only if their mother is (or converted to) Jewish.
- In Reform Judaism, a person is considered Jewish if either parent is Jewish and if they (the individual) has converted.

### **Jewish Texts**

- Tanakh: Composed of three sections.
  - The Torah (Pentateuch): The first section, which consists of five books.
  - Nevi'im (Prophets): The second section, which consists of eight books.
  - Ketuvim (Writings): The third section, which consists of eleven books.
- Talmud: the most famous collection of Jewish teaching, which contains stories, laws, and medical knowledge.

### **Jewish Beliefs**

- God is the creator of all that exists. He is the one true God.
- Moses received the first five books of the bible from God.
- God rewards those who obey his laws and punishes those who do evil.

### **Jewish vs. Christian Beliefs**

- Jews traditionally place actions over beliefs.
- Jewish beliefs do not include the concept of original sin.

- Judaism believes in the inherent goodness of the world.
- No intermediary is needed between humans and God.
- Jews do not recognize Jesus as the son of God.

### **Jewish Rites and Passages**

- Circumcision: As part of the Jews' covenant with God, all male Jewish boys are circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of life. The ritual is called a bris and is performed by a "mohel", a person specially trained to perform this rite. The rite marks the boy's entrance into the covenant (brit) with God. During the rite they are given their Jewish name, a link with previous generations.
- Bar Mitzvah (son of the commandments): When a Jewish boy turns 13 years old and one day, he is then considered a man and must meet the requirements of ritual and civil law. During a normal Sabbath service the child is called upon to read from the Torah for the first time.
- Bas Mitzvah (daughter of the commandments): When a Jewish girl turns 12 years old, she is then considered a woman, and must meet the requirements and obligations for a Jewish woman. The reason girls assume this responsibility at a younger age probably is due to the fact that girls mature faster than boys at this time of their lives.

### **Jewish Death Rituals**

- The body of the deceased is washed thoroughly.
- The deceased is buried in a simple pine coffin.
- The deceased is buried wearing a simple white shroud (tachrichim).
- The body is guarded or watched from the moment of death until after burial.

### **Jewish Holidays and Celebrations**

- Passover: Held in the spring. Recalls Jews' deliverance out of slavery in Egypt, 1300 BC. Marked by the ritual of a Seder meal.
  - To prepare for Passover, homes must be rid of Chametz, which is anything that contains Yeast or any other leavening product.
  - Some Jews avoid rice, corn, peanuts, and beans for the fear that Chametz might have been mixed in.
  - During Passover, any utensils, dishes, or pots and pans that may have come into contact with Chametz may not be used.
  - A formal search (Bedikat Chametz) usually happens the night Before Passover. Any Chametz found is set aside, wrapped, and burned the next morning.
  - The process of cleaning the house for Passover sometimes takes days or weeks.
- Rosh Hashanah: Jewish New Year. Celebrates the creation of the world, which occurred 5,760 years ago. This celebration is held in the fall.

Occurs during the ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kipper: days of fasting and penitence.

- Sukkoth: Eight day harvest festival. Takes place near Thanksgiving.
- Chanukkah (Feast of Lights): Recalls the war fought by the Maccabees. Used to be a minor holiday but now more important. An eight day festival beginning on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the Jewish month of Kislev (December 19-26<sup>th</sup>).
- Purim (Feast of Lots): Recalls the defeat of Queen Esther, who planned to slaughter all the Persian Jews, circa 400 BC.
  - Purim falls in the middle of the Hebrew month of Adar (February & March).
  - To celebrate Purim, it is traditional to send baskets or packaged foods to family and friends.
  - The main religious event of this day is the communal reading of the Purim story from the scroll Megillah. It is a wild and public display of unrestricted joy, highlighted by carnivals and nonsense.
- Shavuot (Feast of Weeks): Recalls God's revelation of the Torah to the Jewish people.

### **Festival Foods**

- Kugel: served in some Jewish homes. Kugel is a type of noodle pudding.
- Shabbat/Cholent: an all-night stew.
- Charoset: A Passover food that is a sweet, pastry mixture and is made differently by Jews all over the world, usually with wine, nuts, and apples.
- Challah: is a common twisted loaf of egg bread that you are most likely to see in all homes served on the eve of Sabbaths and festivals. Usually served with sweet Kosher wine.
- In celebration of Rosh Hashanah, an apple dipped in honey is used to symbolize a sweet new year.
- Other festival foods: Potato pancakes (latkes) and Chanuka (miracle of oil)
- Matzah: served at Passover. It is a thin unleavened bread. It is made of flour and water and is cooked very quickly so that it does not rise. Enriched Matzah (matzah ashirah) contains egg, milk, honey, wine, or fruit juice. Enriched Matzah is only permitted on Passover for someone who is having difficulty digesting regular Matzah.
- The Seder Meal: held in observance of Passover. The Seder meal holds great importance and is a time of family gathering. Items served include hardboiled eggs, bitter herbs, parsley and horseradish (Maror) and Kosher wine.
- Hamentaschen: pastry eaten during Purim. These pastries are triangular cookies usually filled with jam or poppy seeds.
- Tzimmes: is a sweet stew consisting of carrots, cinnamon, yams, and prunes.

- A common Jewish food item is the bagel (boiled and baked). The addition of cream cheese and lox is a custom born in America.

### **Jewish Dietary Laws (Keeping Kosher)**

- Kosher: Dietary laws practiced by some people of the Jewish faith.
  - Certain animals may not be eaten at all. This restriction includes the flesh, organs, eggs, and milk of the forbidden animals.
  - Jews may not eat such animals as the horse and pig.
  - Jews may not eat birds of prey, since the meat of animals that cause pain to other animals is forbidden.
  - Of the animals that can be eaten, the birds and mammals must be killed in accordance with Jewish law.
  - All blood must be drained from the meat or broiled out of it before it is eaten.
  - Meat (the flesh of birds and mammals) may not be eaten with dairy. Fish, eggs, fruits, vegetables and grains can be eaten with either meat or dairy. According to some views, fish may not be eaten with meat.
  - Grape products made by non-Jews may not be eaten.
  - Utensils that have come in contact with meat may not be used with dairy, and vice versa. Utensils that come in contact with non-kosher food may not be used with kosher food.
  - Most Kosher homes have several sets of dishes to be used only with certain foods.

### **Jewish Clothing and Hair**

- Kippah: headcovering worn by Jewish men and women during prayer.
- Most Orthodox Jewish men wear their kippah at all times, not only during prayer. They cover their head to show respect to God, and since God is everywhere, they believe their head should never be uncovered.
- Married Orthodox women wear headcovers at all times, due to feminine modesty. They may wear a hat, or scarf, or wear a wig over their natural hair. Orthodox women will not allow their natural hair to be seen in public.
- Tallit: Prayer shawl. Orthodox men wear it all day long. A tallit is given to a boy or girl as a sign of adulthood. A Jewish person often passes their tallit on to their children or they are buried in it after death.
- Orthodox (and some Conservative and Reconstructionist) Jews wear a tefillin. A tefillin consists of two small black boxes with leather straps attached. One box is fastened to the left arm, and the other is placed on the forehead. As a rule, tefillin is worn only in morning worship, and only on the weekdays.

### **Jewish Family/Relationships/Roles**

- Jewish households may contain: persons who have never been married; two parent families with no children; two parent families and many kids; single parent families; and divorced households without children.
- Proportions of older, single, divorced, remarried, or dual-career households make up more of the Jewish population than intact young families with children.
- The elderly are the largest growing age group among the Jewish American population.
- The majority of the elderly Jewish population, both couples and singles, live in their own households, rather than with relatives.
- 18% of Jews are divorced. The chance of divorce occurring for Jewish people is 1 in 6. Jewish divorce primarily occurs among couples between ages 30 and 40. An increasing number of couples who have been married for 20 or more years are splitting up after their children become adults.
- Jewish people highly value marital success, so when a divorce occurs, there is often a decrease in self esteem in both Jewish men and women.
- “Being a Jewish mother is strongly associated with belonging to a synagogue, belonging and working for Jewish organizations, making donations to Jewish charitable causes, having mostly Jewish friends, observing Jewish holidays, and seeing Judaism as a very important aspect of one’s life.” (Bayme & Rosen, 1994, p. 31).
- Due to delayed marriage and childbirth, preference for smaller families, and unwanted infertility, the average Jewish family has fewer than 2 children per married household.

### **Jewish Work/Leisure**

- Jewish women are the most highly educated women in the United States. 48% of those employed hold professional or managerial positions.
- Jewish women with children under school age are more likely to stay home with their kids.
- Jewish women with children in school are more likely to work full-time.
- Part-time employment is popular among Jewish women. Working part-time provides time to spend with children and earn a living.
- Leisure activities are very structured and prioritized, due to lack of time. It is difficult to get parents of young children to participate in any activity that is not directed toward the enhancement of the family or their career.
- Jewish families create “sacred” times together. Sacred family times often follow the Jewish calendar and involve preparation for Jewish holidays and celebrations.

## **II. Jewish Attitudes Towards Health and Wellness**

- Jewish people believe that human beings do not own their own bodies. They believe that each one of us is created in part by God and we do not have the right to do what we want with our bodies.
- Jewish people do not believe in euthanasia, suicide, or abortion and such actions are prohibited by Jewish law. Jews believe that we are not permitted to destroy something that we do not own.
- Jewish people believe that the body and soul are integrated. For example, with Alzheimer's disease, a person may lose their memory but they still retain their soul.
- Jews believe that God gives the permission to heal and that they have an obligation to heal. Members of the community are obligated to care for one another.
- The practice of medicine should be carried out with humility. There is no expectation by the Jewish patient or physician that all diseases can be cured.
- Prevention is seen as the highest form of healing. Drugs and surgery are regarded as failure in prevention.
- Nutrition plays an important role in treatment of disease and prevention of illness.
- In Judaism, becoming informed about medical treatment and options and giving consent for appropriate treatment is required. Jewish patients may refuse treatment until they are convinced that the proposed course of treatment is the best option, but once all information has been gathered and processed, the patient must make a decision to receive care.
- Judaism demands fair treatment of individuals with disabilities. Jews believe in having a mature attitude of meaningful concern toward handicapped individuals. Disabled or handicapped individuals should be included within the Jewish community. A family member with a disability is not seen as the "black sheep" of the Jewish family.

## **III. Challenges for Health Care**

- Modesty: Jewish women are very private and modest, and prefer to be treated by a practitioner of the same sex.
- After the death of a Jewish patient, the person's body is watched until after the burial, which could be inconvenient for healthcare professionals.
- Many Jewish disapprove of circumcision being done by a pediatrician, although it is allowed. The procedure takes more time to complete when done by a pediatrician than by a Mohel. It is customary for Jewish families to give their newborn a ritual circumcision performed by a Mohel.
- Hasidic Jews select only specific healthcare providers who are part of the Hasidic Jewish community.
- Elective procedures, such as diagnostic tests, are not performed on the Sabbath or during holy days.

- Kosher dietary laws are often difficult to follow during illness. The patient's family may choose to bring kosher food into the hospital.
- Jewish patients may seem indifferent when making healthcare decisions. Jewish people believe that they do not own their bodies and believe that they do not have the right to do what they want with their bodies. Many Jewish people need a Rabbi to help offer advice when making difficult medical decisions.
- During holidays, especially Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Jewish patients may want to participate in religious services.

#### **IV. Suggestions for Health Care Providers**

- Focus on healing the whole person. Treatment should help to diminish physical symptoms and nurture the patient's spirit.
- Jewish prayer is an important part of treatment. Jewish prayers of healing should be a part of patient care if possible. Health care providers should determine how prayer can be used for optimal effectiveness.
- Everything possible must be done for a Jewish patient. Judaism focuses on the value of life.
- Jewish patients believe in prevention. Discuss prevention of disease and illness with Jewish patients. Educate and support Jewish patients lifestyle and diet changes to promote health and wellness.
- Jewish patients should be encouraged to consult with their rabbi when faced with difficult decisions regarding medical care.
- Health care providers should be encouraging, but be realistic in discussing the impending death of a patient.
- Encourage a Jewish patient who is dying to explore his or her values, concerns, and fears.
- Explore a patient's religious practices. Determine their degree of adherence to Jewish laws, especially dietary laws.
- Patients may want to consult a rabbi when medical recommendations are made that effect dietary restrictions.
- Eating meals is considered important to the Jewish person even in the late stages of disease. Families may be reluctant to accept the withholding of food even for medically necessary reasons.
- Be aware of each patient's life history. Many older Jewish patients may be Holocaust survivors.

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