

Who is a Jew? It Depends Who You Ask

Who Was a Jew in Biblical and Rabbinic Times?

- In the Torah, there are many examples of children being born as a result of marriages between Israelite or Jewish men and non-Israelite or women who are not Jewish. One example is Joseph, who married Osnat, the daughter of an Egyptian priest. Many Jewish parents bless their sons on Shabbat by saying that they should be like Ephraim and Menasseh, the sons of Joseph. Another example is Moses, who married Zipporah. She was also the daughter of a priest from another religion. The children of these figures and many more were considered Jewish or Israelite, regardless of their mother's background.
- During the rabbinic period, in the second century B.C.E., the rabbis created Jewish law that determined whether someone is Jewish by whether their mother was Jewish ("matrilineal descent"). The text of the Mishna, redacted oral law, says: "And any women who does not have the potential for a valid marriage either with this man or with other men, the offspring is like her. And what is this? This is the offspring of a slave woman or a gentile woman."¹ This text is used to show that Judaism is passed through the mother.

Who is a Jew According to Major Jewish Movements?

- "Patrilineal descent" is the idea that you can be a Jew if you have a mother who is not Jewish and a father who is Jewish (movements that accept patrilineal descent also believe you can be a Jew if you have two Jewish parents or a Jewish mother and father who is not Jewish). As intermarriage became more common, the Reform, Reconstructionist, and Humanist movements adopted patrilineal descent, recognizing as Jews children born to a Jewish father and a mother who is not Jewish if other criteria are met.
- In 1961, the Rabbi's Manual of Reform Judaism said "Reform Judaism, however, accepts [a child of a Jewish father and mother who is not Jewish]...as Jewish without a formal conversion, if he attends a Jewish school and follows a course of studies leading to Confirmation." In 1983, the Report of the Committee on Patrilineal Descent made a critical statement, allowing for the children of mothers who are not Jewish and Jewish fathers to be accepted fully as Jewish if they publicly identified with the Jewish people in a formal way—and required the same of the children of Jewish mothers and fathers who are not Jewish. It said: "The Central Conference of American Rabbis declares that the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent. This presumption of the Jewish status of the offspring of any mixed marriage is to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people. The performance of these mitzvot [commandments] serves to commit those who participate in them, both parent and child, to Jewish life."²

¹ Mishna Kiddushin 3:12, explained by Shaye J.D. Cohen, "The Matrilineal Principle in Historical Perspective," *Judaism*, Winter 85, Vol. 34 Issue 1.

² Committee on Patrilineal Descent, *Reform Movement's Resolution on Patrilineal Descent*. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/patrilineal1.html> (Aug. 15, 2013).

- The Reconstructionist movement issued a similar resolution in 1968 saying that they would consider children with Jewish fathers and mothers who are not Jewish to be Jews “if the parents have committed themselves to rear their children as Jews, by providing circumcision for boys, Jewish education for boys and girls, and if the children fulfill the requirements of bar and bat mitzvah or confirmation.”³
- The Humanistic movement in Judaism has an extremely inclusive view of who is considered to be a Jew. In the second biennial conference of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism in 1988, they made the following resolution: “In response to the destructive definition of a Jew now proclaimed by some Orthodox authorities, and in the name of the historic experience of the Jewish people, we, therefore, affirm that 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.”⁴
- Conservative and Orthodox Judaism continue to exclusively accept the children of Jewish mothers (both born Jewish and those who convert to Judaism) as Jews. The Rabbinical Council of America, an association of Orthodox rabbis, issued a statement against the Reform decision to recognize children of a Jewish father and a mother who is not Jewish as Jewish. It includes the line, “A child born to a non-Jewish mother is not Jewish and no statement to the contrary can legitimize its Jewish identity.”⁵ The Conservative movement also believes that people are Jewish if their mothers are Jewish or if they formally convert to Judaism and affirmed that belief in 1986, shortly after the Reform decision.⁶

Who is a Jew in Israel?

- The 1950 Law of Return said that every Jew had the right to immigrate to Israel. In 1970, a Jew was defined as: “[a] person who was born of a Jewish mother or has become converted to Judaism and who is not a member of another religion.” These Jews, their spouses, children, grandchildren, and the spouses of their children and grandchildren were all allowed to make aliyah [move to Israel] provided they did not join a different religion after identifying as a Jew.⁷ In Israel, Orthodox rabbis control marriage, divorce, burial and other Jewish rituals, and accept only matrilineal Jews.

³ “Resolution Regarding Children of Mixed Marriages,” *The Reconstructionist*, Vol. 34, No. 8, May 31, 1968.

⁴ Society for Humanistic Judaism, *Society for Humanistic Judaism Supports IFSHJ Statement: Who is a Jew?* <http://www.shj.org/whois.htm> (Aug. 15, 2013).

⁵ Rabbinical Council of America, *Patrilineal Descent-1983*, <http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=101084> (Aug. 15, 2013).

⁶ Rabbis Joel Roth and Akiba Ludlow, *A Standard of Rabbinic Practice Regarding Determination of Jewish Identity*, <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/20012004/31.pdf> (Aug. 15, 2013).

⁷ *Law of Return 5710-1950*,

http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Immigration/Text_of_Law_of_Return.html (Aug. 15, 2013).