



Judaism

by Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur

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The history of Judaism spans thousands of years. It is comprised of many different denominations, and adherents hold divergent opinions about almost every issue. Therefore, to understand the place of glbtq people within Judaism, one must understand these divisions.

First of all, Judaism is divided ethnically into *Sephardic* Jews (those who trace their ancestry back to Spain, Portugal, North Africa, and the Middle East) and *Ashkenazic* Jews (those who trace their ancestry back to Germany and Eastern Europe). Additionally, there are *Yemenite* Jews (those who trace their ancestry to the historic Holy Land), *Ethiopian/Beta Israel/Falasha* Jews (from Ethiopia), and Jews who have historically lived in Asia (particularly India, China, and central Asian former Soviet republics). These regional divisions have resulted in groups of Jews with different language traditions, different holiday practices, and different versions of the scriptures.

Additionally, there are denominational differences. These differences are most pronounced in the Jewish communities of the United States and Canada (with some appearance in Israel among those who have moved to Israel from North America), where the Ashkenazic background is predominant.

Jewish Denominations

The major denominations are the following: Orthodoxy, Conservatism, Reform, and Reconstructionist.

Orthodoxy refers to a form of Judaism that follows all of the commandments and regulations of traditional Jewish scripture (including the *Torah*, or Old Testament, and the *Talmud*, or Rabbinic commentaries). These regulations include rules of holiday and Sabbath observances and dietary laws. Within Orthodoxy there are a number of subdivisions, including the Modern Orthodox who follow these commandments within the confines of a modern life (wearing contemporary clothing, for instance) and the Chasidim who wear the clothing of eighteenth-century Eastern Europe and worship in a musical, ecstatic style.

Conservatism aims to strike a balance between traditional Judaism and the demands of the modern world. For instance, the Conservative movement encourages the maintenance of Jewish dietary laws, the use of Hebrew in study and worship, and the maintenance of traditional worship formats, while allowing the use of cars and electricity on the Sabbath and insisting on equality between men and women.

Reform emphasizes the importance of individual decisions about commandments and observances and the need for continuing change and revision of practice and belief over time. Although now many reform congregations practice a more traditional style of worship (with perhaps more English and instrumental music than Orthodox or Conservative congregations would use), historically they have been assimilative.

Reconstructionist focuses on Jewish spirituality. This movement treats Jewish scripture as the work of people rather than of a supreme power (and does not take it literally in most cases), and de-emphasizes the historic notion of the Jews as the chosen people. However, Reconstructionist Judaism does believe that

certain traditions, for instance dietary laws, are worth preserving.

There are also some smaller and lesser-known denominations, including the *Karaite* Jews, who practice a form of Judaism that does not believe in any rabbinical interpretations of the Torah, and Humanistic Jews, who treat Judaism as a secular culture and the scriptures as a human literature to be studied.

Judaism and Gbltq People

Given such an incredible diversity of practice and opinion within Judaism, how do we begin to understand the relationship between Judaism and gbltq people? Different denominations have vastly differing opinions on both the inclusion of gbltq people into their communities and the tolerance that should be accorded homosexual acts.

The only mention of homosexual acts in the Torah is in Leviticus 18:22, which reads "[d]o not lie with a man as you would with a woman, since this is an abomination." This statement does not refer to homosexual acts among women. Although this passage does condemn male homosexuality, it is merely one sentence in the entire Torah. Under all but Orthodox interpretation of the Torah, many single sentences are treated as relics from an earlier time that need to be reviewed in light of modern experience. Additionally, the Hebrew term translated as "abomination," *to'eva*, is used in many other contexts, including the eating of shellfish.

Orthodoxy, in its strict textual adherence, views homosexual behavior as immoral. The denomination's teachings condemn homosexual acts, although lesbian acts have historically been less condemned than gay male acts.

Gbltq individuals can not be ordained within the Orthodox movement. Even within Orthodoxy, however, the homosexual act is an individual sin for which the individual him or herself must atone. Many congregations practice a "love the sinner, hate the sin" attitude, though they oppose civil rights protections for gbltq people (including civil commitment ceremonies, the acceptance of gays into the Boy Scouts, and equal opportunity employment laws).

Conservative Judaism believes that homosexual sex is a sin, but separates this scriptural interpretation from its political position. This denomination believes in civil rights for gays and lesbians and welcomes gbltq people into congregations, youth groups, and schools.

In the Conservative movement, many decisions about the acceptance of gbltq people in areas of lay leadership and education are left up to individual congregations, though the movement officially prohibits the performance of commitment ceremonies. Finally, the admission of gbltq people to the clergy is conducted with a "don't tell" policy, meaning that "out" individuals will not be accepted, but those who gain entry will not be later excluded as a result of witch hunts. It is important to note that these policies were adopted in 1992 and can be revised in the future, as the Conservative movement is open to the notion of change.

Both the Reform and Reconstructionist movements have no prohibitions against ordaining openly gay and lesbian clergy. In 2000, the Reform movement adopted a statement supporting the individual decisions of clergy as to whether or not they were willing to officiate at commitment ceremonies. The Reconstructionist movement supports same-sex marriage, not merely commitment ceremonies.

It is important to note that even within these denominations, agreement is far from universal. The platforms represented here are those advocated by United States national organizations of rabbis and congregations--the Orthodox Union, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform), and Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, respectively.

Many individual Jews, along with members of the clergy and particular congregations, disagree with these platforms and choose to act on their own personal opinions. Rarely, if ever, would a congregation or rabbi be disciplined for this choice, and individuals are not excommunicated.

For instance, there are some congregations that function as traditional Conservative ones but have rabbis willing to perform commitment ceremonies. Additionally, some Orthodox leaders veer away from the rigid position of the Orthodox Union. For instance, noted Orthodox Jewish sex expert Shmuley Boteach, while not condoning homosexual acts, finds the singular focus on homosexuality as an abomination to be an exaggeration.

Orthodoxy has additionally faced criticism because of the fact that glbtq people suffered a fate similar to that of Jews during the Holocaust and many Jews believe that this shared history should make Jews more sympathetic to glbtq civil rights.

Gay-Friendly Congregations

Finally, there are some congregations that are notably gay-friendly. Most of these are not affiliated with any particular denomination so that they can offer a wide array of worship styles for members who come from diverse backgrounds; others are Reform or Reconstructionist.

Among the best known of these congregations are Congregation Beth Simchat Torah in New York City (founded in 1973), Congregation Etz Chaim in South Florida (founded in 1974), Congregation Or Chadash in Chicago (founded in 1976), Congregation Beth Ahavah in Philadelphia, Congregation Keshet Shalom in Toronto, and Congregation Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco (founded in 1977).

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About the Author

Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Rhode Island College. Her research focuses on the emergence of academic programs in queer studies, Asian American studies, and women's studies in colleges and universities in the United States.