**VARIANTS WITHIN JUDAISM**



The three major variants or streams of Judaism are Orthodox Judaism,  Conservative Judaism and Reform Judaism (often called 'Liberal' or 'Progressive'). The Australian Jewish community is a united but pluralistic community, which includes groups and sub-groups from all of the major streams. However, the majority of Jews in Australia, whether strictly observant or not, are affiliated to Orthodox synagogues. In the United States, on the other hand, the majority of Jews are affiliated to Reform temples.

 **Orthodox Judaism**



Orthodox Judaism is distinguished by its maintenance of the traditional forms of worship in the Hebrew language, and of the traditional observances as prescribed by the Torah. Men and women sit separately in Orthodox synagogues and women do not participate in some of the rituals.

The Orthodox view is that the Biblical law may be developed and interpreted only by processes of reasoning which maintain respect for its Divine origin. These processes include the codification of the “Oral Law” in the Talmud from the third to the seventh centuries of the Common Era, and a continuing stream of books of interpretation and commentary, and rulings in individual cases.

Orthodox Judaism is not administered by any central authority. Synagogues are established by groups of Jews who raise their own funds and construct their own buildings. The congregation usually elects a voluntary board of management, which employs (and occasionally dismisses) rabbis and other officials.

The result is that each synagogue may represent a distinctive ideological or cultural variety of Orthodoxy and therefore attracts congregants who share that particular approach or background. The list of some 25 independent Orthodox synagogues in the Sydney Jewish News newspaper is by no means exhaustive, but it does give an idea of the range of Orthodox congregations in Sydney.

The oldest synagogue in Sydney is the Great Synagogue in Elizabeth Street, built in 1878 as the successor to the synagogues built by Jewish free settlers after 1831. From its inception the congregation followed English Jewish traditions, and it originally looked to the Chief Rabbi in London for advice and assistance. The largest synagogue in Sydney is the Central Synagogue in Bondi Junction, which is more European in its form of service.

Some Orthodox synagogues serve particular suburban areas; others reflect the traditions of the places of origin of their congregants. Some are connected with the religious Zionist movement and a number are simply gatherings of like-minded people for prayer in houses or rooms.

**The 'Ultra-Orthodox'

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The long black coats, flowing beards and picturesque hats seen in news films of Jerusalem and in some streets of Sydney represent various minority groups within Orthodox Judaism. Many of the costumes are the uniforms of particular religious movements, and some originate in eighteenth century Eastern Europe. Some, but not all, of these movements are Chassidic. Chassidism is characterised by a search for ecstasy in prayer, an interest in medieval mysticism and an emphasis on the possible imminence of a Messianic era. The Chassidim represent a very small but very active minority within Orthodox Judaism.

The following article about Chassidim was adapted by Anne Segal from Rabbi Raymond Apple's book, "The Jews".

Since the second World War the Chassidim - adherents of what has been called the greatest revivalist movement in Jewish history - have become a visible part of the Jewish scene in Australia. The actual numbers of Chassidim are small. Even among strictly Orthodox Jewish groups in Australia, the Chassidim are in a minority. But they are probably the most colourful and distinctive of Australian Jews, and their influence has greatly strengthened Jewish learning and observance in this country since WWII.

Their movement goes back to Eastern Europe in the middle of the eighteenth century, when Jews were living in conditions of difficulty and despair. Among them arose a man called the Baal Shem Tov, born in 1700, whose stories and sayings, cherished by his followers, emphasised joy in life, love of fellow-man, sincerity in word and deed and ecstasy at being in the presence of God.

Chassidism was a way of infusing joy and hope into life, and became popular among the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe, though it aroused opposition amongst other groups who felt it stressed the heart at the expense of the mind. Gradually the two points of view became more or less reconciled, the Chassidim increasingly turned to study, and today piety and learning go together in the movement.

In the Nazi Holocaust, the Chassidic centres of Eastern Europe were destroyed, but some of the Rebbes (Chassidic leaders) and their followers survived and re-established their tradition in new lands.

When Eastern European Jews came to Australia very few at first clung to Chassidic garb and customs. However, in 1948, an organised Chassidic group settled in Shepparton, Victoria, and about eight Russian families who were followers of the Chassidic Chabad movement engaged in agricultural work and started a yeshiva (religious school) to teach their children Talmud. This group later expanded and today Chabad maintains a network of religious and educational institutions which cater for several thousand people. Not all supporters of this movement are Chassidic or even from religiously observant homes, but many people are attracted to the human warmth, religious outreach, enthusiasm in worship and charismatic leadership of Chabad, previously led from New York by the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

**Conservative Judaism

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Conservative Judaism fosters the practice of traditional Judaism while embracing modernity. Developed during the twentieth century in the United States, it comes midway between Orthodoxy and Reform, intellectually liberal in matters of belief, but conservative in matters of religious practice. It attempts to “combine a positive attitude to modern culture, acceptance of critical secular scholarship regarding Judaism’s sacred texts, and also commitment to Jewish observance”. Conservative study of the holy texts is embedded in the belief that Judaism is constantly evolving to meet the contemporary needs of the Jewish people.

The Conservative service follows the traditional liturgy, and it is mainly in Hebrew and similar to Orthodox services. However, men and women sit together and women participate fully in the synagogue services, prayers and rituals.

The movement believes that God's will is made known to humanity through revelation. The revelation at Sinai was the clearest and most public of such Divine revelations, but revelation also took place through the Prophets, and can, in a more subtle form, happen even today.

In 1960 the Rabbinical Assembly of America agreed to modify Orthodox halacha (Jewish law) to permit the use of electrical appliances on the Sabbath and drive to synagogue by car. In 1985 it permitted the ordination of women rabbis.

There is one Conservative synagogue in Sydney.

**Progressive Judaism**

A new element entered the Jewish world in the early nineteenth century, a movement which is variously described as Progressive, Reform or Liberal Judaism.

The Progressive concept originated with the emancipation of the Jews of the various German states. Granted equal rights and released from the ghettos to which they had been confined for centuries, Jews sought full acceptance in the German cultural milieu to which they had finally been admitted. Many were influenced by the philosophy of the eighteenth century Enlightenment.

European Liberal Judaism soon spread to North America where it became more radical and less traditional. Many of the Jews from central Europe who migrated to North America in the 1850s were political liberals who were eager to cast off the shadows of reactionary Europe. By the late 19th Century the ‘Science of Judaism’ (Wissenschaft des Judentums) reflected the developing understanding of evolution, history and biblical scholarship. Non-Orthodox rabbinical seminaries were founded in both Europe and the United States. National rabbinical associations were formed and changes to religious practice were sanctioned.

Progressive Jews regard the “sacred heritage” of the Torah as evolving and adapting over the centuries and continuing to do so. However the Progressive movement has gradually modified its original revolutionary stance, and now places somewhat more emphasis on traditional observance. In its first platform in 1885, for example, the American Reform movement emphasised a distinction between the divinity of the “moral laws and statutes” and laws of ritual observance which “no longer impress us with the character of Divine institutions.” The most recent Progressive Statement of Principles, made in 1999, on the other hand, calls for “ongoing study of the mitzvot, the sacred obligations, and the fulfilment of those that address us as individuals and as a community”. The 1999 Statement also emphasised the study of the Hebrew language and the sacred texts, commitment to Israel, the full equality of women and the acceptance of all regardless of sexual orientation.

The ideological distinctions between the Progressive and the Orthodox are reflected in the form of temple service. The English language is used for parts of the Progressive services, which often features a mixed choir. Progressive services are adapted and shortened and are conducted with somewhat more decorum than Orthodox services, which often accommodate individual praying and occasional conversation. Men and women sit together in the Progressive Temple, both participate in all aspects of the service, and women rabbis may officiate.

There are two Progressive ("Liberal") Temples in Sydney. However the Temple Emanuel in Woollahra has recently changed its name to the Emanuel Synagogue, as a symbol of a more traditional approach.

 **Secular Jews

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Many Jews who would not describe themselves as religious believers, still identify as part of the Jewish people. Most such secular Jews accept Jewish values, ethics and concerns as well as some rituals as part of their cultural Jewish heritage. Many belong to synagogues or temples.

**Mizrachi, Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews**

The difference between Mizrachi, Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews lies in the cultures developed in the countries in which they have lived. Mizrachi Jews are those whose ancestors stayed in the Middle East after the destruction of the First Jewish Temple in 586 BCE. The Ashkenazi Jewish culture originated in the Franco-German region in Western Europe and developed in Eastern Europe and Russia. The formative experience of the Sephardi Jews occurred in Spain and North Africa.

Due to their different historical experiences, there is a variation in the customs and traditions of the three groups. The Mizrachim and Sephardim have a similar distinctive pronunciation of Hebrew, which was adopted in the modern spoken language of Israel. They also have similar traditional liturgical melodies and an order of the synagogue service which differs slightly from the Ashkenazi service. There are two Sephardi synagogues in Sydney, but the majority are Ashkenazi.

 **VARIATIONS IN A JEWISH PRAYER**

**Orthodox Prayer**

"Blessed are You the God of our forefathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob, the great mighty God who bestows beneficial kindness and creates all, who recalls the kindness of the patriarchs and brings a redeemer to their children’s children, for his Name’s sake, with love.  O King, Helper, Saviour and Shield, Blessed are You - the Shield of Abraham."

**Conservative Prayer**

"Praised are you, Lord our God and God of our Ancestors, God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, great, mighty, awesome, exalted God who bestows loving kindness, Creator of all. You remember the pious deeds of our ancestors and will send a redeemer to their children's children because of Your loving nature."

NB: In some Conservative congregations, the matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel) are added as in the Progressive Prayer.

**Progressive Prayer**

"Blessed are You the God of our forefathers and mothers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob, God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Leah and God of Rachel, the great mighty God who bestows beneficial kindness and creates all, who recalls the kindness of the patriarchs and matriarchs and brings a redeemer to their children’s children, for God’s Name’s sake, with love.  O Ruler, Helper, Saviour and Shield, Blessed are You - the Shield of Abraham and the helper of Sarah."

<http://www.ijs.org.au/Variants-within-Judaism/default.aspx>