Chapter 1

That's Funny, You Don't Look Jewish: Who's a Jew and Why

In This Chapter

- The difference between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews
- Exploring the wide spectrum from Orthodox to Reform (and beyond)
- Play the "Who's a Jew" game

We used to think we could tell if someone was Jewish just by looking at them. We each grew up in very different times and very different places in America, but we both developed the same notion of what being Jewish meant: Small stature (but often slightly overweight), large nose, dark wavy or curly hair, dark eyes . . . you can't really explain it in print — it's more like a feeling. "Hey, is that guy Jewish?" "Oh yeah, no doubt about it." You just know!

Then we went to Israel. It took about five seconds for each of us to realize that what we thought was "Jewish" was just one small segment of a much bigger picture — like finding out that kissing isn't all there is to love. There were (and are) blond Jews, Middle-Eastern Jews, Asian Jews, Black Jews, Latino Jews, Jews who looked like Arnold Schwartzenegger, and Jews who looked like Britney Spears. Boy, did we feel stupid.

The Jewish Tribe

Judaism isn't a race or even a particular culture or ethnic group. There are about 13 or 14 million Jews spread around the world, including about 6 million in the United States and about 5 million in Israel — so Judaism obviously isn't "a nation." And, if you're anything like us, you know more Jews who *don't* believe in God or practice Jewish observances than those who do, so being Jewish doesn't necessarily have anything to do with religion.

So what *does* it mean to be Jewish? Here are the basics:

- ✔ Being *Jewish* (being "a *Jew*") means you're a Member of the Tribe (an M-O-T). The tribe started with a couple named Abraham and Sarah about 4,000 years ago, it grew over time, and it's still here today. You can become part of the Jewish tribe in two ways: By being born to a Jewish mother or joining through a series of rituals (called "converting"). Some folks think there are other ways of becoming a Jew, too; we cover that later in the chapter.
- ✔ *Judaism* is a set of beliefs, practices, and ethics based on the Torah (see Chapter 3). You can practice Judaism and not be Jewish, and you can be a Jew and not practice Judaism.

What's in a name?

The word "Jewish" doesn't appear in the Bible at all. For example, the folks who came out of slavery in Egypt in the Book of Exodus (see Chapter 9) were called "Hebrews" or "Children of Israel," and they each belonged to one of the 12 tribes of Israel. Ten of the 12 tribes were dispersed by the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C.E., but the tribe of Judah and the smaller tribe of Benjamin remained as the Southern Kingdom known as Judea.

When Judea fell to the Babylonians, and the people were taken into exile, they became known as the Judah-ites (*Yehudim*), since they were the people of Judah (*Yehudah*). In Hebrew, the name *Yehudim* persists today and simply means "Jews." The religion they practiced was later called "Judah-ism" — which became "Judaism." We prefer to pronounce this word "Judah-ism" rather than "Jude-ism" or "Judy-ism" — unless you're talking about Judy Garland.

Jews far and wide

The Jewish people have always tended to fan out across the known world. There's evidence that even centuries before Jesus, there were Jewish communities along the North African and East African coasts, in Europe, and throughout Asia. Jews were among the first people to come to the Americas from Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There's even some evidence that there was at least one Jew aboard the ship with Columbus (and there are those who suspect Columbus himself was a Jew).

Everywhere the Jews went, they grew through intermarriage and converts, and — most importantly — they kept their basic religion while adopting

the culture and norms of the local area. That's why up to 20 percent of Jews descended from European ancestors have blue eyes, and why some Jews are Black, Hispanic, or Asian. It's also why a Jew from New York looks different and acts different than a Jew from Bombay, but each one could probably fumble along with most of the other's Shabbat service.

Similarly, Jewish food, music, and humor from Iraq and Yemen is much more Arabic in nature than the Spanish flavor of Jews from Brazil and Argentina, which is different than the *borscht* soup and *klezmer* music of Jews from Europe. They even all speak Hebrew with different dialects! Jews just don't fit *any* set of stereotypes or expectations.

And yet, all Jews are inextricably linked together simply by being Jewish. Perhaps it's a common practice and belief in Judaism; perhaps it's a common sense of history, or a shared sense of being an outsider. Or perhaps it's a deep, innate feeling of connection to the tribe.

Rampant controversy

The first thing the new government of Israel did when it came to power in 1948 was pass the Law of Return, which states that anyone born of a Jewish mother or anyone who has converted to Judaism can move to Israel and claim citizenship. This immediately re-ignited a controversy that began much earlier and continues to this day: Who gets to say whether or not someone is really Jewish?

Whether someone practiced Judaism wasn't an issue for citizenship, because Israel was founded for the most part by secular Jews. But what about born Jews who had been raised as Christians or Moslems, or who practiced another religion? Some say you have to not only identify yourself as Jewish, but also not practice any other religion. Others say this has nothing to do with it, and point out that the Nazis killed thousands of people who were Jewish by birth but practiced some other religion.

And what about people who convert? To most Jews, someone who converts to Judaism ("joins the Tribe") is no different than someone who was born Jewish. However, not everyone sees it that way. In the next section, we discuss the various denominations of Judaism, including the Orthodox Jews who refuse to acknowledge the conversion of anyone converted by a Reform or Conservative rabbi.

Many people say, "I'm half Jewish" (if one parent is Jewish) or "I'm a quarter-Jewish" (if one grandparent is Jewish). Traditional Jews argue that

either you're Jewish or you're not. To them, if you're mother's mother was Jewish, then your mother is Jewish, and if your mother is Jewish, then you're Jewish. Many liberal Jews believe that if only your father is Jewish and you were raised Jewish, then you're Jewish, too.

Black and Jewish

In most synagogues in the world, it's rare to see someone of African descent. Sure, there's the occasional convert, like Sammy Davis Jr., but on the whole, Jews tend to be either white- or olive-skinned (Middle-Eastern). However, there are over 100,000 Black Jews around the world, including many Jews from Ethiopia who were airlifted to Israel between the late 1970s and early 1990s. The Ethiopian Jews, who were largely cut off from the rest of world Jewry for millennia, practiced a form of Judaism that hadn't changed since pre-Talmudic times. Note that while these people are sometimes called "Falashas," that name has become somewhat derogatory, and "Ethopian Jews" or "Beta Israel" is preferable. In addition, some African-Americans call themselves Black Jews, Hebrews, or Israelites. Many of these are very observant, read and write Hebrew, and have identified themselves as Jews their whole lives.

After All, It's a Small World

Jews have long spread out to the corners of the world, so there are significant Jewish communities (over 100,000 people) in France, Australia, Argentina, and South Africa. In America, most people think all the Jews live in big cities like New York (where there are 1,750,000 Jews). But there are many Jews who live in the "Wild West" states like Wyoming, the deep south states like Louisiana, and everywhere in-between.

In fact, not only are there far more Jewish people living outside of Israel than within today, it has been this way for over 2,500 years. However, most Jews today identify with one of two groups: Ashkenazi and Sephardi.

Ashkenazi

The descendants of Jews who, until around 1900, lived anywhere from northwest Europe (like France and Germany) to eastern Europe (like Russia, Ukraine, and Lithuania) are usually called *Ashkenazi* (pronounced "ahsh-ke-NAH-zee," *Ashkenazim* is plural). The majority of Jews in the world are Ashkenazi.

Sephardi

The descendants of Jews who lived in Spain up until the fifteenth century are called *Sephardi* (pronounced "seh-FAR-dee," *Sephardim* is plural). After the expulsion (see Chapter 13), these Jews traveled to North Africa, Italy, the Ottoman Empire (Turkey), and back to the Middle East. Of course, many Jews started out in those areas (never having traveled as far as Spain to begin with), but they're generally called *Sephardi* anyway. You also hear Jews from the Middle East called *Mizrachi* ("from the East;" remember that Hebrew has no "ch" sound, so this is the gutteral "kha" sound).

Over the past 500 years, the Sephardim primarily interacted with Moslems, especially African and Arab Moslems. Today much of their culture (music, language, liturgical melodies, food, festival customs, and so on) is based on those cultures. The Ashkenazim, on the other hand, mostly interacted with European Christian cultures, resulting in a very different ethnic feeling.

While Israel was founded primarily by Ashkenazi Jews, more than half of Israelis have always been Sephardim. However, the very different cultures have caused a number of difficulties. Many Ashkenazi Jews mistrust Sephardi Jews and think they've "ruined" Israel, and *vice versa*. Fortunately, as time goes by, things seem to be getting better.

Major Branches of the Tree

When we say that Judaism is a set of beliefs and practices, we're glossing over one key point: There are a lot of different sets of beliefs and practices! In some ways, you can see Judaism as a tree with many branches; there's a common trunk and root system, but each sect or denomination is off on it's own branch, and in many cases, each synagogue is on it's own little twig.

Most Jews see the biggest branches of the tree as Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Non-Religious — plus, they might add a few others, like Reconstructionist, Renewal, and Secular Humanist. On the other hand, some traditional Orthodox Jews see it differently: To them, Orthodoxy is the whole tree and what everyone else is doing is something else — maybe a whole other tree, but certainly not practicing Judaism.

The basic difference between the groups is that while the Orthodox believe that the Torah (both written and oral; see Chapter 3) was literally given by God to Moses, word for word, more liberal Jews tend to believe that Torah and *halachah* (Jewish law) may have been Divinely inspired, but were translated by humans influenced by their own time and place. With this in

mind, liberal Jews hold on to elements that *feel* like Truth, principles that intellectually are affirmed as Truth, and search for those other pieces that need to evolve.

Orthodox Jews

When you hear the term "Orthodox Jew," you probably think of a man in a long black coat, with long locks of hair over his sideburns, a big beard, and a black hat. But in reality, there are dozens of different styles within Jewish Orthodoxy, each of them with a different culture, educational philosophy, leadership model, and set of policies. True, many of them do, in fact, wear black hats and coats, but many others — typically called Modern Orthodox Jews — almost always wear modern dress, and you might not be able to even tell them apart from non-Jews.

However, *all* Orthodox Jews accept the Torah as the word of God. So while there is certainly a massive cultural difference between the Orthodox Jew who wears a *shtreimel* (the black fur hat worn by some Ultra-Orthodox) and the Orthodox Jew who wears jeans and a T-shirt, it would actually be extremely difficult for most people to discern a difference between their religious beliefs and observance.

Liberal Jews actually began calling more observant Jews "Orthodox" (which literally means "correct belief" or "proper doctrine") in the nineteenth century as a somewhat derogatory term. Again, to the Orthodox, there's no spectrum of "less Orthodox" and "more Orthodox," so the term didn't really mean anything to them. Nevertheless, the word stuck.

However, most people make a distinction between "Modern Orthodox" (which approves of many aspects of modern, secular culture) and "Ultra-Orthodox" (sometimes called "*haredi*" or "black hats," who tend to insulate themselves from modern culture). There are always exceptions, though! Chabad (which we discuss in Appendix A) falls somewhere between the two.

Why all the black?

We know you're dying to ask it: "Why do some Orthodox Jews wear all that black?" The simple answer is that they're in mourning for the destruction of the Second Temple over 1,900 years ago. However, that doesn't explain *what* they wear. While some "black hat" Orthodox communities (like Chabad Lubavitch and the Mitnagdim; see "Chassidim and Mitnagdim," later) wear somewhat modern black suits, others — especially those whom

we would call the Chassidic Ultra-Orthodox — consciously try to resist modern influences. Their long black coats, black hats, white stockings, and old-style shoes are a way to hold on to the old eastern European culture of the eighteenth century. Traditional women don't have the same dress codes, but they do tend to dress modestly (see Chapter 4).

It's not just their clothing; many Ultra-Orthodox Jews minimize their contact with the "outside world," so they usually don't have televisions in their homes, radios are set to religious programming, they don't go to movies, and at least one group has ruled that its members shouldn't use the Internet.

For many people, these restraints seem extreme. On the other hand, think of it this way: How much pornography do you want your family exposed to? For some folks, much of the secular world is pretty pornographic and offensive, and they wonder "why even be tempted by it?"

My Torah is bigger than your Torah

Even in a relatively small Jewish community with few Orthodox Jews, you might find several Orthodox synagogues. Two reasons explain this: The Orthodox have to be able to walk to the synagogue on Shabbat (see Chapter 17), and each Orthodox congregation has its own particular culture, ideas, interpretations, and style.

One Orthodox rabbi might say that the biblical commandment "Don't round off the corner of your beard" means don't cut the *earlocks* (the hair that grows to the side of the forehead). Another rabbi says, "No, that doesn't make sense, it's only saying don't shave." A third rabbi says, "You can't shave with an instrument with a single cutting edge, but you can use a rotary-blade shaver or something like that."

Some groups are staunch Zionists (supporters of a Jewish state of Israel), and others don't believe that Israel should exist (because the Messiah hasn't come yet). Some believe that their children should get a secular education as well as a religious education, and others say only a religious education is important. Some will socialize with non-traditional Jews or visit a non-Orthodox synagogue, and others refuse.

Chassidim and Mitnagdim

A "who's who" of all the different Orthodox groups and their doctrines would fill a small book by itself. However, they all basically fall into one of two types: *Chassidim* and *Mitnagdim* (also pronounced "misnagdim" by many Ashkenazi Jews).Even though the word Chassidim (plural of "Chas-

sid") is pronounced with the "kha" sound at the back of the throat, like the Scottish "Loch Ness," some people spell it Hassidim.

Chassidism was a movement founded in the eighteenth century by the Ba'al Shem Tov (see Chapter 26), focusing on sincere, joyful, and intense prayer — including ecstatic dancing, singing, and story-telling as a way to connect with God. Shortly after the Ba'al Shem Tov died, Chassidism splintered into a number of other groups, like Chabad Lubavitch, Belzer, Satmar, and Breslov (which all still exist today).

Chassidism appeared at a time when traditional Judaism focused on an ascetic, scholarly approach to Torah and Talmud. Where anyone could practice the simple and sincere devotion of Chassidism, most rabbis of the time insisted that only learned, critical, and erudite study was important. Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, known as the Vilna Gaon, was the driving force behind these *Mitnagdim* (which literally means "opponents"); he even went so far as to prohibit interactions with the Chassidim, fearing that their ecstatic worship and lack of intellectual focus was a danger to Judaism.

Fortunately, by the end of the nineteenth century, most of the antagonism subsided, especially as both groups formed a common front against both religious reformers and antisemitism. Since then the Chassidic and Mitnaggid movements have greatly influenced each other. There are still differences, though. Where the Mitnagdim tend to focus on the head of a particular *yeshivah* (school), the Chassidim tend to focus on their particular *rebbe* (what they call their rabbis), who acts almost as a guru in some Eastern traditions and is typically a position passed from father to son. Mitnagdim tend to base their study on Talmud and *halachah*, and Chassidim tend to study the writings of their *rebbe* (and his *rebbe*, and so on, as well as other traditional texts).

Breakaway denominations

How does Judaism deal with the fact that times and people change? Traditional Jews tend either to avoid the changes or — more commonly — to apply established interpretations of Torah, Talmud, and previous *halachah* to modern issues. However, in the early nineteenth century, many Jews began to rethink this position, arguing that these sources aren't actually Divine after all, but rather very human responses to Divine inspiration. If the Torah, Talmud, and *halachah* are human creations, they reasoned, then they should be inspected, judged, and each understood to be affected by its particular time and place.

These folks weren't saying that there wasn't meaning in the traditional texts; no, they still studied Torah, Talmud, and *halachah,* but they insisted that some passages were more meaningful for that age than others, and that individuals are responsible for finding what's relevant in their own time.

These groups are usually lumped together under the umbrella of "Liberal Judaism," though there is wide spectrum of belief and observance among them. The best-known groups are Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and Secular Humanistic. Most of these groups are American and — to a lesser degree — European movements. They do exist in Israel, but they tend to be very small.

Reform

Reform Judaism (it's Reform, not Reformed!) — probably the largest Jewish group in America — rests on the idea that all Jews have the responsibility to educate themselves and make decisions about their spiritual practice based on conscience rather than simply relying on external law. In Reform Judaism, the Torah, Talmud, and *halachah* are necessary resources, but the focus tends to be on social and ethical action based on the writings of the Prophets rather than the ritual observance of the Torah and the *halachah* of the Talmud.

Unfortunately, many Jews today associate the Reform movement — which outside of North America is usually called Progressive or Liberal Judaism — with empty and meaningless services, or congregations that want to retain a sense of being Jewish without actually following any practice other than the Passover seder and Friday night services. We won't deny that there are groups like this, nor that the Reform movement of the 1950s and 1960s often lacked a sense of spirituality, but as the ads say, "This isn't your father's Oldsmobile." Today, many Reform congregations are deeply committed to a living and evolving sense of Judaism and Jewish spirituality.

Reform Jews tend to strip away what they consider unessential in order to more closely observe the kernel of the tradition. For example, when the movement began in the early nineteenth century, Reform synagogues started seating men and women together, pretty much dropped the dietary laws, and encouraged instrumental music at Shabbat services. Clothing customs — like yarmulkes and prayer shawls — were discouraged (though today growing numbers of Reform Jews wear them).

In 1972, the Reform movement became the first Jewish movement to ordain women as rabbis (see Chapter 28). Though the Reform movement, which is

currently the fastest-growing group in American Jewry, continues to innovate, there is a general return to more traditional practices, as reflected in the 1999 revision of the basic principles of Reform Judaism.

Conservative

The Conservative Judaism movement (which is often called Historical Judaism in Europe, and is called *Masorti* in Israel) always reminds us of the fable of the Three Bears, in which Goldilocks (obviously a derivation of some Jewish name) said, "That one was too soft, that one was too hard, but this one is just right!" Since the early nineteenth century, many Jews have felt that the Reform movement went too far in its rejection of traditional observance, but also that Orthodox communities were unrealistic in their restrictions regarding modern life.

Conservative Jews tend to respect many Jewish laws, like keeping kosher, observing Shabbat and other religious holidays, and performing daily prayers. At the same time, they also agree with the Reform movement that *halachah* has its basis in history, and therefore needs to be reconsidered in each age. Conservative rabbis ruled that when Jews live too far from a synagogue, they can drive there (but encouraged walking when possible), and some wines and cheeses that were ruled kosher for Conservatives have not been accepted by Orthodox Jews.

Conservative synagogues have sometimes been perceived as being inconsistent on Jewish legal issues. There have also been accusations of hypocrisy because sometimes it appears that Conservative rabbis tend toward the Orthodox and the congregations tend toward Reform. But we know of Conservative congregations which are virtually indistinguishable from Modern Orthodox groups, so you just can't tell without walking in, sitting down, and seeing for yourself.

Conservative Judaism flourished during the twentieth century and was, for a long time, the largest Jewish movement in the United States. However, some reports indicate that its size has been shrinking in recent years as many Conservative Jews find themselves increasingly drawn to Reform, Renewal, or Orthodox congregations. (People who were offended when the Conservative movement began ordaining women rabbis in 1985 were especially drawn to the Orthodox community.)

Reconstructionist

When the seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza announced that God was not a separate being, but rather the forces of nature itself, the Jewish community was so outraged that they excommunicated him, declaring that no other Jew could even talk with him, much less read his material. Skip ahead 300 years and find the twentieth-century theologian Mordecai Kaplan discovering the same "truth." The result? A group of Orthodox rabbis excommunicated him and burned the prayer book that he had published.

Today, no one remembers the names of those rabbis, but every philosophy student in the world reads Spinoza, and Kaplan is the founder of the fourth major Jewish movement: Reconstructionist Judaism.

Kaplan was a Conservative rabbi, and during his long tenure at the Conservative rabbinical seminary, he began to teach that God wasn't a Being, but rather the natural, underlying moral and creative force of the universe, the force that creates order. He also taught that each generation of Jews had the obligation to keep Judaism alive by "reconstructing" it — not by stripping away the practices and words like the Reform movement, but by reinterpreting them, in order to find new meanings that are relevant for the time.

Reconstructionism, as a separate movement, began in the 1960s. Today it counts about 100 congregations. Reconstructionist congregations tend to see the rabbi as a facilitator and a valuable resource, but not necessarily the leader; they encourage a lot of lay participation and creative reworking of both ritual and worship.

Renewal

Jewish Renewal sprang from the philosophies of Martin Buber and Abraham Heschel (see Chapter 26), as well as the "Neo-Chassidic" teachings of Reb Shlomo Carlebach and Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (see Chapter 14). It teaches that people can draw wisdom from a variety of diverse sources, including Chassidism, Kabbalah, feminism, the Prophets, environmentalism, and the writings of the ancient rabbis.

Renewal focuses on a welcoming, egalitarian, hands-on approach to Jewish worship and community. It encourages mixing both traditional and feminist ideals (even going as far as often changing the language of prayers). What's more, Renewal congregations have embraced lessons from diverse spiritual traditions, such as Eastern philosophy and both Eastern and Jewish medi-

tative practices. Renewal programs support a spiritual ecology, relating Jewish practices to both political as well as ecological action.

The 40 or 50 Jewish Renewal congregations and *chavurot* ("friendship groups") around the world (mostly in America) vary widely in their observance of traditional liturgy and ritual. In fact, the group defines itself as "transdenominational," inviting Jews from all aspects of the greater Jewish community to reconnect, learn, and celebrate together.

Secular Humanistic

What do you do if you feel Jewish — you like the Jewish holidays, food, music, sense of ethics and social involvement, humor, and so on — but you're not into the idea of God or spirituality? You're certainly not alone. The Secular Humanistic Jewish movement, which was established in the early 1960s by Rabbi Sherwin Wine, is based on Humanist ideals of rational, critical thinking, as well as developing the depths and dimensions of both individuals and communities.

Secular Humanistic Jews tend to focus on Jewish culture and civilization, emphasizing the importance of celebrating Jewish heritage as a way to find meaning in life, and minimizing the role of God or any cosmic forces. In fact, Secular Humanistic Jews define a Jew as pretty much anyone who identifies with the history and culture of the Jewish people. They completely remove any theistic language from their liturgy.

The approximately 40 Secular Humanistic congregations around North America celebrate the Jewish holidays, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and other Jewish traditions, though they ascribe non-religious interpretations to everything. These Jews tend to be very involved with social action, and it's probably no coincidence that the first ordained Secular Humanistic rabbi was, in 1999, a woman.

