

# Why it so hard to define who is a Jew?

By Rabbi Allen S. Maller

***Because the reality of living life is more complex than simply using a word or a term.***

Abraham was the first Jew but he did not have a Jewish mother or a Jewish father.

Since there were no other Jews to make him Jewish he must have mit-ya-ha-ded-self converted.

**Was Abraham's son Isaac Jewish?** Isaac's mother Sarah did not have a Jewish mother; so how did Sarah become Jewish? Marrying a Jewish man made her Jewish. Joseph married an Egyptian woman, whose father was a priest (Genesis 46:20) and Moses married a Midianite woman, whose father was a priest (Exodus 3:1). Did marrying a Jewish man turn a non-Jewish woman into a Jew?

Or **are the children of Jewish men Jewish because their fathers were Jewish?** In Biblical days this seems to have been the case. Yet Ishmael, the son of Abraham is not considered to be Jewish, so having a Jewish father by itself is not enough to make one a Jew. Even more complex, Jacob is considered Jewish, although his twin Esau who had the same mother and father is not considered to be Jewish. So one's Jewish behavior and one's desire to belong to a Jewish community are also factors of Jewish identity. **Our Torah teaches us that while most people fit within most verbal definitions, many people do not.** Perhaps the future counts more than the past. Jew is a person who would try to influence his or her children to be Jewish. Thus a commitment to the future of the Jewish People is more important for defining a Jew than who your parents were. ***Because the reality of living life is more complex than simply using a word or a term.***

In Halachah, Orthodox Jewish law; if the mother is Jewish, her children are Jewish.

In Sharia, Orthodox Muslim law; if the father is Muslim, his children are Muslim.

So, the children of a Muslim father and a Jewish mother are claimed by both religions, and the children of a Muslim mother and a Jewish father are rejected by both religions.

If this does not make sense in a 21st century free democratic society it is ***because the reality of living life today is even more complex than simply using an old definition or concept from the past. Using old definitions to push away people who want to join the Jewish community is wrong. All Jews should warmly welcome those who want to join us, as Reform Progressive Jews do.***

From the days of Abraham and Sarah until the Babylonian exile, non Jews became Jewish by marrying into a Jewish family and not worshipping any other God other than the One God that Jews worshiped. Children of a Jewish man were considered Jewish unless they worshipped other Gods. The situation was similar to the nature of citizenship in most of the world's **nation** states in the past; where foreigners could live for generations without a path to citizenship (Turks in Germany or Koreans in Japan). But if the father was a citizen of the nation the children were automatically citizens. Now most nation **states** make provision for the children of long term resident aliens to **become** citizens because they were born within the state's borders.

A similar transformation in becoming Jewish occurred 2,500 years ago in Babylonia with the the growth of religious rituals supervised by religious leaders, to make non-Jews into Jews. It is in Babylonia that the prophet Isaiah speaks clearly about converts to Judaism: "Those foreigners who join themselves to the Lord; to serve God, and love God's name, and be His servants; all who keep Shabbat and do not profane it, and hold fast to My covenant; I will bring them to My

sacred mount and let them rejoice in My house of prayer.” (Isaiah 56:6-8) The book of Esther also relates that many non Jews in the Persian Empire became Jewish by Mityahadeem-- Judaizing themselves. (Esther 8:17) This diaspora reform in the way non Jews could enter the Jewish people, even without living as a long time resident alien in the Land of Israel or having a Jewish father, spread to the Land of Israel during the days of the Second Temple. The shift away from father makes Jews to mother makes Jews was resisted by traditional Jews. One of them (most likely a priest, because their claim to status was totally dependent on patrilineal descent) wrote a book based on the well known fact that the great-grandmother of King David was a Moabite woman. The book of Ruth never would have been accepted as holy scripture if its basic facts were not well known. Both Ruth and her sister-in-law became Jewish when they married Naomi's sons, and lost that status when they became childless widows. If they were still Jewish why would Naomi tell them to return to their homes and their Gods. Ruth refuses and chooses to go with Naomi; thus becoming the ideal convert who herself chooses to join the Jewish people and the Jewish God (in that order. (Ruth 1;16-18)

In Babylonia, Judaism changed over a few generations from the religion of an autonomous national community into the religion of a minority ethnic community. The change took longer in the Land of Israel, but even there Jews were no longer an independent nation. Jews, even in Israel, were almost always part of a larger Empire, with the exception of less than 100 years after the successful revolt of the Maccabees. Ezra, who was not a prophet or a rabbi but a priest and a scribe, was influential enough to exile 113 foreign wives (Ezra 10:1-44). Genesis Rabba 7:2 cites this chapter to support the change from patrilineal to matrilineal descent. A century and a half earlier these women would have been considered Jewish, but now their refusal to undergo a religious ritual of conversion meant that they were not Jewish wives and mothers in Ezra's eyes. The change from patrilineal to matrilineal Jewishness over came the traditionals when Judea fell under the influence of Rome where matrilineal descent was of great importance.

The scribes and priests remained the religious leadership until the first century BCE when the Pharisees came to the fore; the Pharisees and priests were in turn replaced by the rabbis in the second century CE. By then the practice of matrilineal descent instead of patrilineal descent had become established. The simple application of this halakah during the Middle Ages sometimes resulted in painful results, especially in dealing with the descendants of Spanish and Portugese Marranos. In the much more complex world of our generation, the Orthodox rule ends up maintaining that, if he has a Jewish mother a Catholic Priest (even a Bishop of Paris) is a Jew; while a rabbi whose conversion was supervised by a non orthodox court, is not a Jew. This is absurd.

In today's world, woman and men should be treated equally in Jewish law. People with only one Jewish ancestor (male or female) who wish to join the Jewish community should be encouraged to do so. After the Holocaust and the rise of an independent Jewish State in the Land of Israel. it is time to encourage every Jewish soul (most converts have a soul inherited from one of their own Jewish ancestors in previous generations) to return to the Jewish People. We should always remember that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 99b) warns us that because Abraham, Isaac and Jacob pushed away Timna, the sister of Lotan, when she wanted to join the Jewish community, their descendants suffered at the hands of Amalek.

At least 50-60,000 people living in Poland today have one or more male or female Jewish ancestors. Although a few thousand have recently discovered this long hidden fact, the majority of Poles with Jewish roots are unaware of their Jewish heritage. Now that Poland is a free country at last, an increasing number of members of the older generation are willing to answer

questions about their grandparents and great-grandparents openly and honestly. Sometimes all they know are hints about some relatives who knew some Jewish words, cooked some foods in a non-Polish way, or who disappeared during the German occupation.

Many Poles have an ancestor who married into a Polish family a generation or two prior to world war 2 and may even have been baptized. Others know that one of their parents or grandparents, was an orphan or was adopted by a Polish family. Zegota, the Polish Jewish rescue organization, saved over 2,500 Jews during the war. Most of them were young children, and almost all of the children were adopted by Polish families or were placed in Catholic convents and orphanages such as the Ursulins and the 20 orphanages headed by Mother Matylda Getter (2 of the 17 orders of Nuns who rescued Jewish children during the war).

If you think you might have an ancestor who was Jewish, but no one in your family seems to know, you can use a introspective personality and character test to give you some hints.

**1-** Do you like to ask challenging questions especially about religion? But when you asked them as a child, you were told faith is a gift from God and you shouldn't question it. This never satisfied you, although others didn't question it.

**2-** The trinity never made any sense to you even as a young child. You prayed to God the father more easily than Jesus, the son of God, even though you were told to pray to Jesus. You never could believe that good people who didn't believe in Jesus couldn't go to Heaven.

**3-** On first learning of the Holocaust you reacted more emotionally than your friends or other members of your family. You feel some sense of connection with the Jewish struggle to defend Israel.

**4-** You have an attraction to Jewish music, culture, and Jewish festivals. You have always been more open to people who were culturally, nationally or religiously different from your own family than your friends or class mates.

If you answer yes to three of these four items you probably have Jewish ancestors. Many, but not all, people who answer yes to all four items will be interested in learning more about their Jewish roots. If you become very interested in studying Judaism you might have a Jewish soul. According to Jewish mystical teachings (Kabbalah), many (not all) people reincarnate after they die. This is especially true for Jews who died and had no Jewish children who survived them (Sefer HaPiyah). Their souls reincarnate in one of their non-Jewish descendants who is drawn to Jewish things, Jewish people and Judaism. For more information see God, Sex and Kabbalah by Rabbi Allen S. Maller.

If the following item also applies to you, you certainly have a Jewish soul.

**5-** When you start to learn about Judaism: the ideas and values seem reasonable to you; the traditions and heritage are very attractive to you; and those around you, and you yourself, are surprised that you slowly come to feel you are coming home.