



Glossary

Aron ha-kodesh (Holy Ark) – cabinet in which →**Torah** scrolls, the most sacred object in Judaism, are kept. The ark is located at the eastern wall of the →**synagogue**, the direction of Jerusalem and prayer.

Ashkenazim – descendants of Jews who, from the Middle Ages, resided initially in German lands, and later also in the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. Today they also live in Israel and in many other countries. Some still speak →**Yiddish**. They have their own customs, which differ somewhat from those of →**Sephardim**.

Bet midrash (Yiddish: *besmedresh*, study house) – a public place, supported by the *kehilla*, Jewish community, where men gather to study →**Torah** and also for prayer.

Bimah – raised platform from which the public reading from the →**Torah** scroll takes place. The *bimah* in Polish →**synagogues** is traditionally located at the center of the main prayer hall and faces the eastern wall.

Cantor (Hebrew: *hazan*, Yiddish: *khazn*) – a professional prayer leader with musical ability who conducts the synagogue service. A →**rabbi** or layperson may also conduct the service.

Diaspora – the collective of Jews living outside the Land of Israel.

Galitsianer – Jew from Galicia, a province of the Austrian Empire created from the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late 18th century. According to the stereotype, Galitsianers were the opposite of →**Litvaks**.

Heder (Yiddish: *kheyder*, lit.: room) – traditional school where young boys learn to read Hebrew and study the →**Torah**. Their teacher is called a melamed.

Halakhah – Jewish religious law, which governs all aspects of Jewish life, is based on the commandments (*mitzvot*) in the →**Torah**.

Hasidism – a movement of spiritual renewal that began in the 18th century in Podolia. Israel ben Eliezer, known as Ba'al Shem Tov (Besht), is considered the founder. The movement is organized around charismatic leaders →**tsadikim** and is based on a religious ethos rooted in mystical experience, with an emphasis on ecstatic worship, song, and dance.

Haskalah – Jewish Enlightenment, a movement that emerged at the end of the 18th century. Its proponents, maskilim, promoted the renewal of Jewish life by reforming it and adopting a modern sensibility. They encouraged the teaching of modern Hebrew as well as foreign languages and other secular subjects.

Hebrew – both the Jewish sacred language of prayer and study (Yiddish: *loshn-koydesh*) and modern Hebrew (Hebrew: *ivrit*), which developed in the 19th century and became the official language of the State of Israel.

Kabbalah – the Jewish mystical tradition, both philosophical and practical. Kabbalah is believed to hold the secrets to the universe and to contact with God. *Sefer ha-Zohar* (Book of Radiance), a medieval collection of mystical commentaries on the →**Torah**, is the key text of kabbalah.

Kahal – Jewish executive council responsible for governing a *kehilla*, the organized Jewish community in a particular location. The kahal recorded its decisions in a *pinkas*, a communal record book.

Karaites – adhering only to the →**Torah** itself, Karaites reject the rabbinic interpretations of its laws, in contrast with Rabbinite Jews. Originating in medieval Babylonia, Karaites eventually settled in Crimea, Lithuania, and other parts of Eastern Europe.

Kashrut – laws of ritual purity relating to food, which prohibit eating certain animals and the mixing of milk and meat, and that prescribe how meat is to be slaughtered and prepared. These laws are based on the biblical book of Leviticus. Food that is fit to eat, according to these laws, is kosher.

Klezmer – a musician who traditionally performed at weddings and on other occasions, traditionally in a band that included a violinist, bassist, cymbalist, and drummer, and later also a clarinetist and trumpeter.

Litvak – a Jew from the northeastern part of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This region (Yiddish: Lite, Hebrew: Lita) includes Lithuania and parts of Belarus, Latvia, and nearby areas. According to a stereotype that arose in the 19th century, Litvaks are the opposite of →**Galitsianers**.

Mahzor – festival prayer book, in contrast with the siddur, a daily and →**Shabbat** prayer book.

Matzevah – Jewish tombstone. In the historic territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Jewish tombstones were often elaborately carved and might be painted in bright colors.

Mikveh – pool for ritual immersion.

Minhag – Jewish custom, which often has the force of binding religious law →**Halakhah**.

Minyan – prayer quorum. Traditionally, a minimum of ten Jewish men (at least 13 years old) is required for public worship in the synagogue, for the →**Torah** reading, and at weddings, funerals, and other religious ceremonies.

Rabbi – religious leader of a Jewish congregation who is qualified to resolve issues on the basis of →**Halakhah**. A rabbi heads the Jewish court (Hebrew: *bet din*, Yiddish: *bezdin*), teaches Torah, performs marriages, and certifies that foods conform to the requirements of →**kashrut**.

Sephardim – descendants of Jews who lived on the Iberian Peninsula. Following expulsion from Spain and Portugal during the 15th century, Sephardim settled in Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire, including the Balkans and North Africa. Some still speak Ladino and many observe their own customs, which contrast with some of those of →**Ashkenazim**.

Shabbat (Yiddish: *shabes*) – day of rest, from sunset Friday until shortly after sunset Saturday, during which work is prohibited.

Shtetl (lit: *town*) – The Yiddish word shtetl, when used in English, refers to towns in Eastern Europe where Jews formed a large percentage of the population and developed a distinctive way of life.

Shtibl – a room or small building where →**Hasidic** men, followers of a particular →**tsadik**, gather to pray, study, and socialize.

Synagogue (Yiddish: *shul*) – house of prayer. Traditionally, men and women sit in separate sections.

Talmud – compilation of Jewish legal literature. The Talmud consists of the Mishna, a legal code that specifies how the commandments of the →**Torah** should be carried out, and the Gemara, rabbinical interpretations of the Mishna. The material in the Talmud was created between the 3rd century CE and 5th century CE in Palestine and Babylonia. The Babylonian Talmud is more comprehensive and became more popular than the one created in Palestine, which is known as the Jerusalem Talmud.

Torah – in the narrow sense, Torah refers to the first five books of the Bible. In the broad sense, Torah refers to all Jewish sacred teachings stemming in one way or another from the written Torah. The handwritten Torah scroll is the most sacred object in Judaism.

Tsadik (Yiddish: *rebe*) – literally “righteous person,” refers to a charismatic leader associated with **Hasidism**. Tsadikim are considered by their followers to be intermediaries between God and His people.

Yeshiva – religious academy where young Jewish men study the →**Talmud** and other religious texts.

Yiddish – the historic Jewish vernacular of →**Ashkenazi Jews**, a fusion of German dialects, Hebrew and Aramaic, and Judeo-Romance and Slavic languages. The beginnings of Yiddish are in the Rhineland in the Middle Ages. About 13 million people spoke Yiddish before the Second World War.

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