IN THIS CHAPTER

- Explaining how the terms Hebrew, Israelite, and Jew emerged
- Witnessing Jacob being renamed Israel
- Investigating the Kohen gene

Chapter 1
Unpacking What Jewish Means

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What does Jewish mean? This chapter answers that question by looking closely at the names, roles, and pathways that have shaped Jewish identity over time. You follow how Abraham is first called "the Hebrew," how Jacob becomes Israel, and how terms like Israelite, Children of Israel, and Jew each reflect different stages in the life of the people and their connection to the Land of Canaan (the ancient region in the eastern Mediterranean), known as the Promised Land. According to the Torah (also known as the *Five Books of Moses*), which is the foundational text of the Jewish people traditionally revealed by God to Moses and containing the core laws, teachings, and stories of the Jewish people, the Promised Land is the land God pledged to Abraham and his descendants as their ancestral homeland, identified in the Bible with the Land of Canaan.

You also see how titles such as Kohen, Levi, and Yisrael still function in synagogue life and how the word Jew is used with pride and misused in propaganda and hate speech. In addition, this chapter walks you through conversion, matrilineal and patrilineal descent, and the idea that joining the Jewish people is both a legal process and a spiritual connection that reaches back to Sinai.

In this chapter, you discover how names, lineage, and choice together form a clear and practical picture of what it means to be part of the Jewish people.

Calling Abraham and His Descendants Hebrew

Way back in ancient times, the people we now refer to as Jews were first called Hebrews, tracing their lineage to Abraham who, in the Torah (The Five Books of Moses), is called Avraham Ha-Ivri (ha-IV-ree) or Abraham the Hebrew (Genesis 14:13). As the story continues, Abraham's grandson's name, Jacob, was changed to Israel, and his descendants became known as Israelites, marking their shared identity as the Children of Israel (Genesis 32:28).

Later, when the tribe of Judah occupied center stage, the people from that territory became known as Jews, named after the tribe of Judah (JEW-duh) (see Chapter 3) or Yehudah (yeh-who-duh) (2 Kings 16:6; Esther 2:5). The term Jew became most common, especially as Jewish communities spread throughout the world. The journey from Hebrew, to Israelite, and finally to Jew, or Jewish, tells the story of a people whose names reflect their changing place in history.

Abraham was the original Hebrew. The Bible uses this term when a fellow runs to tell Abram the Hebrew that his nephew Lot was in a lot of trouble (Genesis 14:13). It's like someone referring to you by a nickname that sticks except, in the case of Abraham and his family, the name distinguishes them as different from everyone around them.

Avram's name is changed to Avraham in Genesis 17:5. The verse reads: "No longer shall your name be called Avram, but your name shall be Avraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:5). This moment occurs when God establishes a new and eternal covenant with him, promising him descendants and the land of Canaan. In the *Torah* (Hebrew Bible), Canaan is described as the land that God promised to Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites, making it central to Jewish history and identity. (See "The 12 Tribes as Israelites," later in this chapter.)

The change in name reflects a change in destiny: Avram (meaning exalted father) is transformed into Avraham (father of a multitude), signifying his new spiritual and universal mission as the ancestor not only of one tribe or region but of many nations.

In the same chapter of the Bible, God also changes Abraham's wife Sarai's name to Sarah (Genesis 17:15, where God tells Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name"), completing their joint transformation from private individuals of faith into public founders of a global legacy that includes the Jewish people and, symbolically, all who look to Abraham as a source of monotheism.

A Hebrew is a trailblazer

There's some discussion among scholars about where the term Hebrew actually comes from. Some scholars say that it's from the word Eber who was an ancestor of Abraham, as it says in the book of Genesis (Genesis 10:21). Other scholars think it means the one who crossed over, possibly due to the fact that Abraham traveled such a great distance from one land to another.

In either case, right from the very beginning, being called a Hebrew set Abraham apart from others. As one of the great Jewish sages in ancient times, Rabbi Judah, said: "The entire world stood on 'one side' (ever echad; EH-vehr eh=KHAD), and Abraham stood on the other side. Therefore, he is called Ha-Ivri" (Genesis Rabbah 42:8).

But the name stuck. It was mixed up with the notion of being an outsider and a rebel. A Hebrew is a trailblazer.

Abraham was a rebel

When you hear that Abraham and his family were trailblazers, it's not just about moving to a new place after packing one's bags. Being a trailblazer is a statement about who they were in essence. Abraham was a rebel. He left behind all that was familiar. He believed in the new voice, the one true God, when everyone around him was bowing down to idols (Genesis 12:1). His leap of faith distinguished him and set him apart. It was not merely that he changed his address. It was evident that Abraham was prepared to change his whole life for something greater, even if the result was making him into an outsider.



REMEMBER

Being a trailblazer is a refusal to stay put or do things the expected way when called to do something greater. Abraham's actions began a legacy of questioning the status quo. The Hebrew Bible is filled with stories of Abraham's children and grandchildren, and in time the whole people of Israel, always on the move, literally and spiritually, wrestling with new ideas and new challenges — more truth, more connection with God, and bigger dreams. It was like being a spiritual

explorer, and it was as if it was a part of their DNA. Whether it was fleeing from slavery or arguing with God Himself, the descendants of Abraham would not accept "that's how it's always been." Instead, Abraham and his descendants made questioning and growing, trailblazing, part of the identity of the family from the outset.

God Promises the Promised Land

Over time, particularly after the Israelites entered The Land of Canaan, the use of Hebrew to describe the nation slowly disappeared in favor of Israelite. The land of Canaan in the Torah (Eretz Kena'an (eh-rehtz keh-nah-ahn)) is the territory that God promised to Abraham and his descendants. "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates." (Genesis 15:18) *Canaan* means the lowland or the humbled land, both geographically and spiritually. It describes a place and a posture. It was a land that could receive God's promise because it was humble and open.

The boundaries of the Land of Canaan (c. 1210–1220 BCE) were:

- **North:** Mount Hermon/Lebo Hamath, possibly to southern Syria or Lebanon
- **South:** Desert of Zin, Kadesh Barnea, Wadi of Egypt
- **East:** Jordan River, east of the Sea of Galilee, ending at the Dead Sea
- **West:** Mediterranean Sea

Most maps as well as most historians describe Canaan as a territory about 500 km north to south (Mount Hermon to Beersheba in the Negev) and up to 100 km wide (Mediterranean coast to the Jordan River and Dead Sea), which contains the central hill country, coastal plains, and Negev desert.

Jacob becomes Israel

The story of Israel actually starts with one man, Jacob, grandson of Abraham and Sarah. After a mysterious encounter where he wrestles with an angel, Jacob gets a new name: Israel. Most sources say it means "one who struggles with God." It was a dramatic moment and says a lot about all the people who descend from Jacob. And Jacob was left alone, and (an angel disguised as a man) wrestled with him until the breaking of the dawn. . . . The angel said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God. . ." (Genesis 32:25–29).

Jacob ends up with 12 sons, and they become the heads of the 12 tribes. (For more about the 12 tribes, see Chapters 3 and 18.) Suddenly, Israel isn't just about Jacob-it's about the whole family. By the way, the first time we see Israel as the name of a people outside the Bible is on the Merneptah Stele, an ancient Egyptian stone inscription around 1208 BCE. There, Israel is no longer just one person or even a kingdom, but rather a group living in Canaan.

The shift from a single individual named Jacob to a whole nation did not happen overnight. At first, Israel was just Jacob, but in the Torah, in the Book of Exodus, people start talking about *B'nei Yisrael* — the Children of Israel. That is Jacob's family at first, but as these people multiply in Egypt, the name Israelites turns into something far bigger. It's the identity for all the people who descend from him, especially as they begin to organize themselves into more of a nation.

Jewish and proud of it

For a long time, Children of Israel and Israelite were the popular terms. But eventually, Jew or Yehudi; (yeh-who-dee) appears. At first, Jew was exclusive, mainly from the tribe of Judah. Over time, especially after the Babylonian exile (see Chapter 5), the use of Jew spread. It came to mean anyone from the people of Israel, no matter which tribe they're from. Eventually, Jew wins as the standard way of talking about the people, particularly after the exile and into the Second Temple period (516 BCE to 70 CE) — see Chapter 5.

When you look at how these names changed, it's a reflection of all the twists and turns in Jewish history. Hebrew was bigger at the start, Israelite reflected the sense of being a true people, and Jew takes over as the main term after big changes and upheavals. Each name had its time, and each one holds a different piece of the story. And today, Children of Israel is still heard during prayers and Torah readings. Throughout the centuries, people have proudly identified with the word Jew. For many Jews, calling themselves Jew is like saying, "This is who I am, and it is something I am proud of!"

Propaganda and outright lies



WARNING

One of the most damaging ways the word Jew has been used as a weapon is through language itself, by turning it into an insult or stereotype that remains, even when people don't realize where it comes from. At times the word Jew has been weaponized in conspiracy theories or scapegoating, blaming Jews for all sorts of things. There's the infamous Blood Libel fiction (see Chapter 7), where Jews were wrongly accused of murdering Christian children. These accusations led to expulsions as well as mass killings in medieval Europe. In more modern times, people have invented myths about Jews having secret control of banks or

governments. During epidemics, Jews have been accused of spreading disease. The word Jew has been twisted into a weapon just by connecting it to suspicion and fear. (See Chapter 7 for more on antisemitism.)

Propaganda posters and some school textbooks have exaggerated Jewish features to make them look grotesque or dangerous, with hooked noses and horns. Sometimes Jews have been called dirty or blamed for corrupting society. These kinds of accusations make it easier for others to justify pushing Jews out, excluding them from jobs or clubs, or treating them as less than human. These horrible stereotypes haven't disappeared. They appear online and in hate speech, using the word Jew as a shortcut for all kinds of mean-spirited ideas.

But the word Jew is really a badge of resilience. After stories of survival, the rebuilding after every setback, the ability to find joy in difficult times, the word Jewish has come to mean strength and belonging. In short, calling something Jewish is like stamping it with a seal of quality, saying it has wisdom and a story worth sharing.

The DNA of Aaron the Priest

In the time of the Temple (see Chapter 5), Israelite society was divided into three hereditary groups. Many Jewish families today have carried the knowledge of their ancestry, whether as descendants of Aaron the Priest, called Kohanim (koh-ha-NEEM), the tribe of Levi (LAY-vee), known as Levi'im (Leh-VEE-yeem), or Yisraelim (Yis-row ALE-eem).

- The **Kohanim** (singular: Kohen (KOH-hen)) were the priests of ancient Israel. Every Kohen is a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses.
- The **Levi'im** (singular: Levi) were one of the 12 tribes of Israel descended from Levi, the third son of Jacob and Leah. They helped the priests (Kohanim, descendants of Aaron) with sacrifices, rituals, and maintenance of the sacred space. Many Levites were singers, musicians, or gatekeepers in Temple worship. Outside Jerusalem, they taught Torah, maintained justice, and oversaw certain local rituals.
- The term **Yisrael** (literally Israel) refers to all Jews who are not Kohanim (priests) or Levi'im (Levites). In other words, Yisrael designates the general population, descendants of the other ten tribes of Israel, who were not assigned hereditary religious duties. The term Yisrael carries a deeper identity. It comes from Jacob's new name Israel, given after wrestling with the angel (Genesis 32:29). It signifies the people who struggle with God and prevail.

You'll often meet people with last names like Cohen, Kahn, Katz, Levy, or Levine and hear, "We're descend from the Kohanim," or "My family are Levites." (For the record, I'm a Yisroel.) But it isn't just names. Most often, it's a family tradition told and retold, sometimes accompanied by treasured documents, sometimes by nothing more than unwavering certainty that "this is who we are." Even among those without a special name or document, many know their status.

This system of classification still comes to life every Monday, Thursday, and Saturday (Shabbat) when the Torah is read in synagogue. Tradition holds that the first *aliyah* (Torah reading honor) of seven always goes to a Kohen; the next, to a Levite; and everyone else, the majority, called Yisrael, comes afterward. If no kohen is present, the first aliyah goes to a Levite.

This weekly moment is where ancient tribal identities get to take the spotlight. A Kohen will usually be called up to the Torah with a special title added to his name, such as HaKohen (the *Priest*), and may also perform rituals that are distinctive to their lineage, such as performing the priestly blessing on festivals. Then a Levi is called up and is identified as a Levi (Ha-LAY-vee), and only then does some of the congregation get their turns. It's an ancient order that links the modern worshipper right back to the time of Moses, Aaron, and the biblical tribes.

What's remarkable is that families have managed to preserve this distinction for thousands of years, even in places where Jews have been scattered far and wide, sometimes losing track of almost everything but this essential identity. Some families might point to the way their fathers and grandfathers pronounced special blessings or took specific honors, while others rely on community recognition ("Everyone knows we're Kohanim!"). In certain communities, the sense of being a Kohen or Levite is a source of pride, a mark of continuity stretching over centuries, and a comforting connection to the rituals of Jewish worship.

EXCUSE ME, BUT WHAT'S YOUR HAPLOTYPE?

The so-called *Kohen gene* is an amazing topic in Jewish genetics, and it's rooted in a pretty cool piece of scientific detective work. Researchers started with the traditional claim that Jewish Kohanim, descended from Aaron (the brother of Moses), are members of a hereditary priestly caste. Modern genetics gave scientists the tools to actually test this theory, using Y-chromosome markers, because the priestly line passes from father to son just like the Y chromosome does.

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What they found was a particular genetic signature, named the Kohen Modal Haplotype (CMH). A *haplotype* is basically a group of genetic markers, specific variations or sequences of DNA, that tend to be inherited together because they're close to each other on a chromosome. CMH is found in a huge percentage of Jewish men who identify as Kohanim all around the world, from Ashkenazim (Jews of Central and Eastern European descent) and Sephardim (Jews of descent from the Iberian Peninsula before the end of the 15th century when Jews were expelled from Spain) to Mizrahi Jews who trace their roots to long-standing Jewish communities in countries, such as Iraq (Babylonia), Iran (Persia), Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and others across the broader Middle East and North Africa region. (See Chapter 11 where I explore Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewish heritage.)

What's special about the CMH is that it shows up far more often in Kohanim than in other Jews or non-Jews, and it also appears among groups in Africa like the Lemba, who claim a Jewish priestly ancestry. The researchers concluded that the CMH is unusually stable and ancient, estimating that it goes back around 3,000 years, right in the historical ballpark for when Aaron would have lived. This supports the idea that many Kohanim today really do descend in a direct male line from a single ancient ancestor, Aaron.

Of course, it's important to remember that genetics can't tell a complete story. There's been plenty of migration, conversion, and mixing along the way. But the Kohen gene research stands as a remarkable scientific echo of what families have believed and recited for generations. For Kohanim in particular, finding out they carry the CMH is like getting a scientific pat on the back from their biblical forebears. It's a beautiful blend of tradition and modern science, affirming the idea that the Jewish people continue to be connected, not only by sacred texts but by the very strands of their DNA.

Converting to Judaism



TIP

Conversion to Judaism is a formal process by which a non-Jew becomes a Jew, fully joining the Jewish people in religion, identity, and community. A convert to Judaism becomes a member of the Jewish family.

Jewish tradition views conversion as a meaningful journey, embracing people who sincerely want to join the Jewish family. Unlike some religions that actively seek out converts, Judaism traditionally takes a cautious but welcoming approach. The process emphasizes sincerity and commitment, as well as participation in Jewish life. Potential converts are encouraged to take part in community events, holidays,

and learning. Rabbis often guide candidates through months, or even years, of study and preparation. The journey is seen as transformative, both spiritually and practically. As the Talmud (see Chapter 2 and 6) states, "A convert who converts is like a newborn child."

Judaism doesn't believe that everyone must become Jewish to live a meaningful or righteous life. Unlike religions that seek converts, Judaism teaches that non-Jews can serve God and live moral lives without changing their identity. For this reason, the conversion process traditionally begins with discouragement: A prospective convert is told about the challenges of Jewish life and reminded of its responsibilities. Only if the person persists, with clarity and sincerity, is the path opened, signaling that conversion is not about persuasion, but about commitment freely and thoughtfully chosen. In the words of the Talmud (see Chapter 6), "We say to the prospective convert: Know that Israel is presently afflicted and oppressed. . . . If you accept this, you are welcomed."

According to classical Jewish sources, every Jewish soul, including those of future converts, was present at Mount Sinai when the Torah was given to Moses (see Chapter 2). This includes not only those born Jewish but also the souls of converts who would one day join the Jewish people. One classical source (Exodus Rabbah 28:6) teaches that when the Torah was given, all souls who would ever accept it were there, "those who are standing here today and those who are not here today" (Deuteronomy 29:14).

Kabbalists (see Chapter 9) teach that a convert's attraction to Judaism is not random. It reflects a soul that already stood at Sinai, drawn back to its spiritual root. From this perspective, conversion isn't seen as joining something new, but as a return to a truth one's soul already recognized. The process of *giyur* (Gee-YOUR) (conversion) is the physical expression of a spiritual reunion, a soul reclaiming its place in the covenant it once accepted and a return to who they really are.

I have to do what?

Once someone feels ready and is accepted as a candidate for conversion, the formal conversion process in traditional Judaism involves a few key steps. For men, this process starts with circumcision or, for the already circumcised, a symbolic ritual, followed by immersion in a mikveh, a ritual bath symbolizing spiritual rebirth.

The symbolic ritual is called *Hatafat dam brit* (haht-ah-faht dahm-BRIT), which literally means the drawing of the blood of the covenant. It's a symbolic circumcision ritual performed by a *mohel* (ritual circumciser) when a non-Jewish male has

already been circumcised, either medically or before conversion, but has not undergone a brit milah (brit mee-LAH; covenant of circumcision) according to Jewish law.

Women go straight to the mikveh stage. The convert then appears before a *beit din* (Bayt din), a Jewish court consisting of three Jews (usually rabbis), who listen to the convert's story, ask questions, and assess sincerity and readiness. After immersion, the convert is from then on considered fully and totally Jewish, with all the rights and responsibilities this brings.

Once you're in, you can't get out



TIP

One of the most beautiful and widely shared ideas in Jewish tradition is that a convert is considered 100 percent Jewish, with no qualifiers or asterisks attached. Once conversion is complete, the new Jewish person is just as Jewish as someone born into Judaism. They are given a Hebrew name, usually Abraham and Sarah, as their spiritual parents. In all matters of Jewish law and community life, a convert stands equal to every other Jew. There's a famous Jewish teaching that God has a special love for converts, sometimes more than for those born Jewish, because they made a conscious choice to embrace the faith and way of life of the Jewish people.

Matrilineal and patrilineal descent

A key principle in traditional Judaism is *matrilineal descent.* Only someone born to a Jewish mother is automatically considered Jewish. This principle is rooted in Talmudic tradition and has shaped communal identity for thousands of years. *Patrilineal descent* (descent through the father) alone does not, in traditional Judaism, confer Jewish status. The law of matrilineal descent implies that someone with only a Jewish father (and a non-Jewish mother) who wants to be recognized as Jewish by traditional Jews must undergo a formal conversion.

However, not all Jewish movements agree on this requirement. Reform Judaism and Reconstructionist Judaism accepts either matrilineal or patrilineal descent, provided the child is raised as a Jew and is engaged in Jewish life. According to these more liberal movements, a child with either a Jewish mother or father can be welcomed as Jewish, as long as the family makes a clear Jewish commitment, such as giving the child a Jewish education, celebrating holidays, and participating in the community. These different approaches have created a patchwork of policies, where a person may be fully accepted as Jewish in one synagogue or movement, but may have to undergo conversion if they want to be recognized elsewhere.



REMEMBER

The underlying value is always the same. The Jewish people are strengthened and enriched by those who choose to join them, and that a sincere convert is valued just as highly as someone born into the faith. No matter where one starts, the door to Judaism is always open for those who come with a full heart, and the tradition has never stopped cherishing the idea that a convert is, in every way that counts, part of the family.

THE CHOSEN PEOPLE: CHOSEN FOR WHAT?

The phrase chosen people comes from the Hebrew Bible, but it's a translation and a shorthand, not a slogan Jews invented about themselves. In the Torah, God repeatedly describes Israel as chosen (ba-CHAR), but the English phrase chosen people became common through Christian Bible translations. Chosen doesn't mean better, superior, morally perfect, or more loved than others. Chosen means chosen for a task, bound by a covenant, and obligated to live by the commandments of the Torah. In Jewish thought, being chosen is more like being assigned responsibility, not winning a prize. Outside Judaism, chosen people is often misunderstood as a claim of ethnic superiority, especially in antisemitic rhetoric. Inside Judaism, the emphasis is on duty, restraint, and moral responsibility, not privilege. Being chosen brings extra responsibility and judgment, not privilege.