

Why Study Jewish History?

Is Judaism a national identity, like being American? An ethnic identity, like being an Italian-American? A religion, like being Christian? Why is Hebrew the language of the Jews? And why is Israel our homeland?

To answer these questions, imagine a time when *all* Jews lived in a country of our own. Just as Italians live in Italy, Mexicans in Mexico, and Swedes in Sweden, so, too, our ancestors, the Israelites, lived in Israel. It was more than twenty-five hundred years ago. We spoke Hebrew, were loyal to our king, worshipped as the majority of citizens did, and served in our army—the armed forces of ancient Israel.



Jews now live in countries around the globe. The majority of Scottish Jews live in Edinburgh and Glasgow, the two largest cities in the country.

Back then there were thousands of Jews. Today there are millions. So how did the Jews grow from a tiny nation to an international community? Why did so many leave Israel? Where did they go? And what do we have in common with our ancestors and with Jews who now live as far away as Greece, India, and Iran?

As you read *The History of the Jewish People*, you will discover that our history is the story of a determined people. In every century, we have adapted to changing times with creativity and a sense of purpose while holding fast to our core beliefs. Our courage and determination have been rewarded by each generation's enriching contributions to Jewish tradition.

In addition, you will discover that you are not just *studying* our people's extraordinary journey—you are also *part of the action*. You will consider how your life compares to the lives of those who came before you and how their decisions influence yours. Most important, you will discover that Jewish history is a story that begins thousands of years ago, moves across and around the world, and leads up to your community, your family, and you. By studying our history you can stand on the shoulders of those who came before you, view the past and learn from it, then turn toward the future to help build a better, stronger world.

How Do We Do It?

Over the centuries, the Jewish people have faced many challenges. They include being cast out from our native land and spread out around the world, often suffering the hardships of poverty and oppression. Yet our people survive.

How do we do it?

Some think we continue to survive because of our belief in God and the teachings of the Bible. Our faith and tradition have given us the wisdom and strength to overcome difficult times and live with joy and courage.

Some think it is our sense of purpose that preserves us. Jewish tradition teaches that we have an important role to fulfill, that it is our duty to help bring justice and goodness into the world. This sense of purpose inspires us to maintain our identity and our values.

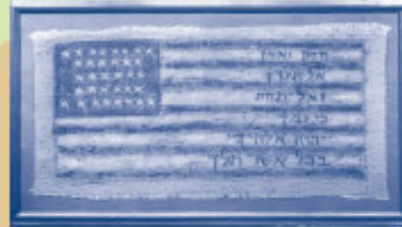
What do you think?

Amazingly, we have not only survived, we have also flourished. And we have enriched the world, beginning with our Torah, and including contributions to science, art, medicine, and peace. These accomplishments account for 20 percent of the Nobel Prizes awarded since 1901. What a feat for a people who make up only .2 percent of the world's population!

Again, how do we do it?

Some think it is our questioning nature. The prophets taught us to question the way we live—are our actions generous or selfish, truthful or dishonest, just or unjust? Perhaps questioning helps us identify both problems and opportunities that are not always obvious.

As you read *The History of the Jewish People*, consider what helped our people succeed in the larger world, even as we maintained our Jewish identities. You may discover more than one answer, each of which enriches your life.



The Hebrew verse on this Union flag may have comforted Jewish soldiers during the American Civil War: "Be strong and have courage; do not be terrified or anxious, for Adonai, your God, is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).



The Four Questions are a highlight of the seder. They remind us to think about why and how we celebrate Passover. How has asking questions and searching for answers helped you learn and solve problems?