

Exploring the Jewish Culture

Background



Jewish history dates back 4,000 years, and most consider the State of Israel to be the Jewish homeland. Historically, Jewish culture thrived in Palestine until the Roman Empire banned Judaism, Jewish people began moving to other countries. Regardless of where they live, their Jewish heritage is passed down through generations. Over the centuries, Jews have suffered persecution, including the Holocaust during World War II. About 6 million Jews live in the U.S. today and enjoy greater acceptance than in any other country. Many Jews consciously avoid assimilation into American culture and view it as unnecessary and harmful to their identity. Michigan is home to over 100,000 Jews, with about two-thirds living in the Detroit, Ann Arbor, and Lansing areas.

Traditions and Customs

Jewish traditions and customs primarily derive from religious practices. Jews learn Hebrew and these religious practices in schools for several years, beginning at a young age. The Thirteen Principles of the Faith, common to all Jews, are the core beliefs of Judaism, and the most important traditions are obligations or rules to help Jews follow their faith. These include commandments and obligations found in the Torah and the Talmud, which describe what to wear and eat, as well as rules of behavior. According to Jewish food laws, there are permissible and impermissible foods for Jews who observe *kashrut* (eating *kosher* foods) and avoid *trefa* (ritually unclean) foods.



Festivals and Celebrations

Jews celebrate several festivals that follow a Jewish calendar, which is based on the lunar cycle. *Rosh Hashanah* marks the start of the Jewish new year, which falls in September or October, and is a 10-day festival during which Jews reflect on their lives. In December, Jews celebrate *Hanukkah*, or the Festival of Lights, for eight days with lighting candles, playing games, and giving presents to children. *Yom Kippur*, or the Day of Atonement, Jews fast by abstaining from food and drink from sundown to sundown. During *Purim*, or Passover, which includes a *Seder* (a passover feast), families enjoy a traditional meal of unleavened bread, parsley, apples, nuts, cinnamon, raisins, and wine.



Education and Literacy

Parents often desire their children to receive education in Jewish schools to teach them Jewish thought and values and to preserve their culture and traditions.



Health Disparities

Due to a long history of marriages close within families, some Jews have genetic diseases, including Bloom Syndrome, Familial Dysautonomia, Gaucher Disease, Niemann-Pick Disease, Tay-Sachs Disease, and Torsion Dystonia.

Traditional Food Practices

For Jews, there is no specific cuisine; rather, there are lists of foods for Orthodox Jews and for those who observe *kashrut*. *Kashrut* is the food laws governing the eating of *kosher* foods and the avoidance of *trefa* foods. *Kosher* foods include fruits, vegetables, grains, meat from cud-chewing mammals with split hooves, such as sheep, cows, and goats, as well as fish with scales and fins like salmon, herring, and perch. They also include milk and domestic birds such as chickens, turkeys, and ducks, as well as their eggs. *Kashrut* prescribes that the slaughter of animals be painless and conducted by a Jewish butcher. Also, meat and milk must be kept separate during storage, preparation, and at mealtimes. *Trefa* foods are considered forbidden by Jewish laws, and they view them as not fit for human consumption. *Trefa* foods include unkosher mammals, such as pork, rabbit, and horse, birds of prey, such as owls and eagles, and water animals without scales and fins, such as lobsters, crabs, and squids. Common Jewish-American foods include soup with matzo balls, pita and hummus, bagels and lox (hollandaise with cream cheese), corned beef on rye, *latkes* (fried potatoes), kosher pickles, *rugelach* (croissant dessert), brisket, and seltzer water.



Considerations for WIC Educators and Counselors

- Jewish families have popular greetings and expressions; WIC staff can build connections by using the following expressions:
 - *Shalom* - means peace; as a general greeting.
 - *Mazel tov* - good luck; commonly used at births.
 - *Le-hayyim* - to life or cheers; wishing someone good health.
- Jewish families keep *Shabbat*, or the Sabbath, from sunset on Friday to late Saturday night, attend synagogue services, and refrain from work.
- Jewish families value marriage and family, and their babies usually receive both Hebrew and commonly used names.
- Jewish families have their babies circumcised eight days after birth as a symbol of the beginning of their life in the Jewish community.
- On days of fasting, pregnant and lactating people are not required to participate, though they can discuss their preferences with their rabbi or health care provider.

Note: This is general information for staff about this culture. It does not account for the diversity within the people of this culture and society, and does not imply that this content applies to all people of this culture.

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