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## What Is a Jewish Word?

By [Joyce Eisenberg](#) & [Ellen Scolnic](#)

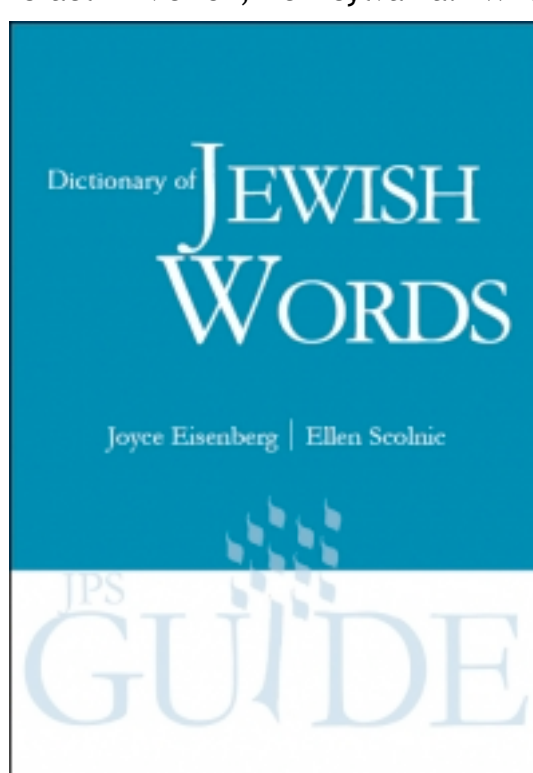
November 13, 2009

When a sportscaster on local network news reports that a baseball player has a lot of [chutzpah](#) asking for a salary increase, you know that Jewish words have made their way into mainstream conversation. "It represents the integration of Jews and Judaism into American culture," says [Rabbi Robert Rubin](#) of [Congregation Adath Israel](#) in Merion, Pennsylvania. "When different peoples and cultures live together, words are often borrowed from one language to another."

But not everyone knows what all these different words mean. What is a "Jewish" word anyway? Judaism is a religion and a culture. How can a word be Jewish?

It's a question we debated for more than a year, as we compiled a list of 1,400 words to include in our book, *The Dictionary of Jewish Words: A JPS Guide*.

We defined "Jewish words" --whether [Hebrew](#), [Yiddish](#), English, or even one Hungarian word--as those associated with some aspect of Jewish life: holidays, rituals, life-cycle events, prayer, modern Israel and food, of course.



We wrote the dictionary for people like us. We're Jewish moms, married to nice Jewish guys, raising Jewish kids. We're both published writers, editors and researchers, but we're not fluent in Hebrew and we're not scholars or rabbis. Although we consider ourselves fairly knowledgeable and moderately observant, we kept coming across unfamiliar Jewish words. For example, when the flyer came home from Hebrew school asking us to participate in [Mitzvah](#) Day, we knew what [tzedakah](#) projects (raising money for charitable causes) were, but we were unsure about [derekh eretz](#) (respect for peers).

We also wrote the book for non-Jewish friends, like the one who had brunch at our house when I was a teenager. I invited my friend to help herself to the fish tray as I pointed to all the whitefish, bagels and lox my mom had ordered from the deli. "I never tasted that before," my friend said. "Could I just try one lock?"

True story. But it made us realize how many words--like lox--that are so familiar to Jewish people are not as well known outside the Jewish community.

We also wrote the book for adults who want to learn more about Judaism. That includes our non-Jewish friends with Jewish spouses who were anxious for a reference that would allow them to look up an unfamiliar word and get an easily understandable explanation without having to consult a rabbi or ask their new in-laws.

Lisa Marks of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania has a Jewish dad and a Catholic mom. She grew up Catholic, though she ate [Shabbat](#) dinner at [Bubbe's](#) house every Friday night. Recently, she used the dictionary to familiarize herself with the [shofar's](#) history and significance before watching a friend's child have the honor of blowing the ritual instrument during [Rosh Hashanah](#) services.

Carol Jaffe of Wynnewood, Pennsylvania is Italian Catholic, but her husband, Dan, grew up celebrating both Jewish and Christian holidays. His dad was Jewish, his mother was not. His parents eloped and married in secret, right after World War II. Carol's favorite inside joke about a Jewish word revolves around [kine-ahora](#), the expression used to ward off bad wishes or the evil eye. For example, if you're Jewish and someone tells you that you're looking very healthy and fit, you might reply, "Oy, you want me to get sick? Don't give me a kine-ahora."

"I was new to Jewish customs and when I first heard the word, it sounded like can o'herring," says Jaffe. "It became an inside joke between Dan and me. In our family now, we don't wish a can of herring on anyone."

Jaffe remembers that it was her non-Jewish mother-in-law who used to take the initiative when it came to Jewish holidays. Her mother-in-law had learned to cook traditional Jewish foods from her new Jewish sister-in-law. "Dan's mom used to make a great [rugelach](#) cookie, and I always enjoyed her [gefilte fish](#)," Jaffe said. "Even though she wasn't Jewish, I think she was probably more of a Jewish mother than most Jewish mothers."

In their own family, Carol, Dan, and their two children celebrate the holidays of both religions. And over the years, Carol, too, has become a pretty good Jewish cook, especially her extra tasty brisket. "The holidays are always a little crazy at our house," Jaffe says, "Because I'm Italian I make meatballs for everything, so we usually have [latkes](#) and meatballs for [Hanukkah](#)."

Whether you're talking about litigation or latkes, not knowing the insider words makes it hard to be comfortable. In Catholicism, think "mass cards" and "name days." For Muslims there are words like "halal" or "hijab." Judaism is no different. Some have referred to the Jewish practice of using insider language to establish connection with other Jews as "[bageling](#)." Unfortunately, using insider language can make people feel like outsiders--especially those just coming into the Jewish community. In any culture, the language helps delineate the insiders, who understand the culture, from outsiders who do not, says Rabbi Rubin. But it's a good thing that the language of Judaism is very accessible and easily learned, says the rabbi.

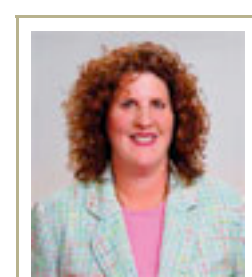
In fact, words are the gateway to understanding the customs and rituals of any religion. The words have to be unique to each religion and culture, because if the words are the same, confusion can ensue. When 16-year-old Ted Eisenberg was being confirmed at Har Zion [Temple](#) in the 1960s, his mom ordered a cake from a well-known Italian bakery to mark the occasion. She bragged to the baker that it was for her son's [confirmation](#). When she picked up the cake, it was elaborately decorated--with a cross. The baker hastily scraped off the icing cross and replaced it with a Jewish star. In Judaism, confirmation marks the completion of religious school for teenagers. It is called confirmation because it confirms the young person's commitment to live a Jewish life. In Catholicism, confirmation is a sacred sacrament and is celebrated by children 10-13 years old who are accepting the Holy Spirit and receiving [communion](#) of their own free will.

We're delighted that every time we present our book talk, we hear from mothers and daughters, men's clubs and seniors, bobbies and their son-in-laws--the gantze mishpucha (the whole family) just how useful our dictionary is, for explaining the nuances of much-beloved Jewish words. We're delighted that our dictionary is contributing to everyone's increased cultural literacy. And remember, if you can learn a few new words, you won't feel excluded by all this bageling. Just tell them you want a shmeer of cream cheese and lox with your bagel.

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Joyce Eisenberg wrote the *Dictionary of Jewish Words* with Ellen Scolnic. A 1973 graduate of Penn State University with a bachelor's degree in English, Joyce lives in Merion with her husband, Ted, and two children, Ben and Samantha. You can read more about her at [www.thewordmavens.com](#).



Ellen Scolnic wrote the *Dictionary of Jewish Words* with Joyce Eisenberg. A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Ellen lives in Wynnewood, PA with her husband, David, and their children Michael, Jessica and Andrew. You can learn more about her at [www.thewordmavens.com](#).

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