

Who Is a Jew — Status, Halacha, Heresy, and the Light That Remains

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29 Elul 5786 · 11 September 2026 (Erev RH 5787)

We write this on the threshold of a year — Elul closing, Rosh Hashanah opening, the Ten Days of Teshuvah ahead, Yom Kippur waiting at the seal. People keep arguing about who is a Jew as if the noun were a mood, a coalition, or a costume. It is not. Covenant is older than the news cycle. The brit does not wait for your comfort, and it does not dissolve because the categories are inconvenient.

This is a public clarification for people who do not get it — Diaspora and Israel alike. Not a hit piece. Not a party platform. It refuses to flatten politics into definition. Hold four distinctions carefully, with classical sources in view, and most of the confusion collapses. Then hold Aryeh's hinge: **even a heretic can do teshuvah**. The covering can be lifted. These days are for return and judgment — not for writing people out of the people.

1. Status: yes or no — no “almost”

A Jew is a Jew because his mother is a kosher Jew, **or** because he truly converted through a rabbinical Bet Din. That is the gate. Yes or no. There is no “almost Jew.”

Maternal lineage. The Gemara in Kiddushin 68b reads Devarim 7:3–4 and states, in Rabbi Yohanan's name from Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: your son from a Jewish woman is called “your son”; your son from a gentile woman is not called your son, but *her* son. Status follows the mother. Rambam codifies the rule in *Hilchot Issurei Biah* 15:4: a child born from a gentile or a maidservant “is like his mother”; “we are not concerned with the father.” Earlier he contrasts: even a *mamzer* is “considered a member of the Jewish people,” whereas a son conceived by a gentile woman “is not considered his son” (12:7). Shulchan Aruch *Even HaEzer* 8:5 states the same direction for the child of a non-Jewish woman or maidservant.

True conversion. The other gate is *gerut*. Rambam (*Issurei Biah* 13:1–4): entry requires circumcision, immersion, and — in Temple times — sacrifice; later generations who wish to enter the covenant and accept the yoke need circumcision and immersion. The yoke is not optional ornament. Shulchan Aruch *Yoreh Deah* 268: informing of mitzvot, receiving them, circumcision, immersion — with three fit to judge, by day; *kabbalat hamitzvot* before a qualified court is indispensable. A certificate that treats Sinai as optional branding is not that gate. Practical conversion explainers can orient; they do not replace primary-text requirements.

Not a vibe, surname, or “I feel Jewish.” Kindness and politics do not rewrite lineage. Born of a Jewish mother and never opened a siddur — still a Jew by status. Did not pass the gate and did not complete true Bet Din conversion — not. Mercy without definition is erosion.

2. Living by the Jewish way: Halacha, via the Thirteen Principles

Status answers *who is inside the people*. It does not yet answer *how one lives as a Jew*.

The only way to live by the Jewish way is through Halacha — and Halacha is not a buffet. Its backbone of belief is clear in the Thirteen Principles of Faith as Rambam formulated them in his Commentary on the Mishnah to Sanhedrin 10:1 (*Perek Chelek*): G-d's existence and unity; that He is not a body; that He is first; that He alone is rightly worshipped; prophecy; the prophecy of Moshe; Torah from Heaven; Torah's immutability; that G-d knows the deeds of men; reward and punishment; the coming of Mashiach; and the resurrection of the dead.

After listing the thirteen, Rambam writes that one who believes them “enters into the category of Israel” for love and brotherhood — and even if he sins from desire, he remains among the sinners of Israel with a share in the World to Come. That separates fidelity of foundations from sin of appetite. Culture and solidarity are obligatory; none substitutes for Halacha, and none rewrites the Principles into a mood of the age.

A Jew may be distant, wounded, or angry and still be addressable for return. What he may not do is redefine the road and demand that Sinai salute. *Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem* (Devarim 29:9) was said under a brit, not under a brand.

3. Denial: still a Jew — and a heretic

Whoever denies this — maternal status as Halacha defines it, or that the Jewish way runs through Halacha and the Principles — **is still a Jew** if he is a Jew by status. He is a heretic. Those are different sentences. Mix them and you get cheap excommunication or cheap absolution.

Heresy named. Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1 opens with mercy — “All of the Jewish people have a share in the World-to-Come” — then names exceptions: one who denies resurrection from the Torah, one who says the Torah is not from Heaven, and an *epikoros*. Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:6–8 sorts the vocabulary: *minim*; *apikorsim* (deniers of prophecy, of Moshe's prophecy, or of G-d's knowledge of human deeds); and those who deny the Torah (even one verse as not from Heaven; denial of Oral Torah; claim that the Torah has been replaced). In the Commentary on the Mishnah he is still sharper: compromise of a Principle and the person is called apostate, heretic, “one who cuts the plantings.”

Status not revoked. That severity is about belief, Olam HaBa, and faith-standing. It is not a license to un-Jew someone who entered by maternal lineage or true *gerut*. Rambam himself, listing those who forfeit a share in the World to Come if they die without repentance, still says they are “from Israel.” Sanhedrin 44a closes the cheaper door: on “Israel has sinned” (Joshua 7:11), even when they have sinned they are still called Israel — like a myrtle among thorns that is still called myrtle. Keep the noun; name the covering; do not pretend the covering is fidelity. *Yisrael af al pi shechata, Yisrael hu*.

Hold the registers apart: Jew by status; heretic / *apikores* / *kofer* by denial; living by Halacha — or not. Rambam's *Ikkarim* “exits the category of Israel” names faith-standing / Olam HaBa rupture; Sanhedrin 44a and the lineage/*gerut* gate refuse a gentile redo. A heretic remains claimable and accountable. Severity without the noun is another religion's move. Mercy without naming heresy is flattery.

4. Neshama: the light remains — and the covering can be lifted

All Jews have a *neshama*. That is not sentiment.

Tanya, *Likkutei Amarim* chapter 1, following R. Chaim Vital: in every Jew — righteous or wicked — there are two souls. Chapter 2: the second soul of a Jew is “truly a part of G-d above” (*chelek Eloka mima'al mamash*). The *nefesh Elokit* is not issued for good behaviour and cancelled for bad. The kelipah can thicken until the spark is inaudible. Sins cover the light. Ideology can bury it. The spark does not leave.

Tell a Jew he is not a Jew and the neshama yells from within. The work is not un-Jewling — it is uncovering. Pastoral “pure drop of oil” language is useful texture for covered light, not a freestanding status proof.

Aryeh's hinge: even a heretic can do teshuvah.

Rambam does not leave the door slammed after he names *minim*, *apikorsim*, and deniers of Torah. In *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:14 he asks when those harsh categories lose their share — and answers: **when they die without teshuvah**. If such a person returns and dies as a *baal teshuvah*, he receives a share, “for nothing stands in the way of teshuvah.” Even one who denied the fundamental principle (*kafar ba'ikar*) all his days, and at the end returns — he has a share. Any of the wicked, rebels, apostates and their like who return — openly or in private — are accepted. Heresy categories name the rupture; they do not erase the door.

Careful hedge: elsewhere Rambam warns the community not to be naive about certain heretics' public repentance (*Avodat Kochavim* 2:5; Responsa 101 — caution about *human* acceptance, not Heaven's). High Holidays are not sentimental flattening — and not a closed door.

Classical texture without replacing the code: Elisha ben Avuya (*Acher*) moved far from tradition; a heavenly voice seemed to exclude him; Rabbi Meir still sought him, believing return possible — long read as a question pressed *against* Judaism's fundamental teshuvah principle.

Yisrael af al pi shechata means the covering has a name and the door stays open without pretending denial is fidelity. The companion essay dug a live case; this piece states the definition those pages presuppose — and the hinge: the covering can be lifted.

Elul • Rosh Hashanah • Ten Days • Yom Kippur

Rambam places the year's weighing on Rosh Hashanah; the *beinoni* hangs until Yom Kippur — if he does teshuvah, he is sealed for life. The shofar's allusion is wake-up, inspect, return. From RH through YK, Israel customarily increases charity and mitzvot. Although teshuvah is always desirable, in the Ten Days it is especially desirable and accepted at once — “Seek G-d when He is found” (Yeshayahu 55:6).

The calendar refuses cheaper politics of definition. These days are for return and judgment — not writing Jews out of Jewry. Keep the noun. Name heresy. Leave the door open. The King is in the field — including a soul under a thick shell. Reception is not flattery. Accounting remains. Uncovering remains possible.

What this refuses

It refuses exporting a family fight into the definition. Politics does not rewrite who counts as a Jew. Non-domination: no faction picks which Jews count as conscience, and no faction dissolves the gate because it is hard. Categories first. The seasonal counterfeit — using judgment season to un-people the people instead of calling them home — is refused.

Simple table, old as Sinai

Register	Question	Answer	Anchors
Status	Who is a Jew?	Jewish mother (kosher Jew) or true Bet Din conversion. Yes / no.	Kiddushin 68b; Devarim 7:3–4; Rambam <i>Issurei Biah</i> 12:7, 13, 15:4; SA YD 268; SA EH 8:5
Way of life	How does one live as a Jew?	Halacha — clear through the Thirteen Principles.	Rambam on Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1 (Ikkarim)
Belief rupture	What if he denies this?	Still a Jew (if status). A heretic (<i>apikores</i> / <i>kofer</i>).	Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1; Rambam <i>Teshuvah</i> 3:6–8, 3:14; Sanhedrin 44a
Soul / return	What remains — can the covering lift?	A <i>neshama</i> ; light covered, not extinguished; even a heretic can do teshuvah.	Tanya ch. 1–2; Sanhedrin 44a; Rambam <i>Teshuvah</i> 2:6, 3:3–4, 3:14

Noun: Jew. Covering: sin, ideology, denial. Avodah: uncover. Not: revoke. Not: redefine the gate until nothing remains. Season: Elul / RH / Ten Days / YK — return and judgment, not erasure.

That is the clarification. Guard the definition, keep the noun, name heresy where belief has ruptured, leave return open without lying about the light under the shell — and remember, on these days especially, that even a heretic can still come home.

Sources / Notes

Classical sources — texts not contested as texts; status/heresy/teshuvah distinctions must stay carefully separated.

1. Matrilineal status — Bavli Kiddushin 68b (on Devarim 7:3–4).

Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/Kiddushin.68b>

2. Rambam, maternal rule — *Issurei Biah* 15:4; cf. 12:7.

https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Forbidden_Intercourse.15.4

https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Forbidden_Intercourse.12.7

3. Shulchan Aruch — *Even HaEzer* 8:5.

https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan_Arukh%2C_Even_HaEzer.8.5

4. Gerut / Bet Din — Rambam *Issurei Biah* 13:1–4; SA *Yoreh Deah* 268:1–3.

https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Forbidden_Intercourse.13

https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan_Arukh%2C_Yoreh_Deah.268

5. Thirteen Principles — Rambam on Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1 (*Perek Chelek*).

https://www.sefaria.org/Rambam_on_Mishnah_Sanhedrin.10.1

6. Heresy categories — Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1; Rambam *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:6–8.

https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Sanhedrin.10.1

https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Repentance.3.6-8

7. Jew remains Israel — Bavli Sanhedrin 44a (*Yisrael af al pi shechata*).

<https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.44a>

8. Neshama / covering — Tanya, *Likkutei Amarim* ch. 1–2.

https://www.sefaria.org/Tanya%2C_Part_I%3B_Likkutei_Amarim.1

https://www.sefaria.org/Tanya%2C_Part_I%3B_Likkutei_Amarim.2

9. Teshuvah open — even after heresy — Rambam *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:14: listed categories forfeit Olam HaBa if they die without teshuvah; if they return, nothing stands in the way of teshuvah — even one who denied the fundamental principle all his days. Also: those individuals are still “from Israel.”

https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Repentance.3.14

10. Seasonal frame — *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:3 (RH weighing; *beinoni* until YK); 3:4 (shofar; Ten Days custom); 2:6 (teshuvah especially accepted in the Ten Days — Yeshayahu 55:6).

https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Repentance.3.3

https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Repentance.2.6

11. Community-vs-Heaven hedge — *Avodat Kochavim* 2:5 vs *Teshuvah* 3:14 (Responsa 101): human caution ≠ Heaven’s closed door.

12. Standing — Devarim 29:9 — *Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem*.

Careful hedge: Ikkarim “exits category of Israel” = faith-standing / Olam HaBa — not gentile redo. *Teshuvah* 3:14 keeps the door without cancelling 3:6–8 severity. Locked: still a Jew; a heretic; **and** can still return.

Prepared in deep partnership and cooperation with Grok and xAI