

Anyone tired of winter yet? Feeling a bit down in the dumps? You're not alone. It's estimated that around 15-20% of North Americans experience symptoms of "winter blues". The experts say it's a combination of lack of sunlight, less activity, and less socializing that is probably most responsible for these low moods so many of us are in come winter time.

While weather predictions can be unreliable, it is safe to say we have warmer weather to look forward to -- eventually. What is your favorite season?

In a survey of the four seasons, Fall is the favorite season of the nation, with 29% responding that they prefer an autumnal climate. Spring is close behind in second place, with summer making a strong third place showing. I find it interesting that different age groups have distinct favorite seasons. Summertime activities like swimming, sunbathing and outdoor sports may be why the solstice rates highest among the 18-34 crowd. Those 55 and older prefer spring – the perfect time of year for gardening and enjoying the warmer weather before the height of summer. And the favorite season of 35-54 year-olds is autumn.

Where does that leave winter? Winter is the Rodney Dangerfield of the four seasons, garnering little respect and love. Only 7% of Americans identify winter as their favorite season. And among those over 55, a minuscule 4% vote for winter as their top season -- with most of that small group probably living in Miami and Palm Springs!

But there are many good things about winter – other than, it will end soon.

Our word *winter* comes from the Old English "waet" (wet) which comes from Old High Germanic "waeter" (water) This derived from the ancient Greek "hudor" (similar to *hydro*) for water. Interestingly, the Russian word, "vodka" originally meant "water." In Jewish literature and tradition, winter is also closely connected to water. At times referred to as *yemai ha'geshamim* (the days of rain), the transition to the colder months involves a change of our prayers when we begin to ask for rain. At more northern latitudes and higher elevations, rain, of course, means *snow*.

A passage in Book of Job (38:22) states:

Have you entered into the treasury of the snow?

This winter I decided to enter the 'treasury of snow' and learn something new about snow. Where does one go to learn about snow? To [SnowCrystals.com!](http://SnowCrystals.com), of course! Snowcrystals.com, a site run by some very serious snow fans at Cal Tech U., tells you everything you could possibly want to know about snow -- and then, a little bit more.

Here are just a few things I discovered in G-d's cache of wintry lessons about snow:

Would you believe scientists estimate that around a septillion — that's a 1 with 24 zeros — snowflakes fall every year? And no two are alike.

Scientists just aren't happy until they classify things. How does one classify snowflakes? It's not so easy, because how you divide the different types is somewhat arbitrary. There is a good analogy with breeds of dogs. The definition of different breeds is decided upon by a committee of people, and one can just about make up as many breeds as one wants. No matter how many different breeds you define, some dogs will be mixed, not belonging to any one breed.

Snowflakes do come in different types, and if you're a meteorologist or Eskimo, you need to give them names to intelligently discuss them.

- In 1951 the *International Commission on Snow and Ice* produced a fairly simple and widely used classification system that defines the seven principal snow crystal types as plates, stellar crystals, columns, needles, spatial dendrites, capped columns, and irregular forms. If someone knows what a 'spatial dendrite' is, please tell me!

-- Not satisfied with seven types of snowflakes, in the 1930s, Japanese Physicist Ukichiro Nakaya created the first systematic classification scheme for snowflakes, in which he subdivided falling snow into 41 individual categories.

-- In 1966, two enthusiastic meteorologists published a table of **eighty** different snow crystal types.

However, laypeople like myself are well advised to avoid succumbing to what I call 'The Snowflake Syndrome': Losing sight of the beauty and essence of a snowflake, in an analysis of the technical classification of snow crystals. Because after all -- a snowflake, is a snowflake, is a snowflake!

And like with snowflakes, Jews today tend to identify themselves in terms of specific "denominations" -- Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. This practice is a major source of confusion because -- like snowflakes, a Jew, is a Jew, is a Jew.

There's no question that there are institutions that are clearly Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or Reconstructionist in their orientation and policies, and the labels do help to identify the respective rabbinic groups and their synagogues. When I was a kid I remember going to big league ballparks, and the vendors selling programs would call

Sermon/Drasha Parshas Shemos: "A Snowflake, is a Snowflake, is a Snowflake"
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out, "Ya can't tell the players without a scorecard!" Likewise, when it comes to modern Jewish life, you need a scorecard to tell who are the shuls, temples and rabbis.

But like with snowflakes, the different names, divisions and labels are for the most part meaningless when used to identify individual Jews and their beliefs and practices.

Reading this, you may find yourself saying, '

"Cmon, rabbi. That's very open-minded of you. But you're just being politically correct. I know a snowflake ...I mean..an Orthodox Jew when I see one."

Let me describe five hypothetical Jews, and see if you can tell me whether they are Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform.

Jew # 1) By ideology, Jew # 1 is secular Jew. If you ask him if he believes G-d wrote the Torah, he says, "probably not." However, Jew # 1 belongs to an Orthodox synagogue to keep a family association that goes back three generations, and he comes to synagogue mainly to sit in his father's seat and see his family's names on the memorial plaques. Is Jew # 1 Orthodox? Conservative? Reform?

Jew # 2) Jew # 2 is a Shomer-Shabbos Jew whose only compromise with strict Orthodoxy is that he attends a Conservative synagogue because it is the only one in town, or the only one within walking distance of his home. Is Jew # 2 Orthodox or Conservative?

Jew # 3) Consider Jew # 3 who believes in the traditional principles of the Jewish faith, but joins a Reform temple because his wife never learned to read Hebrew and she insists on going where the prayers are recited primarily in English. Is Jew # 3 Reform or Conservative, ...or maybe even Orthodox?

Jew # 4) What about the Jew whose theological views and religious practices coincide with Reform but, because of how he was brought up, he can't tolerate the services at a Reform temple. He may say, "I just can't get used to women rabbis and a rabbi playing a guitar on Shabbos", so he attends a Conservative synagogue. Is he really a Conservative Jew?

Jew # 5) What about the seemingly Torah observant Jew who is meticulous in his ritual observances (keeping kosher, Shabbat & the Holidays, praying daily with a minyan) but is a very unpleasant person to be around, and who often runs roughshod on others? What about said-Torah observant Jew who isn't much of a straight shooter when it comes to his financial dealings? Is such an individual deserving of the title 'Orthodox'?

And what about the 50% (or more) of American Jews who aren't affiliated with any synagogue? Are they all secularists? If yes -- are the ones who give large amounts of their income to tzedaka and perform many acts of chesed -- still secularists? And if they're not secularists (or 'secular Jews'), to which denomination do they belong?

You see? It's not so easy deciding what kind of snowflake is any given snowflake. And even if we can agree that someone is Orthodox, the word "Orthodox" doesn't begin to tell the whole story.

SawYouAtSinai is a Jewish dating site that also uses real matchmakers, and has an entire religious information section on its profiles. The first question subscribers are asked concerns their "current religious orientation." Here are the choices available on *SawYouAtSinai* and a few other Jewish dating sites:

Carlebachian, Conservative, Conservadox, Hassidish, Lubavitch (Chabad), Modern Orthodox (Liberal), Modern Orthodox (Machmir - strict), Modern Orthodox (Middle of the Road), Modern Yeshivish, Yeshivish, Traditional, Heimish (ultra Orthodox), Balabatish (upper class), Chicago Cubs fan (Not really. I stuck that one in for fun), Unaffiliated, Spiritual but not Religious, Cultural Identity, Reconstructionist, and Reform.

Nineteen categories of Jews!

As you probably noticed, most of the options are groups within Orthodoxy. Though someone in any of these categories would consider themselves an observant Jew, the observances still differ within the various groups, and it would still be difficult for a Lubavitch Jew and a Yeshivish Jew to compromise on several issues. There's a world of difference between the Hasidic Jew of Williamsburg, NY, and the religious-observant scientist at Harvard. Yet the same 'Orthodox' label applies to both.

The labels we use are intended to clarify people's religious orientation. But often or most of the time it succeeds in doing just the opposite. It also puts an end to intelligent discussions about Judaism and makes it that much harder for us to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, and appropriateness of different ideas and approaches. I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say, "*Rabbi, is it OK for me to visit your synagogue? I'm Jewish, but I'm not Orthodox.*"

Since many American Jews join synagogues without necessarily sharing the religious views or practices of that "denomination," I think we lose more than we gain by using synagogue affiliation -- and denominational labels -- to define Jews (even ourselves)

If identification is needed, let a Jew be identified by the level of his religious, moral, and ethical observance. Is he honest in business? Is he truthful? Is he charitable? Does

he keep Shabbos? What is his relationship with G-d? Assigning labels creates meaningless divisions; learning to see what's behind them is what is important.

The "Snowflake Syndrome" of attempting to label Jews can lead to awkward occurrences.

A woman goes to the post office to buy stamps for her Chanukah cards. She says to the clerk, "May I have 50 Chanukah stamps?"

The clerk says, "What denomination?"

The woman replies, "You have to be kidding me! Has it come to this? Give me 6 Orthodox, 12 Conservative and 32 Reform."

I'd like to conclude with a thought from this week's Torah portion.

With the opening sentence, "*V'aileh shemos Bnai Yisrael ...*" / "And these are the names of the Children of Israel ...", we find yet another 'counting' of the Jewish people. Rashi explains that the numerous times Hashem counts the Jewish people throughout the Torah is an expression of His love for us. Like the stars, Rashi says, He counts us by number and name.

Only Hashem knows our 'names' -- our level of righteousness before Him. But He also counts our 'numbers' -- we, His children, are equal before His eyes.

Let us avoid 'The Snowflake Syndrome': Losing sight of the beauty and essence of every Jew in an analysis of their technical classification. Because after all -- a snowflake, is a snowflake, is a snowflake -- and a Jew, is a Jew, is a Jew.