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[Podcast intro music fades in for a few seconds.]

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**Intro:** Hello, everyone, and welcome to another episode of *Life, Death, and Afterlife in Israel Society*, a podcast where we will explore the complex social and cultural elements of Israel. I'm your host, Leah Spencer. I'm an 18-year-old undergraduate at the University of Kansas, where I'm currently majoring in Psychology and minoring in Applied Behavior Sciences. This podcast series is a part of my First Year Seminar course, guided by Professor Rami Zeedan, for his Fall 2024 course, Titled: Life, Death & Afterlife in Modern Israeli Society.

Today's episode is all about the Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel—who they are, where they come from, and their beliefs about life, death, and the afterlife, and why understanding them is so important for grasping Israel's multicultural society. My own family's roots are Ashkenazi, with my ancestors having immigrated to America before World War II, so this topic holds personal significance to me and has allowed me to further explore my cultural roots.

[Brief pause for a musical transition.]

In this episode, I'll dive into three main topics: the life of the Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel, their beliefs and practices surrounding death, and their views on the afterlife. By the end, I hope you'll walk away with a deeper understanding of how these elements shape their way of life and, more broadly, Israeli society. The information I'll share is based on a variety of academic sources, which I'll post online, in the description, for those of you who want to dig a little deeper.

[Another short musical transition.]

Let's start by understanding the foundation of Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox life: the Torah. This sacred text includes the first five books of the Hebrew Bible and is believed to be a divine revelation from God to Moses. For the Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox, the Torah isn't just a religious text, it's the blueprint for all aspects of life, from daily rituals to community practices. Rooted in traditions that began in Central and Eastern Europe, they live by Jewish law, or in Hebrew: Halacha, with the belief that devotion to Torah study prepares them for eventual judgment and a world to come, as they await the Messiah. But we'll get into that more later.

[Transition music for a few seconds.]

To further understand the presence of Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel, let's trace back their roots. Ashkenazi Jews originated as a distinct Jewish community in medieval Europe, first forming in the Rhineland area of western Germany around the 10th century. This unique culture of Jewish life developed in cities like Worms, Mainz (Mines), and Speyer (Spy-er), often called the cradle of Ashkenazi culture. You can learn more about their original roots on the linked Harvard Medical Research site.

Alright now, fast forward to the early 20th century: from 1919 to 1948, nearly 90 percent of Jewish immigrants who came to British Mandated Palestine were Ashkenazi, primarily from Central and Eastern Europe. This influx laid the groundwork for what would become a largely Ashkenazi-led Israeli state when Israel gained independence in 1948. Their significant numbers and early presence in the region allowed Ashkenazi Jews to shape key aspects of Israel's government, culture, and religious institutions, establishing many of the communities we still see today. All of this information and more can be found in the released CIA documents in the description.

[Transition music for a few seconds.]

Now that we have a better understanding of their origin let's talk about life in Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel. The Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox, sometimes referred to as Haredi Jews, make up a significant portion of Israel's religious landscape. The global Haredi population is estimated to be around 2.1 million, with over 1.3 million living in Israel as of 2023, according to JPR, the Jewish Policy Research Institute. The largest Haredi hubs in Israel are in Bnei Brak and Jerusalem's Me-a She'arim district.

An interesting aspect of life in these communities is the ongoing tension between tradition and modernity. For example, the Israeli government's recent attempts to draft ultra-Orthodox men into the IDF, or Israeli Defense Force,—men who have historically been exempt from service to pursue religious study—has sparked widespread protests. This issue remains a hot topic in Israeli politics, with implications for the government's stability. To learn more about this topic see the PBS News article in the description.

But life in these communities isn't just about politics. It's also about adhering to deeply held religious and cultural values. For instance, the Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox men often wear black suits and wide-brimmed hats, while women wear long skirts and head coverings. These practices are a way of visibly demonstrating their commitment to religious life.

To understand the Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel, it's essential to explore not only their religious beliefs and practices but also the way to a Jewish heart: food. Ashkenazi cuisine, often characterized by its rich, hearty dishes, reflects the Jewish diaspora's history across Central and Eastern Europe. Common foods include matzah ball soup, challah bread, gefilte fish, and kugel—a comforting noodle or potato casserole dish. These recipes grew out of the need to

adapt to limited ingredients available in colder climates, which also gave rise to well-known dishes like latkes and brisket. However, despite these familiar staples, Ashkenazi food is much more diverse than even I realized, with regional differences reflecting the varied influences of countries like Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania.

Do you know about Jewish dietary laws? Another unique feature of Ashkenazi cuisine is its adaptation of kosher dietary laws, such as separating meat and dairy and not eating pork or shellfish. These practices ensure that the food serves not only as sustenance but also as a constant reminder of their Jewish identity. Shout out to *Taste of Jew* for the insight on these tasty foods.

[Music break]

Now, we can't talk about Ashkenazi Jews without mentioning their distant cousin the Sephardim. The main difference between these groups is their origin. While Ashkenazi Jews trace their heritage to Central and Eastern Europe, Sephardic Jews have roots in Spain, Portugal, North Africa, and the Middle East. These geographic origins have led to significant differences in religious customs, prayer styles, and even culinary traditions. For instance, while Ashkenazi food leans towards the heavier flavors of Eastern Europe, Sephardic cuisine features spices and ingredients native to warmer Mediterranean climates, such as olives, cumin, and chickpeas. As a result, dishes like shakshuka, rice pilaf, and dishes with an abundance of fresh herbs and spices are more typical for Sephardic homes.

Culturally, there are also distinctions in religious rituals and pronunciation. Sephardic Jews use a pronunciation closer to modern Hebrew, while Ashkenazi Jews maintain an older Yiddish-influenced pronunciation. These differences influence everything from how prayers are

recited to the structure of synagogue services, showcasing the diversity within global Judaism. Check out *Judaism 101* to learn more about their differences.

[Brief pause for another musical cue.]

Now let's shift to the Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox views on death. This group places immense importance on living a life dedicated to Torah study, which they believe purifies and prepares the soul for the afterlife. Their customs surrounding death emphasize humility, simplicity, and purity, reflecting their view of human life as a brief journey filled with spiritual obligations. A key practice is to bury the body within 24-48 hours, underscoring the belief in returning 'from dust to dust' as quickly and respectfully as possible. During this time, the body is never left alone, a custom called Shmirah, a vigil to show respect and comfort the soul as it transitions from the physical world.

Their rituals are carried out with careful respect and a sense of duty. The Chevra Kadisha, or 'sacred society,' is a group within the community responsible for preparing the deceased through the ritual of Taharah (t-hair-ah). This involves washing the body, dressing it in simple linen garments called tachrichim, and placing it in an unadorned pine box. This simplicity is in keeping with the belief that all souls are equal before God and that material wealth or symbols should not affect how a person is honored in death.

Funerals in this community are marked by solemn and meaningful practices, including Kriah, where family members tear their garments as a sign of deep grief. This physical act reflects the emotional tearing and loss they experience. Mourners then read from psalms and offer eulogies that honor the deceased's character and life. After the funeral procession, they lay the body to rest in a simple ceremony, emphasizing humility and community support rather than personal display.

Mourning practices provide structure and community involvement, starting with Shiva, a seven-day period where family and friends come together to reflect on the loss, offer support, and pray. This is followed by Shloshim, a 30-day transitional phase, and annual Yahrtzeit rituals, where a candle is lit, and the Mourner's Kaddish (a prayer for mourning) is recited on the anniversary of the death. These customs are designed to provide a supportive framework for mourners, helping them find comfort and meaning in a time of sorrow. You can learn about this from the International End-of-Life Doula Association, Jewish Ritual Guide.

If you are ever at a Jewish cemetery and you wonder why there are rocks on all the graves, it is a century-old tradition. This practice, deeply symbolic, honors the deceased and serves as a physical reminder that someone has visited and remembered them. Unlike flowers, which wither, stones are enduring and symbolize the eternal nature of the soul. Leaving a stone also conveys a message of continuity, ensuring that each generation remains connected to those who came before.

[Brief pause for another musical cue.]

In some ways, their beliefs about death are deeply intertwined with their understanding of the afterlife. While there is no single, universally accepted view on the afterlife in Judaism, many Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox Jews hold firm beliefs in the resurrection of the dead and the arrival of the Messiah as a time when earthly suffering will end, and divine justice will be fulfilled. They view life on earth as a period of preparation and purification that readies the soul for the Olam Ha-Ba, 'World to Come.'

Jewish texts, though limited in specifics, describe various concepts surrounding the afterlife. Gan Eden is often envisioned as a state of paradise or Heaven for the righteous, while Sheol serves as

a place where the soul goes to be purified. Gehinnom (je-henn-um), sometimes considered similar to purgatory, is where souls are believed to undergo temporary punishment based on their actions in life. However, the exact nature of these places varies widely across Jewish thought, and the focus remains on living a virtuous, lawful life rather than dwelling on the afterlife.

The belief in bodily resurrection during the Messianic Age is central to many Orthodox Jewish practices, particularly the emphasis on burial over cremation. By honoring the physical body in life and death, they show faith in God's plan for the world and the eventual redemption of all souls. Ultimately, Orthodox Judaism sees ethical, Torah-guided living as a greater focus than concrete doctrines about the afterlife, trusting that the soul's fate rests in the hands of a just and merciful God. For more afterlife information check out Judaism 101 and BBC - Religion.

[Brief pause for another musical cue.]

To wrap up today's episode, the Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel represent a unique community deeply rooted in tradition while also negotiating the realities of a modern and diverse Israeli society. Their beliefs and practices around life, death, and the afterlife offer us a glimpse into the intricate ways they blend ancient customs with a vision of a just world to come. Whether through their daily dedication to the Torah, their reverent rituals in death, or their quiet hope for the resurrection, their lives are shaped by a profound sense of duty to God and to each other.

In a time when global cultures are increasingly connected, learning about such traditions highlights both the diversity and the shared values that unite people. The Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox view of life and death challenges us to consider what it means to live ethically, to honor our ancestors, and to find meaning in our own journeys. If you're interested in diving deeper, I've posted resources to explore the topics we've covered today. Thank you for joining



me on this episode of Life, Death, and Afterlife in Israel's Society. I'm Leah Spencer, and I'll see you next time.

[Outro music fades in.]

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