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Jews today are divided, complicated, professor says

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York U Professor Kalman Weiser spoke at Lodzer Centre on Sunday.

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Today's Jewish population is divided, complicated and different, Professor Kalman Weiser told a Lodzer Centre Holocaust Congregation audience Sunday.

In society, Jews are separated by the different foods they eat, language they speak, the way they pray and even what holidays they celebrate. The Lodzer Centre is primarily Ashkenazi, but with a lot of intermarriages there is an increasing population of Sephardi, about which the Lodzer doesn't know a lot.

"People migrate, intermarry and take on new identities," said Weiser, the Silber Family Professor of Modern Jewish Studies at York University. "They feel strongly about who and what they think they are, which is always changing."

Today there are two main Jewish subgroups: the Sephardi, who trace their origins to Spain and Portugal, and the Ashkenazi, who come from Central Europe. More often than not, Sephardi is used as the 'catch-all' for all non-Ashkenazi Jews, leading to confusion.

In his lecture, *Diversity within the Jewish Population: Ashkenazi and Sephardi Communities*, Weiser spoke about these two main Jewish subgroups and how much they have changed, evolved and grown during the past 1,000 years.

Weiser is himself a product of a "mixed marriage" – his mother's family are Romaniote Jews from Greece, and his father's family are Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe.

For Jews in 21st century North America, identities are shifting, and people aren't always identifying the way they did historically.

“Children of intermarriage follow the practice of their father, but people don’t necessarily follow that in today’s day and age,” said Weiser. “People select what elements they want, which means some traditions die out while new traditions are born.”

With new and advanced ways that people can meet each other, including through online dating, there is more choice than ever. The lines between subgroups are becoming increasingly blurred, and Weiser said that more intermarriage is the trend.

“We live in a society where everyone chooses for themselves what to take and what not to take,” he said. “Some communities encourage intermarriage, while others do not.”

Regardless of how one identifies – Sephardi or Ashkenazi – the result remains the same: we take our cultural identity with us from place to place; Canadians who go to another country will undoubtedly take their ‘Canadianness’ with them as identity continues to be fluid.

“Jews have a fantastic ability to keep a certain core set of values but adapt to changing surroundings,” he said. “People forget the past but assimilate it and make it part of their new identities.”

The Lodzer is a fully egalitarian, traditional Conservative synagogue with its origins rooted in the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. The synagogue, built in 1981 in the Bathurst and Sheppard area, has current membership from many different regions in the world and many age groups.