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Encouraging Jewish Choices & A Welcoming Jewish Community

GUIDE TO THE SYNAGOGUE FOR INTERFAITH COUPLES AND FAMILIES

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Introduction

There are many aspects of Jewish life that require a community. Synagogues as institutions provide social organization and a space for these activities, including group prayer and study. Jews organize synagogues, rather than the other way around as in some other religious traditions. Through synagogues, congregations hire religious teachers and leaders and make communal activities happen. Synagogues can therefore be great places to get to know Judaism--even the parts of Judaism you only do at home.

What happens at a synagogue?

Many authorities on Jewish life have asserted that the most important rituals in Judaism take place in the home, not in the synagogue. This is mostly true, but not the whole story. Just about anything people do in a synagogue they could do in a home or any sort of building, but there are a lot of aspects of Jewish life that require a community. Synagogues as institutions provide social organization and a space for these activities, including group prayer and study. Jews organize synagogues, rather than the other way around as in some other religious traditions. Through synagogues, congregations hire religious teachers and leaders and make communal activities happen. Synagogues can therefore be great places to get to know Judaism--even the parts of Judaism you only do at home.

Daily Prayer

Historians used to believe that Jews didn't have synagogues until after the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE. Archeological evidence now suggests that Jews built synagogues for non-sacrificial worship while the Temple was still standing, and possibly even during the Babylonian Exile. This shows that there was a tradition of congregational prayer that was concurrent with the practice of animal sacrifice. Since Jews only sacrificed in this one central temple, they must have wanted to have a place for prayer nearer to where they lived.

After the Temple was destroyed, the rabbis who wrote the Talmud worked on creating a standard set of worship services. These services, codified in the siddur or prayerbook, were named after, and timed to correspond with, the sacrificial services in the Temple. In this way, rabbinic Judaism replaced animal sacrifice with prayer. There were three services a day during the week: the morning service, called Shacharit in Hebrew, the afternoon service, Minchah, and the evening service, Ma'ariv. On Shabbat and holidays, the priests in the Temple used to have an additional sacrifice, so the siddur included Musaf, meaning additional service. Though services always included occasional prayers, liturgical poems and improvisation, the siddur provides a structure, a schedule and a set of guidelines for when a congregation is needed.

Though Jews can pray anywhere and don't require a sanctified space, the synagogue is a good place to gather a minyan, or minimum number of adult Jews required to form a congregation required for Torah reading and some of the prayers. Today, when you go to a synagogue, it is usually for a prayer service, often with a Torah reading.

Torah Reading

According to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Hebrew scriptures and to post-biblical rabbinic literature, Jews had the practice of public Torah reading in the Second Temple period. It was then that they began reading from the first five books of the Hebrew bible, the five books of Moses, on Monday, Thursday and Saturday. Since the rabbis ruled that public Torah reading requires a congregation of 10 to be public, synagogues have become the place to do this. Torah reading has been integrated into prayer services.

In the contemporary Jewish world, synagogues keep their Torah scrolls in a cabinet, called in Hebrew the aron kodesh. Usually this is translated holy ark. The scrolls are treated like holy things--they aren't allowed to touch the floor and people kiss them, usually using a mediating object like a prayer book or the fringes of their prayer shawl. Practices vary (that's true about just about everything involving the synagogue), but in worship services in which the Torah is read, the scrolls often are removed from the ark with some ceremony and paraded around the congregation. Torah readers use a pointer called a yad, which means hand, to keep their places as they read from the scroll.

In some synagogues, only Jewish men are invited to have Torah-associated honors. In others, all Jewish adults are allowed to open the ark and to help undress and dress and lift up the scroll. Most importantly, they are invited to recite the blessing over the sections of the reading--this is called having an aliyah. Different congregations have different rules about what parts non-Jews may take in the Torah service. Some congregations will honor the non-Jewish partners of Jews by allowing them to have an aliyah jointly with their Jewish partner, or to read the translation in English.

If you are at a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony or the Torah service before someone's wedding, the congregation may try to find a way to honor you. It's good to make sure that people giving out honors know whether you are Jewish, and also to feel OK about turning down an honor if it makes you uncomfortable. On the other hand, if you aren't Jewish and the congregation has come up with a way to give you an honor, it's a good thing, if you do feel comfortable doing it, to accept it. It benefits the congregation to find ways to honor beloved non-Jewish relatives and friends, and it's not a way of pressuring you to be Jewish.

Special Prayers For Holidays

Jewish holidays have their own special prayers. The siddur model contains both the remnants of the old Temple pilgrimage holiday cycle, and additional prayers that have been added over the last nine or 10 centuries. For most holidays, there is a custom of reciting Hallel, a set of psalms of praise. On the major holidays, there is a custom of reciting a memorial service, called Yizkor, to remember dead relatives. On Rosh HaShanah, the Jewish New Year, there is an additional service for blowing the shofar, or ram's horn. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, there are several additional services that can make the time in the synagogue stretch out all day. (Which is fine if you're fasting and don't have to get home for lunch anyway.) Some of these prayers and rituals require a congregation, which is why the synagogue is a perfect place for them. There are also home rituals for nearly all holidays.

Lifecycle Events (But Not All Of Them!)

This might surprise you: it's not important in Judaism to get married in a synagogue. Marriage does not require a full congregation of witnesses, only the two needed to sign the marriage contract. On the other hand, it is a mitzvah, a commandment, to make the bride and groom rejoice, so it's customary to have a big party. Synagogues usually have social halls and kitchens to make this possible.

There was a tradition in many Jewish communities of holding girl baby-naming ceremonies in synagogue, while most boy baby namings, which happened during ritual circumcisions, could happen in family homes, synagogues or other venues. One girl baby-naming tradition was to announce the girl's name during the Torah reading in synagogue. In the last 30 years, many Jewish parents have created new rituals for naming girls, but the custom of announcing a girl's name before the Torah in synagogue is still done in many places. (I was named that way.)

Many families make a big celebration for their children's religious maturity, called a bar mitzvah (son of commandments) or a bat mitzvah (daughter of commandments.) At 13, the child is old enough to be responsible for his or her own actions and can have adult honors. In most synagogues, the bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah learns to read the Torah portion, and possibly to lead a part of the service, and in some congregations, to give a short talk about the meaning of the Torah portion. Most bar and bat mitzvah celebrations take place at a regular Saturday morning service, which can last two or three hours.

The Reform movement in Judaism started two lifecycle traditions: consecration and confirmation. Consecration brought into the synagogue some of the many Jewish folk customs for celebrating the beginning of Jewish education. These were much less formal customs like giving children sweets in the shape of letters or putting honey on the slate or on a book to teach the child learning is sweet. Consecration is more formal--the children receive miniature Torah scrolls around the Jewish holiday of Simhat Torah.

Confirmation was originally intended as an egalitarian replacement for bar mitzvah, but no one wanted to give up bar mitzvah. Instead, families began to give their daughters equal responsibility and attention for the bat mitzvah, and some synagogues used, and continue to use, the Confirmation ceremony as a way of extending Jewish education. Held on the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, Confirmation is a stately ceremony at the end of what can be serious Jewish education.

Funerals are sometimes held in synagogues, but not in all communities. Some have a strong preference for funeral services to be in funeral homes and at the graveside.

Study

Providing a place for study is a very important function of synagogues. Many families don't join a synagogue until they need a children's supplemental religious school in order to prepare children for bar or bat mitzvah. Synagogues often also house preschool programs, sometimes with Jewish content. Children's programming is what brings in the most people, but adult and family education programming is what helps retain them.

Usually programming for interfaith couples is part of adult and family education programs. Some classes that aren't labelled for interfaith families may be great for you, no matter what you know when you start them. Torah and other text study classes with the rabbi or another Jewish educator are not only for people who already have a background in Hebrew. Finding intellectually stimulating adult study can be a revelation, point of entry for adult spiritual life that goes beyond your own childhood religious education (which you may or may not remember fondly.)

Other Community Activities

Synagogues also house social action or charitable efforts, like canned food drives, sanctuary for refugee families and pastoral care for elders. If the synagogue is affiliated with a Jewish denomination like the Reform or Conservative movements, they may participate in some nationwide charitable program, like activism for Darfur or providing mosquito netting to prevent malaria.

What Kind of Synagogue Is it? Jewish Denominations

When someone asks "What kind of synagogue is it?" you might want to say, "A Jewish one." Of course, that's a great answer! Still, it's good to know what to expect. Will the rabbi be female? Do men and women sit together? Will my small children be welcome or are they too rambunctious for the community? How long is the service?

For interfaith families, there are other questions. How will a non-Jewish person be received? Does the congregation have a way to honor non-Jewish family members at lifecycle events? Do they consider my children Jewish? Who can become a member of the synagogue, and how will we integrate into its social life?

Sometimes, knowing what denomination the synagogue affiliates with will help you answer those questions.

At the beginning of the modern era, European Jews developed movements or denominations that split the Jewish world along factional lines. These movements have come to the United States and grown here.

Reform

Reform Judaism is the largest Jewish movement in the United States, with 1.5 million members and 893 congregations. Reform started in the early 19th century in Germany and Hungary. If you had to pick a single Jewish concept that motivated the original Reform movement, it would be kavanah--intention. Reformers were concerned that Jews were reciting prayers they could not understand. They introduced vernacular language to the synagogue, and also brought in instrumental music. Before that point, all synagogue music was exclusively vocal music and there were very few prayers translated into people's everyday language. Reformers believed that services in a language everyone could understand, with a high level of decorum, would help modern Jews retain their religiosity.

Reform rejected the divinity of the Talmud and the binding character of halachah--the practical code of Jewish law. They began to call their synagogues "temples" in a conscious rejection of the need for a re-establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem. Reform Jews were the first to have family seating in synagogue instead of separate seating for men and women, and nearly a century later, the first to ordain women as rabbis. Reform prayerbooks follow the form of the traditional siddur but prayers are translated or summarized in English. Services in the Reform movement today still feature choral and instrumental music. It's still relatively easy to follow a Reform service, even though some prayers are read or sung in Hebrew. If you have small children, do ask whether there is a children's service for them, as the general level of decorum in a Reform congregation may be too hard for them. Some Reform congregations have intergenerational services like Tot Shabbat that may be just right for you.

In a Reform congregation, any child of one Jewish parent who was raised Jewish and with no other religion is Jewish. This is different from much of the Jewish world, which insists on matrilineal descent. The patrilineal descent decision of 1983 made it possible for the highly organized Reform movement--the Union of Reform Judaism in the US--to grow to be the largest Jewish movement.

The Jewish community has a bad habit of contrasting "Reform" with "religious." This isn't right. Many Jews choose Reform not because of what it doesn't require of them, but because of what it does. The positive values of egalitarianism and an explicit endorsement of ethics motivate many Reform Jews. Inclusivity of interfaith families is one of the Reform movement's values, and that may make a Reform congregation a good one for you.

Conservative

The Conservative movement grew out of the mid-19th century idea of Positive Historical Judaism, pioneered by German Jewish reformer Zecharias Frankel. In the United States, Conservative Judaism was at one point the largest movement. It's a reform movement (lower case) that embraces traditional Jewish legal process. Hence, Conservative Jews rely on Jewish legal reasoning to justify the ordination of women, for example.

Conservative synagogue services are most often mainly in Hebrew. Most of the prayers appear precisely as they do in an Orthodox prayerbook. The Conservative movement changes the Hebrew of some of the prayers, usually in very minor ways. For example, in the morning blessings, most siddurim have Jewish men bless God that they are not created female and not created as a non-Jew. Conservative movement scholars found an alternative text in a medieval prayerbook that blessed God for making the individual in the divine image, as a Jew, and used those positive versions of the blessings, so that they would no longer stigmatize women and non-Jews. This is very typical of Conservative Judaism: an ideological change based in an alternative historical text. It's also typical in that it's a change that's very subtle to a newcomer to the synagogue.

The Conservative movement considers the children of Jewish mothers to be Jewish. Children of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother are not technically Jewish under the rule of matrilineal descent. Some interfaith families who want to raise Jewish children have conversion ceremonies for their children in order for them to participate in Conservative synagogues.

Conservative synagogues often have a lot to offer interfaith couples. Services tend to be more traditional but the pages are announced and there may be cantorial or choral singing and instruments, like an organ. Conservative synagogues often have great educational programming, both for children and for adults and families. Check for children's services--many Conservative congregations offer them. The Conservative Movement's Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs has made outreach to interfaith families their priority. Active laypeople in the Conservative movement have been at the forefront of outreach to interfaith families--the impulse to do this comes from the heart of the movement.

Orthodox

There are many kinds of Orthodox synagogues. Some are congregations that moved together as a group during one of the waves of Jewish immigration from a particular city or Jewish community. These congregations maintain the tunes and traditions of the old country and sometimes have names that reflect their origins. These synagogues may be Sephardi--that is, sharing the customs of Jews whose ancestors lived in Spain in the Middle Ages--or Ashkenazi, sharing the customs of Jews whose ancestors lived in Christian Europe in the Middle Ages, like the majority of Jews in the U.S. There are also synagogues with Iranian, Iraqi, Italian or Greek customs. Some congregations are the second and third generation of a single Ashkenazi community that settled together in the United States after the Holocaust.

Some Orthodox synagogue services may seem busy and a little chaotic, a feeling is that is enhanced by children running around. In other synagogues, congregants are focused on their prayers and may pray at a rapid rate. The service will be entirely in Hebrew and the leader may or may not announce page numbers. Your best bet if you are brand new is to introduce yourself and sit near someone friendly to help you follow the pages. You may feel alienated that men and women don't sit together, or you may find that a lot of good things are happening on your side of the barrier between the two sections--it really depends on the congregation and your openness.

The largest association of Orthodox synagogues in the United States is the Orthodox Union, which claims about 1,000 synagogues under its aegis. Synagogues in the Orthodox Union must have separate seating for men and women with a barrier called a mehitzah separating the two sections. They pray in Hebrew, but usually discuss the Torah portion in English. The Orthodox Union is also one of the largest organizations providing supervision of kosher food. Orthodox Union synagogues are often called "Modern Orthodox."

Orthodox Jews consider the children of Jewish mothers to be Jewish. Children of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother are not technically Jewish under the rule of matrilineal descent. Some interfaith families who want to raise Jewish children have conversion ceremonies for their children in order for them to participate in Orthodox synagogues.

The kind of Orthodoxy many non-Orthodox Jews get to know is Chabad Hasidism. A non-Hasidic Orthodox outreach organization that interfaith families might encounter is Aish Ha-Torah, which has 26 offices providing programming and a popular website. This organization is not geared to interfaith families. Indeed, they are the inventors of Speed Dating (really!) as a means of helping Jews to find Jewish partners, and they actively discourage intermarriage. Like Chabad, however, their purpose is to provide

outreach to any Jew who wants to become more observant in an Orthodox fashion, and this includes some children and spouses in interfaith families.

Though Orthodox Judaism by definition resists new things, many Jews identify as Orthodox who are liberal and open to new things--and new people. An Orthodox synagogue doesn't seem like the natural choice for an interfaith family--but one near you might be.

Hasidic Orthodox

Hasidism looks very old-fashioned, but one could think of it as the first of the modern European Jewish movements. A backward-looking popularization of mysticism, Hasidism was founded in the 1700s by Israel ben Eliezer, the Ba'al Shem Tov. Clinging to past dress and language, Hasidic Jews are anti-modern--and you can't have an anti-modernist movement before there is at least a threat of modernity!

The most important concept in Hasidism is *devekut* (usually transliterated *devekus*) sticking or cleaving to God. All practices in Hasidic Judaism are intended to bring the individual closer to God. These practices may include more ritual immersions than other Orthodox Jews typically do, singing and dancing, storytelling and other mystical practices. One item of practice that divided Hasidim from non-Hasidic Orthodox Jews in Europe was *kashrut*; Hasidim had additional practices around ritual slaughter.

Hasidic Jews differ from other Orthodox Jews in following a single leader, called a *rebbe* or *tzaddik*. A *rebbe* isn't an ordinary rabbi--he's more like a guru. Each school in Hasidism is named after the town where the original *rebbe* lived, whether or not he had dynastic successors. Hasidim also have rabbis, men who have learned enough Talmud to teach and make legal rulings, but *rebbe*s have special status.

In the present day, an interfaith family is most likely to come into contact with Chabad Hasidim, because this group has sent emissaries (called in Hebrew *shlichim*) to all corners of the globe to share with other Jews the traditional practices of Judaism. Other Hasidic groups are more closed to outsiders.

Chabad rabbis and their families provide Shabbat dinners to guests on college campuses and demonstrate how to put on tefillin, light Shabbat and Hanukkah candles, and perform other *mitzvot*. Chabad synagogues are often warmly welcoming to interfaith families in spite of publishing books and articles that decry interfaith marriage. Chabad congregations do not consider the children of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother to be Jews. Chabad synagogues, like other Orthodox synagogues, seat men and women separately. Chabad was innovative in using women's education to reach out to non-Orthodox Jews. Chabad has brought Hasidic influence to many non-Hasidic Jews.

Reconstructionist

Most Reconstructionists date the beginnings of their movement to 1934 when Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Conservative movement's main institution, first published *Judaism as a Civilization*. Kaplan maintained ties to the Conservative movement during his lifetime, and it wasn't until 1968 that Kaplan's followers established a rabbinical college, defining themselves as a Jewish movement. More than 100 synagogues and Havurot are affiliated with the Reconstructionist Federation. The Federation of Reconstructionist Synagogues and Havurot first passed a resolution affirming that children with one Jewish parent, whether it was the mother or the father, were Jewish, in 1968.

Reconstructionist theology is very different from Reconstructionist practice. The Reconstructionists tend to be more traditional in their practice than some Reform Jews, but Kaplan's thought moves away from a personal God to a more naturalistic view of spirituality. Traditional Judaism has a strong notion of a personal God, and Reconstructionism departs from that. Reconstructionists regard Judaism as the Jewish people's creation, a response to the divine presence in the world.

Synagogues in the Reconstructionist movement are typically welcoming to interfaith families. Individual Reconstructionist congregations decide who is a Jew for purposes of religious school. The Reconstructionist movement has recommended that synagogues allow non-Jewish family members in Jewish families to become members on condition that they are not participants in another religion.

Reconstructionism is still a relatively small movement, and you may not be able to find a Reconstructionist congregation to explore where you live. Reconstructionist synagogue services follow the format of the traditional siddur, with many changes to the Hebrew text of the prayers.

Glossary

aliyah

Hebrew for going up. In synagogue, the honor of blessing the parts of the Torah reading.

amen

Hebrew word meaning believed, faithful or affirmed. In Jewish contexts, it's usually pronounced ah-meyn instead of eh-men. Saying amen has a technical meaning in Judaism--it means that you have fulfilled your obligation to say the blessing through hearing another person's blessing. (Which is why people usually do not say amen to their own blessing, unless they are trying to give you a cue to do so.)

amidah

A set of prayers the individual recites standing up. (Amidah means standing.) Sometimes these are called the 18 Benedictions or Shemoneh Esrei, even though there are more than 18 blessings. In traditional synagogues these are first recited individually and silently, and then repeated. In some Reform services, some may be recited out loud and seated.

ark or aron kodesh

The cabinet where the Torah scrolls are kept. It is an honor to be asked to open the doors to the ark.

bar mitzvah

Son of commandments. A boy of 13 is considered to be responsible for his own actions, and in celebration of this takes on the ritual obligations of an adult--he becomes a bar mitzvah. Since the medieval period it has been a Jewish ritual to call a 13-year-old to the Torah for an aliyah, the honor of reciting the blessings over the reading. His parents can then recite a blessing on not being responsible for his sins. Many bar mitzvah ceremonies including a demonstration of Jewish knowledge and competence, including leading all or part of the Shabbat morning service, reading from the Torah scroll, reading from the Prophets or giving an explanatory talk about the Torah portion. Families will often celebrate this event with a lavish party.

bat mitzvah

Daughter of commandments. Though the rabbis of the Talmud recognized that girls became responsible adults in a Jewish sense at age 12 and a half, it was not typical for girls to celebrate this occasion in public until the 20th century--at least, we don't have much of a historical record of such celebrations. As bar mitzvah became a larger ceremony in North America in the 20th century, Jewish families began to seek parity for their daughters and to train them to do the same tasks as boys: to read from the Torah scroll and the books of the Prophets, lead the service and to give an explanatory talk about the Torah portion. Most Jewish communities now celebrate girls on their 13th

birthdays. In some Orthodox communities, girls will have a ceremony that shows their learning or piety in a different way from boy.

bimah

The pulpit or platform at the front of the sanctuary in a synagogue.

cantor

Sometimes called by the Hebrew hazan, the cantor is a professional service leader. Many congregations hire a cantor to teach children for their bar and bat mitzvah, organize and rehearse a choir and coordinate music in addition to leading services.

eternal light or ner tamid

A lamp that hangs over the ark in the sanctuary of a synagogue, in remembrance of the eternal light in the Tabernacle mentioned in the book of Exodus.

gabbai

The person who checks the Torah reader.

Havurah

Fellowship--plural, havurot. A small, lay-led group that meets for prayer or study. Some synagogues have smaller havurot that are part of their congregation; other havurot are independent, and function as small independent congregations.

humash (also sometimes transliterated chumash)

From the Hebrew word hamesh meaning five, a bound book containing the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, usually with translation and commentary. In many synagogues you can find a humash in the pew in front of you, or on a shelf on your way into the sanctuary.

kiddush

The blessing over wine on Shabbat and holidays takes its Hebrew name for the word for sanctification. In synagogue, people speak of "a kiddush" when they mean the wine and snacks sometimes put out for congregants after services on Shabbat and holidays. To "make kiddush" is to recite or sing the blessing over the wine.

kippah

A skullcap or yarmulke, worn as a sign of respect in Jewish contexts. The plural is kippot. In many synagogues there are baskets of kippot in the entryway for guests to wear. In some congregations only men cover their heads this way, but the custom of women using a kippah as a head covering has become more widespread. For many years, Reform Jews didn't wear kippot, but today they are the norm in many Reform synagogues for both men and women. It is fine for a non-Jew to wear a head covering to show respect in a Jewish context in which Jews cover their heads.

mazel tov

Congratulations. The phrase means a good sign or good fortune.

minyan

The minimum number of adult Jews (10 people) required to form a congregation required for Torah reading and some of the prayers. The plural is minyanim. Also, some small congregations that don't have their own building refer to themselves as independent minyanim.

rabbi

A spiritual leader and teacher.

repetition

In traditional morning services, the service leader repeats the silent standing prayer, the Amidah. During the repetition, the congregation stands and joins the leader in reciting the Kedushah or sanctification of God's name. In most Reform services, there is no repetition of the Amidah.

Sefer Torah

The Torah scroll containing the first five books of the Hebrew bible.

Shema

The most central prayer in Judaism, from Deuteronomy 6:4, often translated: "Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is One.". In the traditional prayerbook, the recitation of the Shema also includes three additional paragraphs from Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37–41.

siddur

Hebrew for prayerbook. The plural is siddurim. In most synagogues, the siddurim are in a wooden holder in the pew in front of you, or on a shelf on your way into the sanctuary.

tallit or tallis

Prayer shawl. (Some say tallit and use the Hebrew plural tallitot, and others say tallis and use the Yiddish plural tallises.) Because it is rectangular, a tallit is subject to the commandment in Numbers 15:37-41, quoted in the Shema, on wearing ritual fringes in the corners of the garments. (If your clothes don't have corners, they don't meet the requirement for fringes!) People who wear a tallit to pray do so in part in order to get to look at (and sometimes kiss) the fringes while they read the verse about them in the Shema. In many congregations, there are racks outside the sanctuary where guests may borrow a tallit. A non-Jew is not obligated to wear a tallit but it is OK to try one.

transliteration

If you don't read Hebrew and you want to participate in singing Hebrew prayers and songs, some congregations will provide you with the text spelled out in English letters.

yarmulke

See **kippah**.

yasher koach!

More power to you! This is a way to congratulate someone for doing a good job at a ritual task in services. You can also say "Good job!" The appropriate response is "Baruch tiheyeh"--Be blessed. Or you can just say, "Thanks!"