

5 minute guide

to

JUDAISM

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Introduction

There are approximately 12 million Jews in the world today.

Judaism began in the Middle East over 3,500 years ago. Jews believe that there is only one God and they are His chosen people. It is sometimes referred to as the “parent faith” of Christianity. Christianity and Judaism both recognise the Old Testament as Holy Scripture.

History

The word Judaism comes from the Hebrew word Yehudah (meaning “The Praised”). Yehudah (sometimes called Judah) was the founder of a tribe of people. This tribe took his name and eventually Judah became the name of a kingdom and a new state. One cannot look at the word Judaism only as a description of a religion, it is more than that. Judaism is linked by three elements, the union of a God, a people (Israel) and a country (the Holy Land).

The Torah (the Five Books of Moses that begin the Hebrew and Christian Bible) states that the Hebrews are descended directly from Abraham. Abraham was alive around 2000 B.C.E. and he was raised in the religion of the time which worshipped the moon and other natural gods. Over time, Abraham began to believe that there was really only one God. He decided to no longer worship idols with his family and community. God rewarded him for this wisdom and made a promise to him and said: “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.... And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.” (Genesis 17:1-8) Abraham left his family and travelled to the land of Canaan. It is believed that in Canaan God entered into a covenant (an agreement held to be the basis of a relationship of commitment with God) with Abraham, promising to give the land to his descendants and to make them a chosen people as an example to the other people of the world. The rite of male circumcision on all the male children in Abraham’s line sealed this covenant and this rite is performed by Jews to this day.

Growth

Abraham’s son Isaac became leader of the Hebrews after his father. Isaac’s son Jacob continued after his the former’s death. Jacob fathered twelve sons who were the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. They all settled around the Nile valley around 1700 B.C.E. The Hebrews lived well and peacefully until approximately 1580 B.C.E. when the Theban Pharaohs began to persecute them. The Jews had become threatening to the Pharaohs because of their large numbers. One method of persecution was to kill all Jewish newborn males.

According to The Old Testament, the mother of a man called Moses determined to save him from this infanticide and hid him in the rushes by a stream. The Pharaoh’s daughter found him and he was raised in the royal court. When Moses was a man, God came to him (in the form of a burning bush) and said: “I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.....and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the people of Israel, “I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians....and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God.....who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord” (Exodus 6:2-8).

Moses then rescued Israel by helping people to escape the Egyptians by parting the water of the Red Sea for them. The children of Israel wandered the desert for forty days until they came to the wilderness of Sinai. It was there that the Jews believe that God entered into a new covenant with Moses. This was a wider covenant than the previous one, made with the people as a whole, and it demanded that the Israelites offer great sacrifice and total dedication to their God. The covenant consisted of 613 commandments; 365 referred to forbidden things and 248 to things that had to be done. He gave Moses a complete and detailed system of rules by which his people were to live. The most important were the first Ten Commandments or Decalogue.

The Ten Commandments

These commandments are some of the most important spiritual pillars in Judaism and represent the heart of the law in the Jewish tradition. Here is an abridged version of this Decalogue:

- I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
- Thou shalt have no Other Gods before Me.
- Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain.
- Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
- Honour thy father and mother.
- Thou shalt not kill.
- Thou shalt not commit adultery.
- Thou shalt not steal.
- Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.
- Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house; thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his man-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbour's. (Exodus 20:2-17)

It is worth noting that these same commandments have a very important role in some other religious traditions as well, particularly Christianity.

Around 1500 B.C.E., the Israelites returned to the holy land of Canaan to start what they believed would be a peaceful existence for generations thereafter. Over time, struggles and jealousies broke out among the leaders of the Israelites and eventually the nation became divided. The Jews are said to have stopped living by the required standards which God had given them. The Lord, according to the Scriptures, used the Assyrian and Babylonian nations as tools to punish the Hebrews. From 721 to 586 B.C.E. the Israelites were embattled, overcome and exiles. In 586, the Babylonians burnt the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and held the people there captive for approximately fifty years.

The Hebrew prophets of the time put together the Old Testament. These prophets also presented the concept of a Messiah (Saviour). They believed that the Messiah would be a king who would not be divine, but that he would be called the son of God and this man would unite Israel and lead it to the Kingdom of God.

The Diaspora

The destruction of the Temple marked a turning point for the Jewish community. Exiled and with communities separated from one another, this period of their history is called the Diaspora. The prophets believed that the Jews themselves were to blame for their misfortune and that God would offer forgiveness in time if they returned to the ways of the Covenant with Moses. This is a period when the centre and driving force of Jewish life became the synagogue. In the seventh century B.C.E. the centre of Judaism was returned to Jerusalem. However, this did not mean that there was complete unity among the Israelites, because the Diaspora caused Jews to develop differently. Three leading parties emerged from this period: the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Essenes.

In about 25 C.E., a man named Jesus of Nazareth became important in the region. He was heralded to be the Messiah by some Jews and these Jews became the first Christians.

From 66 to 135 C.E., the Jews began a war against the ruling Romans. Towards the beginning of this war the Romans burnt the second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. That event was considered to be the beginning of a new period of suffering and it was so important that the Jews began to date events from that time.

With the destruction of the temple, Jews were pressured into preserving their heritage at any cost. The only sacred things left to the Israelites were the Torah, the Oral Law and the teachings of scholars and Rabbis. The teachings of scholars were put into writing and became what is called the Talmud. The Talmud is one of the most important works in Judaism. The Talmud explains the relationship between man and the land, lists man's duties in observing religious rites, and explains other Jewish laws and practices.

In the middle of the 7th Century C.E. Judaism was revitalized by the rise of Islam. It benefited both spiritually and economically. This period ended around the 10th Century. During the Christian Crusades, the Jews were forced to emigrate. They faced harsh treatment in Europe and were treated badly. By the sixteenth century some countries forced them to live in special districts called ghettos, while some countries had either simply expelled them or imposed severe restrictions on their movements and rights. The sixteenth century also saw the rise of a Jewish mystical movement called Cabala.

In the eighteenth century, the discovery of the New World, the economic and political revolutions in Europe and the internal split in the Christian Church combined to make the world outside of the Jewish Ghetto more accessible to the Jews. This period saw increased rights and more equal footing for them with other Europeans. As a result of increased Jewish assimilation, the Jewish Reform Movement began in Germany in 1840. The reform movement was attacked by Jewish traditionalists (counter-reformists), resulting in a split in Judaism which remains to this day.

The Jewish community then experienced the near annihilation of the race in Germany and Eastern Europe. Between 1940 and 1945 the Jews were violently and almost completely exterminated by the German Nazis.

In 1948 the British army, who had occupied Palestine since the end of World War I, gave control of the area to the Jews. Jews from all over the world left approximately 74 countries and arrived in Palestine to begin a new life.

Traditions/Beliefs

- A belief in one true God who is an all-powerful being; with whom each individual person has a direct personal experience and to whom prayers are addressed.
- A belief that life is holy.
- A belief that the Torah (Jewish Holy Scripture) is the guide to correct living. Studying the Torah is a form of worship.
- That Community is very important. Group worship and prayer are essential elements of right living and Jews have a sense of collective purpose and shared responsibility for one another.
- A belief in the Covenant (God's agreement with the chosen people of Israel).
- A belief in the Ten Commandments.

Within Judaism there are three main movements:

- The **Orthodox** movement. Orthodox Jews believe that complete uncompromising conformity to the dictates of God is what is required. They are bound to preserve ritual, tradition and doctrine as it was received in the past (back to its very beginnings). Conforming to new social conventions is not important to the Orthodox view, which holds that it is vital to live as God's will was revealed in the Holy Scriptures. For the Orthodox view, Judaism is the world and obedience to the will of God is the primary objective.
- The **Conservative** Jew. For the Conservative Jew, the idea of absolute adherence to past traditions is not the guiding principle. It is important to preserve the "old ways" as much as possible, but not to the degree of importance for an Orthodox Jew. They affirm the primacy of tradition within their religious experience, but do acknowledge the importance of carefully chosen adjustments to accommodate the world in which they live.
- **Reform** Judaism. For the Reform Jew, it is important to retain the essential elements of Judaism which make the most sense in a contemporary setting. The Torah is accepted, but it is seen to be more open to study and interpretation by the individual than the previous movements mentioned. This movement arose in the mid-nineteenth century and experienced remarkable growth, particularly in the United States.

Worship

For Judaism, life is a religious ceremony in itself – the emphasis on the detailed code of conduct and the following of each individual and community of these codes is a form of daily worship. Therefore, all of life is a liturgy (public worship).

Orthodox, Conservative and **Reform** Jews are in agreement that life should be seen as a ritual to honour the Creator. The difference lies in what the definition of the word "ritual" should be.

For the **Orthodox** tradition, there is a heavy emphasis on the precise recitation of specific prayers in specific situations. According to the Torah, there are specific prayers for waking and before eating, for example.

For the **Conservative** Jew, the approach to worship is less formal than the Orthodox, but it is still guided by tradition. The **Conservative** holds to the view that ritual is an expression of values such as loving God and helping others.

For **Reform** Jews, the practice of some specific forms of daily religious worship does not have to be found in scripted responses to daily activities.

It would be impossible to speak about Judaism without mentioning the Jewish **Dietary Laws**. The adherence to these food laws is another form of worship for the Jew. The rules were set out in the Hebrew Bible. Kosher (that which is in accordance with the established standard of Jewish ritual) food laws are broadly:

- Kosher meat comes from an animal that chews a cud and has cloven hoofs (sheep and cows for example). The meat must be killed in accordance with special rules and the meat must be prepared in such a way that all blood is removed.
- Seafood is kosher if the animals have scales or fins.
- Poultry is kosher if it follows the special rules of slaughter and preparation.
- It is prohibited to consume dairy products at the same time or shortly after a meal which included meat products.
- Separate utensils are required for dairy and non-dairy meals.

Synagogues are the names of the Jewish places of worship. Group prayer is extremely important. The prayers vary depending on the hour of the day, the day of the month and the branch of Judaism. During services Jewish males are required to wear yarmulke (small headpieces).

The Jewish holy day is called the **Shabbat** (repose). The Shabbat begins at sunset on Friday and continues until nightfall on Saturday. Work is prohibited during the Shabbat. On the Shabbat, prayer services are more detailed for all branches of Judaism – Friday services can be anywhere from half an hour to an hour and a half; and Saturday morning services can be as long as three hours.

The sacred language of Judaism is Hebrew. Hebrew would be used the most in an Orthodox service, while it would be used the least in a Reform one. It is Jewish tradition that a communal service requires something called a **minyan** (or quorum) of at least 10 adults. For Orthodox Jews, this quorum must consist of ten men and the men and women sit separately.

Services are conducted by a rabbi (Jewish scholar or teacher) and a cantor sings and leads the congregation in song. Essentially a service consists of three parts:

- **Amidah**. Grateful salutations and prayers to praise God.
- **Sh'ma**. The pledge of faith.
- A public reading of a passage of the Torah.

Rituals

- **Brit Millah**. This is the covenant of circumcision. It is the ritual removal of the foreskin which is performed in accordance with the Torah scripture Genesis 17:10. It takes place on the 8th day of a baby boy's life.
- **Brit Hayyim/Brit Bat**. This is a naming ceremony for baby girls. It also takes place on the 8th day of life.
- **Bar Mitzvah**. A ceremony for boys at the age of 13. It marks a Jewish boy's entry into the community as an adult. The words literally mean "son of the Commandment".
- **Bat Mitzvah**. A ceremony for girls, who may be as young as twelve years old, the literal translation being "daughter of the Commandment." This is a ceremony that

was first celebrated in the 20th Century and would not be followed by all branches of Judaism.

- **Kiddushin.** The Jewish marriage ceremony. It takes place under a **huppah** (canopy) and includes the ritual breaking of a glass underfoot. The breaking of the glass is an act to commemorate the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 C.E.
- **Funeral.** Funeral practices vary within the tradition.

Holy Days and Celebrations

- **Rosh Hashanah.** The Jewish New Year. Occurs around the middle of September/October. It celebrates the religious New Year and the creation of the earth.
- **Yom Kippur.** Occurs shortly after Rosh Hashanah. It is the Day of Atonement. It runs from sunset to sunset and believers do not eat or drink during this time. It is a time to repent for actions of the past year.
- **Sukkot.** The feast of Booths. It lasts for eight days and occurs around the end of October. It is known as the Harvest celebration.
- **Chanukah (Hanukkah).** Occurs early to mid December. Known as the Festival of Lights, it celebrates the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrians in the second century B.C.E.
- **Purim.** Occurs late February to early March. It remembers the deliverance of the Persian Jews from destruction. The day before Purim is spent fasting, and the actual day of Purim is joyous.
- **Pesach (Passover).** Occurs from late March to early April. It honours the delivery of the Jewish people from slavery. It lasts between seven and eight days (depending upon the branch of Judaism).
- **Shavout.** Occurs in May/June and lasts for two days. It is the spring harvest festival and the celebration of God's gift of the Torah.

Timeline

2000-1750 B.C.E.	Middle Kingdom Period (Egypt)
2000-1700 B.C.E.	Old Babylonian Period
1850/1750/1700 B.C.E.	Abraham & Sarah, Isaac & Ishmael
1250-1200 B.C.E.	Exodus from Egypt, Sinai Torah, Canaan entry
1150-900 B.C.E.	Middle Babylonian Period
1050-450 B.C.E.	Hebrew Prophets (Samuel-Malachi):
1030-1010 B.C.E.	King Saul
1010-970 B.C.E.	David makes Jerusalem his capital
970-931 B.C.E.	Solomon and the Building of the Temple
750-725 B.C.E.	Israelite Prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah
620 B.C.E.	Josiah (Judean King) and "Deuteronomic Reforms"
600-580 B.C.E.	Judean Prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel
586-587 B.C.E.	Southern Kingdom (Judah) and Temple destroyed – Babylonian exile
550 B.C.E.	"Second Isaiah" Judean Prophet
520-515 B.C.E.	Second Temple rebuilt in Jerusalem
ca 450 B.C.E.	Torah (Pentateuch – First division of the Jewish Scriptures) begins to gain recognition as Scriptures
ca 200 B.C.E.	Prophets (second division of the Jewish Scriptures) is recognized by some
168/7 -63 B.C.E.	Jewish Maccabean revolt and Hasmonean rule
5-4 B.C.E.	Jesus Christ is born
70 C.E.	Destruction of Jerusalem and the second temple
90-150 C.E.	Writings (third and last division of the Jewish Scriptures) is discussed and accepted as sacred scripture)
ca 400 C.E.	Jewish Palestinian Talmud is edited
Ca 400-600 C.E.	Babylonian Talmud is edited
570-632 C.E.	Muhammad the Prophet of Islam
638 C.E.	Jews permitted to return to Jerusalem under Islam
Ca 1200 C.E.	The Zohar (a Jewish kabbalistic book) is written
1290-1291 C.E.	Expulsion of Jews from England
1306-1384 C.E.	Expulsion of Jews from France
1492, 1496 C.E.	Expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal by the Christians
1516, 1555 C.E.	Jewish ghettos instituted in Venice and Rome, Italy
1567/1571 C.E.	Publication of the Shulhan Aruk (code of Jewish law by Joseph Caro)
1654 C.E.	Arrival of Jews in America
1655 C.E.	Jews readmitted to England by Oliver Cromwell
1670 C.E.	Jews expelled from Vienna
1700-1760 C.E.	Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Jewish Hasidism
1712 C.E.	First public Jewish synagogue in Berlin
ca 1850 C.E.	Rise of the Jewish reform movement in Europe
1870 C.E.	Ghettos abolished in Italy
ca 1881 C.E.	Beginning of mass migration of Eastern European Jews
ca 1900-1910 C.E.	Founding of the Modern Jewish Orthodox movement
1909 C.E.	Founding of Tel Aviv as Hebrew speaking Jewish City
1917 C.E.	Balfour Declaration favours Jewish Palestinian state
1933 C.E.	Adolf Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany
1935 C.E.	Jewish rights in Germany are rescinded by Nuremberg laws
1937 C.E.	Reform Jewish Columbus Platform (Zionism)

1939-1945 C.E.	Nazi German Holocaust against Jews
1948 C.E.	Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel.
Ca.1960 C.E.	Founding of the Jewish Reconstructionist Movement
1967 C.E.	"Six Days War"
1973 C.E.	"Yom Kippur War" in Israel
1972 C.E.	Ordination of the first (Reform) Jewish woman Rabbi
1984/1985 C.E.	Ordination of the first Conservative Jewish woman Rabbi

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