

What Is Judaism?

Judaism is one of the world's oldest religions still practiced. It originated in the beliefs, practices, and experiences of the ancient Israelites. Today, Judaism is practiced by millions of Jews living in every inhabited continent.

Jewish observance is expressed through the fulfillment of the commandments of Jewish law. These commandments include both teachings about traditional practices, such as not eating certain foods, and teachings about ethical requirements, such as giving charity. Some forms of Judaism believe that all Jewish teachings must be followed. Other forms of Judaism believe that only the teachings about how to lead moral lives are required and the others are optional. Because Judaism is a diverse religion with a wide variety of beliefs and practices, one should not assume that a Jewish person has a particular belief or follows a particular religious practice. Different forms of Judaism are connected by a strong sense of peoplehood, a common heritage, and shared values.

God

The central belief of Judaism is that there is a single God who created the universe, cares about humanity, and wants people to live moral lives. This belief, called *ethical monotheism*, spread from Judaism to Christianity and Islam. It is one of the main reasons that understanding Judaism is important in understanding world history.

Sacred Texts

The Jewish Bible is called the Hebrew Bible because it was originally written in the Hebrew language. Jews believe that studying the Hebrew Bible helps one learn how to lead a righteous life. Because Christianity developed from Judaism, the Christian Bible includes the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament. The Hebrew Bible contains accounts of the early history of the Jewish people and Jewish laws. The Ten Commandments are an example of Jewish law. The Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Torah, also called the Five Books of Moses, is the holiest of the sacred texts of Judaism.

The Talmud also contains Jewish teachings along with legal discussions and narratives about Jewish history, ethics, and traditions. These laws were passed down through the generations until the early rabbis began writing them down to ensure the knowledge was not lost after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE. The Talmud contains a great amount of material and a typical printing covers about 12,800 large pages. It is pictured to the right. Together with the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud forms the foundation of Jewish ethics, law, philosophy, and religious practice today.



Religious Leaders

Jewish religious leaders are called *rabbis*. Rabbis spend many years studying Judaism. They teach, lead religious services, comfort community members who have lost loved ones, and represent the Jewish community to the larger community. Rabbis are respected because they have a great deal of knowledge, but Jews do not think that rabbis speak for God. Rabbis have a leadership role because of their scholarship and commitment to serve the community.

The Star of David



The most common Jewish symbol is the Star of David, which is pictured to the left. The Star of David is named after King David of ancient Israel. According to tradition, it represents the shape of his shield or an image that was on it. Many synagogues have a Star of David on the outside to identify them as a Jewish place of worship similar to the way that many churches have crosses outside. The Star of David is also a common non-religious symbol of Jewish identity and peoplehood.

The Jewish People

The idea that Jews are a people as well as a religious community is important in Judaism. In fact, people can be Jewish without being religiously observant. Religious practice and belief are components of Jewish identity, but other elements, such as culture, history, and a connection with the Land of Israel are also important. This sense of belonging to a people is a key element of Jewish identity.

According to the Hebrew Bible, God formed a covenant, or agreement, with the Jewish people in which He promised to protect them and they promised to follow the Torah's laws. The idea of Jews being a "chosen people" because of this covenant has sometimes been misunderstood and used to attack Jews by suggesting that they see themselves as better than others. In reality, Jews see their covenant with God as a special responsibility to improve the world. Jews believe that God loves all people.

Social Justice

Judaism teaches the importance of social justice, the idea that individuals and groups should be treated fairly. This concept is derived from the idea that all human beings are created in the image of God and therefore entitled to dignity and equal opportunity. In addition, it states in the Torah: "love your neighbor as yourself." Jewish texts stress the commandment in the Torah to treat everyone fairly because "you were strangers in the land of Egypt" and therefore understand what it means to be treated unfairly. Biblical law requires that trials be just, that workers receive fair wages, and that foreigners and weaker members of society be protected. The books of the Prophets build upon the idea expressed in the Torah with passages such as "Justice, Justice, shall you pursue." It is not surprising that many Jews rank commitment to social justice as the most important aspect of their Jewish identity.

Traditional Practices

Traditionally observant Jews have several distinctive practices based on the commandments of Jewish law. They eat only kosher food – food that the Bible says can be eaten. For example, they do not eat pork or shellfish or mix milk and meat products. Men keep their heads covered with a special cap called a *kippah*, which is pictured at the right. During major holy days, including Shabbat, work is prohibited and traditionally observant Jews avoid activities such as writing and driving. Many Jews today do not follow all of these practices. They believe that these practices can be modified as long as Judaism's ethical teachings are followed.



Israel

Judaism began in the Land of Israel. Israel is the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people and the site of Judaism's holiest places. Jewish prayers, artwork, and songs express a deep connection to Israel. The city of Jerusalem is very special because it was the capital of the ancient Jewish kingdoms and the site of Judaism's holiest place, the Temple.

Because of their religious and historical connection to the Land of Israel, Jews across the world feel a special connection to the modern State of Israel, which is pictured to the right. This connection is strengthened by the fact that while there are many countries that are officially Christian or Muslim, Israel was founded as the world's only Jewish state and it has offered a refuge for those who face persecution because they are Jewish. Israel is a democracy with equal rights for all its citizens, Jewish and non-Jewish.



Jewish Holidays

All Jewish holidays begin at sunset *before* the date specified on most calendars. This is because a Jewish "day" begins at sunset and ends the next evening, rather than at midnight. The dates of Jewish holidays, or holy days, are different each year. A year in the Jewish calendar does not have 365 days like the secular, or non-religious, calendar. But the Jewish calendar periodically adds extra days; therefore Jewish holidays always fall in the same season.

The idea of a weekly day of rest is one of Judaism's important contributions to the world. *Shabbat*, the Hebrew word for Sabbath, is the most frequently mentioned holiday in the Hebrew Bible, and many Jews see it as the most important holy day. It is observed from sundown on Friday until nightfall on Saturday each week. On Shabbat, one is supposed to set aside work and everyday concerns. Most other Jewish holy days commemorate major events in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish history. The special customs and foods of these holidays help connect Jews around the world to each other and to their ancestors.

Places of Worship



Jewish places of worship are called synagogues. A synagogue for Jews is like a church to Christians or a mosque to Muslims. Approximately 50% of American Jews belong to a synagogue. Synagogues have Torah scrolls which are hand-written in the Hebrew language. There is a picture of an open Torah scroll to the left. When they are not being used, Torah scrolls have beautiful, decorated covers and are kept in a special cabinet called an ark.

During religious services, on certain days, members of the congregation read aloud from the Torah. When Jewish children are in 6th or 7th grade, boys become a Bar Mitzvah and girls become a Bat Mitzvah, which means they have the religious responsibilities of an adult. Many Jews have a special ceremony, also called a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, in the synagogue to celebrate this event.