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Judaism: Background, Basic Beliefs and Sacred Texts



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How did Judaism begin?

Judaism began about 4000 years ago with the Hebrew people in the Middle East. Abraham, a Hebrew man, is considered the father of the Jewish faith because he promoted the central idea of the Jewish faith: that there is one God. At the time many people in the Middle East worshipped many gods. It is said that Abraham and his wife Sarah, who were old and childless, were told by God that their children would be as plentiful as the stars in the sky and that they would live in a land of their own -- the Promised Land. This gradually came true.

Abraham's son, Isaac had a son, Jacob, also called Israel. In this way the descendants of Abraham came to be known as the Israelites. God promised the Israelites he would care for them as long as they obeyed God's laws. While still traveling, the Hebrews lived in Egypt where they were enslaved. Moses, a Hebrew, was chosen by God to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt. Moses led the Hebrew people out of the Sinai Desert toward the promised land. At Mt. Sinai, God gave Moses the Law which would guide the Israelites to today. The laws were called the Ten Commandments and form the basis of the Torah, the book of Jewish law.

It took many years for the Israelites to finally get to what they thought was the Promised Land -Canaan. After some fighting the Jews established the Israelite kingdom. After many years, Canaan was conquered by the Assyrians, the Babylonians and

then eventually the Romans. The Israelites once again found themselves enslaved, this time by Babylonians. The Israelites were then taken over by Romans who destroyed much of what had been built in Jerusalem by the Israelites. Most of the Jews were scattered all over the region and eventually moved from place to place to avoid persecution which continues to this day. The dispersion of the Jews is called the Diaspora.

The worst persecution of the Jews was during World War II by the Nazis who murdered more than six million Jews or a third of the world's Jewish population. This was called the Holocaust. Beginning in the 1880's Jews began returning to their homeland in growing numbers, this time to avoid persecution where they lived. After World War II, many Jews believed that for the Jewish people and culture to survive, Jews needed to live in their own country where all Jews from anywhere in the world would have the right to live and be citizens. In 1948, Palestine was divided up and a Jewish state of Israel was formed in the land that was once called Canaan, surrounded by countries with predominantly Muslim populations. Since Muslims also claimed rights to the land where the Jews were living, there was conflict, which continues to this day in the Middle East.

Today nearly fourteen million Jewish people live all over the world. Approximately half of them live in the United States, one quarter live in Israel, and a quarter are still scattered around the world in countries in Europe, Russia, South America, Africa, Asia and other North American and Middle Eastern countries. Anyone born to a Jewish mother is considered a Jew.

What do Jewish people believe?

Jewish people believe in the Torah, which was the whole of the laws given to the Israelites at Sinai. They believe they must follow God's laws which govern daily life. Later legal books, written by rabbis, determine the law as it applies to life in each new place and time.

The Ten Commandments, as written in the Torah, are:

- Worship no other God but me.
- Do not make images to worship.
- Do not misuse the name of God.
- Observe the Sabbath Day (Saturday). Keep it Holy.
- Honor and respect your father and mother.
- Do not murder.
- Do not commit adultery.
- Do not steal.

- Do not accuse anyone falsely. Do not tell lies about other people.
- Do not envy other's possessions.

There are three basic groups of Jewish people who have a different understanding of the interpretation of the Torah.

- Orthodox Jews believe that all of the practices in the Torah which it is practical to obey must be obeyed without question.
- Conservative and Reform Jews believe that the ancient laws and practices have to be interpreted for modern life with inclusion of contemporary sources and with more concern with community practices than with ritual practices.
- Reform Jews also allow everyone to sit together, men and women, and both Hebrew and the local language are spoken in services.

What are the sacred texts of the Jewish people?

The Tenakh is the ancient collection of writings that are sacred to the Jews. They were written over almost a thousand years from 1000 to 100 BCE. The word Tenakh comes from the three first letters of the three books included in this text: the Torah, plus the Nev'im (prophets) and the Ki'tuvim (writings, which include histories, prophecies, poems, hymns and sayings).

The Torah is written on scrolls and kept in a special cabinet called the aron hakodish, the holy ark, in synagogues. The Torah is read with a pointer called a yad (hand) to keep it from being spoiled. Each week, one section is read until the entire Torah is completed and the reading begins again.

The Talmud is also an important collection of Jewish writings. Written about 2000 years ago, it is a recording of the rabbis discussion of the way to follow the Torah at that time. Later texts, the Mishnah Torah and the Shulhan Aruch, are recordings of rabbinic discussions from later periods.

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Judaism: Festivals and Celebrations



Jewish festivals and celebrations center around important events in the history of the Jews.

- Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year festival which usually takes place in September or October.
- Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement during which Jewish people fast, pray, and atone for their sins, asking God for forgiveness. This happens ten days after Rosh Hashanah.
- Passover or Pesach is in the Spring and marks the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt, the giving of the ten commandments and the journey to Israel. The Hagaddah, which is the story of the exodus from Egypt, is read at this celebration, which takes the form of a ritual meal. There are many ritual objects which enable the family to experience the Exodus as they sit around the dinner table.



- Hanukkah is the festival of lights. It is held in late November or December. When the temple was rededicated after a period of persecution, the eternal light was rekindled but there was only enough oil for a few days. Miraculously, the oil lasted for eight days, until more oil could be found. The Menorah, a candelabra with eight candles representing the eight days, plus an additional candle to light the others, is

a central focus for prayers said during the nights of Hanukkah.

Important passages in Jewish life are marked by special observances. There are specific traditions for the birth of a child and for when someone dies.

Bar mitzvah and Bat mitzvah ceremonies mark a child's thirteenth birthday (in some traditions, a girl's twelfth birthday). The first act of adulthood is reading from the Torah scroll during services.

All Jewish holy days begin at sundown and end at sundown. The Shabbat begins at sundown each Friday and lasts until dark on Saturday. There is a special Sabbath meal which includes special foods, songs and readings and prayers. Families hold this ceremony together, beginning with the blessing of Shabbat candles, wine and bread (challah).

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Judaism: Sacred Spaces and Places



Israel itself is a very sacred place to Jewish people. Jews who do not live there try to visit at some point in their lives. In particular, Jerusalem is important because it is the ancient capital of Israel and the site of the original temple. The Western Wall of the ancient temple remains. This is where the tablets that Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai with the ten commandments were stored in a golden box called the Ark of the Covenant. Jewish people make pilgrimages to this wall. It is also called the Wailing Wall because people grieve the destruction of the temple and other persecution of the Jews.



Jewish people worship in synagogues. A synagogue is a center for Jewish life - not just worshipping, but education and community.

Synagogues, of course, vary in style around the world, but all contain certain features.

- The Holy Ark with one or more Torah scrolls, covered by curtains.
- A six-pointed star, the Star of David, is often found both inside and outside synagogues.

- An eternal light in front of the ark, which represents the light which led the Hebrew people through the Sinai and was in the original temple, is kept lit at all times.
- A reading table, at the front or in the middle of the sanctuary, sometimes on a stage, or bimah.
- A replica of the ten commandments.
- A special seat for the rabbi.
- No images of God since images are forbidden in the commandments.



Synagogue services are led by a rabbi and usually a cantor, who sings traditional and contemporary melodies. There are prayers, songs, chants and readings, as well as a sermon or discussion by the rabbi or members of the community. Some Jewish people go to the synagogue daily, some weekly on Shabbat, and some periodically on Shabbat and on special holy days.

Some rituals, like the blessing said at the Shabbat meal and the observance of Passover, take place in Jewish homes.