



History and Region

Judaism is understood to have begun with a covenant first struck between God and Abraham (3600 years ago), reiterated with Abraham's descendants and re-established through Moses at the giving of Torah to the Jewish people on Mt Sinai. The central experience of the people was their Exodus from bondage in ancient Egypt. Following the Exodus they settled in the land known as Canaan, which today is Israel. The history of Jewish settlement in the covenantal land is described in the rest of the Bible. Through a series of historical tragedies the Jewish people were dispersed around the world ("Diaspora"). The Jewish community suffered the horrific events of the Shoah ("Holocaust") during the Second World War. The modern State of Israel was established as a Jewish homeland in 1948. Today, there are an estimated 14 million Jews living in different parts of the world, including 6 million in Israel.

Sacred Texts

The sacred scriptures consist of "Written Torah" and "Oral Torah". The twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) comprise three major sections: "the [Written] Torah" (= the five books of Moses), "the Prophets" and "the sacred writings". The voluminous collections of Torah interpretation (*midrash* and *Talmud*) make up "Oral Torah".

The traditional Jewish view is that the words and texts of both Written and Oral Torah are God-given. What this means in reality is widely discussed. Some Jews believe that the sacred texts are "progressively revealed" over time. In its broadest sense, "Torah" refers to the totality of Jewish tradition as it has evolved over 3000+ years.

Teachings and Beliefs

The main belief of Judaism is that God is Creator of everything that is, and at the same time in a unique relationship with the Jewish people. The *Shema*, a passage from the Torah recited regularly in Jewish worship, encapsulates the basic pattern of a Jewish life, the obligations (*mitzvot*) laid down within the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

Judaism focuses more on practice than belief. Jews in the modern world hold a broad range of opinions about God. Some go so far as to deny the existence of God, yet their Jewish identity remains strong.

Most Jews believe that Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people ("Zionism"). This reflects the covenant with Abraham, who was promised a land for his descendants through the ages. The nature of this attachment is vigorously debated within the Jewish community.

Rituals and Practices

There are many different expressions of Judaism, even within the main categories of "modern Orthodox", Progressive, and "ultra-Orthodox". Each congregation has its own ways of "being Jewish" which will accord with others in some respects but not others.

Jews observe the Sabbath ("Shabbat") as a day for families to come together, for personal rest and for communal worship. For many families Shabbat begins with the lighting of candles

before sundown on Friday, followed by a special meal. On Saturday morning people gather in the synagogue to pray as a community. These services often include joyous celebrations (*simchah*) such as bar-mitzvah (coming of age).

Judaism has a rich treasury of special ceremonies for birth, marriage and death. At birth, a boy is circumcised in continuation of the covenant that God made with Abraham; and both boys and girls receive Jewish names which are used in all religious contexts.

The marriage ceremony takes place under a canopy (*chuppah*) representing the home that the bride and groom will build together. A ring is given accompanied by a Hebrew formula that places the marriage within a context of holiness. At the end of the ceremony, the bridegroom smashes a glass with his foot to memorialise the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. At this, everyone shouts '*mazal tov*' to congratulate the couple.

At death, burial takes place within 36 hours to enable the family to begin the process of grieving as quickly as possible. The first seven days of mourning are particularly intense. The status of mourner continues for around eleven months, at the end of which a memorial stone is erected over the grave. Every year on the anniversary of a death (*Yahrzeit*) the mourners recite a memorial prayer in communal worship.

Holy Days and Festivals

Three major Torah-based festivals were originally marked by pilgrimage to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the Temple. These are *Pesach* (Passover), *Shavu'ot* (Weeks) and *Sukkot* (Booths). All three are also linked to the Exodus from slavery in Egypt and God's gift of Torah three months later at Mt Sinai.

On the first night of *Pesach* a special family celebration is held (called *seder*), and throughout the week of the festival ordinary bread products are replaced by *matzah*, "unleavened crackers". On *Sukkot* families erect flimsy booths where they eat their meals and incorporate the waving of bundles of four different plant species into their worship. On *Shavuot* Jews often gather for study into the early hours of the morning, and at the morning service the section from Torah describing the giving of the Ten Commandments is read.

Two other festivals described in Torah have to do with seeking forgiveness for wrongs done to other people and to God. On *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish "new year", the ram's horn, or *shofar*, is sounded to inaugurate ten days of reflection and repentance. This period culminates in *Yom Kippur*, "the Day of Atonement", a 25-hour fast. Worship services in the synagogue begin in the evening and continue through the next day until sunset when the fast is broken.

Other festivals were introduced later in Jewish history. *Chanukkah*, "Dedication" (also known as the "Festival of Lights"), is an eight day festival commemorating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in the time of the Syrian Greeks. A lamp is lit, songs are sung and children play games with spinning tops.

The festival of *Purim* is based on the Biblical book of Esther that tells of the survival of the Jewish people when they were threatened by an anti-Semitic villain in ancient Persia. It is the most carefree of the festivals.

In the 20th century other commemorations have been added to the calendar in relation to the Shoah ("Holocaust") and the establishment of the State of Israel. Their rituals are still evolving, and this is considered a sign of the vitality of Judaism today.