

Voices from Jewish Worldview Traditions

Over the last few years we have collated responses to questions about religion and worldviews from different perspectives. This resource provides personal answers to questions from lived experience and were written directly by believers.

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1. What do you believe about God and the purpose of life?

Response 1

We Jewish people believe there is one God who created the world and is always there. We have a special relationship with God, we say thank you to Him by following his rules and commandments and by trying to bring holiness into everything we do. This means treating people with loving kindness and doing good deeds, like giving charity and helping people. I think if you behave with ‘chesed’ – loving kindness – then you can make a Heaven on earth.

You can see how important God is by looking at our most special prayer, the Shema. It begins, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” We don’t have pictures of God but know he is with us all the time. He is supporting us, judging us and forgiving us if we do wrong but are sorry. He rewards us if we do the right thing.

We think of God as our Father and our King. He has made us in his image. We call this ‘b’tselem Elohim’. We must try and be good and kind and live up to this responsibility. It tells us in the Torah, “Each person is created in the image of One God and no-one is less human than others.”

The comments about the afterlife in Judaism are correct - it is certainly not as central to us as Christians and one of our points of difference.

Most Jewish people would see how we lead our lives ethically and how we make a difference in the world, to be a key purpose of life. I suppose we are more concerned with building a heaven on earth.

Here are some key concepts that shape our righteous behaviour and responses to others during our lives. The concept of ‘repair of a damaged world’ (tikkun ha’olam) and helping others through social action, has become more central to Jewish thinking in recent years.

Tzedakah and Gemilut Hasadim (giving and doing)

- Although tzedakah can be translated as charity, its root is ‘justice’. We have a word ‘tzedek’ which is social justice and ‘tzadak’ – righteous individual. It is different from the Christian idea of charity, which is coming from

the idea of love (caritas) and being moved from the heart to give. It can be seen in charity boxes in homes, charity events in the Jewish community, bequests in synagogues.

- It's considered by some the highest of commandments. For example, at Yom Kippur, the three elements to enable us to gain forgiveness for our sins are tzedakah, tefilah (prayer) and teshuvah (repentance).
- We have a religious obligation to do what is right and just. We are obligated to give tzedakah as a way of serving God. Religious Jews give 10% of their earnings to charity 'ma'aser kesafim'.
- There's a teaching that says when a beggar is standing by you asking for alms, the holy presence of God is by his side. The beggar is doing us a favour by asking for charity.
- The obligation to give tzedakah can be fulfilled in giving to charities, hospitals, educational institutions etc

Gemilut Hasadim means 'giving of loving kindness'.

- It's a mitzvah – commandment, but also moral deed done as a religious duty.
- Talmud supports this, stating that the reward for service is in this world, not in the world to come (Shabbat 127a).
- More important than just giving money, you give kindness, time, attention, to the rich and poor, to the dead as well as alive.
- Many Jewish people volunteer for charitable committees.
- "Charity awaits the cry of distress. Benevolence anticipates the cry of distress."
- Jewish tradition singles out six particular acts as gemilut hasadim: providing clothes for the naked, visiting the sick, comforting mourners, accompanying the dead to the grave, providing for brides, and offering hospitality to strangers. (Sotah 14a, Eruvin 18a, Shabbat 127a-b).

Bikur Cholim means 'Visiting the Sick'.

- It is considered an important mitzvah (commandment).
- It is an aspect of gemilut chasadim.
- It is the most basic way of showing chesed (loving kindness).
- It is traditional to recite prayers for healing, such as the Mi Shebeirach prayer in the synagogue, and Psalms (especially Psalm 119) on behalf of the sick.
- Linked with this is a wish for refua shlema – complete healing.
- The mitzvah goes back to Genesis, when three angels visited Abraham, who was resting outside his tent after being circumcised at age 99 as part of the covenant with God. The rabbis regard the visit as the first known case of bikur cholim. The angels are messengers of God and appear on God's behalf.
- There are many guidelines about visiting – for example, how to make the patient feel less anxious, e.g., friends not suddenly visiting but waiting for family to attend first, so as not to make the patient's condition seem more serious.

Tikkun Ha'Olam means 'repair of the world' and is synonymous with social action.

- It's not mentioned in the Torah but in the Mishnah (200CE) and in Jewish mysticism in the 16th century and teachings of Isaac Luria. Divine light was contained in vessels by God which became shattered and scattered. So our role is to gather the lost light. With each mitzvah, a divine spark is returned.
- In the 1950s this term became used for social action work and the idea of human responsibility for fixing a damaged world. There is also another idea that carrying out ritual obligations (prayers / good deeds / commandments) will hasten the coming of the Messiah. For example, the idea that keeping Shabbat twice will encourage the Messianic age to come.

Response 2

People say that Judaism is a religion of deed, rather than a religion of creed. That is maybe so. We do not follow a set of dogmas, there is no catechism in Judaism. However, faced with a situation where Jews were living in exile and dispersion and faced with constant urgings to convert to a more dominant faith, the 12th century Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1135 – 1204) outlined 13 Principles of Faith which believing Jews should subscribe to. One of those principles is the belief that God is the creator of all things. God gave the Jewish people a mission, to create a society that would be a witness to his existence, and to assist us in this task God

gave us the Torah. Another principle is that the Torah given to Moses is fundamentally unchanged and unchangeable. As someone who is an Orthodox Jew I tend towards that view.

The Torah is not merely a rule book, it is a set of legal principles that act as a guide to how to navigate a world in which values are dissolving into moral relativity. The principles laid down in the Torah, buttressed by the 613 commandments that guide our daily lives, enables us to understand how far we can participate in society, contributing to it and benefitting from it, and where we have to draw the line. This is particularly important for all Jews, living in the state of Israel and in the diaspora.

This therefore underpins what I, as a Traditional Orthodox Jew, see as the purpose of life. Fundamentally I see the purpose of my existence is to bring heaven closer to earth. By that I mean that there is an ideal state of affairs that we can strive to bring about. An ideal society is one in which relationships are based on fidelity gained through mutual respect, rather than by power. This can be achieved by using the laws of the Torah to guide our lives in every sphere of life, both on an individual basis and on a national basis. On an individual basis every aspect of our lives can be used to turn the mundane into the holy. One example of this is the dietary laws.

The Dietary Laws (Kashrut)

These laws regulate what Jews can or cannot eat. Food that Jews can eat is called Kosher (fit), whereas food that is forbidden is called Treif (torn). Every day when Jews eat certain foods and ignore others. When we say a blessing before and after we eat, we elevate a meal or a snack from merely satisfying our hunger or taste buds to a reminder of who is the provider of this food and whom we should be thankful for it. It also reminds us of who we are and what God expects from us. There should be some corollaries. Kosher food should be produced ethically, minimising distress to animals and fish. Another example of the Torah in action is care of the less fortunate.

Tzedakah (charity as social justice)

By Torah law Jews were encouraged to care for the less fortunate. Therefore, in Leviticus Ch. 18 V.9 Jews were commanded to leave a corner of the field unharvested so that the poor could have it (PEAH) and that any wheat sheaves that have been dropped should be left for the poor to glean (LEKET). In an industrial society this has now been transformed into a mass of Jewish charitable organisations that are involved helping needy Jews and non-Jews alike. Tithing has metamorphosed into giving 10% of take-home pay to charitable causes (TZEDAKAH). In Jewish communities, self-help organisations have mushroomed to lend all kinds of things (such as cots, prams, trestle tables for celebrations). This is all part of creating a gracious society that elevates earth closer to heaven. The main purpose in life. For more details of Jewish observance please visit www.jewfaq.org

2. What is it like being a Jew in Britain today? Are there any difficulties of being a Jew in Britain?

Response 1

There is a lot of diversity within the Jewish community. Although my own family in the past are from Russia, Poland and Lithuania, I do meet Jewish people who are originally from Spain, Egypt, India, the Yemen and Morocco. I also have friends from Israel. They have their own ways of practising their faith and their own traditions for the festivals. They also have their own special Jewish food, based on the countries they came from.

We also identify as Jewish in different ways. For example, I am from the Reform movement, but there are also Liberal, Progressive, Masorti, Orthodox and Charedi Jewish people. The big difference is how we respond to

the Torah. Orthodox Jews see the Torah as coming directly from God and so cannot be changed. Reform Jewish people see the teachings as being inspired by God but we respond to the commandments in a modern way. For example, we are allowed to have female rabbis and women take an equal part in the synagogue services.

Our community is not growing a lot, due to more people marrying out of the faith and not raising their children as Jewish. It is also hard in my religion to convert into the faith, it takes a long time and you have to show real commitment, like learning Hebrew and living for a while with a Jewish family.

If there aren't many Jewish people in a local area, then shops selling kosher food may have to close and it is harder to get the numbers to run a Sunday religion school for children. Synagogues have to join together. The majority of Jewish people in Britain are now based in and around London. <https://www.bod.org.uk/jewish-facts-info/jews-in-numbers/>

We do feel sad when there are anti-semitic incidents, for example, one of my local synagogues had its gravestones deliberately pushed over and smashed. We have to guard our synagogues whenever there is a service and patrol outside. Most Jewish people feel anti-semitism has got worse in the past few years, not just in this country but also around Europe and this makes them anxious.

Response 2

To take a quote from Charles Dickens and change the tense from past to present "It is the best of times, it is the worst of times". In many respects it has never been easier to be Jewish in Britain than it is today. However, there is a possibility that things could get worse very quickly. England was the first country to expel its Jews in 1290. Oliver Cromwell allowed Jews to live in Britain in 1656. From that time Jewish disabilities were light, compared to those suffered by Jews in most parts of Europe and were abolished in 1858 when Jews were allowed to become MPs. However, there was a great deal of unofficial discrimination against Jews (e.g., not being allowed into golf clubs or tennis clubs). Another inhibiting factor in Jewish self-expression was the monocultural nature of how British culture was expressed. Jews were made to feel that they had to "fit in" with the prevailing culture and this expressed itself in Jewish dress (in many synagogues people wore top hats) and a general feeling that Jews shouldn't stand out.

This has largely dissipated in the last 50 years. Urban Britain is much more multi – cultural and therefore there is much less pressure to conform to a certain style of dress. It is now common to see Jewish men wearing a kippa in our main cities and all forms of social discrimination are now illegal. In the main areas of Jewish domicile, it has never been easier to buy Kosher food in many varieties. There are synagogues for Jews of all denominations and there are a growing number of Jewish day schools that provide a good standard of Jewish education. Jews play an important role in many aspects of public life for example in politics, the arts, the media.

Yet, it is the very openness of British society that constitutes a danger to Jewish continuity in Britain today. There is an extraordinarily strong temptation to assimilate into British society, particularly from homes where Jewish education and practise are weak. This has been accentuated by the fact that Britain has become very secular. This is leading to moral relativism that is having a major impact on Jews of all persuasions, but particularly on those who are more ambivalent about their Jewish beliefs and practise. Antisemitism, which seemed to be dying out in the later 20th century, has reared its ugly head again. Far right antisemitism, accompanied by Holocaust denial, has led to attacks on synagogues in Europe and the USA. In my opinion, far left and Islamist inspired antisemitism uses the State of Israel as an excuse for attacking Jews in general, this has led to a spate of attacks on visibly Jewish people and buildings. Jewish buildings are routinely guarded by security guards, both volunteers and professionals in a way that was largely absent 40 years ago. Britain is still a good place to be Jewish, but there is a growing challenge to Jewish self-expression in a society that is both increasingly open and yet has developed a less tolerant side.

3. What would you like children in schools to be taught about your tradition?

Response 1

First of all, it's important that Judaism is taught in school as a distinctive living religion, not as something just from Bible times or the roots of Christianity. As over 34,500 children attend Jewish faith schools, the opportunities for children in secular schools to learn naturally about Judaism from classmates may not be there. As well as learning key facts about Judaism, it would help if children learnt about the importance of keeping your Jewish identity, challenges about keeping food laws in modern times and how a day of rest (Shabbat) is so central.

Jewish values and mitzvot (commandments), such as tzedakah (charity/justice), gemilut hasadim (acts of loving kindness), tikkun ha'olam (repair of the world and social action) and bikur cholim (care of the sick) are very key in Jewish lives. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMnADItaL7D5YzydNbo7bzA> Shaboom on Youtube have fun videos that communicate these important values to children.

It is also important to show the relationship between the monotheistic beliefs of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and the role of Abraham. Schools sometimes focus on the Middle-East conflict but I would like it if peace initiatives, such as Neve Shalom, could also be used to give balance and hope. <https://www.oasisofpeace.org.uk/>

Schools teach about the Holocaust but there has to be a response to the serious rise in present anti-semitism and how it affects the community. As we lose our survivors of the Holocaust, schools have an important role in keeping the memory alive and trying to ensure a future free from prejudice and hate.

It is easy for pupils to have a stereotyped view of what a Jewish person looks like, but good teaching should reflect the diversity in the community, the range of denominations and also the different cultures. It should also reflect how the community responds to modern life, such as women's roles, digital technology and influences from the world outside. For example, there is a growing interest in less conventional funerals. The Reform movement has a green burial site which can be chosen instead of a more traditional burial ground.

Response 2

When teaching about religion, it is easy to focus on the events that stand out and can make that faith seem unique. Children are taught about Shabbat, Festivals, life-cycle events. They are often very colourful, special clothes might be worn and ceremonies take place. However, teaching about a faith community that way can lead to exoticisation of it as a weird, esoteric, otherworldly existence that is unconnected with the real world. It may seem completely disconnected with the way people live their lives.

I would teach these aspects of Judaism, but as part of what a day in the life of an observant Jewish person is like. For Primary school children I developed a session entitled "A Jewish Child's Day". The children imagine that they have been transformed into a Jewish child and we go through a day taking in clothes, prayer, the Torah, kosher food, and Shabbat. Over an extended period, a half term, other aspects of Judaism can be included. For secondary school pupils I call it "Growing up, or growing pains" Living a Jewish life in Manchester. Besides the topics already mentioned I include a Jewish social life and how Judaism impacts on assistance for vulnerable people.

What I seek to do is to show that Judaism is a dynamic faith that impacts on every aspect of life. It enriches ordinary life and turns the mundane into the holy. When it is based upon an understanding of the Torah and its implementation it has relevance to modern life, giving us the tools to navigate a world of increasing complexity and moral relativity.

4. What is the most important festival and how do you celebrate it?

Response 1

Firstly, there are no more and no less important festivals in Judaism. There are major and minor festivals, but all are important. Secondly, if I were to choose one it would be Yom Kippur as many Jews, even Jews who don't believe there is a G-d, keep Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is a 'strange festival'. No one eats or drinks after they become an adult (girls at the age of 12 and boys at the age of 13) or washes, wears perfume or leather shoes and married couples don't have intimate relations. The fast starts on the Eve of Yom Kippur (you can find the date on the internet for the next one) about 15 minutes before sunset. Members of the family would have had a bath / shower that afternoon, put on their best clothes and then had a festival meal. Unlike other festivals the candles are lit after the meal is finished. Usually a candle to remember the dead is also lit in the home. The family then walks to the synagogue and the first of seven services begin. It is called Kol Nidre and has beautiful traditional tunes to the songs sung. That night we go home to study and sleep – the service lasts about two hours. The next morning, we get up and dress and go back to the synagogue until nightfall. The services are long and there is a lot of repetition – a bit like watching the ocean. Sometimes a wave breaks but usually just little waves. Lots of people come and go but I like just being there. According to tradition on that day we become like the angels. I love the afternoon service with the reading of the Book of Jonah, but my favourite is Ne'ila – the closing of the gates. At the end there is the blowing of the shofar and everyone wishes everyone else Shana Tovah – a good year. We then break the fast with a meal of special foods. I love Yom Kippur because it is like standing still in time and I love the feeling at the end as I can start a new year without the burden of the last.

The festivals go like this: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the most solemn days of the year as we ask forgiveness of sins and try to put our lives on the right track.

Sukkot, Pesach and Shavuot are all related to the harvest. Sukkot is the fruit and vine harvest, Pesach the early wheat and barley harvest and Shavuot the late wheat harvest. They also commemorate the life of the Israelites in the wilderness. Sukkot is the wandering, Pesach the liberation from Egypt and Shavuot the giving of the Torah.

Chanukah and Purim are minor festivals celebrating liberation from various enemies in Israel's history. Both fun festivals they are loved by children.

We also have fasts but perhaps those come into festivals – although a fast often precedes a festival.

I suppose the special stages are birth, growing up, getting married and dying. We've dealt with most of them so let's focus on growing up. In most communities, boys have a bar mitzvah at the age of 13. This is when a boy becomes a man and responsible for himself. Often, he is invited to observe the reading of the Torah and sometimes reads it for himself. In Reform and Liberal communities, girls have the same opportunity, but this would be called a Bat Mitzvah. In Orthodox communities some girls have a Bat Chayil others a Bat Mitzvah. This often involves preparing a project on Jewish life and understanding the duties of a Jewish wife.

Of course, this is only a start. I suggest you have a look at a website that can answer all your questions in greater detail. I hope this taste has given you enough to start with and that now you'll be so excited that you'll want to do even more. The website is: www.jewfaq.org/index.htm it is American and doesn't always refer to British Jewish life but it is pretty good on the basics.

The most important and serious time is the festival is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. We fast for 25 hours and think about how we have behaved during the year. We try to make things better if we have upset anyone and mend relationships that are broken. We say sorry to God for our behaviour and ask for forgiveness. We try to be better people and give more to charity.

The day is different from other days. Things like spending time making meals and going shopping stop for just over a day. It means we can focus on deeper things in life. You have some discomfort but in the long run it leads to much more happiness. God judges us and puts us in the Book of Life for the year to come.

Response 2

I enjoy all the festival days that link up the Jewish year, like a string of pearls. They give a focus as I navigate the year, rather like a series of Islands in a vast ocean in time that is the Jewish year. As we live our daily lives it is hard to keep a sense of purpose, remembering why the Almighty put you on this earth and what is the role that he wants you to play, when you are undertaking a myriad of tasks that seem to fill the days. Festivals have the capacity to act as a source of spiritual electricity which Jewish people can plug into and use to enhance their own lives and society for the rest of the year.

At the time of writing, we are approaching the festival of Shavuot (weeks), often called Pentecost. On Shavuot we celebrate the day that the Almighty revealed his Torah to the entire Jewish people at Mount Sinai. Many Jewish people sit up all night and learn Torah in order to show that we are ready to receive the Torah again, as if for the first time. In Britain that is not so daunting as it might seem. Because we are so far north, and it is approaching Mid-summer, the time for Shacharit (Morning service) is at about 3.30 AM. There is a learning programme at my Synagogue from 1.00 AM – 3.30. Those who study in this way will return home at about 6.00 and sleep until midday. Personally, I learn for about an hour with two friends (or by myself because of COVID) and attend synagogue at the normal time, 9.30 AM. Synagogues are usually festooned with flowers as there is a tradition that Mount Sinai bloomed with flowers when the Torah was given, even though it is in the desert. There is a custom to eat milky foods on Shavuot as the dietary laws were not given yet. Therefore, cheesecake is extremely popular, which suits me fine!

5. What are the current issues for a Jewish person today?

Response 1

I suppose that there are a number of issues facing Jews today - for me two would be key. Firstly, the issue of Jewish continuity. The Jewish community in the UK is getting smaller all the time, and older. Many communities are finding it difficult to survive as viable communities and in turn this brings the question: will there be Jews in the future? Linked to this are the issues of intermarriage and the general secularisation of society as a whole. I believe that a Britain without Jews would be a culturally and intellectually poorer place and that would be sad. Of course, Jews have been on the brink of disappearing before so I don't get too pessimistic about this but it is an issue.

Secondly, the State of Israel. It concerns me that the dream of Zion has not been fulfilled in the modern State of Israel and that its continuity and security is not assured. I have mixed feelings about Israel, I believe in its right to exist and in many of its founding principles but sometimes the way it acts despite the Torah deeply saddens me. I think we need to support Israel but also to feel free to challenge what it does because it should exemplify the beauty of Jewish culture and tradition.

Response 2

Jews living in Britain will have many of the same concerns that everyone else has. Over the last few years, we have argued over BREXIT, the economy, whether the "Line of Duty" finale lived up to expectations. However, there are particular concerns which Jewish people do have that the general public would be less concerned about. Jews are concerned about the regular attacks on shechita, the method of Jewish ritual slaughter of cattle, sheep and poultry that produce kosher meat and poultry. Many Jews feel that shechita is more humane than pre-stunning. Any attempt to exclusively label meat that has been ritually slaughtered is considered to be discriminatory. If meat is to be labelled by method of slaughter then all meat should be labelled, not just shechita, or Halal, the Muslim method of ritual slaughter.

Another issue that has raised its head is the attempt to outlaw male circumcision of babies (Brit Mila). This has not arisen yet in Britain, but it did recently in Iceland, where the tiny Jewish community received assistance from the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the matter was shelved. "Brit Mila" means the Covenant of Circumcision. In Genesis Chapter 17 the Almighty commands Abraham to circumcise himself and his family and that all future generations of Jewish males should be circumcised at eight days old, or when the baby is medically ready) as a sign of the special relationship with the Almighty. To outlaw this practice would deal a body blow to the continued presence of Jews in Britain.

Another issue for Jewish people in Britain is when legitimate criticism of the actions of the Israeli Government morph into claims against the very existence of the only Jewish state in the world. This means that many Jewish students on university campuses are often faced with hostility from anti-Israel activists.

6. How might I understand the differences between orthodox and reform Judaism?

Response 1

Both Orthodox and Reform would see the Torah as 'a tree of life for all who grasp it' and share a commitment to life-long learning into its riches. However, this article shows the key difference between Reform and Orthodox beliefs – Orthodox teaching has the concept of 'Torah from Heaven'.

<https://www.reformjudaism.org.uk/reform-judaism-1000-words-torah/> Because God chose to speak to us through the Torah, then it is all seen as the eternal truth and unchangeable. However, the Reform movement sees the Torah as divinely inspired, instead of divinely revealed. It is a product of people, sharing the story of their history.

This response to the Torah leads to more emphasis in Reform to social issues, interfaith dialogue and the concept of 'tikkun ha'olam' – repair of the damaged world. There is a focus on equality, men and women are given equal status in the service, they are not separated in seating areas and there are women rabbis.

Reform teachings on God would focus on a progressive revelation, which develops as humanity continues. Sad incidents in the world are not seen as God's punishment, for example, but seen as God suffering by our side.

Jewish people do speak about the world to come and Orthodox tradition does mention the Messianic era, when there is a physical resurrection. However, these ideas are not fully worked through, unlike Christianity. Judaism is very much a religion of the here and now, with emphasis on leading a good life in this world. This is reflected in Deuteronomy where God tells the Israelites, "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. You shall choose life, so that you and your offspring will live" (30:19). You may find this interesting on the afterlife <https://www.reformjudaism.org.uk/reform-judaism-1000-words-death-afterlife/>

The role of mitzvot is a very big and interesting area. For example, in Orthodox teachings, doing an act of charity because it is a mitzvah would be more important than doing it out of kindness and the goodness of your heart. This is because you would be following God's commandment and would have the additional spiritual commitment. On the other hand, in Reform teachings, the act of charity would reflect Rabbi Morris Joseph's statement that, "the divine test of a man's worth is not his theology but his life" (1903). This shows Reform teachings on mitzvot <https://www.reformjudaism.org.uk/reform-judaism-1000-words-halachah-progressive-integrity/> The whole Jewish community unites for Mitzvah Day each year, a celebration that also draws in members of other faiths. <https://mitzvahday.org.uk/>

Response 2

The term "Orthodox" means "straight thinking" and it was a term coined by Reform Jews to describe traditional Jews. Traditional Jews believe that the Torah (the Five Books of Moses) was revealed divinely by the Almighty to the entire Jewish people on Mount Sinai. As well as the written Torah there was also an oral tradition, which fleshes out the written Torah, which was written down in the Talmud. The Torah is not a rule book, more a set of legal principles that are sufficiently flexible to be applied today.

Reform Judaism developed after 1800. They reject the idea of "Torah from Heaven" and see the Torah as being written by men, under divine inspiration. They also feel that the Oral law is not considered an essential part of the Torah and can be set aside if it conflicts with modern values. A good example is the idea of equality. Reform Judaism values equality of activities. Therefore, there will be mixed seating in Reform synagogues and female Rabbis. Orthodox Jews feel that equality has been confused with similarity. Men and

women have different roles. Men take the more public roles, while women take the responsibilities at home. Each are equally important in raising the next generation of committed Jews and safeguarding the needs of the entire Jewish community. These days men play a greater part in home life and women have some roles on the executive of many Orthodox synagogues.

The differences will also be apparent in attitudes to relationships. Traditional Orthodox Jews consider traditional marriage the only basis for healthy adult relationships. Reform Jews have embraced the variety of relationships, both heterosexual and homosexual, which are being increasingly adopted in wider society. Once again, it all depends upon whether you see the prohibition against homosexual relationships in Leviticus Ch. 18 V.22 as the word from heaven (Orthodox viewpoint), or man's imperfect understanding of the Torah, which is being refined by progressive revelation (Reform viewpoint).

7. What is a typical day like for a person of the Jewish faith?

Response 1

Although there are some things we share, there isn't just one way of being Jewish. However here are some ideas:

Prayer - When religious Jewish people wake up, they say a prayer thanking God
I offer thanks to You,
living and eternal King,
for You have mercifully restored my soul within me;
Your faithfulness is great

There is also a promise before they say more morning prayers
I hereby take upon myself
to fulfil the commandment of
loving your fellow as yourself

When they wake up in the morning, Jewish people promise to be kind to others. If you are religious, you think of God all day long. There is a special blessing if you see a rainbow, go on a journey, or see lightning in a storm or do something for the first time.

Food

Jewish people eat kosher food. That means 'fit and proper' or suitable for Jewish people to eat. So a breakfast would not include bacon or pork sausages. These would be 'treif' or not suitable for Jewish people to eat. You can find the food rules in the part of the Torah called Leviticus. When they have lunch or dinner, they wouldn't mix milk and meat in the same meal – so no burger and milkshake together!

What to wear

This depends how religious you are, but observant men and women dress modestly. This is called tzniut. That means not wearing shorts in hot weather! Religious Jewish women wear sleeves to their elbows, long skirts and a headscarf or hat. They don't wear trousers. Religious men wear a kippah (skullcap) or a hat.



You can buy football design kippot or ones for your best team.

A special time of the week

When you are Jewish you look forward each week to the celebration of Shabbat, the peaceful day of the week that begins on Friday at sunset and ends on Saturday nightfall. This is a day when no work is done, so you wouldn't do homework if you were in secondary school. Children help make the house neat and tidy for Shabbat and look forward to the special Friday night Shabbat meal with the plaited bread called challah.

Response 2

This can vary widely, as it depends upon how much of a person's world view is shaped by his/her faith. There are many Jewish people, who in their daily lives are indistinguishable from any other people. Maybe that person might observe Shabbat, possibly some festivals. However, they may be less observant in many of the daily aspects of Jewish life (e.g., kashrut). Whereas to me, Judaism plays a central role in my life, affecting my work, my eating habits, my politics, and my view of where I am in relation to the world.

An observant Orthodox Jewish person will attend synagogue twice daily for morning & afternoon/evening prayers. Our Rabbis say that there should be a fixed time which is set aside for daily Torah study. Being Jewish doesn't absolve you from earning a living, so work will absorb much of the day. Meals will consist of food that is kosher. If a meat meal is eaten this will impact on what you may have for dessert, or have to drink afterwards, as there must be at least a three-hour gap between eating meat and having something containing milk. Of course, emergencies arise which disrupts the regular rhythm of the day and may necessitate saying prayers at home or may limit time for Torah study.

However, none of these things should create a distinction between things that are Jewish and aspects of life which are not. Prayer, Torah study, giving charity should infuse an observant Jewish person with the spirituality that will turn the actions that punctuate the rest of the day with spirituality that celebrates the joyful realisation of Torah in all spheres of life, elevating the earthly to the heavenly and bringing us closer to the Almighty.

8. How does Judaism understand the promise of the Messiah?

Response 1

Jewish people are aware that Jesus was born, lived and died as a Jew and was a teacher and rabbi. However, although a small sect of Jews at the time – the Nazarenes – believed Jesus was the Messiah as prophesised in the Jewish texts, the majority of Jewish people did not believe this.

This is because for us he did not fulfil the criteria. These call for a Jewish man descended from the house of King David (Jeremiah 23:5). We consider that as Joseph was not related to Jesus, Jesus was not descended from the house of David.

He was not an ordinary human being and, in our beliefs, did not bring peace to the world (Isaiah 2:4). He did not gather all Jews back into Israel (Isaiah 43:5-6 and rebuild the ancient Temple in Jerusalem (Ezekiel 37:26-28). He did not unite humanity in the worship of the Jewish God and Torah observance (Zechariah 14:9). (Deut. 13:1-4).

We have a different understanding of 'Messiah' than Christians. The idea of a person who will sacrifice themselves to save us from our sins is not part of the Jewish belief system. The following passages in the Jewish scriptures are the ones that Jews consider to be messianic in nature or relating to the end of days. Isaiah 2, 11, 42; 59:20 - Jeremiah 23, 30, 33; 48:47; 49:39 - Ezekiel 38:16 - Hosea 3:4-3:5 - Micah 4 - Zephaniah 3:9 - Zechariah 14:9 - Daniel 10:14

Our key belief in Judaism – in the oneness of God – means that we cannot accept the idea of the holy trinity or God having a son. The 12th century influential philosopher, Maimonides, stated, 'God is a unity unlike any other possible unity'.

We await the Messiah, who according to Jeremiah 33:18, will restore the religious way of justice in Israel and establish Jewish law as the law of the land (Jeremiah 33:15). <http://www.iewfaq.org/mashiach.htm>. This is helpful in clarifying what Moshiach means to us. The word doesn't mean 'saviour' for us, but the 'anointed one'. On a personal level, as we look around at so much suffering and sadness, it is uplifting to feel that there could be hope, in a Messianic age, for peace and tranquillity to spread around the world. However, there is also a hope that we can, in our everyday acts of loving kindness (chesed) create a heaven on earth. It is sometimes said that if everyone observed a Shabbat (or two) properly, then this would hasten the coming of Moshiach.

Response 2

The Messiah "The anointed one" is not mentioned in the Torah, he is first mentioned by the prophet Isaiah as Cyrus King of Persia, who allowed the exiled Jews to return from Babylon to the land of Israel. Later, the concept of the Messiah developed within Judaism as a descendant of King David who would bring the Jews back to Israel and inaugurate peace throughout the world.

Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1135 – 1204) established 13 principles of faith that believing Jews should hold fast to. The twelfth says "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though he delays I wait for his coming daily. For some Orthodox Jews like Lubavitch Hassidim place great emphasis in his imminent coming. Reform Jews think in terms of a Messianic age of peace, but not in a personal Messiah. Personally, I believe in a Messiah, but he will come only when we prove by our actions that we are ready for him. Therefore, it is best to get on with your life, doing your best to live a life of Torah values, and the Messianic coming will take care of itself.

9. Why is Moses an inspiration to the Jewish people?

Response 1

We Jewish people call Moses 'Moshe Rabbenu' – Moses Our Teacher. Did you know that the Torah, our special book, says that Moses lived until he was 120? You can see his name in Hebrew here https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6e/Moses_name.jpg

Here are some things that make him a special person. I have chosen four human values that make an inspiring teacher.

1. **Kindness:** He showed kindness towards animals when he was a shepherd looking after sheep. A Bible story tells us that when he was looking after a flock of sheep, a little lamb escaped. When it got to a shady

place, it started to drink from a pool of water. Moses didn't get angry. He understood the lamb ran away because it was thirsty and was now tired. He picked it up and put it on his shoulders and carried it back. God liked this and said, "Because you have shown compassion to the flock, you must lead my flock, the people of Israel."

2. **Fairness:** Moses cares about fairness and justice. When he sees unfair things happening, he tries to make a difference. When he sees a slave being hit by a cruel Egyptian master, he stops it. When he sees two slaves fighting each other, he tries to find out why they are fighting. He also stops some shepherds from pushing away the daughters of Jethro who are trying to get water for their sheep at a well. He then helps the girls look after their sheep. It is amazing when God gives Moses the Ten Commandments on the Mount Sinai. These rules are still important to us today and help us to lead a good life.

3. **Honesty:** When God asks Moses to lead the Children of Israel out of slavery, Moses says to God, "I am slow of speech and tongue." Moses is very honest to admit to his problems with speaking. God understands this and makes his brother Aaron help him. It is very special that Moses has problems speaking but still becomes a wonderful leader, taking his people from slavery to freedom.

4. **Curiosity:** When Moses encounters the Burning Bush, he isn't afraid but asks wondering questions – very much like we do in RE! He says, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn." When God asks him to lead the Israelites out of slavery, he again raises some questions, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" This ability to think about problems means that he understands people and the concerns they have.

Finally, there is a sequence of lessons about Moses and the Exodus on RE:ONLINE:

<https://www.reonline.org.uk/resources/how-did-moses-inspire-the-exodus/> I think a Year 4 class would enjoy it!

Response 2

In the twelfth century another Moses, Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1135 -1204) penned 13 basic principles that all Jews should adhere to if they really believed in Judaism. In principle number 7 it says, "**I believe with perfect faith that the prophecy of Moses our teacher, peace be upon him, was true, and that he was the Chief of the prophets, both of those that preceded and those that followed him**". In this he was following the word of the Torah. Whereas other prophets had visions in dreams "**G-d would speak to Moses face to face, just as a person speaks to a close friend**". Exodus Ch.33 V.11.

Moses occupies a unique status in Jewish thought. In his early life he abandoned his privileged position of an Egyptian prince in order to save an enslaved Hebrew, before rescuing three shepherdesses from bullying shepherds. In these two instances he showed a love for his people, physical bravery and a zeal for justice. Having accepted his calling to lead the people out of slavery to the promised land he never abandoned his calling, nor his people.

It could have been so easy to do so. In the episode of the spies the Almighty announces to him that he will destroy the Children of Israel and make Moses the father of a new nation, a new Abraham. Moses pleads for that judgement to be rescinded and that the people should continue on their journey (Numbers Ch. 14 V. 11 – 20). When the people complained about the lack of water and Moses struck the rock instead of calling on the name of the Lord in order for water to flow. The Lord punishes Moses by refusing him permission to enter the Land of Israel. Moses accepts the divine decree without a word. (Numbers Ch. 20 V. 1 – 12). When describing his death Moses is described as "servant of the Lord" (Deuteronomy Ch.34 V.5). Having spent his life speaking with the almighty "Face to face" and teaching the people his Torah. Having led a people who were at times querulous and challenging, he knew that his days of service to the Almighty, and to his people, were over and he died with the Promised land in sight and that the people were in good hands. Moses was our teacher and "servant of the Lord".

10. Can you give me a brief overview of what happens at a Jewish burial/funeral, wedding and birth or birthday please?

Response 1

Some basic information on Jewish births, weddings and funerals

Here are some facts. There is plenty online. I recommend this website

<http://www.smashingtheglass.com/chuppah/> for great pictures of wedding canopies. Remember there are some differences in customs between the different Jewish traditions (for example, Ashkenazi Jewish people name their children after relatives who have died, whereas Sephardi families name them after living relatives). However, you probably want to keep it simple for younger pupils and I haven't gone into details about what circumcision means!

Jewish birth

- A baby is Jewish if its mother is Jewish
- There is circumcision (brit milah) for baby boys at 8 days old
- We name babies after family members who have died
- We get a Hebrew name – boys are called, for example David Ben (son of) Ezra or Miriam Bat (daughter of) Avraham
- When we go to synagogue and the rabbi calls us out to read from the Torah or do a special duty, he or she uses our Hebrew name

Jewish weddings

- Sunday is a popular day for Jewish weddings, we don't get married on Shabbat
- We are married under a special canopy called a chuppah
- It symbolises the home that the couple will share
- The ceremony ends with the groom breaking a glass (usually in a velvet bag) with his foot, to symbolise, so that we remember sad things that have happened to the Jewish people as well as happy things
- We have to sign a marriage document called a ketubah, this can be decorated very beautifully and be put on the wall afterwards

Jewish burial

- We try to bury people as soon as possible, sometimes it is the next day after they die
- We use a plain wooden coffin, so everyone has the same burial, whoever they are
- The seven days after a funeral is when the close family 'sits shiva'. They sit on hard low seats, there are prayers every evening and people come to visit them and wish them a long life
- We don't give people flowers as we think of flowers as being for happy times
- When people visit the grave, they put a stone on top of the grave to show they have visited
- We remember the person who has died by lighting a candle every year on the day of their death.

Response 2

Firstly, it must be remembered that at each stage of the life cycle events of a Jewish person the relationship between that person and the Almighty changes and the rituals of these events reflects that point and reinforces it in the minds of the participants and spectators. At birth males are initiated into the Covenant through the "Brit Mila", The Covenant of Circumcision (referred to earlier). A trained person called a mohel carries out this ritual before a select group of family and friends. Then there is a festive meal where a learned address, Dvar Torah (words of Torah) are said. The boy is given his name at this time. Girls are given their name in synagogue, the first time that the Torah is read after the birth, when the father is called up to say a blessing over the Torah.

Birthdays are celebrated like everyone else does, with parties and presents. The exception is when a boy is Bar Mitzva (son of the Commandments) at the age of 13. Girls become Bat Mitzva (daughters of the commandments) at the age of 12. Boys read from the Torah, as do girls in Reform Synagogues. In Orthodox synagogues girls will often give a learned address in the synagogue.

At a wedding, the bride and groom become new people in the eyes of the Almighty. On the day of the wedding a bride and groom will fast in order to achieve forgiveness for their sins as single people. The wedding takes place under the chuppah (wedding canopy), open on all sides to remind everyone that the tent of Abraham and Sarah was open to guests on all sides. The ceremony itself is short, the bridegroom says that he takes his bride as a wife “according to the laws of Moses and Israel”. The Ketubah (marriage certificate) is read in order to safeguard the economic welfare of the bride. Seven blessings are read, prayers for the joy of bride and groom and for the whole congregation. Then the groom breaks a glass, to show that as long as the Temple in Jerusalem is not rebuilt our joy can never be complete. Finally, the bride and groom are escorted to a room where they will spend a few minutes alone and break their fast. After that they will join their guests for singing, dancing, Divrei Torah and food! After the meal, during Grace the seven blessings will be joyfully sung by the guests.

In the Jewish faith death is not seen as the end of the story. The soul returns to its maker and may well return in another body. There is a cycle of life of which death is a part. It is customary to bury the deceased within 24 hours out of respect. Therefore, funerals are arranged swiftly as soon as the immediate family can arrive at the cemetery, which is always some distance from the synagogue. The immediate family will observe seven days of mourning (“sitting shiva”), where all prayers are said at home, people visit and comfort the mourners and eulogise the deceased. Another 23 days of partial mourning is observed but the mourners return to normal life. Children of the deceased will observe 11 months where they will say kaddish, a prayer said by mourners in which they acknowledge the wisdom of the Almighty and accept his judgements. At the end of the 11 months the tombstone is unveiled, eulogies for the deceased are said and official mourning ends, Judaism is after all a religion of life which is exemplified by the toast of “L’chaim” to Life!