Jewish worldview traditions

This subject knowledge essay on Jewish Worldview Traditions has been developed in a new, innovative and collaborative way:

- Anna Silver, Education Officer for the Board of Deputies of British Jews, has given generously of her time and expertise to provide much of the text for this resource.
- Dr Kate Christopher, Lead Consultant for Professional Development with Culham St Gabriel's Trust has written some of the text utilising AI software and working closely with Anna who acted as an editor.

This is the first time the Trust has used AI software as a way of developing knowledge essays as a resource for teachers and other educators. We are considering ways of using it in the future and would welcome feedback.

We would like to express our thanks to the Board of Deputies of British Jews for their support of this resource for teachers.

Who are the Jews?

Judaism is what we can call an 'ethnoreligion'. This means that some Jews define themselves as Jewish by their beliefs, (which includes converts to Judaism who are seen as fully Jewish), while some identify as Jewish due to birth into a Jewish family, heritage and ethnicity. It is not an 'either/ or' system as for some Jews, both of these are equally important.

We cannot assume that all Jews believe the same thing, for example, that all Jews believe in G-d or understand ideas like the messiah or the land of Israel in the same way. Some Jews see themselves as Jewish without holding any beliefs about G-d at all. They describe themselves as 'cultural' or 'secular' Jews. Being Jewish might be about living out the religious commandments for some, it might be about belonging to a community for others, it might be about a cultural identity for others, or a combination.

Within the global category of 'Jews' there are certain named groups, although these are internally diverse. These terms describe both geographical roots, and religious approaches. We will start with the **religious** groups found in the UK.

Branches of Judaism

Haredi

This group is recognisable due to their style of dress. Men often wear black coats, black hats, beards and sidelocks. Haredi women wear extremely modest dress including hair coverings for married women. Halacha (Jewish law) is seen as given directly from G-d and totally binding. It governs every action taken throughout the day. Many communities will also follow the teachings of a particular Rabbi. Haredi Jews embrace traditional values and reject many modern ideas such as changes in gender roles. Women have a very traditional role, running the home and usually having many children but some also do run businesses or work.

To protect community members from outside influences, Haredi Jews avoid media like television and do not often mix with non-Jewish people. Some speak Yiddish as a first language. Haredi life is focussed around study of traditional Jewish teachings, observance of Sabbath and festivals and in sharing joyous family events such as weddings.

The meaning of 'Haredi' is 'trembling one' (Lawton, 2016, p. 135). This group is also called 'ultra-Orthodox' or 'Strictly Orthodox' but Lawton suggests they should simply be understood as 'differently Orthodox' (Lawton, 2016: p. 7). A group within Haredi are the Hasidim, meaning 'righteous ones' (Lawton, 2016 p. 135).

Reference: Lawton, C (2016) *Judaism GCSE Religious Studies: the Definitive Resource*, Board of Deputies of British Jews

Orthodox (including Modern Orthodox)

Orthodox Jews are the largest group of Jews in the UK. Orthodox Judaism teaches that the Torah is the direct word of G-d given at Mount Sinai and each word is holy. This includes the oral law that was told to Moses at the same time to explain what is written in the Torah. Sinai is a region of dessert between Israel and Egypt. In Jewish pre-history, after G-d helped the Hebrew slaves to escape from Egypt, the Torah was revealed in Sinai, as the Hebrews travelled to the land of Israel.

The Torah contains 613 commandments, or laws. These 613 laws form the basis for everyday living. They are seen within Orthodox Judaism as eternal with Rabbis called upon to decide how to apply Jewish law to modern day life. Traditions vary depending on where Orthodox Jews come from in the world, but they are united in the essential belief in Torah given on Mount Sinai.

Men and women have different ritual roles in Orthodox Judaism, based on the commitments required by Jewish law. For example, only men can be Rabbis and lead synagogue services. Both men and women are leaders and teachers in Orthodox communities.

Masorti

Masorti is Hebrew for ‘traditional’. Masorti Jews are committed to halacha (Jewish law) and believe halacha should gradually evolve to meet the needs of a changing world. Masorti Judaism teaches that Jews should be inclusive and welcoming, questioning, and open-minded.

Masorti synagogue services use traditional prayers said in Hebrew. Most Masorti synagogues are egalitarian, offering equal opportunities for women and men to lead and take part in the service. Women are recognised as Rabbis across the Masorti movement. Some communities choose to have more traditional, male-led services.

Jewish learning is one of Masorti’s highest values. Every Jewish person should have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of Jewish thought, history and culture, and to develop the ability to read and explore Jewish texts for themselves.

Reference: https://masorti.org.uk

Reform Judaism

Reform Judaism started around 1810 in Germany and 1840 in the UK. It aimed to help Jews balance their Judaism and full citizenship in a modern society.

Differences in Reform synagogues included changing some prayers, saying prayers in English and men and women sitting together for services. Later, women Rabbis were introduced and people with only Jewish fathers were counted as Jewish. In recent years, there has been a strong focus on equality, human rights and looking after the environment.

Reform Jews see the Torah as inspired by G-d but written down by humans and therefore not the exact ‘word of G-d’. Torah study and debate are considered very important and the Torah is read and discussed during Shabbat services.

Reform Judaism values both tradition and text as well as knowledge of the wider world. Both should help people create their own opinions and make informed choices about their Jewish practice. This allows Judaism to be relevant to each new generation.

Liberal

Liberal Judaism was founded in 1902, by a community of people with a strong Jewish identity who wanted to connect their Judaism with their modern lives. It is innovative and always thinking about the present and the future, with a focus on justice, social action and equality. As an organisation, Liberal Judaism engages with society as it finds it and plays an active role in building collaboration across the Jewish community and with other faiths and causes.

Liberal Judaism encourages members of their communities to make decisions about how they live their own Jewish lives today, whilst taking Jewish tradition and history into account, so that they can be fully active participants in their own Jewish journeys.

Liberal prayerbooks have updated the language used in prayers and blessings to be inclusive of everyone, including when referring to God. They also published guidelines for LGBTQ+ weddings before they were legalised in the UK.

Reference: https://www.liberaljudaism.org

What’s the Difference?

Broadly speaking, the difference between the ‘traditional’ groups, such as Orthodox and Haredi, and ‘progressive’ groups, such as Reform and Liberal, is a view of revelation. The traditional groups understand the Torah to represent one divine revelation at Sinai, which is complete. The revelation has been passed on in an unbroken chain through the biblical prophets and kings, and later the Rabbis. The progressive groups see revelation as an ongoing process in the world. They acknowledge that the prophets had to interpret the divine word, and humans will always have to interpret divine guidance for each new age.

Differences may be seen in whether someone keeps to the Jewish food laws (kashrut) or not, whether women have leading and teaching roles in the community, how they keep shabbat (i.e. how to define ‘rest’), and whether a group accepts someone with a non- Jewish mother as Jewish.

Geography and Culture

Jews are geographically and culturally extremely diverse, but there are broad geographical groupings.

Sephardi Jews

The word Sephardi comes from the Hebrew word for ‘Spain’; ‘Sefarad’. Sephardi Jews migrated to Spain and Portugal from Israel. The Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE and Jews were exiled from the land of Israel, many groups settling in Spain and Portugal. They lived there for centuries, becoming a thriving community. This land was controlled by Moorish (Muslim North African) rulers for centuries and Jews took part in the rich and productive cultural life of Moorish Spain. A language called ‘Ladino’ developed, which is a mixture of Spanish and Hebrew, blended with Arabic and Portuguese words.

In 1492 Spanish Catholics re-took the land from the Muslim Moorish rulers. At that point they perceived Sephardi Jews to be a threat and expelled them from Spain.

From: https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/who-are-sephardic-jews/

Ashkenazi Jews

The word ‘Ashkenazi’ is taken to mean ‘German Jews’, but actually comes from the name of a grandson of Noah in the bible, Ashkenaz. In Genesis 10 the sons and grandsons of Noah are described as spreading out and founding new regions after the flood. After the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE Jews were forced to spread around the world, finding new places to live. The communities that settled in Germany and Northern Europe were associated with Ashkenaz, one of the 10 descendants of Noah who settled new regions.

Today the term Ashkenazi describes Jews who settled in Germany as well as Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Poland. They moved to Northern Europe from the Middle East around the 8th and 9th Centuries. These communities grew and flourished, focusing on education and developing a rich cuisine and culture. The language spoken by Ashkenazi Jews is Yiddish; a mixture of German and Hebrew, with some Aramiac words (the language Jesus spoke). A system of religious education produced well-educated Rabbis who interpreted and analysed Jewish religious texts. Their work in making sense of and living by the Torah underpins forms of Ashkenazi Judaism today. Jews in the UK and USA are largely Ashkenazi-heritage.

From: https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/who-are-ashkenazi-jews/

Mizrachi Jews

Mizrachi Jews are Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent. The term "Mizrachi" means "Eastern" in Hebrew, and refers to Jews who come from countries such as Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Morocco, and Egypt, among others. Mizrachi Jews have a rich cultural heritage that includes unique customs, music, and cuisine. They also have their own religious traditions and practices that sometimes slightly differ from those of Ashkenazi Jews, who are Jews of European descent. Mizrachi Jews have faced discrimination and persecution throughout history, but have also made significant contributions to Jewish culture and society. Today, Mizrachi Jews can be found all over the world, and continue to maintain their unique identity and traditions.

For example, Mizrachi style food, such as kebabs and flatbreads, is popular. Yemeni silversmiths create beautiful pieces that Jews all over the world value.

Reference: https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/who-are-mizrahi-jews/

Watch this video on Sephardi and Mizrachi Jews from the Jewish Museum:
https://jewishmuseum.org.uk/schools/asset/sephardi-voices-curator-talk/

Indian Jews

Indian Jews are a small but significant Jewish community in India. The community is made up of several distinct groups, including the Bene Israel (from Mumbai), Cochin Jews (from Kerala), and Baghdadi Jews (originally from Baghdad, who settled in port cities in India). The Bene Israel are believed to be one of the oldest Jewish communities in India, and have a unique

history and culture. The Cochin Jews have a long history in the southern Indian state of Kerala, and have developed their own customs and traditions over the centuries. The Baghdadi Jews, who came to India from Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries in the 18th and 19th centuries, have had a significant impact on the Indian Jewish community, and have contributed to the development of Jewish life and culture in India. Today, Indian Jews continue to maintain their unique identity and traditions, while also integrating into the broader Indian society. Most Indian Jews migrated to Israel in the 1950s.

Ethiopian Jews

Ethiopian Jews, also known as the Beta Israel (the 'House of Israel'), are a Jewish community that has lived in Ethiopia for centuries. They found their way to Ethiopia following trade routes from the 1st to the 6th Centuries CE. The Beta Israel have a unique history and culture and Jewish religious practices can be influenced by Christian Ethiopian customs. For example, over the centuries, small orders of Jewish monks have arisen. Monastic orders are not really found in Judaism but are prevalent in Christian regions. Beta Israel traditions have been passed on orally, whereas Jewish communities usually have high levels of literacy and rich written traditions.

The Beta Israel have faced discrimination and persecution throughout history, and many were forced to flee Ethiopia in the 20th century due to political instability and famine. A word used in Ethiopian culture for the Beta Israel, 'falashas' translates as 'landless' or 'wanderers'. In the 1980s and 1990s, Israel launched several operations to bring Ethiopian Jews to Israel, where they could live freely and practice their religion without fear of persecution. Today, there are around 140,000 Ethiopian Jews living in Israel, where they continue to maintain their unique identity and traditions while also integrating into Israeli society.

Reference: https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-history-of-ethiopian-jewry/

Check out this video, '20 Jewish faces': https://vimeo.com/coussins/20faces

This image library and information source from the Jewish Museum reflects the huge diversity of Jewish people: https://jewishmuseum.org.uk/schools/in-the-classroom/inclusive-judaism/

What makes a Jewish Identity?

The following information is taken from a 2022 report published by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research. A link is given below. The report is called 'The Jewish Identities of European Jews: What, Why and How?'

Researchers gathered and analysed responses from 16,00 European Jews in 12 European countries.

You can read an introduction and watch a short video explaining the research on this link, as well as download the full report: https://www.jpr.org.uk/reports/jewish-identities-european-jews-what-why-and-how

You will find other interesting research into Jewish identity, contexts and movement at the bottom of this page which is worth a read.

The report focuses on how European Jews understand themselves as Jews in religious, cultural or ethnic terms.

What, Why, How?

Three interesting sets of answers emerge from the report findings:

What is Jewishness to me?

Why is Jewishness important to me?

How do I express my Jewishness?

Answers to the question, *what is Jewishness?* reflect how individuals perceive Judaism and being Jewish. Some define Judaism as a religion, some as an ethnicity, or a culture, while others perceive being Jewish as the product of parentage and upbringing.

Answers to the question, *why is Jewishness important to me?* reveal ideas about meaning and relevance. Answers include recalling and learning from the Holocaust, the need to fight antisemitism or be involved in social activism. Other reasons are to maintain faith in G-d, support the wider Jewish community or support the State of Israel.

Answers to the question *how do I express my Jewishness?* Speak to a variety of outward behaviours, such as being part of wider Jewish networks, such as a named Jewish group, such as Haredi, Orthodox or Reform. Some Jews describe themselves as 'just Jewish' and do not affiliate with any named group. Actions which express Jewish identity range from attending synagogue, observing Shabbat and other religious practices, as well as feeling a sense of G-d or simply supporting other Jews.

Other interesting Findings

The report reveals some fascinating insights into European Jews' sense of identity. This summary is taken from the main webpage, referenced above:

- European Jews are much more likely to see themselves as a religious minority than an ethnic one, yet fewer than half of all Jewish adults across Europe light candles most Friday nights;
- Jewish identity is strongest in Belgium, the UK, France, Austria, Spain and Italy, and weakest in Hungary and Poland;
- The memory of the Holocaust and combating antisemitism played a more important part in people's Jewish identity than support for Israel, belief in G-d or charitable giving. Rising perceptions of antisemitism may have stimulated a stronger bond with Jewish peoplehood;
- Only about half of all Jews in Europe identify with a particular denomination, although there are significant differences at the national level;
- Higher proportions of younger Jews are religiously observant than older Jews;
- Belgium has the largest proportion of Jews identifying as Orthodox in its Jewish population, followed by the UK, Italy, France and Austria;
- Spain has the largest proportion of Jews identifying as Reform/Progressive, followed by Germany and the Netherlands;
- Levels of attachment to the European Union among European Jews are higher than, or very similar to, levels of attachment among their fellow citizens in the countries in which they live.

Recommended Teaching Resource

If you want to delve into some of this information with students, RE Today have produced an infographic presenting this data together with a set of suggestions as to using it in the classroom.

This is found inside this volume, *Investigating Jewish Worldviews* (2023), priced at £10:
https://reteachingresources.co.uk/product/investigating-jewish-worldviews/?

This book comes free with NATRE membership.

How many Jews are there in Britain today?

There are approximately 270,000 Jews in England which makes it the second largest Jewish population in Europe. There are just under 6,000 Jews in Scotland, 2,000 in Wales, and around 70 in Northern Ireland. A small community also exists in Jersey (in the Channel Islands). Jewish people make up about 0.04% of the British population, which is a tiny minority.

Judaism's Origins

Who was the 'first Jew' in history? We need to go back about 4000 years in history to a place called Ur (in modern day Iraq) to where a man named Abram grew up. At that time, worshipping multiple gods was common practice. Abram pioneered the idea that there was one G-d – an all powerful creator of everything, who didn't have a physical form. We now call this idea monotheism.

According to the story in the Torah, G-d appeared to Abram and told him to leave his home and head for the land of Canaan (now called Israel) and that he would be the father of a whole nation. In Genesis 25 we read, 'G-d said to Abram, "Go from the land where you grew up, from your father's house to the land that I will show you.''

Abram and his wife Sarah made the journey as requested and their family grew in the land called Canaan. This was the start of the strong link between the Jewish nation and the land now known as Israel.

Where did the name Abraham come from? Abram's name later had the Hebrew letter 'ה' (H sound) added into it, representing G-d in his life… and he became known as Abra**h**am.

Abraham

Abraham is an important figure in Jewish thought, representing Jewish identity, history, faith and community. Traditionally Abraham is seen as the ancestor of the Jewish people, and his story is central to Jewish identity.

Abraham is credited with being the first person to recognize and worship the one G-d amidst a world of polytheism. His rejection of idolatry and his devotion to the monotheistic belief in G-d's oneness are seen as foundational principles of Judaism. Abraham's monotheistic stance is considered a significant contribution to the development of Jewish theology.

Abraham's journey and covenant with G-d are seen as the foundation of the Jewish people's relationship with G-d. Abraham is upheld as a model of faith and obedience to G-d. His willingness to leave his homeland, his trust in G-'s promises, and his readiness to follow G-d's command to sacrifice Isaac demonstrate his unwavering faith. Abraham's faith is seen as an example for Jews to emulate in their own relationship with G-d. To mark this covenant with G-d, Abraham was the first to be circumcised. This is a symbol of Abraham and his descendant's bond with and loyalty to G-d.

Abraham's hospitality and kindness towards strangers are emphasized in Jewish teachings. His welcoming of the three strangers in the biblical story is seen as a moral lesson and a model for how Jews should treat others. Abraham's acts of kindness and generosity are seen as an integral part of Jewish ethics and values. Abraham is also associated with the value of 'hesed' (sometimes written as 'chesed')- meaning kindness. This involves selfless deeds, and showing love and compassion for fellow humans.

The existence of Abraham as a historical figure is a topic of debate among scholars. While there is no direct archaeological evidence to confirm his existence, many scholars believe that Abraham may have been a real person who lived in the ancient Near East during the second millennium BCE.

The primary sources for Abraham's story are found in the Hebrew Bible, specifically in the book of Genesis. However, the biblical narratives were likely written down centuries after the events they describe. Some biblical scholars view the events as mythic, while others see them as more definitely historical.

Some scholars argue that the stories of Abraham were developed as a way to explain the origins of the Israelite people and their special relationship with G-d. They view Abraham as a legendary figure who embodies the ideals and beliefs of the Israelite community.

Others, however, suggest that the stories of Abraham may have been based on historical figures or traditions that were passed down orally before being recorded in written form. They argue that while the biblical accounts may contain embellishments and theological interpretations, they could still reflect some historical kernel.

Ultimately, the question of whether Abraham was a real person remains a matter of interpretation and belief. For many Jews, Abraham's existence is accepted as a foundational part of their religious tradition.

The Patriarchs and Matriarchs

Abraham and Sarah were the first of the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Jewish people – followed by Isaac and Rachel, Jacob, Rebecca and Leah and the 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of Israel.

Most of the history of the Jewish people told in the Torah takes place in Israel, (apart from 210 years of slavery in Egypt… see the story of Passover) After this, the Jewish people returned to Israel under the leadership of Moses, who was succeeded by Joshua, but now with a guiding set of principles for living called the Torah.

Some Jews believe that the Torah was given word for word by G-d directly to Moses and therefore see every word as holy and relevant for all time. Others see the Torah as a history book which tells the story of their people, along with some good advice which was important at the time, but may need reinterpreting due to changes in society and technology.

Who are the Jewish Patriarchs?

The Jewish patriarchs are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their stories are recorded in Torah. Abraham is considered the first patriarch and is known for his faith, hospitality, kindness and obedience to G-d. Isaac is his son, who is known for being peaceful, restrained and forgiving and Jacob who was know for wanting harmony and truth. He later became known as Israel (meaning 'wrestling with G-d') after he wrestled with an angel. This is why Jews are often referred to as Bnei Yisrael (the children of Israel). The twelve tribes of Israel descended from Jacob's children and grandchildren.

Who are the Jewish Matriarchs?

The Jewish matriarchs are the four biblical women who are considered the founding mothers of the Jewish people. They are Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. Here is a brief overview of each matriarch:

1. Sarah is the wife of Abraham and the mother of Isaac. She is known for her faithfulness to G-d, and her role in the fulfilment of G-d's promises to Abraham. Sarah is remembered for her hospitality, her laughter upon hearing that she would bear a child in her old age, and her protection of Isaac.

2. Rebecca is the wife of Isaac and the mother of Jacob and Esau. She is known for her kindness, her role in the selection of Jacob as the heir to Isaac's blessings, and her guidance of Jacob in obtaining the blessings. Rebecca is remembered for her generosity towards strangers and her willingness to follow G-d's plan.

3. Rachel is the wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. She is known for her beauty and her love for Jacob. Rachel is remembered for her devotion to Jacob, her fertility struggles, and her burial place near Bethlehem.

4. Leah is the first wife of Jacob and the mother of six of his sons, including Levi and Judah. She is known for her loyalty, her role in the deception that led to her marriage to Jacob, and her eventual acceptance and love from Jacob. Leah is remembered for her strength, her faithfulness to G-d, and her important lineage within the twelve tribes of Israel.

These four matriarchs are revered in Jewish tradition and their stories are significant in understanding the history and identity of the Jewish people. They are seen as examples of faith, resilience, and the important role of women in Jewish history and spirituality.

What are ways of understanding the stories of the Patriarch and Matriarchs?

There are several ways to understand the stories of the Jewish matriarchs and patriarchs. Some scholars approach these stories from a historical perspective, seeking to understand them as accounts of real individuals and events. They analyse archaeological evidence, ancient texts, and cultural context to gain insights into the lives of these figures and their significance in the development of the Jewish people.

From a religious and theological standpoint, these stories are seen as sacred texts that reveal G-d's interactions with humanity. They are interpreted as narratives of faith, obedience, and divine promises. The matriarchs and patriarchs are seen as

exemplars of faith and models for believers to emulate. The stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs often contain moral and ethical lessons. They depict virtues such as hospitality, compassion, and perseverance, while also highlighting the consequences of negative traits like jealousy, deceit, and pride. These narratives can serve as moral guides and sources of inspiration for individuals seeking to live a righteous life.

Some interpret the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs symbolically or allegorically. They view these narratives as representing broader themes and concepts rather than literal historical events. For example, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac can be seen as a metaphor for the importance of surrendering one's desires and submitting to G-d's will.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in interpreting the stories of the matriarchs from a feminist perspective. This approach seeks to highlight the agency, strength, and contributions of the female characters in a patriarchal society. It aims to challenge traditional gender roles and explore the significance of women in shaping the Jewish narrative. Although traditional Judaism is patriarchal, there has always been a focus on women's strengths. Even within traditional gender roles, a woman is seen as having authority in the home, which is not insignificant. Women can also be seen as operating on a higher spiritual level. For example, the idea behind the requirement for men to wear a kippah (skullcap) is a reminder to them of G-ds' presence and how they should behave, with the view that women do not need to be reminded. The 4 matriarchs as well as other key females such as Miriam and Ruth are seen as very important role models and leaders.

The Jewish Temple

First Temple

The heart of the ancient city of Jerusalem was the Jewish Temple. Jerusalem emerged around 1000 BCE, designated by King David as the main city of the kingdom of Israel. King Solomon, the successor to David, oversaw the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, completed in 957 CE. The Temple provided a centre of worship for the kingdom, a place of sacrifice, ritual observances and as the focus of pilgrimage. In ancient times male Jews were expected to make three pilgrimages a year to the temple in Jerusalem. This was to observe the festivals of Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot (see section on the Jewish Calendar).

The Temple built in Solomon's reign is called the First Temple, it was destroyed in 587 BCE by the invading Babylonian Empire, which occupied the kingdom and took many Jews into exile.

The land of Israel and city of Jerusalem has been invaded, besieged and attacked many times. The Babylonians were one of several empires who wanted to control the kingdom.

Second Temple

The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem in 587 BCE and destroyed the Temple. After some time, the Babylonian empire was attacked by the Persian empire. In 539 BCE the Persian king Cyrus gained control of Babylon. In 538 Cyrus released the Jews from exile in Babylon and returned them to Israel where they re-built the Temple. The Second Temple was completed in 516 BCE.

Israel came under Greek control in the 300s BCE and, after a brief period of independence, fell under the control of the Roman empire. The Jews resisted Roman rule. In 66 CE a rebellion arose, but eventually the Romans under Titus conquered Jerusalem. The Romans destroyed the Second Temple and much of Jerusalem in 70 CE. A Jewish attempt to retake the land failed in 135 CE and Jews were exiled from the land for good.

Today one wall of the Temple remains, called the Western Wall. The Temple is a focus for Jews all over the world and remains of great importance to this day.

Jewish Texts

There are several Jewish texts which are considered authoritative and guide Jewish beliefs, practices, and traditions. The texts form a rich and diverse body of writing.

The Tenakh

The Tenakh is the sacred scripture and foundational text of Judaism which holds central importance in Jewish religious and cultural life. The Tenakh is a record of G-d's covenant (agreement) with the Jewish people, containing laws, commandments, historical accounts, prophecies, poetry, and wisdom literature. The word ‘Tenakh’ comes from the three books which make up the scriptures: T, N and K.

Torah (laws)

Nevi’im (Prophets)

Ketuvim (writings)

The Tenakh as a source of guidance for ethical and moral living, as well as a repository of historical and cultural heritage. It provides a framework for understanding the relationship between G-d and humanity, the Jewish people's history, and their obligations to G-d and fellow human beings.

The Tenakh is studied and interpreted through various methods, including traditional rabbinic teachings, commentaries, and modern scholarly approaches. Jewish individuals and communities engage with the Tenakh through prayer, study, and observance of its commandments. It serves as a source of inspiration, spiritual guidance, a way of life and a connection to Jewish identity and tradition.

The Books of the Tenakh: Summary

Torah: the creation of the world, the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs, the Exodus and arrival at the land of Israel, Moses receiving the 10 Commandments at Sinai, as well as 613 rules on how to live daily life, the Sabbath and festivals.

Nevi’im: historical narratives, prophetic writings, and poetic books.

Ketuvim: various books that include poetry, wisdom literature, historical accounts, and other writings.

The Books of the Tenakh: Detail

The Torah

The Torah, also known as the Pentateuch (meaning ‘5 Books’ in Greek) or the Chumash (‘5’ in Hebrew), is the first five books of the Tenakh. The English names are given, and the Hebrew names are in brackets:

Genesis (B'reishit): Genesis recounts the creation of the world, the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, and the patriarchs and matriarchs (see section above).

Exodus (Shemot): Exodus narrates the story of the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt, led by Moses. It includes the Ten Plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the revelation of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.

Leviticus (Vayikra): Leviticus focuses on the laws and rituals of the Israelite priesthood, including instructions for sacrifices, purity, and holiness. It also covers various ethical and moral commandments.

Numbers (Bamidbar): Numbers recounts the Israelites' journey through the wilderness, including the census of the tribes, the rebellion of Korah, and the sending of the twelve spies to scout the Promised Land.

Deuteronomy (Devarim): Deuteronomy consists of Moses' speeches to the Israelites before they enter the Promised Land. It includes a restatement of the laws, ethical teachings, and reminders of the covenant between G-d and the Israelites.

The Hebrew names come from the first lines of each book:

B'reishit means 'in the beginning' (Genesis 1:1).

Shemot means 'names'; "These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob" (Exodus 1:1).

Vayikra means 'and he called'; 'And the Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting' (Leviticus 1:1).

Bamidbar means 'In the wilderness" or "In the desert" in English; "The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai" (Numbers 1:1).

Devarim means 'words'; 'These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel' (Deuteronomy 1:1).

These five books collectively form the **written Torah**, which is considered the most authoritative and foundational text in Judaism. The Torah contains not only historical narratives but also laws, commandments, ethical teachings, and theological concepts that guide Jewish beliefs, practices, and traditions. It serves as the basis for Jewish religious and ethical principles and is studied, interpreted, and revered by Jewish communities worldwide.

Oral Torah

The oral Torah refers to the body of Jewish teachings and interpretations that were transmitted orally (by mouth, i.e. by speaking) from generation to generation alongside the written Torah. The oral Torah, as well as discussions, debates, and explanations of Jewish scholars and sages throughout history, was eventually written down in books that became known as the Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash. We give a longer explanation of the Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash below.

The oral Torah is considered an essential companion to the written Torah, as it provides additional insights, explanations, and practical applications of the laws and teachings found in the written text. It helps to interpret and apply the principles of the written Torah to various situations and contexts. Among Orthodox Jews the oral Torah is believed to have been given to Moses alongside the written Torah on Mount Sinai, and its transmission and development have been a central aspect of Jewish religious and scholarly tradition.

The Nevi'im

The Nevi'im, which means "Prophets" in Hebrew, is the second section of the Tenakh. It consists of historical narratives, prophetic writings, and poetic books. The Nevi'im contains a total of eight books:

Joshua: the Israelites' conquest of the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua.

Judges: the period of the so-called 'Judges'; various leaders who emerged to deliver the Israelites from oppression.

Samuel (1 and 2 Samuel): the life of the prophet Samuel, the reigns of Saul and David as kings of Israel, and the establishment of the Davidic dynasty.

Kings (1 and 2 Kings): the history of the Israelite monarchy, including the reigns of various kings and the eventual destruction of the Kingdom of Israel and exile.

Isaiah: prophecies and messages of hope, judgment, and redemption, addressing both the immediate historical context and future events.

Jeremiah: Jeremiah's prophecies focus on warning the people of impending destruction due to their disobedience, as well as offering hope for restoration.

Ezekiel: visions and prophecies of the prophet Ezekiel, including messages of judgment, restoration, and the future temple.

The Twelve (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi): These twelve short prophetic books cover a range of themes, including social justice, repentance, and the future redemption of Israel.

The Nevi'im provides historical accounts, moral teachings, and prophetic messages that guide Jewish understanding of G-d's relationship with the people of Israel and their responsibilities.

The Ketuvim

The Ketuvim, also known as the 'Writings', is the third and final section of the Tenakh. It consists of various books that include poetry, wisdom literature, historical accounts, and other writings. The Ketuvim contains a total of eleven books.

Psalms: a collection of 150 poetic hymns and prayers, attributed to various authors, including King David.

Proverbs: wise sayings and teachings on various aspects of life, morality, and practical wisdom.

Job: The book of Job explores the question of human suffering and the nature of G-d's justice through the story of Job's trials and his search for answers.

Song of Songs: a collection of love poems, often interpreted allegorically as expressing the love between G-d and Israel.

Ruth: the story of a Moabite woman who becomes an ancestor of King David, highlighting themes of loyalty, kindness, and redemption.

Lamentations: Lamentations mourns the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, expressing grief and longing for restoration.

Ecclesiastes: Ecclesiastes reflects on the meaning of life, the pursuit of wisdom, and the fleeting nature of worldly pursuits.

Esther: the story of Esther, a Jewish queen who saves her people from a plot to annihilate them.

Daniel: narratives and visions of the prophet Daniel, addressing themes of faithfulness, prophecy, and divine intervention.

Ezra-Nehemiah: the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the restoration of Jerusalem.

Chronicles (1 and 2 Chronicles): a historical account of the Davidic dynasty, the reigns of various kings, and the importance of the Temple.

The Ketuvim offers a diverse range of writings that provide insights into Jewish spirituality, wisdom, historical events, and the experiences of the Jewish people. These books contribute to Jewish understanding of G-d's presence, human experiences, and the importance of faith and righteousness.

Midrash

The term 'midrash', meaning 'to seek' or 'to inquire', refers to a genre of Jewish literature that includes interpretations, explanations, and expansions of biblical texts. Midrashic texts often explore the moral, ethical, and theological implications of biblical stories and provide insights into Jewish law, customs, and beliefs.

The midrash is not a single, separate book but a collection of Midrashic texts, split into 2 categories:

Midrash 'halacha' (law) – These look at the use of the specific wording and patterns of language used in a part of Torah text to help explain and elaborate on what is being discussed in a particular part of the Torah (especially the parts based on laws).

There is no book of Midrash halacha about the book of Genesis as there are only a couple of mitzvot (commandments) in it to explain – not enough to dedicate a book to.

Midrash 'agada' (story/narrative) – These are parables and analogies which help explain and give more insight around what was happening in a particular part of the Torah. They are not generally to be taken literally, but to make a point or explain something, although these are not used to explain texts on laws.

Themes in the Tenakh

Covenant

The Tenakh contains numerous references to the covenant (agreement) between G-d and the Jewish people. The covenant is seen as a sacred agreement or pact between G-d and the Israelites, establishing a special relationship and mutual obligations.

In the book of Genesis, the covenant is first mentioned with Abraham, where G-d promises to make him the father of a great nation and bless his descendants. This covenant is later reaffirmed with Abraham's son Isaac and grandson Jacob (also called Israel). The covenant includes promises of land, descendants, and G-d's protection, and the requirement for males to be circumcised. This is called the Brit Milah, which means 'covenant of circumcision' in Hebrew. For example, in Genesis, G-d says to Abraham; "Every male among you shall be circumcised… it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you" (Genesis 17:11)

The book of Exodus describes the covenant at Mount Sinai, where G-d gives the Israelites the Ten Commandments and other laws. The people agree to follow these commandments and live according to G-d's instructions. This covenant establishes the basis for the Israelites' relationship with G-d and their identity as a nation.

Throughout the Tenakh, the covenant is emphasized as a t-o-way relationship. G-d promises blessings, protection, and guidance, while the Jewish people are expected to obey God's commandments, live ethically, and maintain their unique religious practices. The covenant also includes the expectation of repentance and returning to G-d when the people stray from the path.

The Tenakh teaches Jews that the covenant is an enduring bond between G-d and the Jewish people, emphasizing the importance of faithfulness and a commitment to living a righteous life in accordance with G-d's teachings.

Judges and Monarchy periods

The biblical narrative recounts the period of the so-called judges. During this period the people of Israel experienced a cycle of invasion and persecution from neighbouring tribes or invading empires, such as the Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites and Midianites. At this time there was no central government or monarchy in Israel. Instead, men described as 'judges', who were charismatic leaders raised up by G-d, emerged to save the Israelites from their oppressors. The bible makes clear that successive invasions are as a result of the people of Israel turning away from G-d and indulging in idolatry and other forbidden practices. After these threats the people return to G-d, grateful for G-d's protection, only to stray again. This cycle is recounted in the book of Judges.

As the book of Samuel begins, the people of Israel express a desire for a king to rule over them, similar to the surrounding nations. In 1 Samuel 8, the people of Israel approach the prophet Samuel and express their desire for a king "to judge us like all the nations." Samuel is initially displeased with their request, as he sees it as a rejection of G-d as their king. However, G-d tells Samuel that the people have not rejected him, but rather they have rejected G-d as their king. G-d instructs Samuel to listen to the people's request and anoint a king for them.

The request for a king can be seen as a lack of trust in G-d's direct rule and a desire to copy the political structures of neighbouring nations. It can be viewed as a deviation from the ideal of G-d as the sole ruler and ultimate authority over Israel. However, G-d allows for the establishment of the monarchy and works through the anointed kings, such as Saul and David. The Bible portrays David as a man after G-d's own heart and blesses his reign.

The period of the judges gives way to the monarchy, firstly under king Saul then king David. The transition to the monarchy is a significant shift in the political and religious structure of Israel, with the establishment of a hereditary line of kings that continues through subsequent generations.

G-d instructs the prophet Samuel to anoint Saul as the first king of Israel. Saul initially shows promise as a leader, but he eventually disobeys G-d's commands, leading to his downfall. G-d then instructs Samuel to anoint David, a young shepherd, as the future king of Israel.

David's rise to power marks the establishment of the Davidic dynasty, which becomes the royal line of kings in Israel. David is portrayed as a successful and beloved king, known for his military victories, his establishment of Jerusalem as the capital, and his desire to build a temple for G-d.

Overall, the monarchy period in the Bible can be seen as a complex interplay between human desires for political stability and G-d's sovereignty. While the request for a king may be seen as a partial rejection of G-d's direct rule, it is also a part of G-d's larger plan for the nation of Israel.

The Talmud

The Talmud is a central text in Judaism that consists of two parts: the Mishnah and the Gemara. It is a compilation of Jewish oral law and commentary on the Tenakh. The Mishnah was compiled in the 2nd century CE and contains a systematic codification of Jewish laws, customs, and traditions. The Mishnah is organized into six orders, which cover various aspects of Jewish life, such as agriculture, festivals, civil and criminal law, and more.

The Gemara is a collection of discussions, debates, and commentaries on the Mishnah. It was compiled over several centuries and is written in Aramaic. The Gemara expands upon the topics discussed in the Mishnah, providing explanations, interpretations, and additional legal rulings. There are two versions of the Gemara: the Babylonian Talmud, completed around the 5th century CE, and the Jerusalem Talmud, completed around the 4th century CE.

The Talmud is considered a foundational text in Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, and theology. It is studied and analysed by scholars and students to understand and interpret Jewish tradition and to apply its teachings to contemporary life.

The Siddur

The siddur is a Jewish prayer book that contains a collection of prayers, blessings, and liturgical texts used in Jewish worship. It is a central and essential tool for Jewish prayer and is used by individuals and communities during daily, Sabbath, and holiday services.

The word "siddur" comes from the Hebrew root "seder," which means "order" or "arrangement." The siddur follows a structured order of prayers and blessings, guiding worshippers through the various components of the prayer service. It typically includes prayers of praise and thanksgiving, requests for forgiveness, expressions of gratitude, and petitions for various needs.

The content of the Siddur can vary depending on the specific Jewish tradition or denomination. Different versions of the Siddur exist for Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and other Jewish communities, each with their own variations in prayers and customs. Additionally, the Siddur may include additional sections for special occasions, such as prayers for the High Holidays or specific festivals.

A siddur will contain prayers in Hebrew but will often have the texts translated into the local language too.

The Siddur serves as a guide for Jewish individuals and communities to engage in communal and personal prayer, connecting with God, expressing devotion, and seeking spiritual connection. It is a cherished and significant text in Jewish religious practice.

Jewish Ways of Understanding G-d

In this section we will consider traditional Jewish theology, or ways of understanding G-d. Before we begin, it should be noted that we cannot assume all Jews share these beliefs, and beliefs will vary among different denominations or individual interpretations. In fact the 2022 Institute for Jewish Policy Research report shows that many European Jews see their Jewishness as much about remembering the Holocaust or being part of their local community, as beliefs about G-d (find more details in the section ‘What makes a Jewish Identity?’).

In traditional belief, G-d is eternal and beyond time and space; not limited by a physical body; omnipresent; the creator of the world and everything in it. G-d is omnibenevolent; is interested in people's moral behaviour; is omnipotent and omniscient and judges each individual. Let's look at these beliefs in a bit more detail.

What are traditional Jewish beliefs about G-d?

Judaism is a monotheistic tradition, the world's first significant monotheistic tradition. Therefore a key aspect of Jewish belief about G-d is that G-d alone is the creator and ruler of the universe. This belief is central to Judaism and is expressed in the 'Shema', Judaism's most important prayer; 'Hear! Oh Israel. the Lord your G-d, the Lord is one.' (found in Deuteronomy 6: 4-9, 11: 13- 21 and Numbers 15: 37- 41).

G-d is both transcendent and immanent. G-d is beyond human comprehension, seen when G-d is described as infinite, eternal, and all-powerful. G-d is not limited by time or space and is not bound by physical form. G-d is also immanent, or close to human lives. G-d is present and active in the world. This belief is expressed in the concept of Shekhinah, the divine presence that can be experienced in prayer, study, nature and acts of kindness. G-d who is interested in human lives made a 'covenant', or a special agreement with Abraham and then later the Israelites as a group, or the Jewish people. Records of the covenant are found in the Torah. This includes the commandments and teachings given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Jews believe that by following the commandments, they can maintain a close relationship with G-d.

G-d is just, merciful and fair and wishes humans to live in a just and loving way. Humans are given many instructions encouraging compassion and generosity, as well as chances to rethink their behaviour and, if necessary, make changes. A traditional view is that G-d is good and giving, and that the world was created so that G-d could give to people, meaning all events are ultimately derived from G-d. If events or situations seem 'bad', they still serve a purpose and are part of a grand scheme. An example of this way of thinking is found in a traditional Jewish response when hearing of a death; 'Baruch dayan emet' which means 'Blessed be the one true Judge' in Hebrew.

What are Jewish ideas about G-d based on?

Jewish beliefs about G-d are primarily based on the Tenakh, the Torah (laws), Prophets (Nevi'im) and Writings (Ketuvim). These texts contain stories, laws, prophecies, and poetry that provide insights about the nature of G-d (you will find more details in the section 'Jewish Texts').

The Torah, the foundational text of Judaism, contains the narrative of G-d's creation of the world, the covenant with Abraham, the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. These stories and teachings shape Jewish beliefs about G-d's role as the creator, lawgiver, and protector of the Jewish people.

In addition to the Hebrew Bible, Jewish beliefs about G-d are also influenced by centuries of interpretation and commentary by Jewish scholars and thinkers. These interpretations, found in works such as the Talmud, Midrash, and various philosophical writings, provide further insights into the nature and attributes of G-d.

Furthermore, Jewish beliefs about G-d are shaped by the collective experiences of the Jewish people throughout history. The Jewish tradition emphasises the importance of personal and communal experiences, such as prayer, study, and acts of kindness, in developing a relationship with G-d.

A Note on Terminology

You will notice the formulation 'G-d'. This is due to the idea that G-d's name should not be destroyed or disrespected. Many Jewish people choose to write 'G-d', so that is not written fully, the document can be thrown away or deleted with no problem. Some believe that as G-d's true names are in Hebrew and any word written in another language is not a real name of G-d, just a representation of the concept of G-d, therefore think that using the full English word 'God' is not a problem.

However, Jews living in a dominant Christian culture, where the name of G-d is used freely, have adapted to honour their traditions while remaining comprehensible to Christians.

The most sacred word for G-d is made up of four Hebrew letters: Yod, He, Vav, and He. This word is often referred to as 'the Tetragrammaton', or 'four letters'. The exact meaning of the Tetragrammaton is not definitively known. Scholars believe that it

may be derived from the Hebrew verb "to be" or "to exist," indicating G-d's eternal and self-existent nature. as the 4 letters contain versions of the verb ‘to be’, including ‘was’, ‘is’ and ‘will be’. It is often translated as "I am who I am" or "I will be what I will be." and some have understood the original meaning to be “He who brings being into being.” The name is the most sacred and personal name for G-d in Judaism. To avoid any potential misuse or disrespect, Jews traditionally substitute the name with other terms when reading from the Torah, in prayers or writing, which are given below.

This practice partly stems from the commandment in the Hebrew Bible to not take the name of G-d in vain (Exodus 20:7). Only the High Priest was allowed to utter the name, and only when in the Temple and reciting the priestly blessing. As this name is not used, the actual pronunciation has been lost over time. Some say the name is pronounced as Yaweh or Jehovah. This practice also reflects the belief that the name of G-d is too sacred to be spoken casually or without proper intention. By refraining from using the name, a sense of awe and reverence for the divine is maintained.

Alternative Jewish words for G-d:

Hashem: This Hebrew term means "The Name" and is used as a respectful way to refer to G-d. This is most commonly used in conversation.

Adonai: This name is commonly used as a substitute for the Tetragrammaton, particularly when reading from the Torah and in prayer. It means "Lord" or "Master" in Hebrew.

Elohim: This name describes G-d as the creator and ruler of the universe. It is a plural form of Eloah, meaning "G-d" in Hebrew.

El Shaddai: often translated as "G-d Almighty" or "G-d of the Mountain." It emphasises G-d's power and might.

A Chosen People?

The Torah describes the Jews as G-d's ‘chosen people’. This concept is primarily found in Deuteronomy, "For you are a people holy to the Lord your G-d. The Lord your G-d has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession." (Deuteronomy 7: 6).

The idea of being chosen does not imply superiority or exclusivity, but rather a special relationship and responsibility between G-d and the Jewish people. A modern version of this idea is rather of Jews being a ‘choosing people’. The tradition, according to the midrash or the oral tradition, is that G-d offered the Torah to many nations who all refused it and the Jewish people chose to take the Torah and its teachings on as a way of life, therefore creating a special relationship with G-d. By the Israelites decision to choose to follow G-d and the Torah, G-d chose to have a stronger ‘bond’ with them. There is no belief by Jews that Jews are ‘better’ than other people.

In the following section, we focus on 3 key points of Jewish theology; covenant, commandments and the land of Israel.

Theology Focus: Covenant

The idea of an agreement between G-d and the Jewish people is key strand of Jewish theological thought.

Jewish belief in a covenant goes back to the covenant made between G-d and Abraham, as described in Genesis 12- 17. Abraham pledged allegiance to G-d (refuting all other deities) and in return G-d promised Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation and inherit the land of Canaan (later known as the Land of Israel). The covenant in Judaism later established at Mount Sinai is between G-d and the entire Jewish people, found in Exodus 19- 24. According to Jewish tradition, the Israelites agreed to accept G-d's guidance with the phrase ‘Na’aseh v’nishma’ meaning ‘We will do and we will listen’, showing that they were agreeing to take on G-d’s law before even hearing it. This was because G-d had just rescued them from slavery in Egypt and they had witnessed G-d’s miracles and protection. G-d revealed the Torah to Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai, 3 months after the exodus from Egypt.

This covenant forms the basis of Jewish religious and ethical life. The Tenakh contains many references to the covenant in the prophetic books. Prophets like Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel often call the Jewish people back to their obligations and warn of the consequences of straying from the covenant. The Psalms and other wisdom literature in the Tenakh also reflect a sense of

covenant. These writings express gratitude for G-d's faithfulness to the covenant and provide guidance on how to live in accordance with its principles.

The covenant is seen as a mutual agreement with obligations for both parties. G-d promises to protect and guide the Jewish people, give rain and ensure produce grows in Israel while the Jewish people commit to obeying G-d's commandments and living according to the teachings of the Torah. The covenant is eternal and unbreakable. Despite invasion, exile, persecution and oppression, the covenant remains and G-d's promises endure.

The covenant carries a sense of responsibility and purpose for the Jewish people. They are called to live in accordance with the ethical and moral teachings of the Torah, promoting justice, compassion, and righteousness in the world. Jewish beliefs about covenant have been shaped and developed through centuries of interpretation, commentary, and rabbinic teachings. Rabbinic literature, such as the Talmud and Midrash, as well as the works of Jewish philosophers and scholars, have contributed to the understanding and application of covenantal concepts in Jewish thought and practice. You will find more information about covenant, including circumcision of boys, in the section below- Theology Focus: Covenant.

Theology Focus: Commandments

A key aspect of Jewish theology is the idea of ‘mitzvot’, which means ‘commandments’ in Hebrew. Not all Jews follow all the biblical commandments, but nevertheless, the notion of following G-d’s wishes is a significant aspect of Jewish belief. Fulfilling the mitzvot is traditionally a way to keep the covenant (see above). The Torah provides a comprehensive list of 613, covering a wide range of topics including ethical behaviour, ritual practices and social justice. Additionally, the oral tradition and subsequent rabbinic literature have further expanded upon and interpreted the mitzvot found in the Torah. Interpretation and understanding of the mitzvot can vary among different Jewish denominations and scholars.

Many of the mitzvot are a guide for leading an ethical life. They provide a framework for individuals to act in accordance with G-d's will and to contribute positively to society. Therefore observing the mitzvot is something that is done, as well as something that is believed. For example, to care for the poor and vulnerable, treat others with fairness and honesty and pursue justice. The Torah also provides detailed instructions for various rituals and ceremonies, such as the observance of Shabbat, the celebration of Jewish holidays, the dietary laws (kashrut), and the laws of ritual purity. The Torah also provides guidelines for personal conduct, including laws related to marriage and family, business practices, and interpersonal relationships.

Observing the mitzvot is a means of spiritual growth. By fulfilling the commandments, individuals can theoretically strengthen their relationship with the divine and enhance their own spiritual well-being. Mitzvot often involve family gatherings and communal practices and rituals. Many mitzvot are designed to be performed collectively, fostering a sense of shared identity and purpose.

The principles outlined in the Ten Commandments provide a moral and ethical framework for Jewish life. While the specific practices and interpretations of the commandments may vary among different Jewish denominations and individuals, the principles themselves are widely recognized and observed. The Ten Commandments include instructions such as the prohibition of idolatry, the observance of the Sabbath, honouring one's parents, not stealing, not committing murder, and not bearing false witness, among others. These commandments are seen as guiding principles for ethical behaviour and are considered essential in Jewish religious and moral teachings.

Judaism does not expect or even wish for all people to convert to Judaism or to follow all Torah laws. The guidance for non-Jewish people would be to follow the 7 Noachide laws.

There are some mitzvot that are challenging or impossible to follow in today's world. Many mitzvot in the Torah are related to the functioning of the Temple in Jerusalem, such as offering sacrifices, observing certain festivals in Jerusalem, and the appointment of priests. Since the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, these mitzvot cannot be fully observed. Some mitzvot are specifically related to agricultural practices in the land of Israel, such as leaving the corners of fields for the poor (pe'ah) or observing the sabbatical year (shmita). These mitzvot are challenging to observe in modern agricultural practices. The Torah contains laws related to the appointment and conduct of a Jewish king. Since Israel does not have a monarchy, these mitzvot cannot be practically followed.

Reform and Liberal (Progressive) Judaism view some of the mitzvot as no longer applicable or subject to reinterpretation in light of changing circumstances in the world and modern technology.

Theology Focus: the Land of Israel

Jewish theology regarding the land of Israel is multifaceted and has evolved over time. It is rooted in Jewish religious texts, historical experiences, and the idea of the covenant. In the Tenakh, the land of Israel is often referred to as the Promised Land, given to the Israelites by G-d. It is seen as a sacred place for the Jewish people where they can fulfil their religious obligations and live in accordance with G-d's commandments.

The concept of the land of Israel is also tied to the idea of Zion, which represents both a physical place and a spiritual ideal. The word 'Zion' is mentioned 152 times in the Tenakh. Originally the word referred to the hill in Jerusalem where the ancient Temple stood, it has become synonymous with 'Jerusalem', or even the whole of 'Israel'. Throughout history, Jews have maintained a strong connection to the land of Israel, including in periods of exile. The longing for a return to the land is a central theme in Jewish prayers and liturgy. In modern times, the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 has had a profound impact on Jewish theology. You might have heard the term 'Zionist' or 'Zionism' to describe the religious idea that the land of Israel by rights belongs to the Jews.

Many Jews view the return to the land of Israel and the establishment of a Jewish homeland as a fulfilment of biblical prophecies and a manifestation of G-d's protection. It is referred to as making 'aliyah' (going up spiritually) to live in Israel. Religious Zionism is a specific movement, but it is not the only way of seeing the land of Israel in Jewish theology.

Zionism is also a political and ideological movement that emerged in the late 19th century with the aim of establishing a Jewish homeland in Israel. The political movement was founded by Theodor Herzl, an Austro-Hungarian journalist and writer, who published *The Jewish State* in 1896. Zionism is based on the belief that Jews are a distinct national or ethnic group with a right to self-determination and a homeland, moreover, that Jews need the protection of a sovereign state to escape oppression and violence. The aim of Zionism was to 'ingather' Jews from around the world to Israel. Zionism gained momentum in the early 20th century in response to rising anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. In 1948, the State of Israel was established, fulfilling the vision of a Jewish homeland. The modern state of Israel is viewed as the fulfilment of the political Zionist vision. The religious Zionist vision includes a 3rd temple being built and used in service, so that all mitzvot relating to the temple can be fulfilled.

It is for political and religious or ideological reasons that Jews have been moving to Israel since around 1800. Waves of immigration have continued since then to the present day. Some have travelled as refugees, escaping persecution and violence in their countries of origin. Some have made the journey for ideological reasons and have overcome practical and financial hardships to settle in the land.

As well as Jewish self-determination, protection from genocide and fulfilment of G-d's wishes, Israel represents the cultural and spiritual centre of Jewish life, a beacon of Jewish unity and the preservation of Jewish cultures and practices.

Jewish theology regarding the land of Israel is not monolithic. Critics of Zionism argue that it has led to the displacement and marginalization of the Palestinian people and has contributed to ongoing conflicts in the region.

While Zionism is a mainstream view among Jews there are also those who oppose or critique the ideology and policies associated with the State of Israel. Some scholars' interpretation of religious texts leads to the conclusion that establishment of a Jewish state should only occur with the arrival of the Messiah. They argue that the current political entity of Israel does not align with this religious understanding and that the Zionist movement is a deviation from religious teachings. Some Haredi Jews are non-Zionist as they do not view the modern State of Israel as being run by Jewish law – for example, not all restaurants are kosher and people are allowed to travel on Shabbat. A tiny percentage of Haredi Jews are anti-Zionist, as they believe that no-one should live in Israel until the Messiah has come and 'gathered' all the Jews together in the Land of Israel.

Other Jews oppose specific policies or actions of the Israeli government, such as the occupation of Palestinian territories, expansion of Jewish settlements, or the treatment of Palestinians. They argue that these policies contradict Jewish values of justice, equality, and compassion.

Taking an anti-Zionist position is not the same as anti-Semitism, which is hatred of Jews. Criticizing Israeli policies or holding anti-Zionist views does not necessarily imply hatred or discrimination against Jews as a religious or ethnic group, although the situation is highly charged and painful for all groups involved. Anti-Zionist views can overlap with anti-Semitic views, such as relying on stereotypes about Jews, refusing Jews' right to self-determination or denying the Holocaust.

Jewish Ethics

Principles derived from Jewish religious teachings and traditions guide the behaviour and actions of individuals and communities, providing a framework for moral decision-making and ethical conduct. The word ‘Halakha’ describes Jewish law. This includes a wide range of ethical guidelines and commandments derived from the Torah and other Jewish texts. Halakha covers various aspects of life, including interpersonal relationships, business practices, and personal conduct.

One principle is that of ‘Tikkun Olam’, a Hebrew phrase which means "repairing/perfecting the world". This emphasizes the Jewish responsibility to actively work towards social justice and make positive contributions to improve society. Another key principle is ‘Tzedakah’, often translated as "charity" but it is a variant of the word ‘tzedek’ meaning justice. This is the Jewish obligation to give to those in need. Halakha emphasizes the importance of helping the poor, supporting social welfare programs, and promoting economic justice, and Tzedakah is one way of doing this. Jews might donate money or goods or for a specific purpose, such as asylum seekers or children in need. Giving of your time is also seen as an important part of tzedakah.

The phrase ‘Derech Eretz’ means "the way of the land". This phrase refers to the ethical behaviour expected in everyday life, such as to behave in an honest manner and treat others with respect and kindness. Associated with Derech Eretz is the idea of ‘Lashon Hara’, meaning ‘evil tongue’. This is a prohibition of gossip or speaking ill of others. It is a reminder to guard one's speech and use words responsibly to avoid causing harm.

Pikuach Nefesh, meaning "saving a life," is a fundamental principle in Jewish ethics that prioritizes the preservation of human life above all else. It allows most religious laws to be broken if necessary to save a life. For example the principle of ‘no work’ on Shabbat should be overridden if someone needs help, such as medical attention.

Finally, Jewish ethics includes the idea of ‘Bal Tashchit’ meaning "do not destroy/waste". This is a view of respect and care for the world around us and in modern times promotes environmental responsibility and sustainability.

The Jewish Calendar

The Jewish year follows a pattern of festivals and observances, some ancient and some instituted in more recent times, each with its own story and meaning, some serious and sombre, some joyful.

This section gives some details as to some of the main Jewish religious observances throughout the year.

Shabbat

Traditionally, every Friday sunset to Saturday when it is fully dark, around 25 hours later, Jews come together to rest, reflect on their week and spend quality time with family and friends for Shabbat.

Marking and celebrating Shabbat (the sabbath day) is one of the 10 commandments and commemorates the story from Genesis of G-d creating the world in 6 ‘days’ and resting on the 7th ‘day’. Candles are lit at the start and end of the day, the ‘kiddush’ blessing is said over wine to remember the story of creation and special foods such as hallah bread are eaten to make the day special. Orthodox Judaism has strict rules where 39 categories of creative work should not be done on Shabbat. Other groups within Judaism have a looser or self- defined definition of what would be considered ‘work’ that should be avoided on the day.

Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah, or ‘Head of the Year’ in Hebrew, is the Jewish New Year. It falls in September or October. Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of the High Holy Days, a ten-day period of introspection and repentance that culminates in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

During Rosh Hashanah most Jews attend synagogue services even if they are not regular attendees during the year. Some Jews participate in a ritual called Tashlich, which means ‘casting off’ in Hebrew. This involves going to a body of water, such as a river or lake, and symbolically casting off their sins and regrets by throwing breadcrumbs or small stones into the water.

Rosh Hashanah is a time for families and friends to come together and share festive meals. Symbolic foods are eaten, such as round hallah bread, apples dipped in honey, pomegranates etc, to symbolize a sweet and fruitful year ahead.

The shofar is blown during Rosh Hashanah services, as well as at other times throughout the high holy days. The sound of the shofar is meant to awaken the soul and inspire individuals to reflect on their actions. Rosh Hashanah is a time of renewal, new beginnings, and spiritual reflection. It is a time for Jews to reaffirm their commitment to living a meaningful and ethical life.

Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur, or the ‘Day of Atonement’ in Hebrew, is the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. It falls in September or October. Yom Kippur is a solemn and introspective day of fasting, prayer, and repentance.

Jews who are physically able to do so observe a complete fast from sunset until it is dark the following day. Yom Kippur is marked by a series of prayers and readings in synagogue services. The first prayer of Yom Kippur is Kol Nidre, which is recited at the beginning of the evening service, annulling all promises made that were not kept that year.

The Neilah service is the concluding service of Yom Kippur. It is a powerful and intense service that takes place just before sunset. The Ark (where the Torah scrolls are kept) remains open throughout the service, symbolizing the gates of heaven being open as the day comes to a close.

Yom Kippur is a day of deep reflection, repentance, and seeking forgiveness for mistakes from the past year. It is a time for Jews to reconcile with themselves, with others, and with G-d, as they strive to start the new year with a clean slate and a renewed commitment to living a good life.

Sukkot

Sukkot commemorates the Israelites' 40- year journey through the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. It is a week-long holiday that falls in September or October.

During Sukkot, Jews build temporary outdoor structures called sukkahs (‘huts’ or ‘booths’). These are typically made of wood or other materials and have a roof made of branches or foliage, through which one can see the stars. The sukkah represents the temporary dwellings the Israelites lived in during their journey in the desert. Many Jewish families eat their meals and spend time in the sukkah throughout the holiday. Some even sleep in the sukkah. The flimsiness of a sukkah is to remind Jews that it is God which is ultimately protecting them, not bricks and mortar.

Sukkot is also a harvest festival, and it is customary to decorate the sukkah with fruits, vegetables, and other agricultural products. 4 species of plants are prominent during Sukkot: a citron fruit, branches from a palm, myrtle and willow tree. These are held together and waved during specific prayers. The citron represents the heart and unity of the Jewish people; the palm represents the spine and strength; the myrtle represents the eyes, beauty and clarity and the willow represents the lips, prayer and speech.

Sukkot is a joyous holiday emphasising gratitude, unity, and the temporary nature of material possessions. It is a time for Jews to come together, celebrate, be hospitable to guests and reflect on their connection to their ancestors and the natural world.

Pesach

Pesach, or ‘Passover’, commemorates the liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in ancient Egypt, as described in the biblical book of Exodus. During Pesach, Jews observe various rituals and traditions. The holiday lasts for seven or eight days, depending on the Jewish tradition and location.

The ‘Seder’ is a special meal held on the first or first two nights of Pesach. It involves retelling the story of the Exodus, following a specific order. The Seder plate contains symbolic foods, such as matzah (unleavened bread), bitter herbs, and a roasted lamb

shank bone. ‘Seder’ means ‘order’, referring to the specific steps taken at this meal. Throughout the holiday, Jews eat matzah, which is unleavened bread. It symbolizes the haste in which the Hebrews left Egypt, as they did not have time to let their bread rise.

Before Pesach begins, Jews engage in a thorough cleaning of their homes to remove all hametz (leavened products). During Pesach, Jews abstain from eating hametz and instead consume only unleavened products. This includes avoiding bread, pasta, and other leavened foods. Instead, they eat matzah and specific Passover-friendly foods. This is not only as a reminder of the hurried Exodus, but also a spiritual reminder of the nations’ lowly beginnings as slaves – hametz represents haughtiness as it is ‘puffed up’. Matza represents the basics of life and humility.

Pesach is a time of remembrance, gratitude, and celebration for the Jewish people, symbolizing their freedom from slavery and the beginning of their journey as a nation.

Shavuot

Shavuot, also known as the Festival of Weeks, is a Jewish holiday that occurs seven weeks (50 days) after Passover. It is a significant holiday that commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

Shavuot has both historical and agricultural significance. Historically, according to Orthodox tradition, it marks the day when the Hebrews received the Ten Commandments and the Torah from G-d. Agriculturally, it celebrates the wheat harvest in ancient Israel.

Many Jews participate in a tradition called Tikkun Leil Shavuot, which involves staying awake all night studying Torah and other Jewish texts. This practice is believed to demonstrate eagerness and readiness to receive the Torah. In synagogue services on the first day of Shavuot, the Ten Commandments are read from the Torah. This re-enacts the moment when the Hebrews received the commandments at Mount Sinai. It is customary to eat dairy foods during Shavuot. This tradition has various explanations, including the idea that the Hebrews did not have kosher (‘fit’) meat available immediately after receiving the dietary laws of the Torah. Therefore, they ate dairy until they could prepare kosher meat. Many synagogues and homes are decorated with flowers and greenery to symbolize the beauty and bounty of the harvest season.

Shavuot is a time for Jews to celebrate the importance of the Torah in their lives and to renew their commitment to its teachings. It is a holiday of learning, gratitude, and spiritual reflection.

Rites of Passage

Rites of passage occur throughout the year in a Jewish community, from welcoming a baby, celebrating a marriage or mourning a death. There are many different laws and traditions surrounding all of these. Here are some:

Brit Milah, Bar and Bat Mitzvah

In Genesis we read, “And G-d said to them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” (Genesis 9:1). This supports the idea that having children is encouraged and celebrated at their birth and as they grow into adults.

Brit Milah is the Jewish celebration for welcoming and naming baby boys. The phrase means ‘covenant of circumcision’ in English. It takes place when a baby boy is 8 days old (as long as they are well). Brit Milah is mentioned in the Torah: “the promise between G-d and Abraham.” (Genesis 17:11-12).

Simhat Bat is the Jewish celebration for welcoming and naming baby girls, meaning ‘joy of a daughter’. There are various customs for the celebration. Some girls are named when their parent is called up to say a blessing over the Torah in the synagogue.

Boys celebrate their Bar Mitzvah at the age of 13. To demonstrate that he accepts religious responsibility, the boy is invited to read from the Torah. The Hebrew phrase means ‘son of the commandments’. Girls celebrate their Bat Mitzvah age 12 or 13, and become a ‘daughter of the commandments’. They may be invited to give a talk in synagogue, which is usually on a topic relating to the weekly portion of the Torah. In some synagogues, the Bat Mitzvah girl is invited to read from the Torah. Some Jews do fundraising or volunteering for a charity to mark their Bar / Bat mitzvah. There is often a party or meal to celebrate

these milestones. From this age, girls and boys are responsible for their religious decisions, including doing ‘mitzvot’ (commandments).