

## Jewish Worldview Traditions Core Knowledge Essay



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## Introduction

Judaism is one of the world's oldest living religions, with roots stretching back around 4,000 years. A person may be described as Jewish because of their religious beliefs, their family heritage, or their sense of belonging to Jewish culture, ancestral identity and peoplehood. Jewish life is shaped for many by the study of the Torah, which is written in Hebrew, and by prayer in the synagogue (sometimes called a shul). Observing holy days such as Shabbat and festivals like Pesach, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are particularly important as they remind Jews of their community and history. Everyday Jewish life is full of ritual, tradition, community memory and belonging.

## Origins and history

The Jewish story begins with Abraham, regarded as the first to enter a covenant with God. God promised him descendants as numerous as the stars, and a land for his people. Abraham and later figures such as Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel and Leah, are remembered as the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Jewish people.

Moses is another central figure. He led the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom, an event remembered at Pesach. At Mount Sinai, he received the Torah, including the mitzvot (commandments), which guide Jewish life.

The land of Israel is key to Jewish identity for most Jews, no matter where in the world they live. It was promised to Abraham as part of the covenant with God and his descendants, and Jews lived there for hundreds of years. The heart of the ancient city of Jerusalem was the Jewish Temple. The second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. After Jews were exiled from the land of Israel, they lived and moved through many countries, often as a result of violent state and communal persecution. The state of Israel was declared in 1948 following the Shoah, the systematic murder of six million Jews by the Nazis, during World War II.

The only remaining part of the Second Temple, the Western Wall, remains one of the most important places of Jewish pilgrimage and prayer.

## Core beliefs

Judaism is a monotheistic religion: Jewish people believe there is one God, expressed in the prayer, known as the Shema, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." Many Jews show reverence for God by wearing a kippah or using words such as Adonai ("my Lord") in prayer.

The covenant between God and Jewish people is central. Jews are called to live by the mitzvot, traditionally numbering 613. These cover all aspects of life, from justice (tzedakah) to care for creation (bal tashchit: meaning, "do not destroy"). Acts of kindness, or gemillut

chasadim, are also a core value. Some Jews emphasise tikkun olam, the idea of helping to repair the world. The moral code is contained in the Halakhah, the body of Jewish law.

## **Practices and rituals**

Practice, narrative and story are central to Jewish traditions. Jewish practice centres on the synagogue but also the home. In the synagogue, the Sefer Torah (a handwritten scroll, produced by a sofer) is read from the bimah, using a yad to avoid touching the delicate parchment. The scrolls are stored in the Ark (Aron Hakodesh), often adorned with an eternal light called the Ner Tamid. The room in the synagogue, in which religious services are held, will be configured so that the congregation prays in the direction of Jerusalem, the site of the now destroyed Temple. This has been the case throughout Jewish history.

At home, many families attach a mezuzah to their doorframes, containing the Shema. On Shabbat, which begins at sunset on Friday and concludes at sunset on Saturday, families share a meal with wine (blessed with kiddush) and challah bread. People may wear a tallit with knotted fringes (tzitzit) or bind tefillin during weekday prayers.

Celebrations of festivals are also central to both home life, and life in the synagogue.

Rites of passage include the Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah, marking when boys and girls take on responsibility for following the mitzvot. A traditional marriage contract, the ketubah, is part of Jewish weddings.

Food laws are a key example of difference. Kosher food is permitted, while treif is not. These rules are part of kashrut, which forbids mixing meat and dairy, and excludes foods like pork or shellfish.

## **Diversity within the tradition**

There is great diversity in those who identify as part of the Jewish community. There are branches, sometimes called streams or movements.

Orthodox Judaism holds closely to traditional interpretations of the Torah and therefore law and kashrut (dietary law). Modern Orthodox Jews try to follow Jewish law and values, whilst also engaging with the modern world. Haredi communities follow traditional interpretations of Jewish law but also separate themselves from the parts of modern life that might challenge traditional Jewish values, such as views on gender roles or avoiding technologies, such as television or the internet.

Progressive movements, such as Reform and Liberal communities, adapt practice for modern life, for example, counting people with both Jewish fathers and mothers as Jewish (Judaism traditionally followed the female line). Progressive Jewish communities are more likely to have female rabbis and have men and women sitting together in services. In the UK, the Reform and Liberal communities have recently amalgamated to become the movement for

Progressive Judaism. A growing Masorti community, meaning traditional, sits between Orthodox and Progressive movements.

Varied cultural heritages: Ashkenazi (European), Sephardi (Spanish/Portuguese), and Mizrahi (Middle Eastern/North African) Jews can be found in all branches. This might be particularly noticeable in relation to how festivals are marked and foods which are eaten, reflecting the heritage of families.

Some Jews see themselves as Jewish without holding beliefs about God, but nonetheless holding strongly to values of justice, human dignity and ethical responsibility to all humanity. They often describe themselves as cultural or secular Jews.

## **Sacred text**

The Torah, which means law or teaching, is made up of five books, which include an account of how God created the world and part of the early history of Jewish people. It also contains the ten commandments given to Moses and the 613 mitzvot or laws (Halakhah). There is a Sefer Torah in the synagogue, which is usually richly dressed in silver crowns and a mantle, an embroidered material cover. Each week, in the synagogue, a section of the Torah is read in sequence until, over a year, the whole Torah is read.

The Torah is part of the Jewish or Hebrew Bible. It is called the TeNaKh in Hebrew. It can be described as the written law. TeNaKh is an acronym made up of the initial letters of the Torah, Nevi'im (the books of the Prophets) and Ketuvim, which includes Psalms and other books, such as Elijah, Isaiah and Hosea. The books of the TeNaKh also form part of the Christian Bible, and many non-Jewish people will refer to these books as the Old Testament.

The oral law or Talmud is a compendium of Jewish teachings and interpretations, which provide an essential companion to the written Torah for Jews. It helps to interpret and apply the principles of the written Torah to various situations and contexts.

## **Key figures and places**

- Abraham – one of the three Patriarchs, father of the Jewish people, received covenant from God.
- Sarah- one of the four Matriarchs, wife of Abraham, and crucial in establishing lineage, and serving as a model of Jewish values.
- Moses– received the Torah and led the Exodus of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt to the land of Israel.
- Rabbis – teachers and leaders of communities interpreting Jewish law.
- The Western Wall – remains of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, a sacred site.
- The Land of Israel – location of many foundational stories of Judaism, of great importance to the relationship between God and Jewish people.

## Festivals and special days

- Shabbat – the weekly day of rest, from Friday’s sunset to Saturday’s sunset.
- Rosh Hashanah – Jewish new year, a day of celebration marked with the blowing of the shofar (ram’s horn).
- Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement, a solemn fast day.
- Sukkot – the harvest festival, when Jews build a sukkah decorated with lulav and etrog.
- Chanukah – the Festival of Lights, recalling the miracle of oil in the Temple. Families light the chanukiah, play with a dreidel, and eat fried foods.
- Pesach – a spring festival of freedom, celebrated with a seder meal using the Haggadah. Foods on the seder plate include, charoset, maror, karpas, beitzah, and zeroah. Jews avoid chametz and eat matzah.
- Shavuot – the festival marking the giving of the Torah, celebrated with dairy foods.
- Purim – a joyful festival, recalling Esther’s bravery.
- Simchat Torah – the celebration of completing and restarting the annual Torah reading cycle.
- Tu B’Shevat – the Festival of Trees, celebrating the environment.
- Yom Ha’Shoah – the date in which Jewish communities around the world all remember the six million Jews murdered in the Shoah (Holocaust).

## Contemporary expressions

Jewish life continues to thrive worldwide. In Britain, Jewish communities are small but active in cultural, religious, and social life. In the 2021 Census of England and Wales, 0.5% of the population, approximately 287,000 people, identified as Jewish. In the 2022 Scottish census, 5847 people identified as religiously Jewish, with a further 1466 who indicated an ethnic group of Judaism, without having Judaism as a religion.

Many express Jewish identity through food, celebration of festivals, music, activism, engagement with Israel, or memory of the Shoah. Different groups emphasise different aspects: Orthodox Jews may follow every detail of halakhah, while Progressive Jews may prioritise values like equality, inclusion, and social justice.

Many Jewish people are also concerned about the persistence of anti-Semitism in contemporary society, and this will form part of their Jewish identity. The connection with Israel also leads to a diversity of expressions. While some (a very small minority) may not see Israel as part of their Jewish identity, the great majority of people, who describe themselves as Jewish, will see it as a part of their identity in some way, shape or form.

## Key takeaways

- Judaism is rooted in covenant, mitzvot, the Torah and peoplehood.
- Life is shaped by community, tradition, law, prayer, and festivals.

- Jewish identity can be religious, cultural, or both.
- Diversity exists within Jewish practice, both in terms of levels of religiosity, and cultural heritage.
- Festivals, rituals, and ethics (such as tikkun olam and gemillut chasadim) give Jewish life both structure and purpose.
- Remembrance of historic persecution (including but not limited to the Shoah) are a part of contemporary Jewish life, as is consideration for the relationship with Israel.