

Core Knowledge: Jewish Worldview Traditions

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 first Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586BCE and the second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. At that point, most 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. There has always been some Jewish presence in the land, but for 200 years Jews around the world yearned to return to their ancestral and spiritual homeland. 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 some sources of information, entertainment and media, such as television or the internet as either maybe a negative influence and not align with the ideals of the community (such as modest dress).

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 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 **Mizrachi** (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 identify as Jewish due to their Jewish ethnicity, 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. Judaism is an ethno-religion; both a religious faith and an ethnic group.

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. **TeNaCh** 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.