

## **JUDAISM AN OVERVIEW**

Jews have always made up only a tiny percentage of the world's population-- in fact today less than 15 million. Yet, the Jewish people have had and continue to have an enormous influence upon the religious beliefs and practices of Western civilization, particularly the belief in the oneness of God. Judaism's influence upon social, political, and cultural dimensions of the West particularly its legal systems and sense of justice are also immeasurable. So as with any long lived major religious tradition, the possibilities for discussion of truly important aspects of Judaism extend beyond this brief overview. For the sake of brevity and a clear focus, this overview will discuss three enduring commitments of the believing Jew: God, Torah, and Israel. Following this discussion will be a brief listing of the dates of major historical events and finally a consideration of selected Jewish practices including observance of the Sabbath, celebration of yearly festivals, dietary laws, and rites of passage.

### **GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

#### **GOD**

Central to the Jewish religion is faith in the one God who is the creator and sustainer of the entire cosmos. The Hebrew Scriptures witnesses to the God of Israel who reveals the divine self through creative activity not only in bringing the world into being but also in interacting with the world particularly in relationship with human beings through historic events. God's revelation through words and deeds demonstrates a transcendent personal presence whose involvement in the world arises from moral concern for the welfare of all creation and a willingness to remain in a relationship of loving kindness and divine judgement with all creatures.

According to Jewish tradition, the first to profess this belief in the one God was Abraham. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, conceived a child, Isaac, whose birth marks the beginning of the Jewish people, a people in covenant with God. God promised to establish them as a nation of witness to God's presence and activity throughout creation. Covenant remains the central term to describe the relationship between God and the Jews or Israel.

The covenantal relationship received its clearer definition through the Hebrew leader, Moses. The book of Exodus gives an account of Moses's call from God to take a heroic stand against the Pharaoh, Israel's oppressor, and to lead an enslaved people into the wilderness to be formed into God's people. It is to Moses that the holy name of God is revealed. This name found in Exodus 3:13 and commonly translated as "I am who am" indicates something of the essence of this God, as simply the One who is.

For an observant Jew, the name revealed to Moses remains unspoken. When it appears in the Scripture portion to be read aloud, the name pronounced is adonai [Lord]. Such a practice reminds Jews of their commitment to a God who ultimately surpasses all human understanding and yet willingly enters into a loving relationship with them. This loving relationship finds expression as a way of life guided by the teachings of the Torah.

## TORAH

The Torah refers to the first five books of the Jewish Scripture. They are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Torah's human author has been traditionally identified as Moses. Most contemporary Biblical scholars see the actual writing of these texts as developing over a longer period after Moses's death, though many still identify the origins of the teachings with Moses. Yet, more important than resolving precisely the question of authorship is recognizing the centrality of the Torah as God's revelation for the Jewish practice of faith. The Torah contains all the laws which guide Jews for life in a community dedicated to God.

Though believing Jews fully acknowledge the important role that human authors in articulating the Law to Israel in their sacred texts, they recognize the ultimate source to be God who has provided the Israelite people with specific guidance for every aspect of life. "Revelation" refers to this divinely inspired guidance through historical events and through God's prophets or messengers. The prophets must always prove themselves by the holiness of their lives and the wisdom [lived experience] of their words.

The Written Torah provides the Jews with 613 mitzvot (commandments). Over three hundred concern various aspects of cultic sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem. With the Temple's destruction in 70 C.E. [see below], the observant Jew was left with less than half of the mitzvot that he or she could still observe. Yet with the aid of their sages, particularly great rabbis of this period, the Jews continued to observe the remaining laws. Some concern only men's behavior; others, women's practices. Yet taken together, these mitzvot guide everything from prayer life to dietary habits.

Like all laws that continue to be practiced, Jewish Law is a living tradition that depends on precedents set by earlier interpretations of the written texts. This "Oral Torah" as it is called was also collected and appears in written form in the "Talmud." The Talmud itself has two divisions: the Mishnah and the Gemara. The Mishnah took its present form by 200 C.E. The Gemara, a commentary on the Mishnah, had new additions as late as the tenth century of the common era.

While the Torah and its commentaries remains the central sacred texts for Judaism, two other collections of Scriptures remain important. First are the writings of the prophets (Nebi'im). Spanning approximately seven hundred years, these texts recollect the history of God's people as well as the messages of those called by God to bring Israel back to their covenant and to remind the people of God's loving kindness and just judgment. The other group simply called the writings (Kethubim) includes the Psalms, Proverbs, and other visionary texts like Daniel. Together with the Torah, the Hebrew Scripture is referred to as Ta Nakh or TaNak meaning "testament." The Scriptures were written in Hebrew, and serious students of the Torah study this ancient language to fully appreciate their sacred text. The TaNak plus the Talmud serve as Judaism's canonical texts.

## ISRAEL

Central to Judaism as a defining term is "Israel" which can refer to both a people and a nation. Israelite is often used interchangeably with Hebrew and Jew to describe an individual adherent. Hebrew seems to come from the term "Ibri" which means "from the other side" and in Genesis is associated with Abraham who came across the Euphrates River to the other side of the river. Israel, which literally means "prince of God," is first used as an alternate name for Jacob as recorded in the Genesis account. Jew is derived from Jacob's oldest son, Judah. The Judean tribe who settled in southern Canaan remained long after the other Israelite tribes had vanished. Hence, the name Judaism and Jew remain the most common used term to refer to the tradition and an adherent respectively.

To be Jewish is to be a member of this great nation who traces its ancestry back to a single family line, that of Abraham. Anyone born of a Jewish mother is considered a member of this nation, Israel. Even those Jews who remain non-observant often identify themselves as participant in this ancestry. Of course, conversion to Judaism is possible though infrequent. Any convert to Judaism also shares in this great heritage.

Today, religious Jews who strictly observe the Jewish law identify themselves as either orthodox or traditional. Another major group founded in Cincinnati in 1885 is the Reformed tradition which has overturned the observance of many practices (see below) in favor of commitment to the one God through worship adapted to modern culture and social action on behalf of the Jewish community and the wider society. Conservative Jews hold a compromise position observing some of the traditional practices but adapting them to the various societies that they inhabit. Finally, there are the cultural or secular Jews who remain tied culturally to their identity but have foregone a belief in God or any revelation through the Torah.

Today the vast majority of Jews do share a common bond in their allegiance to the modern state of Israel.

The ancient nation Israel definitely ended in the second century of the common era although for all intents and purposes the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. marked a definitive dissolution of Jewish religious national identity. It is only since May 14, 1948, that a Jew can once again speak meaningfully of the nation of Israel. On that date, Israel re-emerged as an independent state. The memory of the six million Jews killed in Nazi concentration camps motivated many Jews to take a militant stand on their own behalf to ensure that no Jew would be defenseless against his or her enemies again. So that today, the term Israel refers to both the spiritual and cultural bonds among Jews scattered throughout the world as well as the land known today as the nation of Israel.

## **A BRIEF HISTORICAL OUTLINE**

c. 1800 B.C.E.-1700 B.C.E.

Age of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob)

c. 1290 B.C.E.

Exodus from Egypt

c. 1050 B.C.E.

Kingship of David

c. 921 B.C.E.

Division of Two Kingdoms (Israel [north] and Judah [south])

c. 750-400 B.C.E.

Age of the Prophets

721 B.C.E.

End of the Northern Kingdom

586 B.C.E.-538 B.C.E.

Fall of Judah to Babylon--Babylonian exile

333 B.C.E.

Conquest of Alexander the Great

167-142 B.C.E.

Maccabean War

63 B.C.E.

Roman occupation

66-73 C.E.

Jewish revolt with destruction of Second Temple, 70 C.E.

90 C.E.

Council of Jabneh [established Hebrew Scriptures canon]

c. 132-135

Jewish revolt and expulsion of all Jews from Palestine

c. 200 C.E.

written collection of Mishnah

c. 100-550 C.E.

collection and formation of Talmud [further expanded and revised through 950]

1135-1204 C.E.

Life of Moses Maimonides--greatest of medieval Jewish philosophers

c. 1300

beginning of Kabbalah movement [Jewish mystical writings--esoteric]

1492

Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain

c. 1700

founding of Hasidim movement

1885

Reformed Judaism founded in America

1897

First Zionist Congress (Basel)--beginnings of Zionist movement

1939-1945

Holocaust of World War II

1948

Israel established

## **JEWISH PRACTICES**

One of the most distinctive features of the Jewish religious tradition is its multifaceted practices that have developed over the centuries. If one can characterize Christians as having concern for orthodoxy, i.e., correct (ortho) teaching (doxy), one might characterize Jews as having a concern for orthopraxis, i.e., correct practice. The practices described below are those of the orthodox since all modifications are based upon these observances.

## DAILY PRACTICE

Most important are the basic observance of the Decalogue--the debarim [Ten Words] or Ten Commandments. These provide the basic instruction for daily living with God and with one's neighbor. These commands are summarized in the instructions to love God with one's whole heart, mind, and soul and one's neighbor as oneself.

Among the other practices of an observant Jew is the practice of daily prayer in the morning and evening. Incumbent on every Jew is the recitation of the Shema, the central profession of faith. It begins: "Hear [shema], O Israel! The Lord, Your God, is One!"

The entire Jewish household, particularly among traditional Jews, reminds its occupants of their religious commitments. For example, a mezuzah is attached to the doorpost of every exterior and interior entrance of a household except the bathroom. The mezuzah is a case containing a kosher parchment inscribed with the Shema and another Torah passage concerning observing the commandments. It reminds those who enter and exit that wherever they go they are to observe the commandments.

Perhaps more amazing to the non-Jew is the observance of kosher laws. (Kosher means "fit".) These laws dictate diet including the types of meats to be eaten, the combination of foods, and their preparation. No observant Jew would eat pork or shellfish nor would he or she eat improperly butchered chicken or beef. Strict directions on how to kill an animal quickly and painlessly must be observed for a meat to be considered kosher. The prohibition of combining meat with dairy products means no cheeseburgers or meat lovers' pizzas. Orthodox Jews in fact keep entirely separate set of dishes and pots for their meat meals and their dairy meals to ensure no inadvertent violation of the Law. In Dayton, the observant Jew has few alternatives for going out to eat.

When asked why one would maintain such strict practices, the devout Jew simply answers that such practices keep one mindful of God and the Jew mindful of his or her duty to bring every aspect of life into the realm of holiness, into the presence of God.

## WEEKLY PRACTICE: THE SABBATH

The devout Jew finds deep meaning in the weekly observance of the Sabbath. Beginning at sundown on Friday evening through Saturday evening, Jews cease from their work to spend time with family, friends, fellow Jews in prayer, study of Torah, and celebration of creation through sharing meals and simple leisure activities. Preparation for the Sabbath includes preparing all foods to be eaten, and ensuring that all other work oriented tasks have been completed.

Sabbath begins in the home with the mother lighting the Sabbath candles about twenty minutes prior to sundown. A blessing is then recited. This blessing as do many Jewish blessings begin: "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe . . ." During the blessing, all present cover their eyes. Upon uncovering their eyes, they can then view the Sabbath light in its full brightness. Then the family joins other Jews at the synagogue for evening prayer. Upon returning home, the family gathers at their table where the father recites a blessing over each of his children and then recites another blessing over a cup of wine, a sign of joy and festivity. The cup is then shared by all at the table. After a ritual washing, another blessing is recited over two loaves of challah, bread commemorating the two portions of manna provided by God in the wilderness for the Sabbath. These loaves are then cut and shared among all those present, and a festive meal follows.

On Saturday morning, the family attends synagogue service, and two more meals are eaten during the day. The Sabbath ends when three stars are visible in the evening sky. A blessing is said over a cup of

wine and a box of fragrant spices symbolizing the sweet smell that lingers from the Sabbath. Finally, the Sabbath ends as it began with the lighting of another candle, commemorating God's first act of creation. This blessing, like the first, speaks of the "Lord God, King of the Universe" and praises God for establishing a special time to commemorate the sacred.

## **YEARLY OBSERVANCES: MAJOR HOLY DAYS/FESTIVALS**

The yearly observances of Judaism commemorate important events in the history of God's interaction with God's people. The following serves as a brief description of major holy days indicating the event commemorated, some distinctive aspect of the practice, and Hebrew and Western calendar month of the festival.

### **ROSH HASHANAH**

The New Year commemorating creation and judgment as well as the beginning of another year of serving God. The commemoration begins with the blowing of shofar [ram's horn] that represents a call to repentance. The next ten days are known as the Days of Awe as one recalls one's relationship to God. It culminates with Yom Kippur.

Tishri 1 [October-November]

### **YOM KIPPUR**

The Day of Atonement is marked by prayer and complete fasting from sunset to sunset the following day.

Tishri 10 [October-November]

### **SUKKOTH**

Feast of Booths commemorates the Jews' wandering in the wilderness. Each household is to build itself a succah, i.e., an outdoor dwelling whose roof consists of materials such as tree branches and palm leaves. The shelter commemorates the Jews' dependence upon God in the wilderness. This highly celebrative holy day culminates in Simhat Torah, the rejoicing with the Torah. Among the festivities is removing the Torah scrolls from the synagogue ark and dancing with the scrolls out of doors.

Tishri 15-23 [October-November]

### **HANUKKAH**

Dedication of Lights commemorates the rededication of the Temple in 165 B.C.E. after the Maccabean victory. It is marked by the lighting of an additional candle of a menorah for eight consecutive days.

Kislev 25-Tebet 4 [November-December]

### **PURIM**

Feast of Lots commemorates the deliverance of the Jews by Esther. The synagogue service centers upon the reading of the entire Book of Esther in a single sitting. Each time the oppressor's name, Hamaan is mentioned, the listeners may hiss, stomp their feet, and blow whistles. Because the Book of Esther involves hidden identities and the hidden ways of God, another type of festivity is a masquerade ball.

Adar 13-14 [February-March]

### **PESACH**

Passover commemorates the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. The observance stretches across seven days during which no leavened bread or other leavened -like starch is eaten (including pasta and rice). The week's observance begins with the Passover meal. Each portion of this meal commemorates a different aspect of the deliverance from Egypt. A ceremonial plate with the following items guide the practices of the first part of the meal. An egg and a shankbone represent Temple sacrifice; vegetable (karpas) represents the promises of spring; bitter herbs reminds the Jews of slavery's bitterness; haroset (apple, walnut, wine mixture) represents the mortar used by the slaves; and salt water stands for the Israelites' tears. Of course, central to the commemoration is

the sharing of the matzah or unleavened bread, commemorating the Jews' flight from Egypt. These commemorations are interspersed with four blessings over cups of wine that signify God's gracious redemption of God's people. Finally, a festive meal is served to culminate the celebration

Nisan 14 (March-April)

#### SHAVUOTH

Pentecost is celebrated on the fiftieth day after the beginning of Passover. It commemorates the giving of the Torah and the first fruits of harvest. It is customary to eat at least one dairy dish on this holiday.

Sivan 6 (May-June)

#### rites of passage

Jewish days, weeks, and years are marked by special practices to ensure the religious traditions of God's people continue. Another way in which Jews mark their lives with their religious identity is through special ceremonies to mark important changes that occur in most people's lives. Birth and death are marked by prescribed rituals to bring God's blessing upon these occasions of changes in family life. Male children, for example, are marked by the covenant of circumcision on the eighth day after birth. The most important practice for a Jew at the death of a family member is the recitation of the Kaddish. This prayer, like those of the Sabbath, praise God, focusing especially on the Name, the most holy of utterances, revealed to Moses at Sinai.

Marriage as well as divorce are also celebrated through special ceremonies. Perhaps the most well known Jewish practice is the Bar and Bat Mitzvah signifying a child's coming of age. Bar Mitzvah, which means son of the Law, is the traditional practice in which a young man recites a portion of the Torah and recites some blessings before the synagogue congregation. Bat Mitzvah, which means daughter of the Law, is practiced in the Reformed and certain Conservative Jewish congregations. The young woman performs the same tasks as her male counterpart.

What should be clear in this brief overview is the high priority which the religious Jew places on bringing the presence of God into every aspect of life and to commemorate God's special relationship with the people of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To understand more of traditional Judaism, see Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, To Be a Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life (Basic Books, a Harper Collins division, 1972; 1992 ed.). That text served as a basic reference for the information provided in the overview.

