

## **CONTENTS**

- 1 INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY
- 2 MOSES AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS
- 3 PLACE OF WORSHIP
- 4 HOLY SCRIPTURES
- 5 BELIEFS
- 6 BELIEFS
- 7 FESTIVALS
- 8 BAR-MITZVAH
- 9 BIRTH AND DEATH
- 10 MARRIAGE

# JUDAISM

By Harry Jivenmukta

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## INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

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**Judaism** is the religion which is followed by Jews. Jews identify four people in particular who played a big part in establishing Judaism. These are;

**ABRAHAM,**

**ISAAC,**

**JACOB,**

**MOSES.**

**Abraham** lived in about 2000 BC in an area which today is in Iraq. Abraham felt that God wanted him to travel to somewhere new and so set off with his people northwards to Canaan which today is called Palestine. Abraham believed that God had made an agreement, (covenant), with him and had promised that the people who Abraham led would one day become a great people with a nation of their own. This covenant was renewed in time with Abraham's son, Isaac, and then with his grandson Jacob. These people were originally known as '**Hebrews**' and later in the time of Jacob, as the '**Children of Israel**'.

The Jews settled in Egypt eventually after a long period of travelling and living nomadic lives. The Egyptian rulers were quite good to these people until the accession of a new Pharaoh. Egyptians began to doubt the Jews and felt that they might be a threat to them. The Jews were forced into slavery. The Pharaoh ordered that all male children of the Jews be killed so that they would eventually cease to exist. At this time **Moses**, (a Jew), was born, and it is said that he was brought up as an Egyptian by an Egyptian Princess, which probably saved his life.

In adulthood, Moses accidentally killed an Egyptian and had to flee to save his life. He began living with some herdsmen near mount Sinai. One day he had an incredible experience. God revealed himself to Moses and told him to take his people out of Egypt and lead them to Canaan where God had originally told Abraham about a **Promised Land**, (this incident is the Burning Bush story). Moses returned to Egypt and implored the Pharaoh to release his people from slavery. The Pharaoh would not and so Moses promised that bad fortune would befall the Pharaoh. Eventually the Pharaoh agreed after the first born sons of Egyptians began dying from a mysterious illness.

Moses led the people out of Egypt and the Pharaoh sent his army after them to kill them. The Egyptian army was destroyed at the Red Sea, where the waters having parted for Moses and his people to cross, crashed back together when the Egyptians tried to cross.

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## QUESTIONS

Find out more of what happened in Moses' early life and about the incident of the Burning Bush.

What happened at the Red Sea which allowed Moses and his people to cross but stopped the Egyptians?

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### MOSES AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

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Moses led his people to the foot of Mount Sinai and they settled there. The people made a covenant with God to believe in Him and obey Him. Moses went up Mount Sinai and there God gave him the law by which the people should live. These were various and included the laws known as the **Ten Commandments**.

The Ten Commandments Are;

**There Is Only One God And You Shall Have No Other,  
You Should Not Make Or Believe In Images Or Idols,  
You Must Respect God,  
Keep The Sabbath Day Holy,  
Honour Your Father And Mother,  
You Shall Not Commit Murder,  
You Shall Not Commit Adultery,  
You Shall Not Steal,  
You Shall Not Accuse Anyone Falsely,  
You Shall Not Covet, (want), The Things That Belong To Others.**

Moses led his people for about 40 years and they mainly travelled around in the desert. During this time the **Twelve Tribes of Israel** became one group and finally Moses led them to the **Promised Land**, Canaan. Moses died before they entered Canaan and his successor Joshua led the people across the River Jordan into Canaan.

Jews today see Moses as the most important person who shaped their religion.

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### QUESTIONS

Make a list of the main achievements of Moses.

Do you think the Ten Commandments are a good guide to how people should live?

How do the Ten Commandments compare to the rules which other religions follow?

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### PLACE OF WORSHIP

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Jews worship in a **Synagogue**. This word means a gathering, and people meet there to pray together and to share their religious beliefs. The first synagogues were built in about the 6th century BC. The Jews started to build synagogues in greater numbers when they settled in Israel and there were many by the time of the birth of Jesus.

Synagogues can be any size or shape but all have a **Star of David** to indicate that it is a Synagogue. The Star of David is also the symbol used by Israel as its national symbol. Believers pray facing Jerusalem which in the case of Britain is east.

The main features of a Synagogue are the **Ark**, and **Bimah**. The Ark is usually a cabinet in which Jewish law scrolls are kept. These are called the **Torah**. The cabinet also has a copy of the Ten Commandments and a curtain is closed in front of the cabinet when it is not in use. On each side of the Ark there is usually a seven branch candlestick called a **Menorah**. The Bimah is in front of the cabinet and is a platform from which the **Rabbi**, (priest and teacher), addresses the congregation. Women and men often sit apart during services.



### THE STAR OF DAVID

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### QUESTIONS

Draw a plan of what the inside of a synagogue might look like.

Why is it important to have a special place to keep the law scrolls and the Ten Commandments?

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### HOLY SCRIPTURES

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Jews have a Bible which has three main parts;

**The Torah, (including The Talmud),  
The Prophets,  
The Writings.**

**The Torah** is the section which tells believers what their relationship to God should be and includes the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Numbers. These five books are the law books which Moses laid down. The Ten Commandments can be found here. **The Talmud**, (which is part of the Torah), is a detailed look at the general laws laid down in the Torah. A code of law called the **Mishnah** was compiled in the 2nd century. The original laws laid down by Moses were general in their nature and did not necessarily relate to everyday affairs. Over time laws were added which told people how to behave in particular situations.

**The Prophets** tells of the history of the Jews through the stories of the prophets of the religion. This section is divided into two sections; the history of the Jews, and the Prophecies of others including Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Many minor Jewish prophets are also included in this book.

**The Writings** tell of the history of the Jews as well as containing the Psalms which are also usually written in prayer books.

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### QUESTIONS

How do Jewish religious texts compare to the texts of other religions?

Which parts of Jewish religious texts are most important? Why?

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**BELIEFS**

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The beliefs of the Jews are probably best summed up by the **Shema** which is a prayer in the Torah. Moses originally gave the Jews this prayer. The Shema includes;

*...the Lord our God is one Lord  
and thou shalt love the lord thy God with all thine heart  
and with all thine might...*

*...and thou shalt teach these words diligently  
unto thy children  
and shalt talk of them when thou walkest...  
...and when thou liest down  
and when thou risest up...*

The belief in one supreme God is common in many religions. The Jews also emphasise community and are instructed to '**Love Thy Neighbour**'. In addition to these basic beliefs, Jews have the Ten Commandments and believe in;

**The Coming Of The Messiah****The Resurrection Of The Dead****Life After Death**

Jews believe that some day the rule of God will be established on Earth. This will be done by the return of God's messenger in human form, **The Coming of the Messiah**, who will establish a new way of living. There will be an end to war and injustice. The new world will be perfect in every way and there will be no more suffering. This is an ideal view of how the world should be and something for everyone to strive for.

When someone dies it is believed that the soul of the dead returns to the presence of God to reside there forever. This belief in **Life After Death** means that in life people should live in a way which best prepares them for the afterlife.

Jews believe in the **Resurrection of the Dead**. The belief is that when someone dies their soul lives forever and that some day God will resurrect the dead. This may coincide with the coming of the Messiah.

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**BELIEFS**

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There are three times a day which should be set aside for prayer for men, but no specific times for women who can pray at any time during the day. Men should pray preferably at the Synagogue;

**In The Morning,  
At Noon,  
In the Evening.**

A Jew wears his skull cap for prayer. Jews will wash before morning prayers, and thank God for the new day. Jews must wash and pray before each meal.

One of the most important considerations for Jews is the food laws laid down in their scriptures. It is usually the responsibility of the woman of the household to make sure that these rules are followed in the cooking and preparation of food. Jews eat only from animals who have 'cloven feet and chew the cud'. These are cattle and sheep. They may also eat fish. But all meat must be killed according to the laws of **Kosher** and is usually purchased from Kosher butchers shops to guarantee that it has really been killed according to Jewish law.

Jews are instructed to put God's laws on their 'doorposts and gates'. Jews have **The Mezuzah** which is a scroll of the laws put in a case. These are fastened to the doors of Jewish houses in line with God's command. Some people also fasten these to interior doors throughout their house. The Mezuzah reminds Jews of their laws and duties. It is considered important to constantly have the reminder that they must live according to the holy laws laid down by God.

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**QUESTIONS**

Can you find out which prayers are important to Jews and which ones are said each day?

Why do Jews only eat Kosher meat?

Is it a good idea to have the laws fastened to doorposts to remind Jews of their obligations?

Why is it important to Jews?

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## FESTIVALS

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The **New Year** is a very important time for Jews. It takes place according to the phases of the moon and can take place in September or October. The first day of the new year is called **Rosh Hasanah**. The new year celebrations continue from the day before Rosh Hasanah to ten days after and that day is called **Yom Kippur**, (Day of Atonement). The ten days of the new year celebrations are a time for reflection and soul searching to identify any misdeeds done previously. By the time of Yom Kippur they have, therefore, cleared their minds and are at peace with God. Jews fast for 24 hours on the day of Yom Kippur, and wear white robes to show purity. The synagogues may be decorated also with white cloths. On Yom Kippur people pray all day, admitting their sins and praying for a good year ahead.

The festival of **Tabernacles** happens five days after Yom Kippur and remembers the Children of Israel and their journey from Egypt. Tabernacles is another word for shelters and people remember the way the children of Israel lived in tents and other temporary shelters during this time and the hardships they faced. The seventh day of this festival is called **Hoshaana Rabba** and is very holy. People say prayers and may go on processions. The last day of this festival, **Simchat Torah**, is a special day for children. They go in a procession to the synagogue carrying candles and banners and singing hymns. Children are expected to read from the scriptures in the synagogue. Then the children get presents and sweets to celebrate the event.

**Chanukah**, held in November and December recalls the bravery of Judas Maccabaeus who fought against the Syrians two thousand years ago. The Syrians were trying to force a pagan religion on the Jews of the time. When the Jews finally won the war after 3 years of fighting they cleansed the Temple and lit the Menorah. The oil which was only enough to last for one day actually burned for eight days and the festival today lasts for eight days in recognition of this.

**Passover** is the most important festival of all for Jews. It is a celebration of the freedom of the Children of Israel from the Egyptians. Moses predicted that God would send death to the Egyptians if they did not release the Jews from slavery. Flat unleavened bread is also eaten at this festival recalling, how the children of Israel fleeing from the Egyptians had time only to make thin cakes of bread to take with them for sustenance.

**Pentecost** is held in May or June and celebrates the giving of the Ten Commandments by God to Moses. People spend time reading the Torah and other religious texts to remind them how they should live.

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## QUESTIONS

Why are festivals so important to Jews? Which festivals are most important?

There are many more Jewish festivals than these. Can you find out which they are?



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## BAR-MITZVAH

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**Bar-mitzvah** is an occasion when boys become men in the Jewish religion. The ceremony happens on the nearest Sabbath day, (Saturday), to the boy's thirteenth birthday. The child attends a course of instruction with the Rabbi in which he must learn Hebrew to the point at which he is able to read from the sacred scriptures. The point is for the boy not only to be able to read the scriptures but also to understand them.

On the Sabbath before the boy's thirteenth birthday the family along with the congregation gather at the Synagogue and say prayers. The scrolls are taken out of the Ark and the boy stands with the other men on the Bimah and the scrolls are read at first by the other men. Then the boy is invited to read. After the boy has read his part the Rabbi reads a sermon and explains to the boy and the congregation what the purpose of the Barmitzvah is and how the boy should behave as a practising Jew. At the end of the service the boy is expected to live according to Jewish law for the rest of his life.

The family of the boy see this ceremony as a crucial part of their son's development and have a party to celebrate it. The boy makes a speech to thank the Rabbi, and his own family.

For girls the ceremony is called **Bat-Mitzvah** and happens near their twelfth birthday. Girls therefore, are expected to start living according to Jewish laws one year earlier than boys.

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## QUESTIONS

Why is it important for boys and girls to go through this ceremony?

Is it fair to expect boys and girls to start observing Jewish law at so young an age?

What sort of responsibility does following Jewish law place on children?

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## BIRTH AND DEATH

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A birth is a time of great happiness for Jewish families. The most important ceremony after the birth of a baby boy happens eight days after the birth of the child when the Rabbi performs a religious ceremony and the boy is **circumcised**. This has great religious significance for the Jews because it renews the covenant between God and his followers. The service includes prayers for the health of the child and a good life and good fortune.

For girls there is a naming ceremony at which the Rabbi prays for good health for the baby and its mother and then the girl is given a name. The Rabbi talks of the importance of following the Jewish faith.

After a death, the body is washed and wrapped in a white sheet. This is done by older members of the community. The burial is fairly simple. The body is placed in a coffin and buried with the nearest family members shovelling earth onto the lowered coffin.

For seven days after the death family members stay at home and cover their mirrors with cloths. Jews feel that it is the duty of each to visit the bereaved family and the seven days are spent with visits from family and friends and the saying of prayers for the soul of the dead person.

The son of the bereaved is expected to visit the Synagogue for the next 12 months to say a special prayer called the **Kaddish**.

the death of the person is also remembered each year and a candle is lit all day on the anniversary, and the Kaddish is also read.

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## QUESTIONS

Why do Jews believe in circumcision?

After a death why is it important for Jews to pray and for them to spend seven days mourning?

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## MARRIAGE

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**Kiddushin** is the name of the Jewish wedding ceremony. The Jews believe very strongly in marriage and believe in the importance of a strong family unit.

A canopy with four posts is erected in the Synagogue for the ceremony. The bridegroom and his father will stand under the canopy awaiting the arrival of the bride. When the bride arrives she stands next to the bridegroom and the parents of both also stand under the canopy. The Rabbi explains to both of them the importance of getting married and the way they should try to live once they are married. The canopy is a symbol of the security and importance of the home.

The **Blessing Of Betrothal** is then chanted by the Rabbi who also holds a glass of wine. Both the bride and the bridegroom sip from the glass and then the bridegroom places a ring on the brides finger. He promises to honour her for the rest of his life.

The Rabbi then reads from the marriage contract, the **Ketubah**. The bridegroom signs this contract and the Rabbi reminds him of what he has agreed to and the importance of being true to his vows. After this, the **Cantor**, (someone who has been trained to sing hymns from the scrolls), chants the **Seven Blessings**. The Cantor also holds a glass of wine. At the end of the ceremony the bridegroom breaks the glass under his foot. Everyone congratulates the couple and the marriage ceremony is complete.

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## QUESTIONS

What are the main features of a Jewish marriage ceremony?

Why is it important to read from the religious texts when a couple get married?

How does the Jewish marriage ceremony compare to the marriage ceremonies of other religions?

Topics In World Religions