



CHAPTER 8

JUDAISM

A covenant with God

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Judaism, which has no single founder and no central leader or group making theological decisions, is the diverse tradition associated with the Jewish people, who may be defined either as a religious group or as an ethnic group.

In religious terms, Jews are those who experience their long and often difficult history as a continuing dialogue with God. In a religious sense, “Israel” refers to all those who answer the call of God and who acknowledge and strive to obey the one God, through the Torah, or “teaching,” given to the patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets.

As a nation, the Jews preserved memories both of being nomads and of having a homeland in the land of Israel. Both memories contributed to their survival through millennia of dispersion and oppression. After the horrors of the Holocaust in the twentieth century, some Jews successfully promoted the idea of a state for a concentration of Jews in the land of Israel as the only safe way for Jews to resist **anti-Semitism** and to survive. Other Jews continued to believe that they could seek safety in communities around the world. Many who consider themselves Jews have been born into a Jewish ethnic identity but do not feel or practice a strong connection to Jewish religious traditions.

Given the persecution, dispersion, and even lack of religiosity among many Jews, how have they survived as anything more than fossils? Their survival, and that of Judaism as a whole, has required constant accommodation to changing circumstances. Nonetheless, they have managed to sustain a remarkable degree of cohesiveness and similar practices and beliefs.

In this chapter we will focus on Judaism as an evolving tradition, first by taking an overview of the history of the Jewish people and then by examining the religious concepts and practices that generally characterize the followers of the Torah today.

A history of the Jewish people

The Jewish sense of history begins with the stories recounted in the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh. Biblical history begins with the creation of the world by a supreme deity, or God, and progresses through the patriarchs, matriarchs, and Moses who spoke with God and led the people according to God’s commandments, and the prophets who heard God’s warnings to those who strayed from the commandments. But Jewish history does not end where the stories of the Tanakh end, about the second century BCE. After the holy center of Judaism,

TIMELINE

Judaism

BCE c.1900–1700	Abraham, the first patriarch
c.1300–1200	Moses leads the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt
1207	Israelites present in Canaan
c.1010–970	David, king of Judah and Israel
961–931	King Solomon builds the first Temple of Jerusalem
722	Fall of northern kingdom of Israel to Assyria
586	Fall of southern kingdom of Judah to Babylon; first temple destroyed; Jews exiled to Babylon
c.535	Jews return to Jerusalem and Judaea
515	Second Temple of Jerusalem built
c.430	Torah read to the public by Ezra the Scribe
167	Maccabean Revolt
30 BCE–10 CE	Hillel the Elder
CE 70	Jerusalem falls to the Romans and second temple destroyed
c.90	Jewish Canon of Tanakh set, under Rabbi Akiva's leadership
132–135	Bar Kokhba revolt
c.200	Mishnah compiled
c.500	Babylonian Talmud completed
1095	Crusaders begin massacring Jews in Europe en route to the Holy Land
1135–1204	Life of Maimonides
1478	The Spanish Inquisition begins
1492	Mass expulsion of Jews from Spain
1555 onward	Ghettos of Italy and Germany
1654	Jews begin to settle in North America
1700–1760	The Baal Shem Tov begins Hasidism
c.1720–1780	The Enlightenment in Europe
1881	Large-scale Jewish migrations to North America begin
1933–1945	The Holocaust, reaching its climax in World War II
1935	Nuremberg Laws
1947	Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls
1950	Law of Return
1948	Israel declared an independent state
1967	The Six-Day War
1972	First woman rabbi ordained
1982	United Nations supports independent Palestinian state
1990 onward	Israeli–Palestinian conflicts and peace initiatives
2003	Security wall under construction by Israel
2009	First black female rabbi ordained

the Temple of Jerusalem, was captured and destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, Jewish history is that of a dispersed people, finding unity in their evolving teachings and traditional practices. These were eventually codified in the great compendium of Jewish law and lore, the Talmud.

Biblical stories

Although knowledge of the early history of the Children of Israel is based largely on the narratives of the Tanakh, scholars are uncertain of the historical accuracy of the accounts. Some of the people, events, and genealogies set forth cannot be verified by other evidence. It may be that the Israelites were too small and loosely organized a group to be noted by historians of other cultures. No mention of Israel appears in other sources until about 1230 BCE, but biblical narratives and genealogies place Abraham, said to be the first patriarch of the Israelites, at about 1700 to 1900 BCE.

Jews hold the Pentateuch, the "five books of Moses" that appear at the beginning of the Tanakh, as the most sacred part of the scriptures. Traditionalists believe that these books were divinely revealed to Moses and written down by him as a single document. Some contemporary biblical researchers disagree. On the basis of clues such as the use of variant names for God, they speculate that these books were oral traditions reworked and set down later by several different sources with the intent of interpreting the formation of Israel from a religious point of view, as the results of God's actions in human history. The Pentateuch seems to have assumed its final form in the days of Ezra the Scribe (fifth century BCE).

The Jewish scriptures consist of the Torah (or Pentateuch), the Prophets, and the Writings. These books date roughly from the 10th to the 2nd century bce, and were written mostly in classical Hebrew. They are often referred to as Tanakh, an acronym from the first syllables of each division—Torah, Nev'im, Kethuvim.

TORAH	The Five Books of Moses	NEVI'IM	The Prophets
בראשית	GENESIS	יהושע	JOSHUA
שמות	EXODUS	שופטים	JUDGES
ויקרא	LEVITICUS	שמואל א	I SAMUEL
במדבר	NUMBERS	שמואל ב	II SAMUEL
דברים	DEUTERONOMY	מלכים א	I KINGS
		מלכים ב	II KINGS
		ישעיה	ISAIAH
		ירמיה	JEREMIAH
		יחזקאל	EZEKIEL
KETHUVIM	The Writings		The Twelve Minor Prophets
תהילים	PSALMS	הושע	HOSEA
משלי	PROVERBS	יואל	JOEL
איוב	JOB	עמוס	AMOS
שיר השירים	THE SONG OF SONGS	עבדיה	OBADIAH
רות	RUTH	יונה	JONAH
איכה	LAMENTATIONS	מיכה	MICAH
קהלת	ECCLESIASTES	נחום	NAHUM
אסתר	ESTHER	חבקוק	HABAKKUK
דניאל	DANIEL	צפניה	ZEPHANIAH
עזרא	EZRA	חגי	HAGGAI
נחמיה	NEHEMIAH	זכריה	ZECHARIAH
דברי הימים א	I CHRONICLES	מלאכי	MALACHI
דברי הימים ב	II CHRONICLES		

Some stories in the Pentateuch, such as the Creation, the Garden of Eden, the Great Flood, and the Tower of Babel, are similar to earlier Mesopotamian legends. Only the last four books of Israelite history (I and II Samuel and I and II Kings) are thought to be edited directly from contemporary sources. Although the accuracy of many of the stories has not yet been independently documented, they are of great spiritual significance in Christianity and Islam as well as in Judaism. They are also politically important, for along with the Talmud they later gave a scattered people a special sense of group identity and of God's active role in Jewish history.

From creation to the God of Abraham The Hebrew scriptures begin with a sweeping poetic account of the creation of heaven and earth by God in six days, from the time of "the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from (or: the spirit of) God sweeping over the water."¹ After creating the material universe, God created man and woman in the divine "image" or "likeness," placing them as masters of the earth, rulers of "the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on the earth."² In this account, God is portrayed as a transcendent Creator, without origins, gender, or form, a being utterly different from what has been created. Since Hebrew has no gender-neutral pronouns, God is generally—though not always—described in male singular terms. This creation story (in Genesis 1 and 2:1–4) is attributed by scholars to the "priestly source," thought to be editors writing immediately before or after the exile of the Jews to Babylon in 586 BCE.

A second, probably earlier, version of the creation story follows, beginning in Genesis 2:4. It is thought to be a contribution to the scriptures from the "Yahwist source," which used the word transliterated as "Yahweh" for the supreme deity. Instead of presenting woman as the equal of man, the second account of creation portrays her as an offshoot of Adam, the first man, formed to keep him company. This version has commonly been interpreted as blaming woman for the troubles of humanity, although this reading is not supported in the Hebrew manuscripts. According to the legend of Adam and Eve, originally God placed the first two humans in a garden paradise. The woman Eve ("mother of all the living") was promised wisdom by a serpent (later often interpreted as a symbol of Satan) to encourage her to taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, against God's command. She gave some to Adam as well. According to the legend, this ended their innocence. God cursed the serpent and the land, and banished Adam and Eve from their garden; their lives were no longer paradisaical nor were they immortal, for they no longer had access to the "tree of life."

After eating the fruit of knowledge, Adam and Eve are exiled from paradise. (The Wandering of Adam and Eve, Abel Pann, c.1925, Jerusalem. Colored lithograph.)



The theme of exile reappears continually in the Hebrew Bible, and in later Jewish history the people are rendered homeless again and again. The biblical narratives emphasize that the people risk God's displeasure every time they stray from God's commands. They are repeatedly exiled from their spiritual home and continually seek to return to it.

A more optimistic interpretation developed later, however. This was the feeling that the Jewish people were spread throughout the world by God's will, for a sacred purpose: to be good citizens of whatever land they reside in, and to help raise the imperfect world again to the condition of perfection in which God had created it. The rabbinic tradition, which began in the first century CE and has shaped Jewish theology into the modern period, emphasized that the way out of exile was through study and righteous living. Commandments have their origin in God and, if followed, will lead humanity back to a life in harmony with God.

The Israelites identified themselves as a people whose ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, moved from Ur and Haran in Mesopotamia to Canaan; Abraham's grandson, Jacob, called "Israel," resettled his large family in Egypt, where the Israelites were eventually treated as slaves.



Covenant A unique belief introduced into Jewish theology was the idea of a special covenantal relationship between the Jewish people and God. In this contract both are accountable. On the people's side, obedience to God is expected. On the divine side, God grants special favors and is also bound by his own ethical agreements to the people. The paradigm for this special relationship is the covenant between God and Abraham on behalf of the Jewish people. A more universal covenant with humanity as a whole is portrayed in the story of Noah, who was said to be the sole righteous man of his time.

According to the biblical narrator, who attributes thoughts and emotions to God, God despairs of the general wickedness of humans, regrets having created them, and sends a great flood "to destroy all flesh under the sky."³ The belief that a great flood did occur in Mesopotamia is now supported by nonbiblical evidence from archaeology, geology, and legends of other peoples, grounding at least part of the narrative in historical fact. In the biblical story, God establishes a covenant with Noah and gives directions for the building of an ark, which saves Noah's family and two of each of God's creatures. God promises never again to destroy the created world or to interfere with the established natural order, with the rainbow as a sign of this covenant "between me and all flesh that is on earth."⁴

God does, however, continue to intervene in history, according to the narrators. Ten generations after the legend of Noah, the narrative focuses on Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (the "patriarchs"), and their wives, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel (the "matriarchs"). According to the biblical narratives, Abraham was born in Ur (now in Iraq), migrated to Haran (now in Turkey), and then was called by God to journey to Canaan. With his wife Sarah and his household, he left the land of his father and also the religion of his father, a worshiper of the old gods.

Abraham is held up as an example of obedience to God's commands. Without hesitation, he is said to undergo circumcision (cutting away of the foreskin of the penis) as an initiatory rite, a sign of the covenant in which God agrees to be the divine protector of Abraham and his descendants, with all males to be likewise circumcised on the eighth day after birth.

Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless for many years. Sarah offered her servant, the Egyptian woman Hagar, as Abraham's concubine. According to social tradition, any child who was born of this relationship was considered to be the offspring of Abraham and Sarah, and if Sarah herself were to give birth to a child, it would carry the inheritance rights of the firstborn. After Hagar conceived a son by Abraham—Ishmael—God blessed Sarah at the age of ninety, saying that she will become the "mother of nations: the kings of many people shall spring from her" (Genesis 17:16). According to the biblical account, Sarah does indeed give birth to a son, Isaac, and then insists that Ishmael and Hagar be banished to the wilderness. God supports this demand, assuring Abraham that he will be father of two nations—one line through Isaac (to become the Israelites) and one through Ishmael (whom Arabs consider their ancestor).

According to the biblical narrative, God tested Abraham by demanding that he sacrifice his most precious possession, which was his beloved son Isaac (see Box). Thinkers have struggled to explain this demand, for human sacrifice was deemed to be very loathsome, but the point of the story seems to be the merit of Abraham's great obedience to God. When Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac, the Lord stops him, satisfied that "now I know that you fear God."⁵



Abraham's descendants are said to have given birth to the twelve tribes of Israel. They are symbolically depicted here as sitting in the patriarch's lap. (Seuvigny Bible, 12th century, France.)

TEACHING STORY

Abraham's Willingness to Sacrifice Isaac

God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am." And He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you." So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you."

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together. Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he answered, "Yes, my son." And he said, "Here are the firestone and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together.

They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. Then an angel of the LORD called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am." And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me." When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. ...

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By Myself I swear, the LORD declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command."

Genesis 22:1-18



Statue of the Canaanite high god El, 13th century BCE.

The Hebrew word *yirah*, usually translated as "fear" of God, also implies "awe of God's greatness," or what Rabbi Lawrence Kushner calls "trembling in the presence of ultimate holiness."⁶

Early monotheism Scholars disagree on whether pure monotheism—the worship of a single God of the universe, exclusive of any other divine beings—was practiced by the early patriarchs. Many names for divinity are used in the early scriptures, and some researchers consider them names of separate gods. It is known that the religion of the Canaanites had some influence on that of the Israelites. The Canaanites were polytheistic, with highly developed mythology and ritual directed largely to agricultural fertility. They were settled agricultural peoples who paid homage to a high male god called El, and a Great Mother Goddess named Asherah, whose worship may be more ancient. The goddess, associated with vegetation, agricultural knowledge, and abundance, was worshiped at *asherahs* (sacred poles or trees).

Although the Israelites destroyed the *asherahs*, they apparently incorporated or adapted elements of the older faiths of the area into their own. The hymns recorded in the biblical book of Psalms, for example, may have roots in Canaanite traditions. However, the ultimate thrust of Judaism was the rejection of the gods of surrounding peoples. The Israelites came to see themselves

as having been chosen by a single divine patron. In their patriarchal culture, this God was perceived as a ruler in a close relationship to the people, like a parent to children, or a sovereign to vassals. At first Israel's God may have been perceived as a private tribal god, later known as the supreme and only deity of the universe.

Israel's birth in struggle It is also unclear who the people of the biblical narratives were. Some scholars think the word "Hebrew" is derived from the generic term *habiru*, used for the low-class, landless people who lived as outlaws and were often hired as mercenaries. Another derivation may relate to the Hebrew word *ivrim*, which means nomads or wanderers. Others point to *'ibri* as the biblical word for Hebrew, meaning "children of Eber," an ethnic term. But because of frequent moving and intermarrying, the Israelites were actually of mixed ethnic stock, including Hebrew, Aramaean, and Canaanite. The word **Semite** is a modern linguistic term applied to Jews, Arabs, and others of eastern Mediterranean origin whose languages are classified as Semitic; it is often inaccurately used as an ethnic designation.

According to the genealogies set forth in the Pentateuch, the people who became known as Israelites were the offspring of Jacob, grandson of Abraham. Jacob received a new name, Israel, after wrestling all night with a being who turned out to be an angel of God ("Israel" means "the one who struggled with God").

This story in which a human being struggles and finally is reborn at a higher level of spirituality has been taken as a metaphor for the spiritual evolution of the people of Israel. As a result of the struggle, Israel the patriarch receives the promise that many nations will be born from him. The nation Israel—"the smallest of peoples"⁷—is perceived as the spiritual center for the world to grow toward God.

Egypt: bondage and exodus Jacob/Israel is said to have had one daughter and twelve sons by his two wives and their two maidservants. The twelve sons became the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. The whole group left Canaan for Goshen in Egypt during a famine. Exodus, the second book of the Tanakh, opens about four centuries later with a statement that the descendants of Israel had become numerous. To keep them from becoming too powerful, the reigning pharaoh ordered that they be turned into slaves for massive construction projects. To further curb the population, the pharaoh ordered midwives to kill all boy babies born to the Israelite women.

One who escaped this fate was Moses, an Israelite of the tribe of Levi, who was raised in the palace by the pharaoh's own daughter. He is said to have fled the country after killing an Egyptian overseer who was beating an Israelite worker. According to the scriptural Book of Exodus, Moses was chosen by God to defy the pharaoh and lead the people out of bondage, out of Egypt. On a mountain, an angel of God appeared to him from within a bush blazing with fire but not consumed by it. God called to him out of the bush and yet cautioned, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground."⁸ When God told Moses to go and rescue "My people, the Israelites, from Egypt,"⁹ Moses demurred, but God insisted:



God speaks to Moses from a burning bush, as depicted by Marc Chagall (1887–1985). (Detail of stained-glass window, Cathedral of St. Etienne, Metz, France.)

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From the Roots of
Belief: Exodus
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According to the biblical narrative, Miriam the prophetess danced triumphantly with a timbrel after the Israelites safely crossed the seabed, with the returning waters drowning the Egyptians. (Anna Kocherovsky, Miriam Dancing, tapestry.)

*I will be with you ... Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "Ehyeh [I Am] sent me to you. ... The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you."*¹⁰

The word given in this biblical translation as "LORD" is considered too sacred to be pronounced. In the Hebrew scriptures it is rendered only in consonants as YHWH or YHVH; the pronunciation of the vowels is not known.

With his brother Aaron to act as spokesperson, Moses did indeed return to Egypt. Many chapters of Exodus recount miracles used to convince the pharaoh to let the people go into the wilderness to worship their God. These signs included a rod that turned into a serpent, plagues of locusts, flies, and frogs, animal diseases, a terrible storm, lasting darkness, and finally the killing by the Lord of all firstborn

children and creatures. The Israelites were spared this fate, marking their doors with the blood of a slaughtered lamb so that the Lord would pass over them. (The holiday Passover commemorates this story.) At this, the pharaoh at last let the Israelites go. The redemption from bondage by the special protection of the Lord has served ever since as a central theme in Judaism.

According to the scriptural account, the Lord's presence led the Israelites, manifesting as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The armies of the deceitful pharaoh pursued them until the famous scene in which Moses stretched his staff toward the sea and God caused an east wind to blow all night, dividing the waters so that the Israelites could pass through safely on a dry seabed. As the Egyptians tried to follow, God told Moses again to hold out his arm over the sea, and the walls of water came crashing down on them, drowning every one. Miriam the prophetess, sister of Moses and Aaron, took a timbrel and danced in triumph, and all the women joined her.

From the wilderness to Canaan According to the Pentateuch, God told Moses that he would lead the people back to Canaan. First, however, it was necessary to travel to the holy Mount Sinai to re-establish the covenant between God and the people. The Lord is said to have descended to its summit in a terrifying show of lightning, thunder, fire, smoke, and trumpeting. God is said to have then given the people through Moses a set of rules for righteous living, later called the Torah. Among them were the utterances that Christians call "The Ten Commandments" (see Box), on stone tablets. God also gave a set of social norms, prescribed religious feasts, and detailed instructions for the construction of a portable tabernacle with a holy ark, the **Ark of the Covenant**, in which to keep the stone tablets on which God inscribed the commandments.

During the forty days that Moses was on the mountain receiving these instructions, the people who had just agreed to a holy covenant with God became disturbed and impatient. The biblical account says that under Aaron's reluctant supervision they melted down their gold jewelry and cast it into the form of a golden calf, practicing what the authors of the biblical narratives considered idol-worship, which had been explicitly forbidden by God. Moses

is said to have been so outraged by their idolatry that he smashed the stone tablets and destroyed the idol. He ordered the only people still siding with YHWH, the Levites, to slay 3,000 of those who had strayed.

After another forty-day meeting with God on the summit of Mount Sinai, Moses again returned with stone tablets on which God had inscribed the commandments. Moses' face was said to be so radiant from his encounter with God that he had to veil it. Aaron and his sons were invested as priests, the tabernacle was constructed as directed, and the people set off for the land of Canaan, with the Presence of the Lord filling the tabernacle.

Acceptance of the laws given to Moses at Mount Sinai brought a new dimension to the covenant between God and Israel. God had freed the Jews from slavery and extinction at the hands of the Egyptians, and now the Jews freely agreed to accept the Torah. As Rabbi Irving Greenberg explains:

In faithfulness to that commitment, the people of Israel pledge to teach the way of justice and righteousness as best they can, to remain distinctive and unassimilated in the world and thus hold up the message for all people to see, to create a model community showing how the world can go about realizing the dream, and to work alongside others to move society toward the end goal of redemption. Thus, the Jewish covenantal mission will be a blessing for all families of the earth.

For its part, the Divine is pledged never to abandon Israel, to protect and safeguard the people, to help in the realization of the dream.¹¹

Carrying the ark representing this covenant, the Israelites had to wander for forty years through the desert before they could re-enter the promised land, fertile Canaan, which at that time belonged to other peoples. The long sojourn in

The Ten Commandments

I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage:

You shall have no other gods besides Me.

You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me. But showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God; for the LORD will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the

seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God: you shall not do any work. ... For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that the LORD your God is assigning to you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house: you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

Exodus 20:2-14



Moses presents the Ten Commandments of God to his people. (Detail of Michal Meron, The Ten Commandments).

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the wilderness is a familiar metaphor in the spiritual search. Faith is continually tested by difficulties. But even in the wilderness, the Israelites' God did not forsake them. Every day they found their daily bread scattered on the ground, in the form of an unknown food, which they named manna.

A stone inscription, the Merneptah Stele, written for the Egyptian pharaoh Merneptah, places the Hebrews as being in Canaan about 1207 BCE. Through what was described as the miraculous help of God, they fought many battles against the kings and tribes of Canaan. Archaeological evidence indicates that every Canaanite town was destroyed from one to four times between the thirteenth and eleventh centuries BCE. At Sinai, God had vowed to oust the inhabitants of the lands into which the Israelites advanced, warning them against adopting the local spiritual practices: "No, you must tear down their altars, smash their pillars, and cut down their sacred posts."¹² The editors of the scriptures clearly considered the Canaanite religion spiritually invalid and morally inferior to their own. But according to the scriptures, whenever the Israelites turned away from YHWH, forgetting or worshipping other gods, they suffered.

The first Temple of Jerusalem David, the second king of Israel, is remembered as Israel's greatest king. An obscure shepherd, David was chosen by the prophet Samuel to be anointed on the head with oil, for thus were future kings found and divinely acknowledged in those times. Composer and singer of psalms, David was summoned to the court of the first Israelite king, Saul, to play soothing music whenever an evil spirit seized the king. When Saul and his son were killed in battle, David was made king. By defeating or making allegiances with surrounding nations, David created the beginnings of a secure, prosperous Israelite empire. He made the captured city of Jerusalem its capital and brought the Ark of the Covenant there.

Under the reign of King Solomon, a great temple was built in Jerusalem. It was to be a permanent home for the Ark of the Covenant, which was housed in the innermost sanctum, with an altar outside for making the burned offerings of animals, grain, and oil to the divine. There already existed an ancient practice among pre-Israelite peoples of using high places for altars where sacrifices were made to the gods. After centuries of wandering worship, the Israelites now had a central, stationary place where God would be most present to them. God is said to have appeared to Solomon after the fourteen-day temple dedication ceremony and pledged: "My eyes and My heart shall ever be there."¹³

The temple became the central place for sacrifice in Judaism. But its builder, Solomon, also accumulated great personal wealth, at the expense of the people, and built altars to the gods of his wives, who came from other nations. This so angered the Lord, according to the scriptures, that he divided the kingdom after Solomon's death. An internal revolt of the ten northern tribes established a new kingdom of Israel, which was independent of Jerusalem and the dynasty of David. The southern kingdom, continuing in its allegiance to the house of David and retaining Jerusalem as its capital, renamed itself Judah, after David's tribe.

Prophets such as Elijah warned the people against worshipping gods other than the Lord, and exhorted them to end their evil ways. Over the centuries, these prophets were men and women who had undergone transformational ordeals that made them instruments for the word of God. The “early prophets,” such as Elijah, focused on the sin of idolatry; the “later prophets” warned that social injustice and moral corruption would be the ruin of the Jewish state.

By the reign of King Hoshea of Israel, the kingdom was so corrupt and idolatrous that, in the scriptural interpretation, God permitted the strong kingdom of Assyria to overtake what was left of the small country. Assyria carried off most of the Israelites to exile among the Gentiles (non-Jewish people). Most of the Israelites became dispersed within Assyria; these people who thenceforth lost a distinct ethnic identity are known as the “Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.” This destruction of the northern kingdom took place in 722 BCE.

Judah maintained its independence, declining and continually warned of impending doom by its prophets. Indeed, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia (which had taken over the Assyrian Empire) captured Jerusalem. In 586 BCE the great walls of Jerusalem were battered down and its buildings put to the torch by the Babylonians. The great temple was emptied of its sacred treasures, the altar dismantled, and the building destroyed. Many Judaeans were taken to exile in Babylonia, where they were thenceforth known as “Jews,” since they were from Judah. The psalmist describes the feeling of exile from Zion, God’s chosen place:

*By the waters of Babylon there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion.
 There on the poplars we hung up our lyres,
 for our captors asked us there for songs, our tormenters, for amusement,
 “Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”
 How can we sing a song of the Lord on alien soil?*

Psalms 137:1–4

In exile among foreigners, the Jews nonetheless remained loyal to their God. They transformed the taunt of their captors into a spiritual challenge. This faithfulness in the midst of difficulties, without the security and support for community provided by territory, was an important development in the history of Western religions. Remembering the terrestrial Zion, maintaining communities of Jews in the land of Israel, and turning in the direction of Zion three times a day in prayer helped preserve the Jews as a scattered people through what they experienced as their thousands of years of exile.

*I never could forget you.
 See, I have engraved you
 On the palms of My hands ...*

Isaiah 49:15–16

Return to Jerusalem

After fifty years of exile in Babylon, a small group of devoted Jews, probably fewer than 50,000, returned to their holy city and land, now called Judaea. They were allowed to return by the Persian king, Cyrus. But most of the Jews did not return to Jerusalem from Babylon, which was now their home. They were thenceforth said to be living in the Diaspora, from the Greek word for

The Temple dominated the cityscape of Jerusalem, as indicated in this scale model of the Second Temple.



“disperse.” They always remembered Zion as a central part of their faith, but also learned to establish their creative lives in the diaspora.

King Cyrus authorized the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem, which was completed in 515 BCE. The second Temple became the central symbol to a scattered Jewish nation. A new emphasis on temple rites developed, with an hereditary priesthood tracing its ancestry to Aaron.

The priestly class, under the leadership of Ezra (a priest and scribe), also undertook to organize the stories of the people, editing the Pentateuch to reveal the hand of God. Some scholars think that it was these priestly editors who wrote the creation account in Genesis 1, glorifying their God as creator of the universe.

The Torah was now established as the spiritual and secular foundation of the dispersed nation. In approximately 430 BCE, Ezra the scribe set the precedent of reading for hours from the Torah scrolls in a public square. These “five books of Moses” were accepted as a sacred covenant.

As the Jews lived under foreign rule—Persian, Greek, Parthian, and then Roman—Judaism became somewhat open to cross-cultural religious borrowings. Concepts of Satan, the hierarchy of angels, reward or punishment in an afterlife, and the final resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgment are thought by some scholars to have made their way into Jewish belief from the Zoroastrianism of the Persian Empire, for these beliefs were absent from earlier Judaic religion. However, they were not uniformly accepted. Greek lifestyle and thought were introduced into the Middle East by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE. The rationalistic, humanistic influences of Hellenism led many wealthy and intellectual Jews, including the priests in Jerusalem, to adopt a Hellenistic attitude of scepticism rather than unquestioning belief.

Tension between traditionalists and those embracing Greek ways came to a head during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Hellenistic ruler of Syria (175–164 BCE), the nation that then held political sovereignty over the land of Israel. Antiochus seems to have tried to achieve political unity by forcing a single Hellenistic culture on all his subjects, abolishing the Torah as the Jewish constitution, burning copies of the Torah, killing families who circumcised

their sons, building an altar to Zeus in the Temple of Jerusalem, and sacrificing a hog on it (in defiance of the Mosaic law against eating or touching dead pigs as unclean). The Maccabean rebellion, a revolt led by the Hasmon family of priests, called in Hebrew the Maccabees (Hammers), won a degree of independence for Judaea in 164 BCE. The successful rebellion established a new and independent kingdom, once again called Israel, once again centered around Jerusalem, and ruled by the Hasmonean family.

Under the Hasmonean kings, three sects of Jews formed in Judaea. One was the **Sadducees**, priests and wealthy businesspeople, conservatives intent on preserving the letter of the law. The **Pharisees** were more liberal citizens from all classes who sought to study the applications of the Torah to everyday life. A third general movement was uncompromising in its piety and its disgust with what it considered a corrupted priesthood. The Jewish historian Josephus describes one of these groups: the **Essenes**. Its initiated members were males who dressed in white, shared their property communally, avoided luxury, and placed great emphasis on ritual purity. What may have been a similar or related group retreated to the desert soon after the Hasmonean takeover of the high priesthood in 152 BCE, and there developed a fortified compound at Qumran, near the Dead Sea. Their leader was the "Teacher of Righteousness," a priest, reformer, and mystic whose name was not uttered. The library of this community, now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, was discovered near Qumran in 1947 and is yielding precious clues about that period. It is possible that members of the dissident sect that collected and wrote the scrolls were scattered throughout Palestine, with Qumran as their center for study and initiation. They apparently were preparing themselves for a cosmic battle in which the "Sons of Light" would be victorious over the "Sons of Darkness" and establish a reign of utmost purity centered in Jerusalem.

Eventually the conflicts among the Hasmoneans erupted into civil war. The Roman general Pompey was called in from Syria in 63 BCE to choose between contenders to the Hasmonean throne, but he took over the country instead. There followed four centuries of oppressive Roman rule of Judaea.



Ruins of the Qumran settlement.

Under Roman rule, belief grew among Jews about a messianic age in which the people would at last be rescued from their sufferings and Jews would return to their homeland. This belief had been voiced by earlier prophets. For instance, the prophet Ezekiel received a vision in which God showed him a valley of scattered, dry human bones, which God then reunited and brought back to life, explaining:

O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. ... I am going to take the Israelite people from among the nations they have gone to, and gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. ... My servant David shall be king over them; there shall be one shepherd for all of them. They shall follow My rules and faithfully obey My laws. Thus they shall remain in the land which I gave to My servant Jacob and in which your fathers dwelt; they and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, with My servant David as their prince for all time. ... And when My Sanctuary abides among them forever, the nations shall know that I the LORD do sanctify Israel.

Ezekiel 37:11-28

In addition to anticipating the ingathering of the Jewish people back to the land of Israel, the classical prophets had foreseen a universal destiny for Israel. Combining the particular and universal orientations of Judaism, they had prophesied a coming "End of Days" in which disaster would be followed by universal redemption, when all nations would recognize the one God. In the books of both Isaiah and Micah appears a famous passage about the coming reign of world peace:

*Instruction shall come forth from Zion,
The word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
Thus He will judge among the many peoples,
And arbitrate for the multitude of nations,
However distant;
And they shall beat their swords into plowshares
And their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation shall not take up
Sword against nation;
They shall never again know war;
But every man shall sit
Under his grapevine or fig tree
With no one to disturb him.*

Micah 4:2-4

Under oppressive Seleucid Greek rule of Palestine, apocalyptic literature became very popular. Such literature sees the world in stark terms of good and evil, predicts the coming of God's victory over evil, asserts that God will then reward good people and punish evil people, and thus urges people to live righteous lives now in preparation for that time. Among some Jews, the belief grew that there would be a Messiah, who would come to bring evil times to an end and establish the reign of peace. In the biblical book of Daniel, probably written while Jews were being persecuted by the Seleucid emperor Antiochus IV (who had ruled from 175 until 164 BCE), the chief character Daniel describes a symbolic vision of "one like a human being" who would come on heavenly clouds, and on him the white-haired, fiery-throned "Ancient of Days" would confer "everlasting dominion" over all people, a

kingship “that shall not be destroyed.”¹⁴ By the first century CE, expectations had developed that through this Messiah, God would gather the chosen people and not only free them from oppression but also reinstate Jewish political sovereignty in the land of Israel. The messianic end of the age, or end of the world, would be heralded by a period of great oppression and wickedness. Many felt that this time was surely at hand. There were some who felt that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

Spurred by anti-Roman militias called Zealots, some Jews rose up in armed rebellion against Rome in 66 CE. The rebellion was suppressed, and after heroic resistance, the Jewish defenders were slaughtered in the holy walled city of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The Roman legions destroyed the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, leaving only a course of foundation stones still standing. The Temple has never been rebuilt. A remaining portion of the Temple’s retaining wall, called the Western Wall, has been a place of Jewish pilgrimage and prayer for twenty centuries. The Essene movement was apparently annihilated in this uprising.

A second ultimately disastrous revolt followed in 132 CE. Its leader was Simon bar Kokhba. His initial success against the Romans brought short-lived excitement over what some considered the long-awaited Messianic Age. Bar Kokhba’s rule over the independent state lasted only three years, however, for the Romans committed up to one-half of their entire army to reconquer the area. A Roman historian of the time reported that 580,000 Jews were killed. Jerusalem was reduced to ruins, along with all Judaeen towns. Those remaining Jews who had not been executed were forbidden to read the Torah, observe the Sabbath, or circumcise their sons. None was allowed to enter Jerusalem when it was rebuilt as the Roman city Aelia Capitolina, except on the anniversary of the destruction of the temple, when they could pay to lean against all that remained of it—the Western Wall—and lament the loss of their sacred home. Judaea was renamed Palestine after the ancient Philistines. Judaism no longer had a physical heart or a geographic center.

Rabbinic Judaism

Judaism could have died then, as its people scattered throughout the Mediterranean countries and western Asia. However, one of the groups who survived the destruction of Judaea were the **rabbis**, inheritors of the Pharisee tradition. They are the founders of rabbinic Judaism, which has defined the major forms of Jewish practice over the last 2,000 years. Another was the messianic movement that had formed around Jesus of Nazareth, later known as Christianity. Between them they have kept the teachings of the Tanakh vibrantly alive. Both Christianity and rabbinic Judaism used the Hebrew Bible as a foundation document, but from it they have developed in their own ways.



Although the Second Temple of Jerusalem was largely destroyed in 70 CE, what is thought to be a section of its western supporting wall remains intact. It is considered the most sacred place in Judaism because of its proximity to the Holy of Holies in the former temple. The Muslim Dome of the Rock is seen behind, on the general site where the Temple once stood.


The rabbis were teachers, religious decision-makers, and creators of liturgical prayer. No longer were there priests or temple for offering sacrifices. The substitute for animal sacrifice was liturgical prayer and ethical behavior. Without the Jerusalem temple, the community itself gained new importance. The people met in **synagogues**, which simply means “meeting places,” to read the Torah and to worship communally, praying simply and directly to God. Synagogue services did not involve animal sacrifices, but rather prayer, song, and readings from the Torah. A **minyan**—a quorum of ten adult males—had to be present for community worship.

Everyone was taught the basics of the Torah as a matter of course, but, from the age of five or six, many men also occupied themselves with deep study of the scriptures. Women were excluded or exempted from formal Torah study, for their family responsibilities at home were considered primary for them. They were responsible for keeping the strict dietary laws, preparing for the Sabbath and other home-centered aspects of Jewish religious life, lighting the Sabbath candles, caring for young children, teaching their daughters the commandments they would be expected to fulfill as women, and regulating sexual expression in the marriage according to rabbinic laws in order to maintain ritual purity in their homes. Although they were under sacred obligation to pray, women did not receive much religious education. By contrast, literacy was highly valued for men. It is said that in the afterlife one can see the Jewish sages still bent over their books studying. This is Paradise.

The revealed scriptures were closed; what remained was to interpret them as indications of God’s word and will in history. This process continues to the present, giving Judaism a continually evolving quality in tandem with unalterable roots in the ancient books of Moses. Centering the religion in books and teachings rather than in a geographical location or a politically vulnerable priesthood has enabled the dispersed community to retain a sense of unity across time and space, as well as a common heritage of law, language, and practice.

The rabbis set themselves the task of thoroughly interpreting the Hebrew scriptures. Their process of study, called **Midrash**, yielded two types of interpretation: legal decisions, called *halakhah* (proper conduct), and non-legal teachings, called *haggadah* (folklore, sociological and historical knowledge, theological arguments, ritual traditions, sermons, and mystical teachings).

In addition to delving into the meanings of the written Torah, the rabbis undertook to apply the biblical teachings to their contemporary lives, in very different cultural circumstances from those of the ancients, and to interpret scripture in ways acceptable to contemporary values. The model for this delicate task of living interpretation had been set by Hillel the Elder, who taught from about 30 BCE to 10 CE, probably overlapping with the life of Jesus. He was known as a humble and pious scholar, who stressed loving relationships, good deeds, and charity toward the less advantaged.

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*What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor;
that is the entire Torah;
the rest is commentary;
go and learn it.*

*Hillel the Elder*¹⁵

Another of the early founders of rabbinic Judaism was Rabbi Akiva (c. 50–135 CE). From humble beginnings, he became revered as a supporter of the poor who was at the same time a powerful intellectual influence upon systematization of the *halakhah*.

This process of Midrash yielded a vast body of legal and spiritual literature, known in Jewish tradition as the oral Torah. According to rabbinical tradition, God gave Moses two versions of the Torah at Sinai: the written Torah, which appears in the five books of Moses, and the oral Torah, a larger set of teachings, which was memorized and passed down through the generations all the way to the early rabbis. After the fixing of the Jewish canon—the scriptures admitted to the Tanakh—in about 90 CE under the leadership of Rabbi Akiva, the rabbinical schools set out to systematize all the commentaries and the oral tradition, which was continually evolving on the basis of expanded and updated understandings of the original oral Torah.

In about 200 CE, Judah the Prince completed a terse edition of legal teachings of the oral Torah, which was thenceforth known as the **Mishnah**. The Mishnah's method of deriving legal principles for social order is based on logical analysis of how things are and why they are so. It systematically sets up hierarchical classifications, such as levels of women's status and domestic responsibilities. Despite the subordination of women to men in traditional Jewish legal codes, a woman enjoys rights and protection from her husband and benefits from the expectations that she be creative and a moral beacon. There are also directives in the Mishnah regarding men's responsibility to women—such as a husband's obligation to give sexual pleasure to his wife—and, in general, the responsibility of rulers and privileged members of society to insure legal justice for people of all classes and to provide for the material well-being of the lower classes, widows, orphans, and resident aliens. Accordingly, Jews have often been prominent in movements for social justice.

The ultimate point in the hierarchy is God, but God's role is often implicit rather than explicit in the Mishnah. Professor Jacob Neusner explains:

The cases are particular, the principles universal. ... God in the form, God in the order, God in the structure, God in the heights, God at the head of the great chain of hierarchical being. True, God is premise, scarcely mentioned. But it is because God's name does not have to be mentioned when the whole of the order of being says that name, and only that name, and always that name, the name unspoken because it is always in the echo, the silent, thin voice, the numinous in all phenomena.¹⁶

The Mishnah became the basic study text for rabbinic academies in Judaea and Babylonia, and after several centuries, the Mishnah and the rabbis' commentaries on it were organized into the Talmud. This is a vast compendium of law, Midrash, and argument. It does not have a beginning, middle, and end in any traditional sense. It records disagreements among rabbis and sometimes leaves them standing. Drawing on "prooftexts" from the Torah, the rabbis came to different and often inventive conclusions.

There are actually two authorized Talmuds. Both have the same Mishnah; what differs is the additional commentaries, or **Gemara**. The Jerusalem Talmud is the earlier one, written down about 400 CE. It emphasizes continual study of the Torah as a spiritual practice, a primary way of coming to know the will and ways of God. Talmudic scholar Adin Steinsaltz refers to the Talmud as "a book of holy intellectualism."¹⁷

A rabbi studying the Talmud.





The Throne of the Shekhinah, as depicted by contemporary artist Hannah Omer and cyber-architect Yitzhak Hayut-Man.

The Babylonian Talmud grew out of the other major center of rabbinical study; Babylonia. Completed about 500 CE, it is more developed as an encyclopedia of the Torah, for Jewish life in Babylonia was less precarious. The Babylonian Talmud was also better preserved than the Jerusalem Talmud, and it has thus become the dominant version in Jewish theology and law. It, too, describes study of the Torah as essential to Israel's destiny as a nation upholding God's laws.

Midrash is still open-ended, for significant commentaries and commentaries on commentaries have continued to arise over the centuries. No single voice has dominated this continual study of the Torah and its interpretations. Rabbis have often disagreed in their interpretations, and these disagreements, sometimes between rabbis from different centuries, are presented together. This continual interweaving of historical commentaries, as if all Jewry were present at a single marathon Torah-study event, has been a significant unifying factor for the far-flung, often persecuted Jewish population of the world.

In the process of exegesis, the rabbis have actually introduced new ideas into Judaism, while claiming that they were merely revealing what already existed in the scriptures. Notions of the soul are not found in the Tanakh, but they do appear in the Talmud

and Midrash. The ways in which God is referred to and perceived also change. In the early biblical narratives, the Lord appears to the patriarchs and Moses in dramatic forms, such as the burning bush and the smoking mountain. Later, the prophets are visited by angelic messengers, and they sometimes hear a divine inner voice speaking to them. In the rabbinical mystical literature, God is presented in even more transcendent, less anthropomorphic ways. God's presence in the world, in relationship to the people, is called the *Shekhinah*, a feminine noun that often represents the nurturing aspect of God. Sometimes the loving protection of the *Shekhinah* is depicted as a radiant, winged presence.

The rabbis also developed prayers that over time replaced sacrifices in the temple. These are still used in contemporary Jewish liturgy. For instance, the *Kaddish*, exaltation of God's name recited repeatedly in Jewish prayer services, is preserved in Aramaic, the language of Babylonia.

*May His great name be praised to all eternity.
Hallowed and honored, extolled and exalted, adored and acclaimed be the
name of the Holy One, though He is above all the praises, hymns, and songs
of adoration which men can utter.*

Excerpt from the Kaddish¹⁸

At the same time that rabbinical Judaism was further developing beliefs and liturgy for public worship, Christianity was also developing as an institution. Contemporary scholars think that Jesus, a Jew who can be seen within the context of the movements of his time, including the apocalyptic expectations of the Essenes and roaming preachers advocating repentance, was also closely related to the Pharisees and the school of Hillel. That is, he emphasized holiness in worldly life and, like the Jewish prophets, observance of the spirit and the full and often complex ethical implications of the law, not merely fulfillment of the letter of the law. The early apostles of Jesus emphasized rabbinic traditions holding that, with the arrival of the Messiah and the age of messianic redemption, observance of the ritual laws would be abrogated. The apostle Paul, who became the major missionary of the Christian sect, preached to both Jews and Gentiles in the Diaspora that with the advent of Jesus, God would accept them without their practicing circumcision (which Greeks and Romans considered barbaric) and Mosaic laws governing many aspects of daily life and hygiene. Both monotheistic and from common stock, Judaism and Christianity grew farther and farther apart.

Judaism in the Middle Ages

In the early centuries of the Common Era, the Jewish population of the land of Israel declined, though it never disappeared, nor did the land of Israel ever lose its spiritual centrality in Jewish consciousness. Some Jews settled in other regions of the Roman Empire, and larger numbers established themselves beyond the boundaries of Rome among the Zoroastrian Persians in Mesopotamia. The city of Babylon became the major center of Jewish intellectual activity, a position it would hold well into the tenth century. The authoritative Babylonian Talmud received its final editing in the middle of the sixth century CE.

Even when the Talmud was complete, the rabbinic enterprise continued. The two great Babylonian rabbinic academies were often appealed to with difficult questions from far-flung Jewish communities. Their answers, which were considered binding on all Jews, and the questions themselves, became a new and enduring form of legal writing, *Responsa* literature, which continues to the present.

When Baghdad became the capital city of the great Abbasid Empire in the eighth century, Jewish life concentrated around that city as well. Jews were treated relatively well under Islamic rule. Like Christians, they were recognized as a "People of the Book," and were allowed to maintain their religious traditions and run their communities autonomously as long as they paid a substantial head tax. In Baghdad, as throughout the Islamic Middle East, many Jews were prosperous merchants, professionals, and craftsmen. In the early Middle Ages, in fact, Jews tended to dominate international trade between Muslim and Christian realms because of their facility with languages and their ability to find supportive co-religionists in virtually any community.

Life under Islamic rule was also intellectually exciting for the Jewish community, which had rapidly adopted Arabic as its spoken language. During its early centuries, Islam was far advanced beyond Christian Europe in its explorations of science, medicine, philosophy, poetry, and the fine arts. Jews living in Muslim countries benefited from an atmosphere of cultural creativity and tolerance. Many Jews were well-known physicians. Muslim Spain, in particular, where some Jews rose to high political position in Muslim courts,



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is renowned for its outstanding Hebrew poets and major philosophical and scientific Jewish writers.

From time to time, however, Jews were threatened by intolerant Muslim rulers and were forced to flee to other territories. The great scholar and physician Maimonides (1135–1204) was forced to leave his ancestral home of Córdoba, Spain, in the mid-twelfth century; he and his family eventually settled in Egypt. Considered one of the greatest of all Jewish intellectuals, Maimonides is particularly famous for his synthesis between reason and faith. In writings such as *The Guide of the Perplexed* he spoke on behalf of the rationality that had characterized Judaism since the dawning of the rabbinic age:

What is man's singular function here on earth? It is, simply, to contemplate abstract intellectual matters and to discover truth. ... And the highest intellectual contemplation that man can develop is the knowledge of God and his unity.¹⁹

Jews who lived in Christian countries were less exposed to the vibrant intellectual energy of the Islamic world between the seventh and twelfth centuries. Christian Europe in those centuries was primarily a feudal agricultural society in which literacy mainly belonged to the Church. Jews, who were primarily merchants, became expendable, and throughout the later Middle Ages there was a steady pattern of expulsions of Jews from countries in which they had long lived.

Prejudice against Jews had long been simmering among Christians. While Jews and Christians, like all humans, suffered from hatred and unwarranted attacks and often directed the vitriol against each other, Jews were hated all the more because Jesus was a Jew but many of his own people never accepted Christian claims that he was the Messiah. Jews were also blamed for his murder and for preventing his messianic successes ever after by refusing to believe in him.

Beginning in 1095, Jews became victims of mobs of Christian crusaders traveling through Europe with the intention to defend the Holy Land. They had been provoked by rumors that Christians were being harmed there by Muslims, with Jews as their accomplices. Believing in the holiness of their mission, crusaders and orders of knights also attacked Jews as nonconformists who did not agree with the doctrines of the Christian church. They massacred so many Jews that many formerly prosperous Jewish communities in Germany were wiped out.

In the twelfth century, superstitious rumors were spread in England that Jews were engaged in ritual murders of Christians, and many were subsequently slaughtered. Then, in thirteenth-century Germany, Jews were accused of stealing the consecrated bread used by Christians for communion with Jesus, and then torturing it. Such strange rumors were never verified, but they spread rapidly, and with them, killings of Jews. In the fourteenth century, Jews were blamed for the plague and thus were either killed or forced out of many countries. In 1492, tens of thousands of Jews were forced to leave Spain, where they had lived for over a thousand years. Others chose to convert to Christianity rather than to leave their homeland even though staying in Spain as *conversos* (converted Jews) would expose them to the dreaded Inquisition, which had been established in Spain in 1478. The Inquisition represented the Roman Catholic Church, and its mission was to discover perceived heretics within the Christian community. It had no power over Jews, but it did have jurisdiction over the large numbers

of Jews who had converted to Christianity, whether voluntarily or by force, and who might be practicing their former religion in secret. The Inquisition, which had the power to torture the accused and to execute the convicted, continued to function in Spain and in Spanish territories well into the eighteenth century.

There was further deterioration of Jewish life in western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After 1555, those Jews who remained in some cities of Italy and Germany were forced to live in ghettos, special Jewish-only quarters, which were often walled in and locked at night and during Christian holy days, to limit mixing between Christians and Jews.

During the later Middle Ages, Poland had become a haven for the expelled Jews of western Europe. Jews were welcomed by Poland's feudal leaders who needed a middle class for the economic development of their agricultural country. Jews were allowed freedom of residence and occupation, and they rapidly grew in numbers, finding in their new home an enclave of peace and prosperity. Jews lived an intensely religious life in villages and towns that were almost completely Jewish, speaking Yiddish, a distinctive Jewish language that was based on the medieval German they had spoken in western Europe.

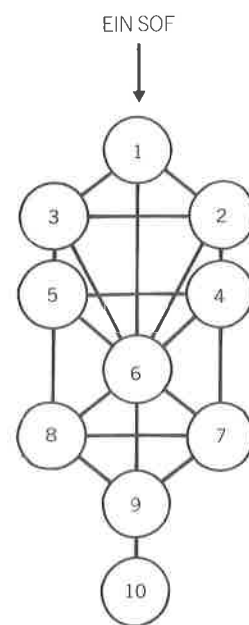
In 1648, the flourishing of the Ashkenazi Jewish communities of central and eastern Europe suffered a great setback when the Cossack peasants of the Ukraine revolted against Polish rule. Associating Jewry with their Roman Catholic Polish oppressors, Greek Orthodox people led terrible massacres against the Jews, which were followed by even more killing as Poland collapsed.

In this time of despair in both eastern and western Europe, Jews were heavily taxed and ill-treated. Their longing for deliverance from danger, poverty, and oppression fueled the old messianic dream. Among the "pseudo-Messiahs" who rose to the occasion, the most famous was Shabbatai Tzevi (1626–1676) of Smyrna, a Turkish port. A rather unstable personality, he became convinced that it was his calling to be the Messiah. A young man named Nathan, who became his enthusiastic prophet, sent letters to Jews throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa announcing that the Messiah had at last appeared in his master. Many believed him and prepared for their return to the Holy Land. However, when Tzevi entered the Ottoman Empire he was arrested and put in jail. Given the choice of converting to Islam or being executed, he chose conversion and was given a government position. The shock to his supporters was terrible.

Kabbalah and Hasidism

Mystical yearning has always been a part of Jewish tradition. The fervent experience of, and love for, God is an undercurrent in several writings of the biblical prophets, and is incorporated into the Talmud as well. The Merkabah (chariot) mystical traditions from the late Hellenistic period are based on the account attributed to the prophet Ezekiel of a vision of "the semblance of the Presence of the LORD" (Ezekiel 1:26–28). Some mystical writings are found in the extra-biblical collections of texts known as the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha. The apocryphal Book of Enoch describes the ascent to God as a journey through seven heavenly spheres to an audience with the King of the celestial court. Some texts from the Qumran settlement also seem to concern mystical experiences.

A central Kabbalistic image is the Tree of God, a representation of the emanation of the qualities of the infinite Ein Sof into revealed aspects, the sephiroth. The topmost circle represents Will; the tenth represents the Shekhinah—the presence of God.



In the Middle Ages, esoteric teachings developed known as *Kabbalah*. The most important book in this genre is the *Zohar* (Way of Splendor). The *Zohar* is a massive and complex offering of stories, explanations of the esoteric levels of the Torah, and descriptions of visionary practice and experiences. It depicts many unseen spiritual dimensions interacting with the physical world in which we live.

During the sixteenth century *Kabbalah's* most influential leader was Isaac Luria (1534–1572). He explained creation as the beaming of the divine light into ten special vessels, some of which were shattered by the impact because they contained lower forces that could not bear the intensity of the light. The breaking of the vessels spewed forth particles of evil as well as fragments of light into the world. Humans have a great responsibility to help end chaos and evil in the world by regathering the “sparks of holiness” in the unclean realms to repair the holy vessels. This concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) has continued to be very important in Jewish thought, emphasizing the relationship between God and humans as a covenantal one with reciprocal responsibilities in which both are working together to uplift the world, and where every human act, both good and bad, has ultimate significance. To this end, Luria asked his followers to follow strict ascetic purification practices, prayer, and observance of the commandments of the Torah, and to chant sacred formulas.

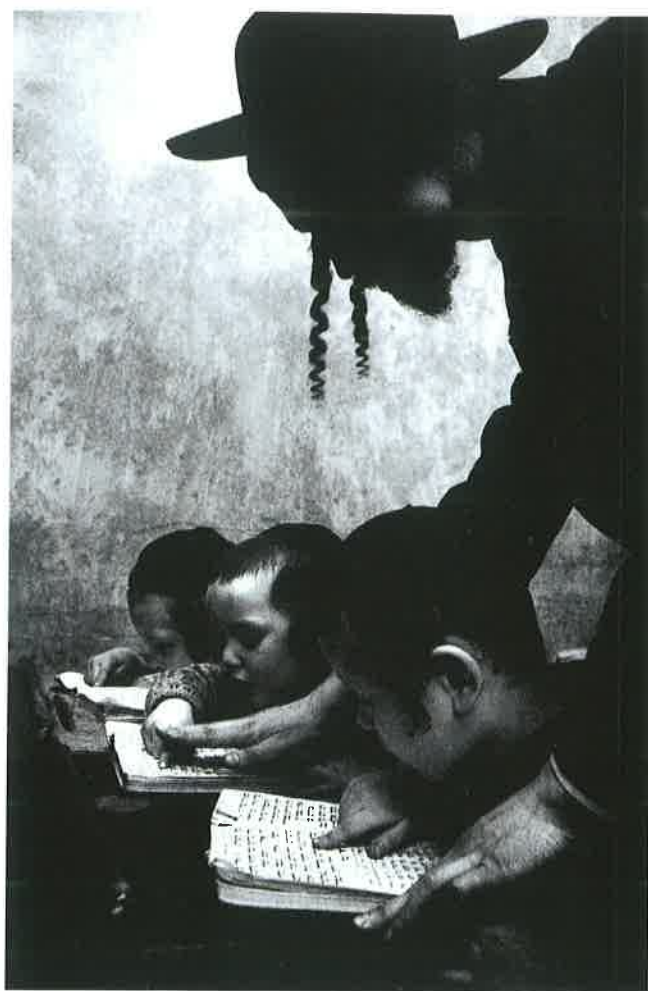
Lurianic *Kabbalism* resurfaced in a very different form in the eighteenth century as *Hasidism*, the path of ecstatic piety. It developed in Ukraine and Poland, where Jews had become legally oppressed, poverty-stricken, and fearful for their lives from riots and murders. The rabbis had little to offer them, retreating into academic debates about legal aspects of the Torah.

Into this grim setting came the Baal Shem Tov (1700–1760), a beloved healer and Hasidic teacher, who offered a joyful version of Jewish holiness. He believed that Torah study and obedience to the letter of the law were not superior to deep-felt, pure-hearted prayer; everyone is capable of the highest enlightenment. He asserted that the divine could be found everywhere, in the present, thereby de-emphasizing the perennial waiting for a future Messiah. “Leave sorrow and sadness,” he cried, “man must live in joy and contentment, always rejoicing in his lot.”²⁰ Followers of the Baal Shem Tov worshiped through joyous songs and ecstatic, swaying prayer, and found God in the midst of the ghetto.

As the hand held before the eye conceals the greatest mountain, so the little earthly life hides from the glance the enormous lights and mysteries of which the world is full, and he who can draw it away from before his eyes, as one draws away a hand, beholds the great shining of the inner worlds.

Attributed to Reb Nachman of Bratislava

Soon an estimated half of all eastern European Jews were followers of the Hasidic path. Spread of the teachings is credited to Dov Ber, who emphasized the importance of the *tzaddik*, or enlightened saint and teacher, called *rebbe* (or Reb) when ordained as a Hasidic spiritual guide. Dov Ber urged Hasidim to take spiritual shelter with a *tzaddik*, whose prayers and wisdom would be more powerful than their own because of the *tzaddik's* personal relationship with God. This idea stirred enormous opposition from non-Hasidic leaders, who believed that each Jew should be his or her own *tzaddik*. While the posi-



In a Hasidic school, preservation of traditional ways is maintained in the teacher's dark dress, beard, and side curls.

tion of *tzaddik* became hereditary and was sometimes subject to exploitation by less-than-holy lineage carriers, such charismatic leadership remains a central element and perhaps one of the enduring attractions of modern Hasidism.

Judaism and modernity

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the great majority of Jews lived in eastern European countries such as Poland and Russia, which were little affected by the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, however, provided new opportunities and better conditions for the Jews in western Europe. In such a rational atmosphere of tolerance, reason, and material progress, restrictions on Jews began to decrease. The French Revolution (1789–1799) brought equality for the masses, including Jews living in France, and in the nineteenth century this trend spread to other European nations. Ghettos were torn down, and some Jews ascended to positions of prominence in western European society. The Rothschild family, for instance, became international financiers, benefactors, and patrons of the arts.

Inspired by Enlightenment views and liberated from the social restrictions that had kept them isolated as a religious community, some “Enlightenment Jews” of Europe also embarked on a path of secularization and acculturation

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that has brought a sea change in Judaism in the modern world. Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) went so far as to question the divine source of the Torah, the authority of rabbis, and the sacredness of ritual. Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), adopting the Enlightenment ideal of the universalism of humanity, urged his fellow Jews to learn German and to dress and comport themselves as non-Jews.

Opponents of these trends warned that in the name of Enlightenment Judaism could lose its distinctive position at the center of Jewish life, and that in adapting to the surrounding culture, Jews would inevitably cease to observe their traditional rituals. Reformers, for their part, insisted that those very *halakhic* observances were standing in the way of Jews' integration into modern life. In the face of this threat to the integrity of their received religious traditions, some scholars and rabbis encouraged Jews not only to live by *halakhah* but also to segregate themselves from non-Jewish secular culture. This position led to what came to be called **Orthodox Judaism**. One of its staunchest advocates was Moses Sofer (1762–1839), the leader of central European traditional Judaism. His testament is still read by today's ultra-Orthodox Jews. In part:

Be warned not to change your Jewish names, speech, and clothing—God forbid. ... Never say: "Times have changed!" We have an old Father—praised be His name—who has never changed and never will change.²¹

Meanwhile, the reform movement—which became known as **Reform Judaism**—was moving farther and farther away from its traditional moorings. It adopted changes such as hymns and sermons in the vernacular instead of Hebrew, a shorter version of the liturgy, emphasis on the weekly Saturday service rather than the traditional prayers three times every weekday, choirs and organ music as in Christian churches, and a new prayerbook omitting references to Jews' longing for a personal Messiah and return to Zion.

Judaism was also evolving in the Americas. In 1654 a small group of Sephardic Jews who had emigrated to Brazil sought to enter the colony of New Amsterdam as refugees. In Brazil the emigrants had enjoyed a period of legal equality and economic freedom. In the New Amsterdam colony as well, they were protected by a directive from the Dutch West India Company that the colony should allow people to pursue their own religions, so long as they did not cause any trouble.

With the independence of the United States and the framing of its Constitution, Jews as well as other minorities were automatically granted equal rights, under the ideals of equality of all humans and separation of church and state. As the new country became a haven for persecuted minorities and was perceived as a land of economic opportunity as well as religious freedom, substantial Jewish immigration to the United States began in the mid-nineteenth century. Today, the United States, with approximately six million Jews, has the largest Jewish population in the world.

The Holocaust

For many Jews the defining event of the twentieth century and the overwhelmingly tragic event of Jewish history was the **Holocaust**, the murder of almost six million European Jews by the Nazi leadership of Germany during World War II. These Jews constituted over a third of the Jewish people in the world and half of all Jews in Europe.



As pogroms occurred, many Jewish families left their homes to try to escape further oppression. (Maurycy Minkowski, After the Pogrom, 1910.)

Anti-Judaism had been part of Greco-Roman culture, and had been present in Europe since the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its state religion in the fourth century CE. New and virulent strains of this disease appeared in western Europe at the end of the nineteenth century as anti-Semitism, with the idea that there is a racial, ethnic, genetic component of Judaism. Racist theories spread that those of "pure" Nordic blood were genetically ideal, while Jews were a dangerous "mongrel" race.

Reactionary anti-Jewish feelings also resurfaced late in the nineteenth century in Russia and in eastern Europe, where Jews formed a sizable minority of the population and where they were accumulating wealth and establishing a presence in higher educational circles. Jews were increasingly associated with left-wing movements pushing for social change, even though many Jewish socialists such as Leon Trotsky were non-observant Jews. Trotsky's leadership in the violent Bolshevik Revolution, and the Red Army, brought terrible reprisals, called **pogroms**, against Jewish communities by White Russians in the civil war. Up to 70,000 Jews were killed by unrestrained rioting mobs.

In the aftermath of Germany's defeat in World War I and the desperate economic conditions that followed, Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party bolstered its popular support by blaming the Jews for all of Germany's problems. Germany, the Nazis claimed, could not regain its health until all Jews were stripped of their positions in German life or driven out of the country. Demands to eliminate the Jews for the sake of "racial hygiene" were openly circulated. Seeing the writing on the wall, many Jews, including eminent professionals, managed to emigrate, leaving their homes, their livelihoods, and most of their possessions behind. Others stayed, hoping that the terrifying signs would prove to be short-lived.

As Hitler rose to power, the Nazis instigated acts of violence against Jews in Germany and passed laws that separated Jews from the rest of the population and deprived them of their legal and economic rights. When Hitler annexed Austria in 1938 and then invaded Poland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Holland, and France, several million more Jews fell under Nazi control.

The anguish of the Holocaust, suggested in a sculpture in Miami, Florida, by Kenneth Treister.



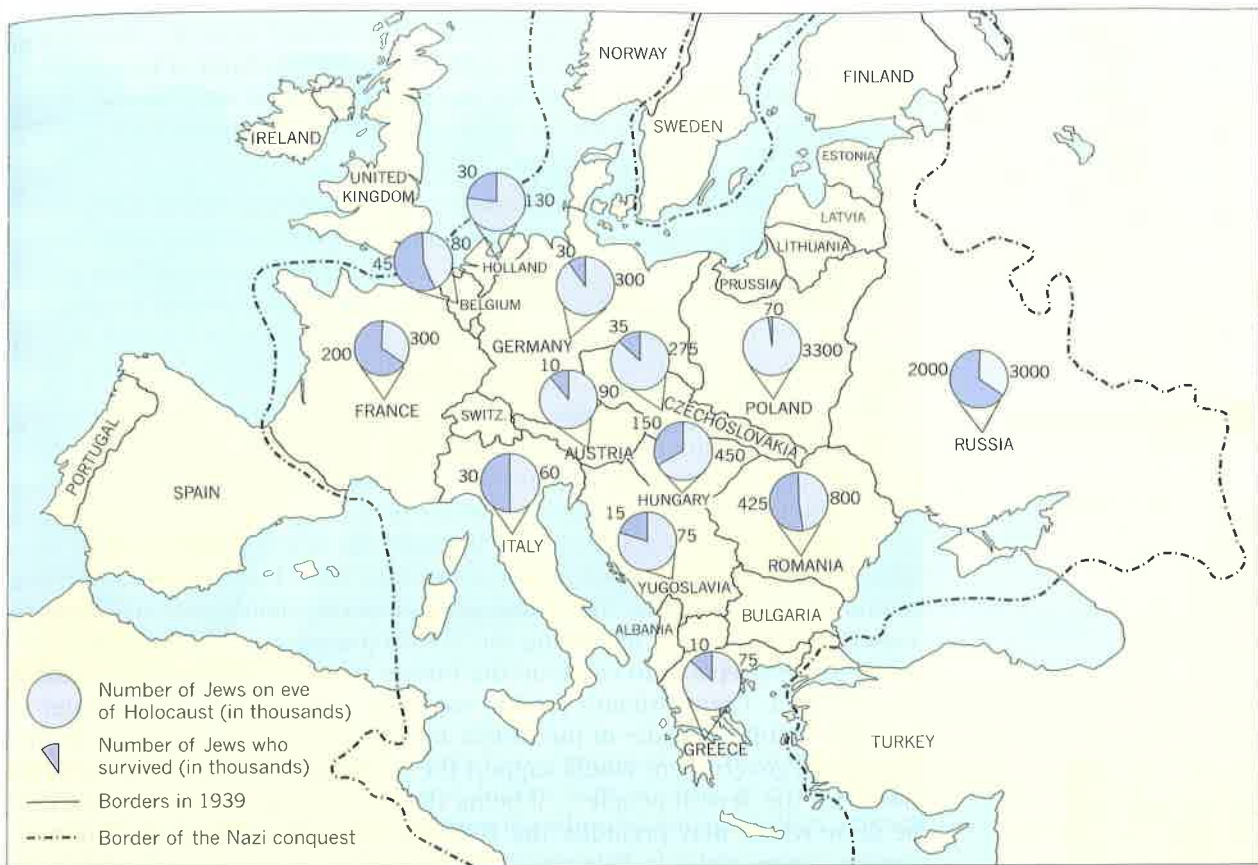
Systematic oppression started, with orders to all Polish Jews to move into the towns, where walled ghettos were created to confine them. Jews were made to wear a badge with the Star of David on it to reveal their stigmatized status, and since all other jobs were taken away from them, they could do only menial labor.

Along the Russian front, special "action groups" were assigned to slaughter Jews, gypsies, and heads of government departments as the German troops advanced, and to incite the local militia to do the same. One cannot comprehend the numbers of men, women, and children killed in these mass murders—34,000 at Babi Yar, 26,000 at Odessa, 32,000 at Vilna—probably totaling hundreds of thousands.

By 1942, large-scale death camps had been set up by the Nazis to facilitate the "final solution"—the total extermination of all Jews in Europe. From the ghettos Jews were transported by cattle cars (in which many died) from all over Europe to concentration camps. There they were starved, worked to death as slaves, tortured, "experimented" on, and/or shipped to extermination camps, where industrial-scale gas chambers were used as the most efficient means of killing.

The governments of some countries tried to protect their Jews; also some individuals, at great personal risk, hid Jews or tried to help them escape. For example, Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat, managed to issue Japanese transit visas to some 10,000 Jews, ignoring all risks to himself in order to help them quickly escape from danger. But there was little outcry from the outside world. In hindsight, many historians have concluded that Hitler's genocidal actions could have been slowed by determined resistance from free Allied countries.

No modern Jewish thinker can ignore the challenge that the Holocaust poses to traditional Jewish beliefs of an omnipotent and caring God. Elie Wiesel (b. 1928), who as a boy survived a Nazi death camp in Poland but lost



all his other family members and suffered great atrocities, was so embittered by his experiences that he could not bring himself to utter the traditional prayers to God:

Why should I bless Him? In every fiber I rebelled. Because He had had thousands of children burned in His pits? Because He kept six crematoria working night and day, on Sundays and feast days? Because in His great might He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many factories of death? How could I say to Him: "Blessed art Thou, Eternal, Master of the Universe, Who chose us from among the races to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, end in the crematory?"²²

Wiesel says that we cannot turn away from the questions about how it could happen, for genocidal actions are being undertaken against other minority groups in our times as well.


Zionism and contemporary Israel

Zionism is the Jewish movement dedicated to the establishment of a political-viable, internationally recognized Jewish state in the biblical land of Israel. While political Zionism was a reaction to increasing anti-semitism in Europe in the late nineteenth century, it is a movement with deep roots in Judaism and Jewish culture. The desire to end the centuries-long exile from Zion (the site of the Jerusalem temples) was a central theme in all Jewish prayer and in

Hitler's final solution was to herd Jews into concentration camps throughout Nazi-occupied Europe and then ship the survivors east into extermination camps in Poland. The pie charts show the number of Jews in each country who were left after the Holocaust, compared to their previous populations.

many religious customs. Jewish messianism is focused around a descendant of King David who will return his united people to the land of Israel, where Jewish sovereignty will be eternally re-established in an atmosphere of universal peace. Professor Aviezer Ravitzky describes the Zionist ideal:

It was a dream of utter perfection: the day would come when the entire Jewish people, the whole Congregation of Israel, would reassemble as one in an undivided Land of Israel, reconstituting its life there according to the Torah in all its aspects. The Jewish people would free itself completely from its subjugation to the great powers. It would then be a source of blessing for all nations, for its redemption would bring about the redemption of the world as a whole.²³

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Zionism became an organized international political movement under the leadership of the journalist Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), who believed that the Jews could never defend themselves against anti-Semitism until they had their own nation. Herzl worked to provide political guarantees for the Jewish settlement that existed in Palestine through the nearly 2,000 years of exile and to offer institutional support to encourage Jews from around the world to immigrate to Palestine. Simultaneously, pioneers, mainly secular Jews from eastern Europe, began increasing the Jewish presence on the land. In 1917, as the Allies prepared to carve up the former Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, Great Britain's foreign secretary, Lord Balfour, sent a letter to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, advising him that the British government would support the creation in Palestine of a "national home for the Jewish people...., it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine." The existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine at the time were primarily Muslims, plus some Christians. Out of Palestine's total estimated population of 600,000, some 85,000 to 100,000 were Jews living there²⁴ when Lord Balfour wrote this brief note which ultimately had a tremendous impact on the history of West Asia. It became known as the Balfour Declaration. Its language was replicated in a 1922 League of Nations mandate giving the United Kingdom administrative control of Palestine. Neither document offered any clarity about how the rights of Arabs living in Palestine were to be protected.

Not all Jews supported the Zionist movement. Most Reform Jews of that time believed the destiny of Jews was to be lived out among the Gentiles, where the Enlightenment had fueled hopes of a freer future. Some support for Zionism came from traditional Orthodox Jews, but not all of the traditional community embraced the idea. Many felt it was God who had punished the people for their unfaithfulness by sending them away from the promised land and that only God would end the exile.

 **View the Map**
Partition of Palestine
after World War II
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Nonetheless, by a United Nations decision in 1947, Palestine was partitioned into two areas, one to be governed by Jews and the other by Arabs, with Jerusalem an international zone. The Jews accepted the plan, and in 1948 declared Israel an independent Jewish state with full rights for minorities. However, the Arabs did not accept the partition and as soon as British troops moved out, Israel was attacked by its Arab neighbors—Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. Outnumbered, Israel nonetheless managed to control a larger area than was allotted to it in the partition plan, thus bringing many Arabs under its rule. Those Arabs who fled to avoid violence were not allowed into the surrounding countries; they were instead kept in refugee



Zionist leader Henrietta Szold discusses plans with pioneers of the kibbutz system in about 1940.

camps, in which for generations people have continued to live in distress and growing hatred for Israel. Egypt and Jordan kept sending guerrilla troops, known as "fedayeen," to attack the Israelis, whose sovereignty they refused to recognize.

When an attack by Arab neighbors and Palestinians seemed imminent in 1967, Israel launched a stunningly successful pre-emptive strike—the Six-Day War. Nevertheless, the Arab countries still refused to recognize Israel's nationhood and Palestinian resistance grew. Despair over attaining any lasting peace with the surrounding Arabs brought hardliners to the fore in Israeli politics. They saw in expanded settlements a fulfillment of biblical prophecy and a defense against Palestinian terrorism.

From time to time, a negotiated peace has seemed almost possible, but it has not yet happened. Frameworks for Palestinian-Israeli settlement have offered some hope of decreasing hostilities in the region by creating two independent states of Palestine and Israel, but they have not satisfactorily dealt with major sticking points. One of these is the "right of return" sought by Palestinian refugees from the 1948–1949 war and their descendants. Countering this demand, some Jews point out that more than one million Jews had to flee Arab lands before and after the creation of Israel because of severe persecution. There is also Palestinian concern that the new state of Palestine would consist only of isolated, dependent enclaves under Israeli control. Yet another problem is control of, and access to, sites which are holy to both Muslims and Jews such as the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, known to Muslims as the place from which the Prophet Muhammad began his Night Journey to the seven heavens but also the most sacred place in Judaism, as the site of the former Temples.

One attempt of Jews to protect themselves from Palestinian terrorist attacks has been the building of massive security fences and walls up to 25 feet (7.6 meters) high that impede the mixing of the two communities in some



Arab and Jewish parents and board members of an ethnically mixed school in Beersheva after collectively exploring their pains, fears, needs, and hopes at an intensive weekend retreat sponsored by the International Center for Conciliation and Ossim Shalom.

cooperate with each other on a local basis. Over 150 organizations are now involved in this work. For instance, the International Center for Conciliation and Ossim Shalom (Social Workers for Peace and Social Welfare) have organized many workshops that are designed to help participants understand and relate to the others' fears and concerns. Historical conciliation methods are used to help people develop empathy toward others' "pained memories" stretching back several generations.

Rabbi Hillel Levine, president of the International Center for Conciliation, observes that throughout the centuries there were some Jews living in the historic Land of Israel but even more Jews remembering why they were no longer actual residents of their homeland. In their yearning to return, he says, they saw it as their task to repent for violations of their covenant with God:

The land in all of its fullness, the world and its inhabitants are unto God," as the Psalmist says. We are custodians of the land. Creation itself in Jewish tradition is about making room for humanity—room in a cosmic sense, separating between the celestial and the terrestrial. Essentially, the Lord provides the earth to humanity on a long-term lease, full of contingencies but the earth is the Lord's. Jews, in their attachment to the Land of Israel, lived with this sense of contingency and responsibility. They knew that it was not a one-time grant based on the merit of their Father Abraham. Indeed, in the fullness of his faith, Abraham responded to God's "Get ye out." He left his homeland, with all of its comforts, with little more than God's assurance of "the place that I shall show you." That place was a very special rim that rises out of the Mediterranean and the West reaching to Mount Zion and Jerusalem and then slopes down to the deserts of the East. It is at the center of the world and provided the Jewish people with special opportunities. It is also a place that other nations so often sought. The biblical covenant making it the land of the Jews makes all entitlements contingent upon behavior. It's not a free gift by any means. To keep the land we have to behave in a certain way. There is a large consensus on some of the details of what that behavior should be. It certainly excludes some actions made in the name of the Jewish people and their security,

particularly sensitive areas, such as the West Bank, where colonies of Israeli settlers are occupying areas of Jordan taken over by Israel during the Six-Day War. Palestinian communities in those areas may thus live in isolated cages in which farmers are cut off from their own fertile land and water, and in some cases, even from the other side of their now-divided villages. However, efforts persist to keep person-to-person contacts open between Israeli Jews and those who have been historically pitted as their opponents. Joint Arab-Jewish initiatives are proliferating, as citizens from both communities attempt to meet, understand, and

*even in response to hostile neighbors. Security, particularly after the Holocaust, is of paramount value. But that security must include spiritual security, moral security, and that which secures our identity as a people who strive for holiness and justice.*²⁵

Rabbi Jeremy Milgrom, a leader in many Israeli peace initiatives such as Peace Now, Yesh G'vul, and Rabbis for Human Rights, points out that in the first century CE Hillel the Elder summarized the Torah's central message thus:

*"That which is hateful unto you, do not do to your comrade .. I am YHWH: Let your love for Me overcome your hatred for him, and keep you from taking revenge; in this way love vanquishes hatred, and peace will come between you." This is the way of the Torah, "whose ways are pleasant, and all of whose paths are peace" (Proverbs 3:17).*²⁶

In addition to Israeli-Palestinian political tensions, tensions also exist within the Jewish community in Israel. Jewish settlers have come to Israel from many divergent backgrounds. Those who are of eastern European origin—the Ashkenazi who founded the state—tend to regard themselves as superior to Jewish settlers from other areas. Ultra-Orthodox religious authorities insist on strict observance of religious rituals, assert considerable control over education and politics in the nation, and claim that converts consecrated by Reform and Conservative rabbis in the United States are not really Jews. The Orthodox rabbis generally favor hardline political policies in Israel, and yet Ultra-Orthodox Jews who claim to be studying "day and night" in *yeshiva* (traditional schools devoted mostly to study of rabbinic literature and Talmud) are exempt from military service. The Orthodox rabbis do not represent the majority of Israeli citizens in religious terms either, for only an estimated fifteen percent of Israelis claim to live completely according to religious laws. The majority are non-Orthodox or not religiously observant. There is also internal dissension over relationships with the Palestinians. Many Israeli Jews sympathize with the Palestinians' situation, while Religious Zionists believe that the land has been promised to them by God for the redemption of the Jewish people and eventually the entire world.

Although the dream of a sovereign Torah-based nation or a peaceful two-state solution is still elusive, Israel is nonetheless a unique home or place of pilgrimage for Jews, and many immigrants are still arriving from countries such as India, Yemen, Morocco, Ethiopia, and the former Soviet Union. According to the Law of Return passed in 1950, any Jew is granted automatic citizenship in Israel. Some new immigrants from West Asia and North Africa are Jews from Arabic cultures and thus have mixed cultural identities. From Israel, where they are known as "Mizrahi" Jews, a group of these young second- and third-generation Arabic Jewish immigrants have stated their desire to be peacemakers in the troubled region:

*We now express the hope that our generation—throughout the Arab, Muslim, and Jewish world—will be a generation of renewed bridges that will leap over the walls and hostility created by previous generations.*²⁷

Even though most Israeli Jews describe themselves as "nonreligious," Israel is a country in which businesses close and buses stop running on the Jewish Sabbath, Jewish holidays are national holidays, and most people celebrate Passover, marry other Jews, and light the Chanukah menorah if not the Sabbath candles.

Torah

It is difficult to outline the tenets of the Jewish faith. As we have seen, Jewish spiritual understanding has changed repeatedly through history. Rationalists and mystics have often differed. Since the nineteenth century, there has been disagreement between liberal and traditional Jews, to be discussed later.

Nevertheless, there are certain major themes that can be extricated from the vast history and literature of Judaism. Jewish teachings are known as the Torah. In its narrowest sense, the Torah refers to the "five books of Moses." On the next level, it means the entire Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, the written and the oral law. For some, "Torah" can refer to all sacred Jewish literature and observance. At the highest level, Torah is God's will, God's wisdom.

The one God

The central Jewish belief is monotheism. It has been stated in different ways in response to different cultural settings (emphasizing the divine unity when Christians developed the concept of the Holy Trinity, for instance, and emphasizing that God is formless and ultimate holiness in opposition to the earthly local gods). But the central theme is that there is one Creator God, the "cause of all existent things."²⁸

God is everywhere, even in the darkness, as David sings in Psalms:

*Where can I escape from Your spirit?
Where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend to Heaven, You are there:
if I descend to Sheol [the underworld],
You are there too.*

*If I take wing with the dawn
to come to rest on the western horizon,
even there Your hand will be guiding me,
Your right hand will be holding me fast.*

Psalm 139:7–14

This metaphysical understanding of God's oneness is difficult to explain in linear language, which refers to the individual objects perceived by the senses. As the eleventh-century Spanish poet and mystical philosopher Ibn Gabirol put it, "None can penetrate ... the mystery of Thy unfathomable unity."²⁹

One of the most elegant attempts to "explain" God's oneness has been offered by the great twentieth-century thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972). He linked the idea of unity to eternity, explaining that in eternity, "past and future are not apart; here is everywhere, and now goes on forever." Time as we know it is only a fragment, "eternity broken in space." According to Heschel:

The craving for unity and coherence is the predominant feature of a mature mind. All science, all philosophy, all art are a search after it. But unity is a task, not a condition. The world lies in strife, in discord, in divergence. Unity is beyond, not within, reality. ... The world is not one with God, and this is why his power does not surge unhampered throughout all stages of being. Creature is detached from the Creator, and the universe is in a state of spiritual disorder. Yet God has not withdrawn entirely from this world. The spirit of this unity

hovers over the face of all plurality, and the major trend of all our thinking and striving is its mighty intimation. The goal of all efforts is to bring about the restitution of the unity of God and world.³⁰

Plurality is incompatible with the sense of the ineffable. You cannot ask in regard to the divine: Which one? There is only one synonym for God: One.

Abraham Joshua Heschel³¹

In traditional Judaism, God is often perceived as a loving Father who is nonetheless infinitely majestic, sometimes revealing divine power when the children need chastising.

Love for God

The essential commandment to humans is to love God. The central prayer in any Jewish religious service and the inscription on the *mezuzah* at the doorpost of every traditional Jewish home is the *Shema Israel*:

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:4–9

Even Maimonides, the great proponent of reason and study, asserted the primacy of love for God. He emphasized that one should not love God from selfish or fearful motivations, such as receiving earthly blessings or avoiding problems in the life after death. One should study the Torah and fulfill the commandments out of sheer love of God.

The sacredness of human life

Humans are the pinnacle of creation, created in the “image” of God, according to the account of Creation in Genesis 1. Jews do not take this passage to mean that God literally looks like a human. It is often interpreted in an ethical sense: That humans are so wonderfully endowed that they can mirror God’s qualities, such as justice, wisdom, righteousness, and love.

All people are potentially equal; they are said to be common descendants of the first man and woman. But they are also potentially perfectible, and in raising themselves they uplift the world. God limited the divine power by giving humans free will, involving them in the responsibility for the world’s condition, and their own.

The German scholar Martin Buber (1878–1965) described the relationship between God and humans as reciprocal:

You know always in your heart that you need God more than everything; but do you not know too that God needs you—in the fulness of His eternity needs you? How would man exist, how would you exist, if God did not need him, did

Jewish theology has been shaped by the most compelling thinkers of each era. In the 20th century, Martin Buber described the cherished human–divine encounter as an I–Thou relationship, in which the self experiences its wholeness.



not need you? You need God, in order to be—and God needs you, for the very meaning of your life. ... We take part in creation, meet the Creator, reach out to him, helpers and companions.³²

Human life is sacred, rather than lowly and loathsome; Judaism celebrates the body. Sexuality within marriage is holy, and the body is honored as the instrument through which the soul is manifested on earth. Indeed, according to some thinkers, body and soul are an inseparable totality.

I praise You, for I am awesomely, wondrously made. Psalm 139:14

Law

Because of the great responsibility of humankind, traditional Jews give thanks that God has revealed in the written and oral Torah the laws by which they can be faithful to the divine will and fulfill the purposes of Creation by establishing a Kingdom of God here on earth, in which all creatures can live in peace and fellowship. In the words of the biblical prophet Isaiah, speaking for God:

*The wolf and the lamb shall graze together,
And the lion shall eat straw like the ox,
And the serpent's food shall be earth.
In all my sacred mount
Nothing evil or vile shall be done.³³*

To the extent that traditional Jews act according to the Torah, they feel they are upholding their part of the ancient covenant with God.

The Torah, as indicated through rabbinic literature, is said to contain 613 commandments, or *mitzvot* (singular: *mitzvah*). Jewish law does not differentiate between sacred and secular life, so these include general ethical guidelines such as the Ten Commandments and the famous saying in Leviticus 19:18—"Love your fellow as yourself"—plus detailed laws concerning all aspects of life, such as land ownership, civil and criminal procedure, family law, sacred observances, diet, and ritual slaughter. The biblical Book of Genesis also sets forth what is called the Noahide Code of seven universal principles for a moral and spiritual life: idolatry (worshiping many gods or images of God), blasphemy against God, murder, theft, sexual behaviors outside of marriage, and cruelty to animals are all prohibited, and the rule of law and justice in society is affirmed as a positive value.

From the time of its final editing in Babylonia in the mid-sixth century CE, the Talmud, together with its later commentaries, has served as a blueprint for Jewish social, communal, and religious life. Through the rabbinic tradition, law became the main category of Orthodox Jewish thought and practice, and learned study of God's commandments one of the central expressions of faith.

From a contemporary point of view, Ismar Schorsch notes that many of the ancient commandments are ecologically useful, for they restrain humanity's ways of using the natural environment. They are addressed to humans not as wise masters of the earth, as envisioned in the first account of Creation in Genesis, but as the Adam and Eve of the second Creation story, who are disobedient and must be saved from themselves lest they destroy the planet, "for as the Bible so often avers: the land ultimately belongs to its Creator and we mortals are but His tenants."³⁴

LIVING JUDAISM

An Interview with Eli Epstein



Eli Epstein, an Orthodox Jew, is a successful international businessman living in New York. In accordance with the teaching of his ancestors, he is also a philanthropist. His particular interest is in promoting interfaith understanding, having noted surprising similarities between Judaism and Islam during his many trips to West Asia. One of the projects he has initiated and supported is "Children of Abraham," which he co-directs with a Muslim philanthropist, to develop dialogue between Jewish and Muslim teenagers through the Internet. He explains the attitude toward giving that he has been taught:

Jewish philanthropy has its antecedents in scripture. The Torah speaks about the fact that the farmers, for example, have to leave some of their crop for the poor to be able to take the droppings and the things that are extra. It has been inculcated into our tradition, to every home and every family. It gives us firstly the sense that what we have is not necessarily our own. And if we are blessed with things that are beyond our own needs, it is because God wants us to effectively be his partner in helping the world, in repairing the world, and in improving the condition of people and civilization around us, Jewish and non-Jewish.

Jewish people who believe in the giving of charity, which is called tzedakah, know that it is based on the word meaning "justice." So it's not something we do out of the amazing ability of our hearts. It's because God says it's a form of justice, to equal out to people around us that which they can't do for themselves, for reasons which we never really understand. We don't have to ask why God gave us more than we need. But when we do have it, we shouldn't be attached to it. We should feel like it's an important thing to do, just to give. In fact, the sages say that the more you give, the more you will be blessed with being able to give more afterwards.

We want to be able to give with an open heart, to everyone who comes and asks. Sometimes you do more, sometimes you do less. But the notion of giving is very much part of our lives and in fact, almost all Jewish homes will have something which is called a "charity box" in English. We will use it even for small coins. So we show our young children that giving is very much part of our lives.

[In our family life], there was almost no occasion in which you wouldn't give. Even in families such as mine which comes from eastern Poland, which was very poor and impoverished, the poor people themselves gave. It's almost as if nobody was excused from giving. The truth is that beggars have the responsibility to give as well. These people who were asking for money because they don't have enough to even feed themselves are responsible to give. It's not always in the form of money. You can give of your time and your efforts. You should give all different kinds and forms. The highest form is when you give a person a job, so you're not giving him anything but his own dignity. And the most perfect form of charity is when you clean a body before burial. It's called in Hebrew "chesed shel emet." Chesed means "kindness," emet being "of truth." It is the most pristine form of giving, because there is no one who will say, "Thank you." So when you are cleaning the body of nobody you will ever see again, you wash it, you purify it, you dress it in shrouds. Even when you finish that act of ultimate kindness, you can't even tell people you did it, because in the acknowledgment that you did it, they will see you as a higher person, and you can't even have that. The family can't pay you, the family can't thank you. You just walk away. You don't even say "Good night" to the person you worked with, because "Good night" is a blessing. So you say, "You should be worthy of doing more acts of kindness," and you walk away."¹⁵

A Sabbath prayer, *Ahavat Olam*, expresses Jews' profound gratitude for God's laws:

*With everlasting love You have loved Your people Israel. You have taught us the Torah and its Mitzvot. You have instructed us in its laws and judgments. Therefore, O Lord our God, when we lie down and when we rise up we shall speak of Your commandments and rejoice in Your Torah and Mitzvot. For they are our life and the length of our days; on them we will meditate day and night.*³⁶

Suffering and faith

Jewish tradition depicts the universe as being governed by an all-powerful, personal God who intervenes in history to reward the righteous and punish the unjust. Within this context, Jews have had considerable difficulty in answering the eternal question: Why must the innocent suffer? This question has been particularly poignant since the Holocaust.

The Hebrew Bible itself brings up the issue with the challenging parable of Job, a blameless, God-fearing, and wealthy man. The story involves Satan, depicted as an angel beneath God, who, in a conversation with God, predicts that Job will surely drop his faith and blaspheme the Lord if he is stripped of all his possessions. With God's assent, Satan tests Job by destroying all that Job has, including his children and his health. On hearing the news of his children's deaths:

*Job arose, tore his robe, cut off his hair, and threw himself on the ground and worshiped. He said, "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord."*³⁷

Later, however, with an itchy skin affliction covering him from head to foot, Job begins to curse his life and to question God's justice. In the end, Job acknowledges not only God's power to control the world but also his inscrutable wisdom, which is beyond human understanding. God then rewards him with long life and even greater riches than he had before the test.

Debate over the meanings of this ancient story has continued over the centuries. One rabbinical interpretation is that Satan was cooperating with God in helping Job grow from fear of God to love of God. Another is that faith in God will finally be rewarded in this life, no matter how severe the temporary trials. Another is that those who truly desire to grow toward God will be asked to suffer more, that their sins will be expiated in this life so that they can enjoy the divine bliss in the life to come. Such interpretations assume a personal, all-powerful, loving God doing what is best for the people, even when they cannot understand God's ways. In such belief, God is seen as always available, like a shepherd caring for his sheep, no matter how dark the outer circumstances.

*Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness,
I fear no harm, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me.*

Psalm 23:4

On the other hand, oppression and then the Holocaust have led some Jews to complain to God in anguish. They, too, feel close to God, but in a way that allows them to scream at God, as it were. In questioning the justice of history, they hold God responsible for what is inexplicably monstrous. But even in the Holocaust, there were those who held fast to hope for better times. As they walked to their death in Nazi gas chambers, some were reciting the hymn *Ani maamin*: "I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may delay, nevertheless I anticipate every day that he will come."³⁸

Sacred practices

Since the rabbinic period began, a major Jewish spiritual practice has been daily scriptural study. Boys were traditionally taught how to read and write ancient Hebrew and how to interpret scripture through the process of exegesis, by means of the oral Torah. This required extensive knowledge of the scriptures and concentrated intellectual effort. This classical pattern continues today even in the Diaspora, where some children continue to be trained in special schools to carry on the study of the Torah, thus encouraging them not only to learn and obey the commandments but also through rational analysis to delve into deeper understanding of truth.

In addition to study, a Jew is urged to remember God in all aspects of life, through prayer and observance of the commandments. These commandments are not otherworldly. Many are rooted in the body, and spiritual practices often engage all the senses in awareness of God.

Boys are ritually circumcised in the *brit milah* ceremony when they are eight days old, to honor the seal of God's commandment to Abraham. Orthodox Jews consider women ritually impure during their menstrual periods and for seven blood-free days afterwards, during which time they and their husbands are prohibited from having sexual intercourse with each other. At the end of this forbidden period Orthodox Jewish women undertake complete immersion in a *mikva*, a special deep bath structure, symbolizing their altered state. Marital sex is sacred, with the Sabbath night the holiest time for making love. By contrast, adultery is strictly forbidden as one of the worst sins against God, for Jewish tradition is extremely concerned with maintaining pure lines of descent.

What one eats is also of cosmic significance, for according to the Torah some foods are definitely unclean. For example, the only kosher (ritually acceptable) meats are those from warmblooded animals with cloven hoofs which chew their cuds—such as cows, goats, and sheep—and poultry. Pork is not kosher, nor is shellfish. Meat is kosher only if it has been butchered in the traditional way, with an extremely sharp, smooth knife by an authorized Jewish slaughterer. Great pains are taken to avoid eating blood; meat must be soaked in water and then drained on a salted board before cooking. Meat and milk cannot be eaten together, and separate dishes are maintained for their preparation and serving.

These dietary instructions are laid out in the biblical Book of Leviticus, which quotes God as saying to Moses and Aaron, "For I the Lord am He who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God: you shall be holy, for I am holy."³⁹ The rules of diet, if strictly followed, give Jews a feeling of special sacred identity and link them to the eternal authority of the Torah.

Before praying, traditional Jewish men bind t'fillin to their arms and foreheads in remembrance of their covenant with God. Here a father is training his son in their use as part of his Bar Mitzvah ceremony.



Some contemporary Jews feel that consciousness about what they eat should be extended to environmental considerations. To them, the styrofoam box in which a cheeseburger is sold at fast-food places is as much a problem as the mixing of meat and milk. Nuclear-generated electricity used for cooking might itself be non-kosher, if there is no safe provision for disposing of nuclear waste.

For traditional observant Jews, the morning begins with a prayer before they open their eyes to thank God for restoring the soul. The hands must then be washed before reciting blessings and, for all traditional male Jews, putting a special fringed rectangle of cloth around the neck. It is usually worn under the clothes as a reminder of the privilege of being given divine commandments. For weekday morning prayers men also put *t'fillin*, or phylacteries, small leather boxes containing biblical verses about the covenant with God, on the forehead and the upper arm, held against the heart, in fulfillment of the Shema commandment, as literally understood: "Bind them [the Shema's words about the primacy of love for God] as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead." Traditional Jewish men also wear a fringed prayer shawl, or *talit*, whose fringes act as reminders of God's commandments, and keep their heads covered at all times, if possible.

In addition to prayers recited on waking and at bedtime, three prayer services are chanted daily in a synagogue by men if there is a minyan (quorum of ten). Women can say them also, but they are excused from rigid schedules partly because of their household responsibilities, and partly because of the belief that women have a more intuitive sense of spirituality.

Jews are also expected to give thanks continually. One should recite a hundred benedictions to God every day. To this end, there is a blessing to be said every time one takes a drink of water. There is even a blessing to be recited after using the toilet:

Blessed art thou, our God, Ruler of the universe, who hast formed (human) beings in wisdom, and created in them a system of ducts and tubes. It is well known before thy glorious throne that if but one of these be opened, or if one of those be closed, it would be impossible to exist in thy presence. Blessed art thou, O God, who healest all creatures and doest wonders.⁴⁰

The Jewish **Sabbath** is observed as an eternal sign of the covenant between the Jews and God. The Sabbath runs from sunset Friday night to sunset Saturday night, because the Jewish “day” begins with nightfall. The Friday night service welcomes the Sabbath as a bride and is often considered an opportunity to drop away the cares of the previous week so as to be in a peaceful state for the day of rest. Just as God is said to have created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh, all work is to cease when the Sabbath begins. Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin explains Sabbath as:

a magical, holy place that opens its doors to us once a week. ... Shabbat is a weekly dose, a megadose, of holiness. For on Shabbat, we are invited to enter God's dream for our world, a place of wholeness and fullness, a place of caring and peace. We wish each other Shabbat shalom, a day full of the peace we hope one day to find.⁴¹

Ruth Gan Kagan describes the Sabbath experience:


I am aware of a wave of peace flooding my heart and that transparent veils of tranquility are covering the World around me. A moment before I would probably be rushing around trying to finish all the preparations, ... but all this tension and rush vanishes when the fixed moment arrives; not a second earlier nor a second later. The moment I light the Sabbath candles and usher in the Sabbath spirit everything undergoes a magical transformation.

The Queen has arrived. In Her presence there are not even talks of weekday matters. The mind quiets down leaving business, plans and worries behind as one quietly walks to the synagogue for services; the sky is aglow with the colours of sunset; the bird-song is suddenly more present; the people of the congregation gather to welcome in the Sabbath in song, prayer and silence.

Coming home, the stars are out; in a religious neighborhood, no traveling cars break the descended peace; children are holding their parents' hands, walking in the middle of the road without fear of death.⁴²

The Saturday morning service incorporates public and private prayers, singing, and the reading of passages from the Torah scrolls, which are kept in a curtained ark on the wall facing Jerusalem. These are treated with great reverence, and it is a great honor to be “called up” to read from them.

More liberal congregations may place emphasis on an in-depth discussion of the passage read. Often it is examined not only from an abstract philosophical perspective but also from the point of view of its relevance to political events and everyday attempts to live a just and humane life. Torah and Talmud study is highly valued as a form of prayer in itself, and synagogues usually have libraries for this purpose.

 **Watch the Video**
Roots and Wings: Sabbath
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Boys praying in a synagogue in Neve Michael, Israel.





California family praying over challah before the Sabbath meal.

In Hasidic congregations, the emphasis falls on the intensity of praying, or **davening**, even in saying fixed prayers from the prayer book. Some sway their bodies to induce the self-forgetful state of ecstatic communion with the Loved One. The rabbinical tradition states the ideal in prayer: "A person should always see himself as if the Shekhinah is confronting him."⁴³

In addition to, or instead of, going to a service welcoming the Sabbath, observant families usually begin the Sabbath eve with a special Friday-night dinner. The mother lights candles to bring in the Sabbath light; the father recites a blessing over the

wine. Special braided bread, challah, is shared as a symbol of the double portions of manna in the desert. The rituals help to set a different tone for the day of rest, as do commandments against working, handling money, traveling except by foot, lighting a fire, cooking, and the like. The Sabbath day is set aside for public prayer, study, thought, friendship, and family closeness, with the hope that this renewed life of the spirit will then carry through the week to come.

It is customary to recognize coming of age, at thirteen, in Jewish boys by the **Bar Mitzvah** (son of the commandment) ceremony. The boy has presumably undertaken some religious instruction, including learning to pronounce Hebrew, if not always to understand it. He is called up to read a portion from the Torah scroll and recite a passage from one of the books of the Prophets, in Hebrew, and then perhaps to give a short teaching about a topic from the reading. Afterwards there may be a simple kiddush, a celebration with blessing of wine and sweet bread or cake, but a big party is more likely. This custom of welcoming the boy to adult responsibilities has been extended to girls in non-Orthodox congregations in the **Bat Mitzvah** (daughter of the commandment).

Holy days

Judaism follows an ancient lunar calendar of annual holidays and memorials linked to special events in history. The spiritual year begins with the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah (New Year's Day) is a time of spiritual renewal in remembrance of the original creation of the world. It is celebrated on the first two days of the seventh month (around the fall equinox). For thirty days prior to Rosh Hashanah, each morning synagogue service brings the blowing of the shofar (a ram's horn that produces an eerie, unearthly blast) to remind the people that they stand before God. At the service on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, a prayer is recited asking that all humanity will remember what God has done, that there will be honor and joy for God's people, and that righteousness will triumph while "all wickedness vanishes like smoke."⁴⁴



Rosh Hashanah includes the blowing of the shofar in a note of alarm, three wails, and nine sobbing blasts of contrition.

The ten Days of Awe follow Rosh Hashanah. People are encouraged to change inwardly, by looking at their mistakes of the past year. It is said that during this period God makes it easier for a person to be repentant, and is also more likely to accept repentance.

Yom Kippur completes the High Holy Days, renewing the sacred covenant with God in a spirit of atonement and cleansing. Historically, this was the only time when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem, and the only time that he would pronounce the sacred name of the Lord, YHWH, in order to ask for forgiveness of the people's sins. Today, there is an attempt at personal inner cleansing, and individuals must ask pardon from everyone they may have wronged during the past year. If necessary, restitution for damages should be made. Congregations also confess their sins communally, ask that their negligence be forgiven, and pray for their reconciliation to God in a new year of divine pardon and grace.

Sukkot is a fall harvest festival. A simple outdoor booth (a sukkah) is built and decorated as a dwelling place of sorts for seven days. Usually this is done as a ritual act, but seeking a deeper experience of the meaning of Sukkot, some contemporary Jews are actually attempting to live in the sukkah they construct. The fragile home reminds the faithful that their real home is in God, who sheltered their ancestors on the way from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan. Participants hold the *lulav* (a bundle made of a palm branch, myrtle twigs, and willow twigs) in one hand and the *etrog* (a citrus fruit) in the other and wave them together toward the four compass directions and to earth and sky, praising God and acknowledging him as the unmoving center of creation. Traditionally there was an offering of water, precious in the desert lands of the patriarchs, and great merrymaking. During the second temple days, the ecstatic celebration even included burning of the priests' old underclothes. The day after the seven-day Sukkot festival is Simhat Torah (Joy in

Simhat Torah is a joyous celebration of the Torah, with dancing and singing. Here the Torah scrolls are being carried in a celebration in Tel Aviv.



Torah), ending the yearly cycle of Torah readings, from Creation to the death of Moses, and beginning again.

Near the winter solstice, the darkest time of the year, comes Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication. Each night for eight nights, another candle is lit on a special candle holder. The amount of light gradually increases like the lengthening of sunlight. Historically, Hanukkah was a celebration of the victory of the Maccabean rebellion against the attempt by Antiochus to force non-Jewish practices on the Jewish people. According to legend, when the Jews regained access to the temple, they found only one jar of oil left undefiled, still sealed by the high priest. It was enough to stay alight for only one day, but by a miracle the oil stayed burning for eight days. Many Jewish families also observe the time by nightly gift-giving. The children have their own special Hanukkah pastimes, such as spinning the *dreidel*, a top with four letters on its sides as an abbreviation of the sentence "A great miracle happened there."

As the winter rainy season begins to diminish in Israel, some Jews celebrate the reawakening of nature on Tu B'shvat. Observances lavish appreciation on a variety of fruits and plants. In Israel, the time is now marked by the planting of trees to help restore life to the desert.

On the full moon of the month before spring comes Purim. It commemorates the legend of Esther, queen of Persia, and Mordecai, who saved their fellow Jews from destruction by the evil viceroy Haman. It has been linked to Mesopotamian mythology about the goddess Ishtar, whose spring return brings joy and fertility. Purim is a bawdy time of dressing in costumes and mocking life's seriousness, and the jokes frequently poke fun at sacred Jewish practices. As the story of Esther is read from an ornate scroll, the congregation responds with noisy stomping, rattles, horns, and whistles whenever Haman's name is read. Purim is also celebrated with gifts of money to the poor and gifts of food to friends and family.

The next major festival is Pesach, or Passover, which celebrates the liberation from bondage in Egypt and the springtime advent of new life. It was the tenth plague, death to all firstborn sons of the Egyptians, that finally brought

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Passover Innovations

In the United States, the most widely practiced and loved Jewish holiday is Passover. Not only do a great majority of American Jews, whether otherwise observant or not, celebrate a Passover Seder, but they are actively engaged in creating new ways of doing so. While reminding Jews of their past, the new Seders are also designed to keep the traditions fresh, relevant, and personally meaningful. Since the Seder is often celebrated at home, people are free to choose or put together their own Haggadah liturgy, perhaps incorporating events from the recent past, homemade rituals honoring deceased relatives, or new ideas found on the Internet. There are apparently thousands of versions of the Passover Haggadah now in existence, including interactive services for children, feminist Haggadahs, secular humanist Haggadahs, transgender Haggadahs, interfaith Haggadahs, Haggadahs in remembrance of the Holocaust, Haggadahs in support of victims of domestic violence, and egalitarian Haggadahs. The innovative rituals are immediately available to others through blogs, podcasts, and YouTube.

Each item of the Seder service is intended to be rich in symbolic meaning. Contemporary Seder tables may include a goblet of water and an orange—apparently ordinary objects, but packed with significance for those in attendance. The water has been added by feminists in honor of the prophetess Miriam, who reportedly led the women in dancing in jubilation after the Israelites had safely crossed through the Sea of Reeds. Inspired by her story, some contemporary women decorate tambourines for joyous dancing during the Seder celebration. “Miriam’s cup” on the Seder table is a reminder of the well of water that, according to Midrash, was created by God on the sixth day of creation and appeared wherever the Israelites sojourned in the wilderness, so long as Miriam the prophetess was

with them. Placing a goblet of water on the Seder table may be considered symbolic evocation of her healing and rejuvenating presence, or it may be used to affirm the wisdom of women in general.

An orange may be placed on the Seder plate in solidarity with Jewish lesbians and gay men, as well as others who are considered marginalized. This tradition seems to refer back to the occasion in 1979 when a Berkeley, California, Jewish women’s group asked the wife of their rabbi to comment on the position of lesbians in Judaism. She reportedly replied something to the effect that, “There’s as much room for a lesbian in Judaism as there is for a crust of bread on the Seder plate.”⁴⁵ Some lesbians thence engaged in symbolic protest by actually putting bread on their Seder plates. Other people were uncomfortable with this flouting of tradition, for the Seder plate had always included only unleavened matzah, since all products made from leavened grain flour are *chometz* (forbidden by the Torah in Jewish households during Passover). Feminist scholar Susannah Heschel thus began using an orange instead to signify solidarity with all those who felt marginalized by traditional Judaism, including widows as well as lesbians and gay men. Heschel explains:

Bread on the Seder plate brings an end to Pesach—it renders everything chometz. And its symbolism suggests that being lesbian is being transgressive, violating Judaism. I felt that an orange was suggestive of something else: the fruitfulness for all Jews when lesbians and gay men are contributing and active members of Jewish life. In addition, each orange segment had a few seeds that had to be spit out—a gesture of spitting out, repudiating the homophobia that poisons too many Jews.⁴⁶

the pharaoh to relent. The Israelites were warned to slaughter a lamb for each family and mark their doors with its blood so that the angel of death would pass over them. They were to roast the lamb and eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. So quickly did they depart that they didn't even have time to bake the bread, which is said to have baked in the sun as they carried it on their heads. The beginning of Pesach is still marked by a **Seder** dinner, with the eating of unleavened bread (matzah) to remember the urgency of the departure, and bitter herbs as a reminder of slavery, so that they would never impose it on other peoples. Also on the table are *charoset* (a sweet fruit and nut mixture, a reminder of the mortar that the enslaved Israelites molded into bricks) and salt water (a reminder of the tears of the slaves) into which parsley or some other plant (a reminder of spring life) is dipped and eaten. Children ask ritual questions about why these things are done, as basic religious instruction. A movement for contemporary liturgical renewal has yielded many new **Haggadahs**, scripts for the Seder—such as special Haggadahs for feminists, for secular Zionists, and for co-celebration of Pesach with Muslims.

A new holy day may be celebrated in April or May: Holocaust Memorial Day. Observances often include the singing in Yiddish of a song from the Jewish Resistance Movement. In part:

*Never say that you are
going your last way,
though leaden skies
blot out the blue of day.
The hour for which we
long will certainly appear.⁴⁷*

In Israel, Holocaust Remembrance Day is observed with a countrywide minute of silence, in which all traffic, speaking, and movement stop entirely. This is a powerful secular ritual that enables secular and religious Jews to remember the Holocaust together.

Early summer brings Shavuot, traditionally identified with the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai and the people hearing the voice of God. It is likely that Shavuot was initially a summer harvest festival that later was linked with the revelation of the Torah. In Israeli kibbutzim, the old practice of bringing the first fruits to God has been revived. Elsewhere, the focus is on reading the Ten Commandments and on presenting the Torah as a marriage contract between God and Israel.

Then come three weeks of mourning for the temples of Jerusalem, both of which were destroyed on the ninth day of the month of Av (July or August), Tisha Be-av. This is traditionally a time of fasting and avoidance of joyous activities. Some feel that there is no longer cause for mourning because even though the temples have not been rebuilt, the old city of Jerusalem has been recaptured. Others feel that they are all still in exile from the state of perfection.

Contemporary Judaism

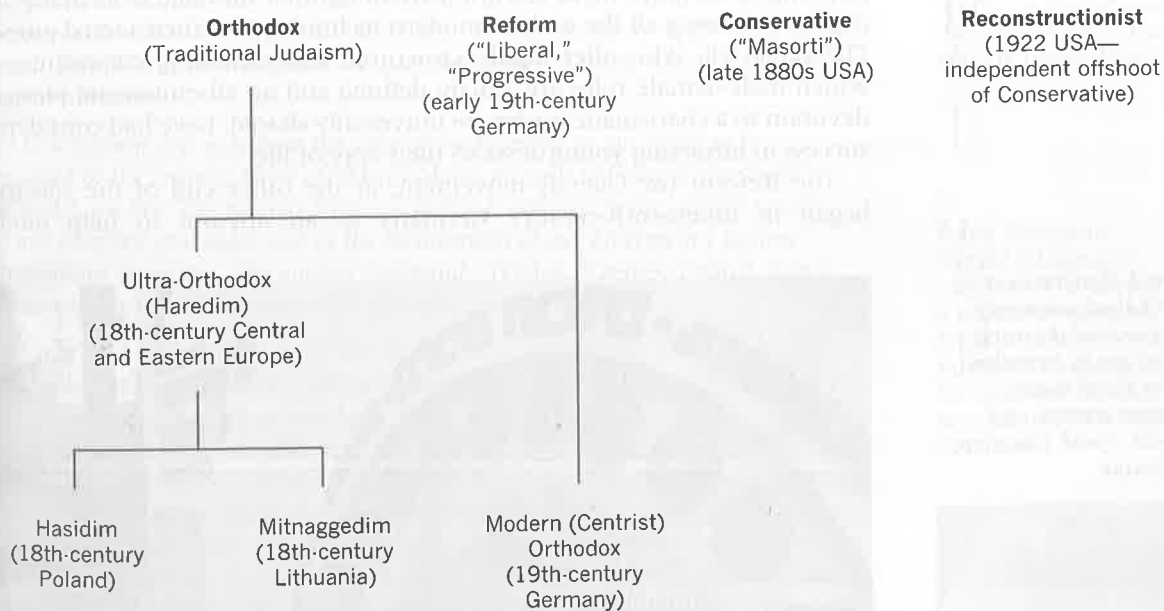
Within the extended family of Judaism, there are many groups, many different focuses, and many areas of disagreement. Currently disputed issues include the degree of adherence to the Torah and Talmud, requirements for conversion to Judaism, the extent of the use of Hebrew in prayer, and the full participation of women.

Major branches today

To a certain extent, contemporary Jews may be divided along historic ethnic lines. The majority—at least sixty-five percent—are descendants of the **Ashkenazim**, who originally migrated to Italy from West Asia during the first and second centuries CE, and then spread through central and eastern Europe, and thence to the Americas. The second largest grouping is the **Sephardim**, descendants of those who migrated to Spain from West Asia in the eighth and ninth centuries, and thence to North Africa, the Americas, and back to West Asia.

As we saw earlier, other distinctions among Jews who are religiously observant have developed as Judaism has encountered the modern world. Judaism, like all modern religions, has struggled to meet the challenge of secularization: the idealization of science, rationalism, industrialization, and materialism. The response of the Orthodox has been to stand by the Torah as

Major Branches of Judaism Today*



* Places and approximate dates of origin are indicated. In Israel, most of the fifteen percent who consider themselves religiously observant are either the equivalent of Modern Orthodox or identify themselves as Haredim. The Haredim (Strict or Ultra-Orthodox) remain divided over worship, with the Hasidim following Isaac Luria's mostly Sephardi prayerbook, and the Mitnaggedim using the traditional Ashkenazi Polish rites. The Masorti (traditional) movement in Israel is most closely related to the American Conservative movement. The Progressive movement in Israel is related to the American Reform movement.

the revealed word of God and the Talmud as the legitimate oral law. Orthodox Jews feel that they are bound by the traditional rabbinical *halakhah*, as a way of achieving closeness to God. But within this framework there are great individual differences, with no central authority figure or governing body. Orthodoxy includes mystics and rationalists, Zionists and anti-Zionists. The Orthodox also differ greatly in their tolerance for other Jewish groups and in their degree of accommodation of the surrounding secular environment. **Modern Orthodoxy** values secular knowledge and integration with non-Jewish society so that its members can be enriched by interaction with the modern world and also help to uplift it; at the same time, Modern Orthodoxy, which first developed in nineteenth-century western Europe, is dedicated to the national and religious significance of Israel and to Jewish law as divinely given. **Religious Zionism**, which is based on the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1864–1935), places central emphasis on resettlement of the Jewish people in Israel as the working out of a divine plan for the salvation not only of Jews but also for the whole world. Involvement with secular society is permissible only when such involvement is beneficial for the state of Israel. **Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Judaism**—which may overlap with Religious Zionism, especially in Israel—is generally in favor of a degree of detachment from non-Jewish culture, so that the community can focus on study of the Torah. Some Haredi groups practice complete withdrawal from the secular world and the rest of the Jewish community, while others, such as the **Lubavich Hasidim** (originally from Lithuania, with strong communities in many countries), are devoted to extending their message to as many Jews as possible, using all the tools of modern technology for their sacred purpose. The Lubavich, who offer highly structured and nurturing communities in which male–female roles are strictly defined and an all-embracing piety and devotion to a charismatic leader are universally shared, have had considerable success in attracting young Jews to their way of life.

The **Reform** (or **Liberal**) movement, at the other end of the spectrum, began in nineteenth-century Germany as an attempt to help modern

Lubavich Hasidim have built Chabad community centers around the world, like this one in Jerusalem offering Torah classes, synagogue services, and help with Jewish education and practice.



Jews appreciate their religion rather than regarding it as antiquated, meaningless, or even repugnant. In imitation of Christian churches, synagogues were redefined as places for spiritual elevation, with choirs added for effect, and the Sabbath service was shortened and translated into the vernacular. The liturgy was also changed to eliminate references to the hope of return to Zion and animal sacrifices in the temple. Women and men were allowed to sit together in the synagogue, in contrast to their traditional separation. *Halakhic* observances were re-evaluated for their relevance to modern needs, and Judaism was understood as an evolving, open-ended religion rather than one fixed forever by the Torah. Reform congregations are numerous in North America, where they are continually engaged in a "creative confrontation with modernity." Rather than exclusivism, Reform rabbis cultivate a sense of the universalism of Jewish values.

Given this approach, it is not surprising that Reform Judaism, particularly in North America, has been at the forefront in the establishment of interfaith dialogue and faith-based social activism, in cooperation with non-Jewish groups. Rabbi Maria Feldman of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism affirms:

To be a Reform Jew is to hear the voice of the prophets in our head; to be engaged in the ongoing work of tikkun olam; to strive to improve the world in which we live. The passion for social justice is reflected in the ancient words of our prophets and sages and in the declarations of our Movement's leaders throughout its history. The ancient command "Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof! Justice, justice shall you seek!" constantly reverberates in our ears."⁴⁸

Reform Judaism is not fully accepted in Israel, where the Israeli rabbinate, which has considerable civil and political power, does not recognize the authority of non-Orthodox rabbis.

The liberalization process has also given birth to other groups with intermediate positions. With roots in mid-nineteenth-century Germany, Conservative Judaism seeks to maintain, or conserve, traditional Jewish laws and practices while also using modern means of historical scholarship, sponsoring critical studies of Jewish texts from all periods. In the United States, Conservative Judaism received a great boost in 1902 when the famous scholar Solomon Schechter became President of the Jewish Theological Seminary, which thenceforth became one of the major centers of Jewish scholarship. Conservative Jews believe that Jews have always searched and added to their laws, liturgy, Midrash, and beliefs to keep them relevant and meaningful in changing times. Conservative women have long served as cantors and have been ordained as rabbis since 1985.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, an influential American thinker who died in 1983, branched off from Conservatism and founded a movement called Reconstructionism. Kaplan held that the Enlightenment had changed everything



Orthodox men wearing their traditional dress in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, which also has a Christian Quarter, a Muslim Quarter, and an Armenian Quarter, plus the Temple Mount.

Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994) developed a worldwide mission to bring Jews back to Jewish traditions, radiating from his Lubavitch Hasidic headquarters in Brooklyn, New York.



RELIGION IN PUBLIC LIFE

Rabbi Michael Melchior



Rabbi Michael Melchior was born in 1954 into a Danish family that had served as chief rabbis of Denmark for seven generations. After his ordination as a rabbi, he became the Chief Rabbi of Norway, and then moved to Israel. There he has held many political positions as leader of the left-wing religious

party Meimad, including ten years as a Knesset member and minister holding various posts. He is deeply committed to the peace process and heads the Israeli Center called Mosaica, which is promoting interfaith dialogue in West Asia.

Of the importance of Jerusalem in his life, Rabbi Melchior says:

I grew up in Denmark in a family with deep Jewish traditions and deep Danish traditions. As a young teenager, I had my first visit to Jerusalem—I was at that time just turned 15. Three times a day we had turned to Jerusalem in prayer and talked about its holiness, but I didn't have a clue what it was...

Three years later I moved to Jerusalem, where I studied in a yeshiva—institute of Jewish learning—in the Old City. It was a short time after the Six-Day War, when Jerusalem had become unified and open for the first time to all peoples and all religions.

For me, the Old City was a very, very special place to live—among the different Jewish populations,

who were just as much at strife as are ... the Jewish and non-Jewish, Christians and Armenians and Muslims...

*In the very first lecture which I heard in my yeshiva the head rabbi said something which stayed with me a long time. He said, "This place where we are now: It's a square kilometer, not even a square mile. They will be able to solve everything, all the conflicts of the world, but this square kilometer they will never be able to solve." I decided to devote my life to prove him wrong, because I feel that cannot be true. It is the most holy place for the Jewish religion, maybe the only holy place where there is a permanent holiness. It cannot be that that sanctification of that place should only result in people's fearing each other, despising each other, hating each other, and crushing the image of each other."*⁴⁹

In a statement made to a conference against racism and intolerance in 2001, Rabbi Melchior explains the aspirations of the State of Israel in terms of equality and freedom:

The twentieth century which witnessed the atrocities of the Holocaust also witnessed the fulfillment of the Zionist dream, the reestablishment of a Jewish state in Israel's historic land. For Zionism is quite simply that—the national movement of the Jewish people, based on an unbroken connection, going back from 4,000 years, between the People of the Book

and that strong measures were needed to preserve Judaism in the face of rationalism. Kaplan asserted that "as long as Jews adhered to the traditional conception of the Torah as supernaturally revealed, they would not be amenable to any constructive adjustment of Judaism that was needed to render it viable in a non-Jewish environment."⁵² He defined Judaism as an "evolving religious civilization," both cultural and spiritual, and asserted that the Jewish people are the heart of Judaism. The traditions exist for the people, and not vice versa, he said. Kaplan denied that the Jewish people were specially chosen by God, an exclusivist idea. Rather, they had chosen to try to become a people of God. Kaplan created a new prayer book, deleting traditional portions he and others found offensive, such as derogatory references to women and Gentiles, references to physical resurrection of the body, and passages describing God as rewarding or punishing Israel by manipulating natural phenomena. Two of Kaplan's ideals became common in American Jewish life: promotion of Jewish

and the Land of the Bible. It has strived continually to establish a society which reflects highest ideals of democracy and justice for all its inhabitants, in which Jew and Arab can live together, in which women and men have equal rights, in which there is freedom of thought and of expression, and in which all have access to the judicial process to ensure these rights are protected. The aspiration to build such a society was enshrined from the outset in Israel's Declaration of Independence: "The State of Israel ... will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants, irrespective of creed, race or gender; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture."

It is a tall task. It is a constant struggle, and we do not always succeed. But even in the face of the open hostility of its neighbors and continued threats to its existence, there are few countries that have made such efforts to realize such a vision.⁵⁰

For the peace process in the Middle East to succeed, Rabbi Melchior believes that the role of religion should not be ignored. He states:

When we look at the successes and failures in the pursuit of peace in the Middle East, we can see that there has been a failure to integrate religion and interreligious dialogue. The repeated attempts to ignore religion's critical role in the search for peace

have been wrong. This is the century of religion, with both its positive and negative consequences...

There is a dominant view among left-wing Israeli and Palestinian policy-makers that peace is a vehicle to secularizing society and that if there were no conflict, people wouldn't need religion. This attitude has emptied the peace process of its soul. Although there are religious components to the conflict, it is a national conflict between two peoples claiming the same piece of land. However, because religion was excluded from the solution, it became an ever-growing part of the problem. It was filled by extremist elements who tried to turn the conflict into a religious one—a conflict between "my God" and "your God" where there can be no compromise and no solution.

If it can be proven that religion can facilitate cooperation and peacemaking, that Islam is willing to live with the State of Israel in the midst of the Islamic world, Israelis would be much more open to the peace process, and it would restore hope for real progress. Likewise if the Palestinians would see that Israelis are not here to spearhead the clash of civilizations or to wipe out their national-religious aspiration, the Muslim world would be much more open to creating a different future together with Israelis... We who look toward religion as our main source of identity can find a world not only of common interests but also of common values.⁵¹

culture (dance, food, music, arts) and of synagogues as multipurpose community centers with recreational, educational, and cultural as well as religious activities.

In addition to those who are affiliated with a religious movement, there are many Jews who identify themselves as secular Jews, affirming their Jewish origins and maintaining various Jewish cultural traditions while eschewing religious practice. There are also significant numbers of people of Jewish birth, particularly in North America and western Europe, whose Jewish identity is vestigial at best, and unlikely to survive in future generations. The possibilities for total assimilation into Western culture are evident in statistics indicating that over fifty percent of Western Jews marry non-Jews. In most cases, neither spouse in such a marriage converts, and research indicates that it is highly unlikely that their children will identify as Jews. Thus, one of the great ironies of the liberty offered to the Jewish people by democratic secular societies is the freedom to leave Judaism as well as to affirm it.



Read the Document
 Women in Jewish Life
 on myreligionlab

Jewish feminism

In contrast to the option of leaving Judaism, some feminists are coming back to religious observance, but not in the traditional mold, which they regard as patriarchal and sexist. Since the mid-twentieth century, women have taken an active role in claiming their rights to full religious participation—for instance, to be counted as part of a minyan, to be called up to read from the Torah, and to be ordained as rabbis. They are also redefining Judaism from a feminist perspective. Part of this effort involves trying to reconstruct the history of significant biblical women, for the Torah was written down by men who devoted far more space to the doings of men than of women. There are hints, for instance, that there were powerful prophetesses, such as Miriam and Huldah, but little information is given about them. There have also been post-biblical women scholars, writers, and teachers, women who supported synagogues and Jewish publications from their earnings as businesswomen, and women who were active in social reform, and their stories and names are being uncovered.

In the past half-century, Jewish feminists have also tackled liturgical issues, changing language to gender-neutral and gender-inclusive terms for worshipers and for God. The Hebrew scriptures describe God as both female and male, validating translations from the Hebrew that use gender-neutral language. There was initial resistance and even shock over feminists' attempts to replace references to God as "He" or "King." But decades after these initial attempts, Rabbi Karyn D. Kedar asks:

So did we go too far in seeking new ways of thinking about and addressing God, or not far enough? ... As the metaphors become literal, our perception of God is weakened, and, thus, our experience of God becomes limited. As Jewish feminists, the greatest service we can give is to call upon the poets of our generation to teach us once again that metaphor is symbolic, that God is beyond reach and can only be understood in whispers of meaning through images, and in pictures that are diverse and rich. God is "like" father and "like" mother. God is "like" king and "like" the womb. Above all, God is none of these. And beyond the metaphor of gender, God is my light, Adonai ori (Psalms 27:1), and God is wind, ruach Elohim merachefet (Genesis 1:2), and God is a silent whisper, kol damma daka (1 Kings 19:12), and God is the shadow beneath the wings, b'tzel kanfecha (Psalms 63:8).⁵³

As a result of feminist efforts, gender-neutral liturgy and women's participation in synagogue worship have become quite common in contemporary Judaism. In Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist synagogues, women may now be counted in the minyan and called up to recite blessings and read from the Torah. Many women have been ordained as rabbis, invested as cantors who lead the prayer service, and installed as presidents of synagogues as well as heads of philanthropical organizations. Many liberal congregations use prayer books with gender-neutral language. Many couples are making egalitarian commitments to each other in their wedding vows, as in this contemporary sample:

In the spirit of Jewish tradition, I will be your loving friend as you are mine. ... I will respect you and the divine image within you. May our hearts be united forever in faith and hope. Let our home be built on Torah and loving-kindness, rich in wisdom and reverence. May we always keep these words

*in our hearts as a symbol of our eternal commitment to each other: I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.*⁵⁴

Reform and Conservative denominations in the United States now allow their rabbis to officiate at same-sex weddings. Even in Orthodox congregations, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance is serving as a resource "for a community constantly balancing tradition and modernity, ... guided by the principle that *halakhic* Judaism offers many opportunities for observant Jewish women to enhance their ritual observance and to increase their participation in communal leadership."⁵⁵ Yeshivat Maharat in New York is now training Orthodox women in Jewish law and spirituality so that they can serve as legal and spiritual authorities.

Having achieved considerable success in bringing about these changes, Jewish feminists are now expanding their perspective to consider global problems such as the threats of terrorist violence and ecological disaster. Since solutions to such problems will require a change in human thinking, some Jewish feminists have turned to the ongoing process of Midrash—interpretation of the deeper meanings of traditional texts. Rabbi Tirzah Firestone reports:

*I am a teacher of Jewish texts—Tanach, Chasidut, Zohar—that have a unique power to engage and call us into discovery and wisdom. Rarely have I witnessed more eagerness and excitement than when I invite women to enter the text itself. ... With more aplomb than ever before, today's women are entering the stories and changing them, breaking them open to reveal the places of both wounds and opportunity. They are seizing the chance to transform the stories that guide our lives, and in so doing, they are rewriting the maps that determine the paths we will travel.*⁵⁶

An example of new feminist Midrash revolves around the interwoven stories of Sarah and Hagar, the mothers of the sons of Abraham who are said to be the founders of Judaism and Islam, respectively. Rabbi Firestone explains:

*The story of Hagar and Sarah and their sons lies deep in our collective unconscious and affects our beliefs about the entrenched relationship with our Arab cousins. To change the rigid story lines requires that we first collectively re-vision and humanize the story of these two women. Many female midrashists have taken up the task of plumbing their relationship. ... [In a musical exploration by Linda Hirshchhorn] they understand that to survive they must finally speak each other's name, hear each other's prayers, share each other's dream of a homeland. I have witnessed hundreds of people weeping as they hear this musical midrash, the reaching out in longing and regret of Sarah and Hagar becoming their own, the pain of the centuries and the possibility for healing alive, palpable, urgent.*⁵⁷

There is also a feminist critique of women's position in the state of Israel. Women among the early Zionist settlers envisioned a society in which men and women would work side by side and each apply their full capabilities to the creation of a new society. Nevertheless, traditional sexual divisions of labor were perpetuated, especially once the Orthodox parties took a major role in the formation and governance of the state. However, some progress toward women's equality and empowerment is occurring within all denominations in Israel, including Orthodoxy.



Rabbi Alysa Stanton, first black female rabbi in mainstream Judaism, in the synagogue of Hebrew Union College, where she was ordained in 2009, many years after her conversion to Judaism from Christianity. She has been called to serve in a North Carolina synagogue whose president says the congregation needs someone with her magnetism, warmth, scholarship, and rapport with children and various kinds of people.

Jewish renewal

Both men and women from varied backgrounds are being attracted to newly revitalized expressions of Jewish spirituality, and conversions to Judaism seem to be increasing. Many young adults whose parents were non-observant Jews are now coming back to their roots and taking great interest in the traditions.

Although anti-Semitism continues to flare up here and there, many non-Jews object to negative stereotyping of Jews. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has issued an historic public apology for the anti-Jewish writings of Martin Luther, the father of Protestant Christianity. In part, they declared:

We recognize in anti-Semitism a contradiction and an affront to the Gospel, a violation of our hope and calling, and we pledge this church to oppose the deadly working of such bigotry.⁵⁸

In post-Soviet Russia, where under Stalin Jews had been so persecuted that only a few rabbis remained in all of Russia, there are now Jewish seminaries and universities, schools, and kindergartens. In 2011, eighty Jewish and Muslim leaders from throughout Russia and Ukraine held a conference entitled "Muslims and Jews United Against Hatred and Extremism" to jointly counteract extremism, discrimination, and abuse, whether in the form of anti-Semitism or Islamophobia.

Contemporary Jewish renewal is not just an absence of fear. It is an active search for personal meaning in the ancient rituals and scriptures, and the creation of new rituals for our times. There are now numerous small *havurot*, communities of Jews who are not affiliated with any formal group but get together on a regular basis to worship and celebrate the traditions. They favor a democratic organization and personal experience, choosing what parts of the traditions to use and how. Some incorporate study groups, continuing the ancient intellectual tradition of grappling with the ethical, philosophical, and spiritual meanings of the texts. Some are bringing fresh ideas to traditional

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Celebrations of life-cycle events, such as this naming ceremony for a girl child, are bringing many Jews back to Jewish practice.



celebrations, so that they are actively transformational rather than simply matters of habit.

From highly conservative to highly liberal quarters, there are now attempts to renew the ancient messianic ideal of Judaism, that by its practice the world might be healed.

From a Jewish point of view, we are living in the worst of all possible worlds, in which there is still hope.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz²⁹

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Key terms

- anti-Semitism** Although “Semitic” properly refers to Arab and other peoples as well as Jews, the term “anti-Semitism” has come to be applied to expressions of prejudice against Jews in general.
- apocalypse** In Judaism and Christianity, the dramatic end of the present age.
- Ashkenazim** An ethnic grouping of the Jews that migrated first to Italy, spread throughout central and eastern Europe and thence on to the Americas.
- Diaspora** The dispersal of the Jews after the Babylonian exile.
- ghetto** An urban area occupied by those rejected by a society, such as quarters for Jews in some European cities.
- haggadah** The nonlegal part of the Talmud and Midrash.
- halakhah** Jewish legal decision and the parts of the Talmud dealing with laws.
- Hasidism** Ecstatic Jewish piety, dating from eighteenth-century Poland.
- Kabbalah** The Jewish mystical tradition.
- kosher** Ritually acceptable, applied to foods in Jewish Orthodoxy.
- Messiah** The “anointed,” the expected king and deliverer of the Jews; a term later applied by Christians to Jesus.
- Midrash** The literature of delving into the Jewish Torah.
- minyan** The quorum of ten adult males required for Jewish communal worship.
- mitzvah (plural: mitzvot)** In Judaism, a divine commandment or sacred deed in fulfillment of a commandment.
- oral Torah** Interpretation of written Jewish law, according to verbal traditions.
- Orthodox Judaism** Observing the traditional rabbinical *halakhah*; the strictest form of Judaism.
- Pentateuch** The five books of Moses at the beginning of the Hebrew Bible.
- rabbi** Teacher; the ordained spiritual leader of a Jewish congregation.
- Reform or Liberal Judaism** Movement that began in the nineteenth century as a way of modernizing the religion and making it more accessible and open-ended.
- Sabbath** The day of the week set aside for rest and worship; in Judaism running from sunset Friday night to sunset Saturday night.
- Sephardim** An ethnic grouping of the Jews who migrated first to Spain and then to North Africa, the Americas, and back to West Asia.
- Shekhinah** God’s presence in the world, in Judaism.
- synagogue** Meeting place for Jewish study and worship.
- Talmud** Jewish law and lore, as finally compiled in the sixth century CE.
- Tanakh** The Jewish scriptures.
- Torah** The Pentateuch; also, the whole body of Jewish teaching and law.
- Zionism** Movement dedicated to the establishment of a politically viable, internationally recognized Jewish state in the biblical land of Israel.

Review questions

1. What are the major texts of Judaism? Describe Tanakh, Torah, Talmud, and name at least one other Jewish text, noting each text's significance in religious practice.
2. What is the significance of the term "covenant" in Jewish tradition? What are the major covenants?
3. How did the Enlightenment in Europe affect the development of Judaism?
4. What role has history played in the development of Jewish identity? How are historical events commemorated in religious practice? Give specific examples.

Discussion questions

1. Discuss the evidence for the development of monotheism in Judaism, and ideas about God's relationship with the people of Israel.
2. Discuss the major branches of contemporary Judaism. What issues have led to the development of new branches? How do they differ on issues such as interpretation of sacred texts, religious practice, and women's roles?
3. Describe the evolving role of women in Judaism, as illustrated by biblical figures such as Eve and Sarah, statements about women in the Talmud and other Jewish texts, and changes in contemporary Judaism. What issues have drawn the attention of Jewish feminists?
4. Discuss the origins of Zionism and the creation of the modern state of Israel. What are some of the key topics debated within Israel today?