

Things To Know About Judaism

What We Call God

El Elyon (Most High) Genesis 14: 18-20

Shapat (Judge) Genesis 18: 25

El Olam (The Eternal God) Genesis 21:33

Jawheh – Jirah (The Lord will Provide) Genesis 22:14

El Elohe – Yisra'el (God, the God of Israel) Genesis 33:20

El Shaddai (God Almighty) Genesis 49:25

Holy Book

The Jewish Holy Book, or Bible, is called the **Tanach**. The first five books of Tanach are called **Torah**. Nivim, or **Prophets**, is the second part of the Bible, and includes the stories of Joshua, Isaiah, and Jonah. Kituvim, or **Writings**, is the last part of Tanach, and includes Psalms and Proverbs.

The Torah is the most important object in any synagogue. It is handwritten on long scrolls of parchment, covered in a velvet case, and kept in a special cabinet, called the *Ark*. When the ark is opened, the whole congregation must rise in respect for the Torah.

Jews begin reading the Torah on a holiday called **Simchat Torah**, and read a section each week. By the end of the year, we will have read the whole Torah.

Worship and Prayer

Jewish religious services take place in a synagogue. At the front of the synagogue is the **Bimah**, or platform, where the Ark stands, with the Torah inside. A lamp, called **the eternal light**, always burns over the Ark.

The **Rabbi** is our spiritual leader, a teacher of the Jewish faith who has studied Jewish history, law and the Bible for many years. The Rabbi helps the congregation to study and understand Torah. Also, when a Jewish person seeks comfort, advice, or information about Judaism, they go to the Rabbi for help. In some congregations, the Rabbi must be a man. Other congregations have women as rabbis.

Rituals

All Jews believe in one God, and the Bible. Since the 1800s, Judaism has branched out into three large groups: **Orthodox**, **Conservative**, and **Reform Judaism**. Orthodox Jews practice very traditional Judaism, as it has been handed down for over two thousand years. They believe that the Torah was given directly to Moses. They follow the kosher laws of the Torah, which forbid them from eating shellfish or pork. Orthodox men pray daily, separate from women.

Reform Jews have adapted Judaism for the modern world. Most do not follow kosher food laws. Men do not always wear **Yarmulkes**, or skullcaps on their heads, which Orthodox men always wear, especially in the synagogue. Reform Jews sometimes wear prayer shawls

called **Tallit**; Orthodox men always wear Tallit in synagogues. Reform Jews hold prayer services in other languages as well as Hebrew. Orthodox services are always in Hebrew.

Conservative Jews are more traditional than Reform Jews, but not as traditional as Orthodox Jews.

Many Jewish homes have **Mezuzahs** hanging on the doorways of the house. A mezuzah is a small box. Inside the box is a tiny scroll with a special prayer written on it, and passages of the Torah. Some Jews touch the mezuzah and kiss their hands as a sign of respect when they enter or leave a home.

The Torah and Jewish prayer books are written in Hebrew, which is an ancient language with a unique alphabet. Jewish children go to religious school not only to learn prayers, customs and history, but also to learn how to read Hebrew.

When a Jewish boy turns 13, he is called up to the bimah of the synagogue to read the Torah to the congregation for the first time in his life. This ceremony is called a **Bar Mitzvah**, and a big celebration follows the service. Non-Orthodox Jewish girls are also called to the Torah to read for the first time, and that ceremony is called a **Bat Mitzvah**.

At weddings, the Jewish bride and groom sign a wedding contract, called a **Ketubah**, before the ceremony, which is held under a canopy called a **Chuppah**. After the bride and groom exchange rings, and the Rabbi blesses the couple, the groom breaks a wine glass under his foot, to symbolize the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and remind Jews that along with great joy, great sorrow also exists in the world.

Holidays

Jewish people have their own calendar, and Jewish months last from one new moon to the next. So holidays fall on different days of the English calendar every year. But one day of prayer, Shabbat, occurs every Friday night and Saturday.

According to the Jewish story of Creation, God created the world in six days, and then rested on the seventh day. So the Sabbath, or **Shabbat**, is the seventh day of the week and a special day of rest for all Jews. It begins on Friday night, and can be observed at home or in the synagogue. At either place, Jews light two Shabbat candles and say a special prayer. Two other prayers are recited over a glass of wine, and a special bread called **Challah**. More observant Jews do not work, travel or carry money on the Sabbath. On Saturday evening, at the end of Shabbat, a single candle is lit and a special spice box is raised, filling the bimah with a beautiful scent.

In Persia many years ago, a Jewish queen named Esther saved her people from annihilation in a story that is written in a text called the Megillah. The story is read every year on a holiday called **Purim**, which falls in February or March. Children reenact the story and dress up as kings, queens and Haman, the evil prime minister who threatened the Jews' existence. Jews eat special cookies called **Hamantashen**, which are shaped like the triangular hat the evil Haman wore.

On **Passover**, in March or April, Jews celebrate the Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt. The holiday lasts for eight days, beginning with a dinner called a **Seder**, where Jews retell the story of their exodus, or escape. Jews eat flat bread called matzoh to remind them of the fact that when the Israelites fled Egypt, they did so quickly, before the bread they were baking had time to rise.

In October, Jews celebrate the harvest festival called **Succot**. They build a simple wooden shelter in their yards, decorated with fruit and branches, to remind them of the homes their ancestors made as they wandered in the desert.

In September, Jews celebrate **Rosh Hashanah**, the Jewish New Year. At the prayer service in the synagogue, someone blows the **Shofar**, or ram's horn, to remind people to reflect on all the things they did the year before. Jews eat sliced apples dipped in honey, to wish everyone a sweet New Year.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the holiest day of the year for Jews, who pray to God to forgive them for the sins they committed over the last year. Adults fast, going without food or drink from sunup to sundown. The Shofar is blown at the end of the holiday.

Hannukah is usually celebrated in December. This holiday commemorates the defeat of a mighty army by a small band of Jews, who drove their enemies out of ancient Jerusalem. These courageous Jews reopened the Holy Temple, but found only enough oil to light the Temple lamp for one night. And then a miracle occurred. The oil lasted for eight full days, until more oil could be brought to the Temple. Jews today light a **Menorah**, a candlestick with eight branches, representing the eight days, and a center branch for the candle which lights all the others. On the first night of Hannukah, one candle is lit. On the second night, two candles are lit, and by the eighth night the whole Menorah is ablaze.

Judaism Around the World

There are around 14 million Jews in the world today. About 7 million of these Jews live in The United States. 4 million Jews live in Israel, 2.5 million in Russia and the former Soviet Republic. 530,000 Jews live in France and 300,000 in England. Jews have scattered all over the world, to India, Canada, Brazil, Argentina and South America, usually to flee persecution. The worst example of anti-Semitism, or discrimination against Jews, occurred during the Holocaust, when Nazis killed 6 million Jews. Many books and movies have shown the world the horror of the Holocaust.

