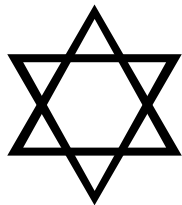


JUDAISM



The six-pointed Star of David dates from the 600s BCE, but has been a universal Jewish symbol only since the late 1800s. The *menorah* (candelabra)—the oldest Jewish symbol—was in use in biblical times.

ORIGINS

A sense of history is foundational for understanding Judaism. It traces its ancient roots to the migration of Abraham and his family from Mesopotamia to Canaan (c. 1900 BCE).

- Centuries later, these semi-nomadic “Hebrews” (people from across the river) migrated to Egypt to flee famine. Their eventual enslavement, exodus to freedom under Moses, receipt of a God-given law code, and re-entry into Canaan as “Israelites” (people of Israel) are pivotal events in Jewish history.
- Beginning with the reign of Saul, government was centralized in a monarchy. Ritual worship was centralized in the Temple built in Jerusalem during the reign of Solomon; the third king of Israel.
- Internal strife led to schism. In 722 BCE, the northern kingdom (Israel) fell to the Assyrians. In 586 BCE, the southern kingdom (Judah) fell to the Babylonians, who destroyed the Temple and took the “Jews” (Judah’s remnant population) into captivity.
- Forty years later, the Jews were freed by Cyrus of Persia. They returned to Judah and, by 515 BCE, had rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. Greek—then Roman—domination followed a brief period of autonomy. In 70 CE, the Romans destroyed the Second Temple and soon evicted the Jews from the region.
- Life in diaspora too frequently was marked by persecution. More than any other event, the

Holocaust—the systematic extermination of European Jews by the Nazis during World War II—has shaped late-20th century Jewish consciousness. In response to the Holocaust, the modern state of Israel was established in 1948.

BELIEFS

- Among Jews today there is variety of degrees and expressions of belief in God. However, the notion that God is One has always been central to the faith.
- Judaism believes that God creates and is sovereign over everything. Humanity is created essentially good, and has been given stewardship over creation. Although incomprehensible, God is reliable and approachable through a personal and direct relationship.
- Traditionally, Jews believe that God acts in and is revealed through history. They believe that God made a series of covenants with humanity, most profoundly in the giving of the Torah. While this relationship obligates the Jewish people to follow the Torah’s laws, and righteousness, however, is not limited to Jews.



“love
your
neighbor
as
yourself”



• In the United States, Judaism takes four main forms. **Orthodox** Judaism includes quite a range of practice in itself—from ultra-traditional to modern. Generally, it accepts the divine authorship of the Torah, and the divine, binding, unchangeable nature of *Halakha* (the Jewish Law developed by ancient Rabbis from commandments in the Torah). At the opposite pole, **Reform** Judaism believes in individual freedom to make choices regarding Jewish practice, based on one's own knowledge of and commitment to God and to the Jewish people. It emphasizes the importance of social justice and the ethical teachings of Judaism, and encourages modernization of its rituals and practices. **Conservative** Judaism emerged from desire for a middle path between these two extremes. It accepts the binding nature of Halakha, but interprets it more liberally than Orthodox Judaism. **Reconstructionist** Judaism conceives of Judaism as an evolving, changing civilization with religion as its base, and obliges each Jew to reinterpret the ancient rituals. Other American Jewish movements include: Contemplative Judaism, Renewal Judaism, and Humanistic Judaism.

WRITINGS

- The *Torah* (instruction) is the sacred scripture of Judaism. After centuries of oral transmission, it was eventually committed to written form. It serves both as a record of the development of the Jewish people and a guide to righteous living.
- Torah can mean the whole of Jewish teaching, or more specifically, it can mean the Five Books of Moses—traditionally said to have been divinely revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

These five books are called the *Hummash* (Hebrew) or *Pentateuch* (Greek). To this foundation two more collections of scrolls were added. The total is often called the TANAKH—an acronym created by the Hebrew names of these three collections: *Torah*, *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Kethuvim* (Writings). The TANAKH includes many kinds of literature:

historical accounts, legends, instructional stories, poetry, proverbs, prophecy, and case law.

- It has been said that Jews do not dispute whether God spoke; only what God meant. Therefore, Jewish sacred literature also includes other collections of rabbinic teachings and interpretations of every book of the Written Torah. This is the Talmud—the Oral Law (now in written form)—the record of Judaism's struggle to understand God's instructions. Although not be-

lieved to be revealed scripture, the Talmud's authority is second only to the TANAKH. The interpretation and application of ancient laws to modern times continues today.

PRACTICE

- Judaism emphasizes observance of commandments more than principles of faith. The degree of observance is a personal choice; the style reflects the branch of Judaism to which one belongs. Jewish laws sanctify mundane aspects of life, making the ordinary extraordinary.
- The Torah, interpreted in the Talmud and later sources, provides detailed instructions for living; *Kashrut* is the term for what is deemed permissible; *treff*, for what is not. For many Jews, living according to the Torah entails observance of kosher dietary and cooking rules; for some it may also mean abstinence from work (i.e., writing, driving,

The *Shema*

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. Blessed be the name of his glorious kingdom for ever and ever. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might. . .

cooking, using electricity) on the Sabbath.

- Much Jewish worship is home-based. Traditional Jews pray formally three times a day. At home, as in the synagogue, men (and some women) may don a *kippah* (skullcap, also called a *yarmulke*) during prayer, a *tallit* (prayer shawl), and *tefillin* (small boxes containing verses of scripture, tied onto the forehead and arm by leather straps).

- According to Judaism, a day extends from one sunset to the next; therefore, *Shabbat* (Sabbath) is observed from Friday sundown until an hour past sundown on Saturday. The Friday evening Sabbath meal in an observant Jewish home is a devout ritual in which both parents have leading roles.

- Congregational worship requires a *minyan*—a quorum of ten people above the age of thirteen (men only for Orthodox and some Conservative congregations). Services are held on Friday evenings, Saturday mornings, and holy days. They are conducted in Hebrew and/or English, and last from one-and-a-half to three hours. Men usually wear a *kippah* in a place of worship; Orthodox and some Conservative women must wear a hat or veil.

- A Jewish house of worship is often called a synagogue (*shul* in Yiddish). Some congregations—particularly Reform—may call it a temple, but others—especially Orthodox—are adamant that only the ancient Jerusalem Temple (now destroyed) may bear that label. A synagogue should have windows—so that worshippers are always aware of the world around them, and should face Jerusalem. The prayer area may be ornate or quite plain, and contains neither pictures nor statues. The congregation is seated, its attention focused on the *bimah*, a raised platform with a reading stand. From here the Torah is read, and a sermon on the reading or on social issues may be preached. The rabbi leads the worship, often assisted by a cantor (music leader).

- The Ark is a niche on the synagogue wall facing Jerusalem. It houses handwritten Torah scrolls, and is the holiest place in the building. It is customary to stand when the scrolls

are being removed or replaced. It is an honor to be chosen to read from the Torah at congregational worship.

- Torah study—alone, with a partner, or in a group—is a means of relating to God; a central activity of Judaism, it is expected of the faithful. Torah study always makes use of commentaries on the passage being considered.



ORGANIZATION

- A Jewish congregation chooses and pays its own rabbi to lead worship, teach, provide counsel, etc. Rabbis usually do not report to a superior or a central authority.

- Each major stream of Judaism maintains its own institutions for educating and ordaining rabbis and cantors.

- While each congregation elects a Board of Trustees and operates independently with funds from dues and fund-raising projects, Jews feel a strong connection to each other all over the world, and a bond to the state of Israel.

- National and international organizations offer a support network and provide opportunities for collaboration. Among these are the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform), the United Synagogues of Conservative Judaism, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations.



SOCIAL ACTION

- The Jewish notion of *tzedaka* (doing the right thing) means that to meet the needs of others is not charity; rather it is a *mitzvah*—a good deed in obedience to God's instruction. The Torah is full of mandates to work for justice. The notion of *Tikkum Olam* (to heal the earth) also calls Jews to social action.

- Locally, nationally, and internationally, Judaism is deeply involved in philanthropy and in every major social issue.

- Major agencies are dedicated to this work. Individual congregations also respond to local needs by running soup kitchens, homeless shelters, etc.

HOLIDAYS

- Some Jewish holidays are mandated by Torah; others mark major historical events. Judaism uses a lunar calendar adjusted with a leap-month approximately every three years; holiday dates vary but their solar seasons do not. Jews outside Israel (except Reform) keep holidays for an extra day.
- *Rosh Ha-Shanah* (New Year)—early autumn—commemoration of the creation of the world, marked by abstaining from work.
- *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement)—ten days after New Year—a 24-hour fast from food, liquid, and work; a time for prayer, reflection, repentance, and forgiveness.
- *Sukkot* (Feast of Booths)—a week-long harvest festival in mid-autumn.
- *Hanukkah* (Feast of Dedication)—an eight-day festival in December—celebrates the rededication of the Temple after its rescue from desecration by Judas Maccabeus during the rule of Antiochus.
- *Purim*—late winter holiday—marks the prevention of a massacre of Jews as told in the Book of Esther.
- *Pesach* (Passover)—a week-long spring remembrance of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. Most Jews abstain from eating yeast-breads and enjoy *Seders*—ritual meals with a menu laden with symbolism.
- *Shavuot* (Feast of Weeks)—late spring—marks God's giving of the Ten Commandments and establishment of the covenant with Israel.

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