

Judaism

Judaism—God, Torah, and Covenant

Lecture 13

Judaism is the oldest surviving monotheistic religion. The relationship between God and the Jewish people is based on the foundation of the Torah, the teaching and law that God gave to the Jewish people. The stories told in the Torah particularly the stories of Abraham and the Exodus, are the keys to understanding the Jewish identity.

Judaism—Discussion and Stories

- The central role of the rabbis and their ongoing textual study is discussion and debate. There is a continuous engagement with texts.
- There is a strong emphasis on determining the proper way to live in accordance with God's law and commandments, which is understood as the way to honor the covenant that Jews have made with God.
- The Jews are, among many things, storytellers, and it is rare to engage in any meaningful conversation in the Jewish context without someone, at some point, saying, "There's a story about this."
- Another prominent theme in Judaism is layered stories and debates. The Jewish oral law, the Talmud, is structured this way.

The Nature of Jewish Identity

- From one angle, a person who is born to Jewish parents is automatically a Jew.
- "Secular Jews" are those who were born Jewish but follow only some—or none—of the traditional Jewish laws and commandments. In fact, there are more secular Jews in Israel than very observant religious Jews.

- There are Jews who do commit to living life in accordance with the Hebrew Bible. There are also people not born Jewish who convert. So, while there is an ethnic component, there is also a universal component. Anyone can be a Jew.

Demographics

- There are approximately 13.4 million Jews in the world, two-tenths of a percent of the world population. Most Jews live either in Israel or the United States, with approximately 42 percent in each. Most of the rest live in Europe and Canada, although Jews can be found throughout the world.
- The community is generally known in two ways—as Jews, or as the “children or nation of Israel.” The traditional story of the Jewish people comes from the Hebrew Bible.
- Since Jews do not accept the authority of the New Testament, there is no conception of an Old Testament. There is the Bible—the Hebrew Bible, so called because the majority of it is written in Hebrew.
- Most Jewish children learn at least some Hebrew, as Hebrew is the main prayer language. Another term for the Hebrew Bible is Tanakh, an acronym for the three main parts of the Jewish scripture into which its 24 books are divided—Torah (teaching, instruction), Neviim (the Prophets), and Ketuvim (writings).
- Orthodox Jews believe the Torah was handed down by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Contemporary scholars believe that most of the Hebrew Bible was written between the 10th and 2nd centuries B.C.E., with the Torah reaching its final form during the 5th century B.C.E. The final canonization process occurred in the 1st–2nd century C.E.

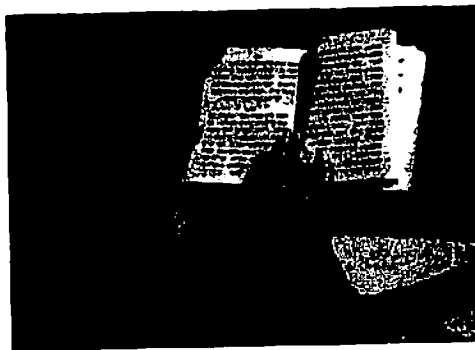
The Torah

- The word “Torah” means “instruction” or “teaching,” although many people translate it as “law,” but it consists of much more

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than laws and rules. The Torah consists of many genres, including narratives, genealogies, poetry, and commandments. The Torah is understood to contain 613 mitzvot, or commandments.

- When you walk into a synagogue, a Jewish house of prayer, and enter the sanctuary, you will see an elevated platform called a bimah, from which the Torah is read. Behind this platform is an elevated cabinet in which the Torah scroll is kept behind a curtain or closed doors. This is known as the ark, and it evokes the Ark of the Covenant.
- At one point in the service, the congregation stands while the Torah is removed from the ark. It will be “dressed” and “adorned.” During some services, the Torah is carried around the synagogue, and some congregants will touch the scroll and kiss whatever touched the Torah.
- The Sabbath service is largely organized around the Torah reading. Every Sabbath service, a portion of the Torah is read, and throughout the year Jews go through the cycle of reading the entire Torah.
- The word “Torah” refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, which are considered the most important. These are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, often referred to as the Five Books of Moses. Torah is also used to refer to the oral Torah that observant Jews believe to have been given to Moses along with the written Torah, and thereafter passed down in an oral tradition until being written later.



The word “Torah” may refer to either the oral tradition or written text, depending on context.

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- The oral Torah, contained in written form in the Talmud, contains the wisdom of the rabbis used to interpret and apply the Tanakh. In its broadest sense, Torah can be used to refer to the entire written and oral Jewish tradition.
- The Torah has a narrative arc that continues to unfold in later books, namely the Books of the Former Prophets (Joshua through Kings).

Important Themes in the Torah

- One major theme in the Torah is God's activity in history, from a single beginning and moving toward an end time. Another theme is that of the covenant, the agreement between God and his people.
- Genesis, the first book of the Torah, is concerned primarily with three origins—of the universe, of humanity, and of the children of Israel—the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- To a point, Genesis shifts from the story of humanity to a particular focus on the story of one people: Abraham and his descendants.

Abraham and His Sons

- Abraham is considered the patriarch of all three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Abraham is called by God to travel to the Land of Canaan. Abraham gives God his obedience, and God promises to make a great nation of Abraham, give his descendants land, bless those who bless him, and curse those who curse him.
- The sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants is male circumcision, which is practiced by all observant Jews, as well as Muslims.
- Abraham is promised by God that he will be the father of many nations, including one through his son with Sarah, Isaac (the Jews), and one through his son with Hagar, Ishmael (the Arabs).

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- In Genesis, chapter 22, God tests Abraham by demanding that he sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. Abraham is willing and is just about to sacrifice Isaac when an angel of God stops him and has Abraham substitute a ram for Isaac. One understanding of this story is the unacceptability of human sacrifice and the requirement that animals be substituted.
- The next important figure is the third great patriarch of the Jewish tradition, Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebecca. In one story, Jacob wrestles all night with a stranger who turns out to be an angel of God—or perhaps God himself. Jacob asks for a blessing and is renamed Israel. This is the origin of the name of the nation, which can mean “to struggle/wrestle with God.”
- Jacob has two wives (Leah and Rachel) and 12 sons, who become the ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel.
- The next story arc brings us to the book of Exodus. Jacob, his wives, and children leave the land of Canaan during famine and go to Egypt. The Pharaoh believes that the Israelites have become too numerous, turns them into slaves, and ultimately orders all male babies born to Israelite women killed. One of these babies survives to become the main protagonist for the rest of the Torah: Moses.

Moses and the Exodus

- The infant Moses is sent floating down the Nile; he is found and raised by the Pharaoh’s daughter, but his own mother was employed as his nurse. Thus, Moses grew up with knowledge of kinship to the Israelites.
- As an adult, while Moses tended his flocks, God spoke to Moses from a burning bush and chose him to be a prophet, telling him to liberate the Israelite people.
- During this encounter, Moses asked who was speaking to him. God responded by saying something like, “I will be who I will be” or “I am who I am.” (God is identified with the verb “to be.”)

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- Moses repeatedly demanded that his people be freed, but each time the Pharaoh consented and then refused. To convince Pharaoh to relent, God sent 10 plagues, which include locusts, flies, and darkness, but none made the Pharaoh change his mind.
- The tenth plague visits on the Egyptians the same horror that Pharaoh had used against the Israelites: the killing of children (in this case, the killing of the firstborn). The Israelite people mark their doors with lamb's blood so that the angel of death would pass over their homes, which is the origin of the term "Passover" (Pesach in Hebrew).
- Finally, the Israelites are freed, but even then the Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his army after them. This leads to Moses holding his staff toward the sea, at which point the waters divide so the Israelites can cross. When the Egyptian army pursues them, Moses again holds up his staff, and the waters come down upon them, drowning them all.
- This begins the account of the 40-year desert wandering of the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land, the Land of Canaan. The story of the liberation of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt is retold every year during the Passover Seder.
- A central moment in the history of the Jewish people comes when God gives Moses the tablets with the 10 Commandments on them. The first four are—to have no other gods but the God of Israel, to not make any image of God, to not make false oaths in God's name, and to keep the Sabbath. The final six are to honor your father and mother and to not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or covet another's wife, house, or possessions.
- The Jewish people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. The notion of wandering before entering the promised land has become an important Jewish theme. Ultimately, the Israelites did reach, and conquer, the Land of Canaan, where they established their kingdom.

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- Although Moses saw the Promised Land from a mountaintop, he did not live to enter it. This has become an inspiration to others, including Martin Luther King Jr.
- The Torah ends with the death of Moses. More than any other human being, Moses is responsible for the creation of the Jewish people. Many Jews call Moses "Moshe Rabbenu," (our rabbi) and "father of all the prophets."

Suggested Reading

Atwood, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*.
 Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews*.
 Coogan, Brettler, Newsom, and Perkins, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.
 Dorff and Newman, *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader*.
 Fishbane, *Judaism: Revelation and Traditions*.
 Holtz, *Back to the Sources*.
 Jewish Publication Society, *Tanakh*.
 Matlins and Magida, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger*.
 Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People*.
 Sharma, *Our Religions*.
 Smith, *The World's Religions*.
 Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the Torah and the Talmud, and what is the relation between them?
2. What are some of the ways that the history of the Jewish people as narrated in the Hebrew Bible has shaped what Judaism is today? In what ways does the Jewish concept of time as linear (as opposed to Asian conceptions of cosmic time as cyclical) shape the Jewish worldview (and that of Christianity and Islam as well)?
3. Why are Abraham and Moses considered by many to be the two most important people in the Jewish tradition?

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Varieties of Jewish Thought and Practice

Lecture 14

There are two sacred centers for Jews, illustrating the two different forms that the religion has taken since the Israelites reached the Promised Land, according to tradition, over 3,000 years ago: Jerusalem, and particularly its temple, which was destroyed by Roman conquerors in the 1st century C.E.; and the second is the sacred text of the Torah itself, the intellectual and metaphysical center of Jewish identity.

The Two Sacred Centers

- The first sacred center of Judaism is Jerusalem, established by Israel's greatest king, David. According to tradition, the Kingdom of Israel existed as a united monarchy from around 1020 B.C.E. to 930 B.C.E., during which it was ruled primarily by three kings—Saul, David and Solomon.
- Under King Solomon the Great Temple was built in Jerusalem as a home for the Ark of the Covenant. After Solomon's death, the northern tribes rebelled and establish a Kingdom of Israel in the north, while the southern Kingdom of Judah remained loyal to David's line.
- The northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C.E., and most of the Israelites were exiled and dispersed, becoming known as the 10 lost tribes of Israel. The Kingdom of Judah remained independent until it was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., leading to the destruction of the Temple.
- After exile in Babylon for 50 years, some Jews returned to their holy land, permitted to do so by King Cyrus of Persia, who had conquered the Babylonians. Although most Jews did not return to Jerusalem, the rebuilt temple, called the Second Temple, became a sacred center and important symbol to Jews wherever they lived.

- The religion of the Second Temple period featured a priestly class and animal sacrifices to God, different from the religion of the rabbis and Torah that characterizes Judaism today.
- In the 4th century B.C.E., the empire of Alexander the Great brought Greek influences to the Middle East, and many Jews began to adopt Greek ways. Tensions between traditional and Hellenized (Greek-influenced) Jews increased.
- This led to a rebellion, headed by the Maccabee family, against later Syrian invaders. This war is commemorated every year through the celebration of Chanukah. The Maccabee kingdom lasted for less than a century until its conquest by Rome. It was the last Jewish nation until the establishment of the state of Israel nearly 2,000 years later.
- The religion of the Jewish people during the Second Temple period centered on the holy site of the Temple. Priests performed sacrifices of animals, grains, and holy oil.
- In addition, there were groups that separated themselves from society, the Essenes. Some Essenes retreated to a compound near the Dead Sea called Qumran, where their library of texts, now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, was discovered in 1947.
- At the same time, another form of Judaism began to emerge. Jewish religious life began to flourish in places outside of the Temple, namely synagogues. The organization of the Hebrew Bible was finalized, and the tradition of reading Torah portions probably began.
- Another group of Jews that was important toward the end of this period is the Zealots, who advocated armed resistance to Roman rule. This all came to a head in the Great Jewish Revolt which began in the year 66 C.E., which culminated in the slaughter of Jewish rebels and the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in the year 70.

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- The only part of the Temple that survived was a set of foundation stones used in a retaining wall. Known as the Western Wall, this is the holiest pilgrimage site to Jews in the world today (along with the Temple Mount itself). Many Jews who come to the wall weep in mourning over the destruction of the Temple, which has given this site the name the Wailing Wall.

Judaism after the Temple

- From that point until the 20th century, the majority of the world's Jews lived in the Diaspora, a condition of scattering and dispersion around the world. During the two millennia that the Jews did not live in their holy land, and without their Temple, what held the community together?



Jerusalem's Wailing Wall is all that remains of the Second Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E.

- Although the Jews of the Diaspora still kept Jerusalem in their hearts and minds, the other center of Jewish life was the text—the Torah—which became the foundation for their traditions, laws, and rituals.
- After the destruction of the Temple, the authority of the priests and the practice of animal sacrifices were replaced by the authority of rabbis and the practices of prayer, Torah reading and study, and ethical behavior.

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- The rabbis engaged in a process of interpretation called midrash, which involves probing the deep meaning of biblical texts, filling in the gaps of stories in the Bible, and looking at subtexts and implications of passages. There are two areas of midrash: Halakah (covering the areas of law and custom) and Aggadah (narratives, history, folklore, and moral and practical advice).
- These discourses were eventually written down and brought together in the Mishnah around 200 C.E. Later rabbis' commentaries were organized and combined with the Mishnah to make the Talmud.
- The Talmud is essential for understanding the Torah and applying it to one's life. It presents an ongoing conversation and debate across space and time among rabbis in its pages, and the process continues among rabbis today.

Historical Treatment of Jews

- From the time of the fall of the Second Temple, Jews have lived in almost every part of the world, but they have typically managed to avoid being assimilated into the dominant cultures where they lived.
- The treatment of Jews has varied dramatically. In some cases, Jews were able to flourish, such as in Poland at times in the Middle Ages.
- Jews of Central and Eastern Europe are known as Ashkenazi Jews. Between the 11th and 19th centuries, Ashkenazi Jews migrated to areas further east, including Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Russia. The Ashkenazi Jews developed the language of Yiddish, which was a hybrid of German and Hebrew, written with the Hebrew alphabet.
- Jews flourished in other areas as well during certain historical periods, with one notable example being Islamic Spain. Jews who lived in Spain and Portugal, and their descendants, are known as Sephardi Jews. In addition to different points of origins,

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Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews differ in matters of ritual, food, and pronunciation of Hebrew.

- An influential Jewish thinker during the Middle Ages was Moses ben-Maimon, known by many Jews as Rambam. Born in Cordoba, Spain, in 1135, Rambam died in Egypt in 1204. His 14-volume *Mishneh Torah*, a codification of Jewish law and ethics, is still studied in yeshivas today.
- The mystical, esoteric expression of Judaism is generally referred to as Kabbalah, which found systematic expression first in the 11th-13th centuries and developed different forms later. The most important mystical text is *The Zohar*.
- A pattern that repeats itself countless times is one where Jews were all too often violently attacked. Even in places where they once thrived, like Poland and Spain, Jews eventually fell victim to changing currents. For example, in Poland, ruthless campaigns were conducted against Jews in the 15th century. In late 15th century Spain, after Christian rulers replaced Muslims, Jews were forcibly expelled.
- Anti-Semitism was pervasive throughout Europe in the Middle Ages and into the modern period, and Jews were exiled from many countries. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in Russia, many Jewish communities were victims of violent mob attacks known as pogroms, which aimed to assault and kill Jews and to destroy their businesses and synagogues.

The Holocaust and Zionism

- During World War II, the Holocaust resulted in the deaths of over half of the entire Jewish population of Europe, about 6 million people (over a third of all Jews in the world). In Hebrew, this is known as the Shoah, or "catastrophe." Yom HaShoah is a day to commemorate the Jews and others who died in the Holocaust.

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- Jewish theologians had to struggle with the Holocaust. Emil Fackenheim argued: "Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz, lest their memory perish. ... They are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish."
- The intensity of the Jewish commitment to "never forget" contributed strongly to the Zionist movement and the creation of the modern nation of Israel. In the late 19th century, Zionism grew into an organized political movement led by Theodor Herzl, an Austrian journalist.
- As an important part of this process, the language of Hebrew was revived in the 19th and 20th centuries as a language to be shared by returning Jews, who spoke a wide variety of languages in the Diaspora. This is the only known example from history of a language with no native speakers being consciously revived to become the native language of millions.
- Many Zionists were secular Jews, motivated not by any particular theological commitments but by the belief that Jews would never be fully secure until they had their own nation

Modern Jewish Groups

- Most Jews—other than completely secular Jews, who consider their Jewishness purely ethnic—fall into one of three groups: Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform.
- Orthodoxy is the form of Judaism that emphasizes closely following the revealed law contained in the Torah and Talmud as interpreted by the rabbis. One form of Orthodox Judaism is Chasidism, which was developed in 18th-century Eastern Europe.
- The movement was founded by Rabbi Israel ben-Eliezer, born in 1698 and known as the Master of the Good Name, Baal Shem Tov. This was the beginning of the tradition of the Tzaddik, or Rebbe.

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in Chasidism, a charismatic figure qualified to transmit a form of transformative mystical knowledge.

- Chasidic Jews find holiness in day-to-day life and highlight the sacredness of the ordinary. Hasidic men usually wear dark clothing, such as a long jacket and black hat, and often have long, uncut sideburns and beards.
- The modern Orthodox seek to combine observance of the law with a fuller integration into the modern world.
- Reform Judaism grew out of this 18th-century Enlightenment movement. It said that the laws of the Torah would be seen as guidelines that could be adjusted to modernity, not as binding obligations.
- One of the most significant transformations came in the role of women, as Reform Judaism has had women serving as rabbis since 1972. Reform Judaism has also embraced gays and lesbians, and gay rabbis have been ordained.
- Most Reform Jews do not keep kosher, do not strictly observe the Sabbath, and do not attend synagogue weekly. However, many Reform Jews do attend synagogue periodically, especially during the High Holy Days, and still practice important rituals and traditions.
- Conservative Jews affirm the authority of Jewish law but argue that its interpretation and application have always changed throughout history.

Suggested Reading

Atwood, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States.*
 Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews.*
 Dohff and Newman, *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader.*
 Fishbane, *Judaism: Revelation and Traditions.*
 Matlins and Magida, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger.*
 Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People.*
 Sharma, *Our Religions.*
 Smith, *The World's Religions.*
 Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures.*

Questions to Consider

1. In what ways have exile, Diaspora, pogroms, and the Holocaust shaped modern Judaism?
2. In what sense are Jerusalem and the Torah the two sacred centers of Judaism?
3. What are the main differences among Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism?

Notes

Living a Jewish Life

Lecture 15

During rituals and holidays, Jews tell stories—often communicating through actions and objects, such as through the arrangement of items on a plate or the construction of a booth. The spinning of a top and the lighting of candles also provide meaning. Some of these involve work, but the heart of the Jewish religious life is a day in which no work is done—the Sabbath.

The Sabbath

- The week for observant Jews is woven around Shabbat, or the Sabbath. It begins at sundown on Friday night and ends at sundown Saturday night.
- The Sabbath is celebrated at home with a special dinner on Friday night. Prayers are recited over the bread and the wine, and a special meal is eaten.
- Sabbath services are held in the synagogue on Friday evening, Saturday morning, and Saturday afternoon. Jewish Sabbath services generally feature reading and chanting from the Torah and the Prophets, congregational and private prayer, singing, and a sermon from the rabbi.
- The Sabbath day is for reflecting on the Torah, praying, and spending time with family and friends.
- Jews who observe the Sabbath avoid work related to their professions and do not use modern conveniences like electricity, ovens, the telephone, and traveling by any method other than walking; there are exceptions made for emergencies.

Lecture 15: Living a Jewish Life

Notes

- Jewish law guides all daily activities, providing boundaries on what is acceptable to eat, wear, and say. Throughout the day, one should offer prayers of gratitude for every blessing.
- Purity was and remains a central concern. Among the Orthodox especially, the mikvah, a ritual bath used for purification, is of great importance.

Prayer Rituals

- As part of the prayer rituals, some Jews keep their heads covered with a kippa or cap (called a yarmulke in Yiddish). Women will sometimes cover with a headscarf, and many Orthodox women will wear a wig.
- Observant traditional Jews pray three times daily, wearing a tallit, or prayer shawl. For weekday morning prayers, men (and some women) put on tfillin ("phylacteries") consisting of two small leather boxes containing verses from the Bible, including the Shema. One box is tied on the forehead and the other on the upper left arm close to the heart.
- Jews will attach a mezuzah, a piece of parchment on which is written the Shema, over their doorframe, contained in a decorative case. Some Jews hang a mezuzah in front of every room of the house (except the bathroom), while others place it only in front of the main entrance.
- Among Jewish symbols is the Star of David. The six pointed star composed of two triangles is said to represent the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

Allowable and Prohibited Foods

- The issue of kosher food will be important if you dine with Jewish friends who keep kosher. The laws of kashrut, or kosher laws, fall into three general areas.

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- The Torah defines certain animals as unclean and forbidden to eat. Cows and sheep are permissible, but rabbits and all pig products are not. Poultry is permitted, and fish with gills and fins are permitted, but not shellfish.
- If the animal is permitted for food, Jewish kosher slaughter practices ensure that blood is separated from meat. Practices such as soaking and salting the meat are used for this purpose.
- Kosher laws do not allow mixing meat and dairy, and there is a separation of dishes and utensils used for meat and those used for dairy. All foods outside the category of meat or dairy are considered parve, or neutral, and can be eaten with either meat or dairy.
- Some Jews are beginning to argue that the best way to honor the intent of kosher laws, which promote care and compassion for animals, is to eat a vegetarian diet.

Holidays and Festivals

- Jewish High Holy Days begin with the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, in September or October. During Rosh Hashanah and throughout the High Holy Days that culminate in Yom Kippur, Jews reflect on their deeds of the previous year, stand before God's judgment, and commit themselves to righteous living.
- At the Rosh Hashanah service, a shofar (ram's horn trumpet) is blown to usher in the holidays. It is said that the shofar wakes up those who are sleeping and reminds people that they stand before God.
- Ten days after Rosh Hashanah comes the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. The main purpose of this day is to atone for one's transgressions. Jews are expected to engage in introspection, ask for forgiveness from God, and ask for forgiveness from those they may have wronged.

- There are many other holidays in the Jewish year. The four most popular and commonly observed are Passover, Sukkot, Chanukah, and Purim, the latter two which commemorate triumphant events in Jewish history. An all purpose greeting is "Chag Sameach," which basically means "Happy Holiday."
- One of the most widely celebrated holidays is Passover, or Pesach. The focus is the retelling of the story of the liberation of Israelite slaves from the land of Egypt. The holiday is celebrated for seven or eight days, with the primary celebratory meals occurring on the first two nights.
- The heart of the Passover celebration is the Seder, a meal at which the Exodus story is told and sung, and symbolic foods are consumed. Passover Seders are family get-togethers, and everyone at the table gets a Passover Haggadah, which gives everyone the text from which to read.
- On the center of the table is a Seder plate that contains symbolic foods. The most well-known is matzoh, unleavened bread, which is eaten throughout the holiday. According to tradition, when the Israelites were fleeing the Egyptians, they did not have time to let their bread rise but ate it flat. For that reason, throughout Passover Jews do not eat any bread, cookies, pasta, or other leavened items.
- There are a number of other symbolic items on the Seder plate, including bitter herbs (maror), as well as charoset, a mixture of nuts and fruit. There is also a shank bone, which represents the sacrificial lamb.
- Sukkot is a week-long fall harvest festival, occurring in late September or October, commemorating the journey of the Israelites in the desert after escaping from Egypt. The main theme of the holiday is the need for Jews to maintain their commitment to their tradition.

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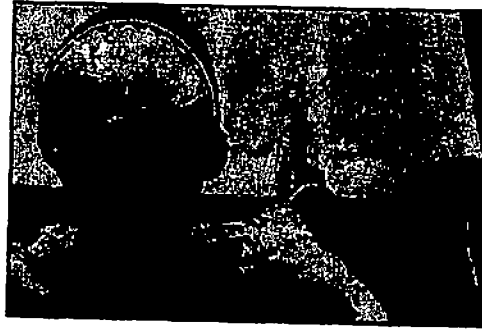
- Chanukah is celebrated for eight days, and its main symbol is an eight-branched candelabrum called a menorah (or Chanukiya) with a ninth branch usually elevated above the other eight to hold the candle that will light the others. Jewish families place the Chanukiya in a window so that everyone can share in the celebration.
- Because of the importance of oil to this holiday, foods cooked and fried in oil (such as filled donuts) are traditionally eaten on Chanukah. One popular Chanukah food is the potato pancake, known as a latke.
- A popular Chanukah game involves playing with a top, called a dreidel, which has a Hebrew letter on each side. Chanukah has become the major gift-giving holiday among American Jews; in some families, gifts are given on each of the eight nights.
- Purim, the Festival of Lots, celebrates the deliverance of the Jews from a plot to destroy them. This is a joyous, celebratory holiday with a sense of drama. The foods associated with Purim include cookies called hamantaschen shaped like triangles and filled with sweet paste.

The Major Life Events

- Along with the rhythms of the week and the year, the Jews follow a sacred timeline for a human life. There are four main events marked by rites of passage: birth, coming of age, marriage, and death.
- The ritual associated with birth is the circumcision of a male baby on the eighth day of its life, an event called a bris. At this ritual, a Hebrew name is chosen, and most Jews throughout the world have a Hebrew name in addition to their given names. A ceremony called a simchat bat ("celebration of the daughter"), in which a baby girl receives her Hebrew name, is celebrated among some Jewish communities.

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- The ceremony in which a Jewish child takes on responsibility for his or her actions, becoming a "son or daughter of the commandments," is the Bar or Bat Mitzvah. A Bar or Bat Mitzvah usually occurs when the child is 13 years old but



A Jewish child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah is a religious rite of passage that marks the transition from childhood to adulthood.

can occur any time after that. The essence of the ceremony is that the child leads the service in the synagogue and chants a Torah and Haftarah portion in Hebrew.

- The next important life-cycle event is marriage. When a couple plans to marry, they receive a ketubah, which is a wedding contract specifying rights and obligations.
- Jewish marriage occurs under a canopy, called a chuppah, which symbolizes the new home being created by the couple. The bride often walks around the groom seven times when she enters the chuppah.
- The second distinctive element of the Jewish marriage ceremony is the seven blessings, which are said by the rabbi or invited guests. These celebrate God's creation of the universe, humanity, the fruit of the vine, and so on.
- At the end of the ceremony, the groom stomps on a glass and breaks it. The guests all shout, "mazel tov" ("good luck").

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Jewish Death Rituals

- On the news of the death of a loved one, it is customary to tear or cut an article of clothing, symbolizing the need to accept the permanent separation. The body of the deceased is washed and dressed, and burial societies specialize in the preparation of the corpse.
- In the Jewish tradition, the body is to be buried as quickly as possible after death. Traditional Jews do not practice embalming and therefore do not have open caskets at funerals.
- One notable Jewish practice is that mourners come to the graveside to pour shovelfuls of dirt over the casket. This practice, seen as a last act of care, is said to provide a sense of closure, which can help with the mourning process.
- Following the death, there is a weeklong mourning period called "sitting shiva" (the Jewish word for seven). Members of the immediate family receive visitors in their home. Friends and members of the community visit, bring food, and sit and talk. Traditionally, visitors will wait for the mourners to talk before talking. Mourners traditionally do not shower or bathe, shave, wear jewelry or leather shoes. Some mourners sit on low stools or the floor, which symbolizes their emotional state.

Suggested Reading

- Atwood, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*.
Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews*.
Dorff and Newman, *Contemporary Jewish Theology*.
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Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People*.
Sharma, *Our Religions*.
Smith, *The World's Religions*.
Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*.

Questions to Consider

1. What does the word Passover refer to, and what do some of the foods of the Seder meal symbolize?
2. In our work-driven society, what would you think of putting all work aside for a whole day every week for rest, worship, and family?
3. In what ways do your religious or ethical commitments influence what you will or will not eat?

Notes

Walking towards the setting sun, we

came to the Mount of Olives, a great sprawl of tombs and gravestones, and there at our feet lay Jerusalem.

She is a jewel, that city, small and brilliant and hard, and as dangerous as any valuable thing can be. Built in the Judean hill country at the meeting place of three valleys—the Kidron, the Hinnom, and the long-buried Tyropœon—Jerusalem had moved uphill from the year-round spring that had made her existence possible. When I first laid eyes on her, some of her structures were already thousands of years old. It was 401 years since the Turks took the city, 820 years since the Crusaders under Godfrey of Bouillon had slaughtered every Moslem and Jew within the walls (and a good number of unrecognised native Christians as well), eighteen and a half centuries since the Romans had last razed her stones to the ground, and still she rose up within her snug, high walls, a nest of stone set to nurture the holy places of three faiths, a tight jumble of domes, minarets, and towers, dominated from this side by the flat expanse of the Temple Mount, the holy place called by Arabs Haram es-Sherif, the largest open space in the city, a garden of worship set with tombs and mosques and the enormous, glittering, mosaic and gilded glory of the Dome of the Rock.

Built towards the end of the seventh century, the Dome of the Rock cost its builders the equivalent of seven years' revenue from all of Egypt. It is constructed as an octagon of three concentric stages, at the heart of which lies the Rock, an uneven grey slab some forty-five feet by sixty. If Jerusalem is the *umbilicus mundi*—the umbilicus of the world—then the sacred Rock is the heart that drives the life-blood through the umbilical cord. The Talmud declares that the Rock is the earth's very centre. Here the priest Melchizedek offered sacrifice, here Abraham bound Isaac in preparation for offering his beloved son's throat to God, and from this place Mohammed entered heaven on the back of his mighty steed, al-Burak. The Ark of the Covenant rested

on the Rock, and tradition maintains that it still lies buried beneath, hidden there by Jeremiah as the enemy entered the city gates. The Rock bears the imprints of the angel Gabriel's fingers and the Prophet Mohammed's foot, and ancient legend has the Rock hovering over the waters of the great Flood, or resting on a palm tree watered by the rivers of paradise, or guarding the gates of hell. In a small cave beneath the Rock, benches mark where David and Solomon, Abraham and Elijah all prayed; in the Time of Judgement, God's throne will be planted upon it. The Rock had been a sacred place to humankind back through the dim reaches of memory, and would continue to be so when the city before me had been buried yet again—either by the forces of destruction, or through being built up beyond recognition.