

Frequently Asked Questions about Judaism

These FAQ's are meant to provide the reader with a brief introduction to the religion of Judaism. FAQ's on Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam are also available. They are provided as a service of Peak Communication Performance, a consultancy firm specializing in cross-cultural management and communication issues. Contact: info@peakcp.com

Who is the founder?

Abraham is considered to be the founding Patriarch of Judaism. Judaism began around 1300 B.C.E.

Where are the adherents of Judaism?

Israel has approximately 4.5 million Jews. North America has approximately 6 million Jews. France has 550,000 Jews, Russia has 375,000 and Great Britain approximately 300,000. There are 14 million Jews worldwide. Judaism accounts for approximately 2% of the world's population.

What do Jews believe?

The most basic teaching of Judaism is belief in one God (monotheism). This is the opening sentence of the **Shema**, a prayer which Jews recite every morning and evening.

Jews understand their relationship with God in terms of covenant. A covenant is an arrangement whereby two or more parties agree to look after each other's interests so that they all benefit.

The Bible describes how God made a covenant with Abraham, the first Jew. Later, at Mount Sinai, the Israelites entered into a covenant with God

The first five books of the Bible (The Five Books of Moses) contain the basic rules i.e. "**Mitzvot**" that God wants the Jews to keep. These books, which Jews call the **Torah** are their most sacred possession. The Torah is a testimony to the cov-

enant, it is the document on which the agreement is written.

The word **mitzvah** (plural **mitzvot**) means 'commandment'. Jews use this term when speaking of the rules that God wants them to keep

There are 613 mitzvot; 248 are positive commandments, i.e. things Jews are commanded to do, and 365 are negative commandments i.e. those things Jews are commanded not to do. The Bible describes how God gave these commandments to Moses, who taught them to the Israelites in the desert. The well-known Ten Commandments are part of these 613.

Are there different sects of Judaism?

Judaism doesn't have different sects, although some Jews are described as more conservative or orthodox.

What are religious leaders called?

Religious leaders in Judaism are called **rabbis** (teachers).

What is the holy text of Judaism?

The Scriptures are written mainly in Hebrew. Jews divide the written Torah into three sections:

Torah—The Five Books of Moses form the first part of the Bible. These books contain the commandments and the ethical ideals of the Jewish people, set in a historical framework.

Nevi'im (The Books Of The Prophets)—The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings continue the history of Israel from the death of Moses. These books are deeply concerned with moral ideals, which are taught in a historical setting.

Also in this section are the three

long books of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, as well as the twelve much shorter books of other prophets. These books are mainly concerned with teaching faith, justice and compassion.

Ketuvim (Holy Writings)—The books in this section are rather varied. They will have either historical (i.e. Esther), liturgical (i.e. Psalms), or philosophical (i.e. Job) content.

What are the holy places in Judaism and why are they special?

The Western Wall in Jerusalem has special significance for Jews because it is the remaining part of the second temple, destroyed in 70 CE.

Where does a Jew worship?

A Jewish house of worship is called a synagogue. A large range of activities takes place in synagogue buildings and so it would also be correct to think of them as community centers.

How does one worship?

Each week Jews have a day of rest known as the Sabbath. Jews usually call it **Shabbat**. **Shabbat** begins at sunset on Friday and lasts until Saturday night when the stars appear.

Each day there are three services in the synagogue: **shacharit**, the morning prayer, **minchah**, the afternoon prayer, and **arvit**, the evening prayer.

In the synagogue, the times of these prayers coincide with the times when Jews used to offer sacrifices in the ancient Temple.

The most important Jewish prayer is the **Shema**. It contains three paragraphs: Deuteronomy 6:4-9

and 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41. The opening sentence declares the oneness of God. In the rest of the Shema Jews accept God as their king and pledge themselves to fulfil His commands. The Shema is recited in the morning and evening services. It is also part of the final prayer aid before going to bed at night.

During the morning services Tephilin (phylacteries) and the Tallit (prayer shawl) are donned.

On Shabbat and festivals the Torah is read in the synagogue. It is also read on Monday and Thursday mornings.

Many parts of these services, and all Torah readings, require the presence of ten Jewish males over the age of 13. This is called a **minyan** (required number). Without a minyan the set prayers may be said, but certain parts are omitted.

Are there any special dietary practices?

The food Jewish people are permitted to eat is known as **kosher**. Kosher means 'fitting', or 'correct'. From this we get the word **Kashrut**, the state of being kosher. Forbidden food is known as **terefah**. Animals that are kosher must have a cloven hoof and chew their cud. Like Muslims, Jews must refrain from eating pork. Animals must also be killed in a special way, and all their blood must be removed before the meat may be eaten by Jews. Shellfish are also terefah. Some people think that kosher food is food which a rabbi has blessed. This is mistaken.

What are the special days or times of the year?

Rosh Hashanah (New Year) and **Yom Kippur** (the Day of Atonement) ten days later are known as the Days of Awe. Some Jews also refer to them as the High Holydays. Jews think of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as two stages in the process of judgment and atonement.

Yom Kippur (The Day Of Atonement)—Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the Jewish year. Jews pray five times on Yom Kippur. The services include a reading of the Torah which discusses the Yom Kippur service in the Temple.

The day's prayers conclude with **N'eilah**, 'the closing of the gates', the final service before the decrees made by God on Rosh Hashanah are sealed.

Pesach (Passover)—God commanded the Israelites to mark their freedom from the bondage of Egypt with an annual festival. During this festival, to be called Pesach, they were neither to eat nor to possess grain products or any leavening substances.

Shavuot (Weeks)—Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, seven weeks after the departure from Egypt. Jews regard this as the most important event in the history of the human race.

Sukkot (Tabernacles)—A **sukkah** (plural **sukkot**) is a dwelling whose roof is a covering of leaves. When the Israelites left Egypt, they needed some form of shelter in the desert. Each time they encamped at an oasis they built small huts and covered them with leaves from the palm trees.

Today, Jews commemorate their ancestors' trek through the desert by building **sukkot** and living in them for an entire week.

Simhat Torah (The Rejoicing Of The Torah)—The day following Sukkot is Simhat Torah (the Rejoicing of the Torah). It is the day when Torah readings in the synagogue end and begin again.

Hanukah—Hanukah (Dedication) is an eight-day celebration which occurs in midwinter. It marks the victory of a small army of Jews over the overwhelming forces of the Syrian Greeks nearly 22 centuries ago.

The enemy the Jews fought was a king who wanted to force them to change their religion.

Purim—Purim, celebrated in late winter, marks the success of Esther in saving her people from annihilation by Haman, the minister of King Xerxes.

Chanukah and **Purim** are not mentioned in the Torah. Jews celebrate them because of important events which the rabbis of long ago decided to commemorate. For this reason they are known as celebrations 'of the rabbis'.

Tisha B'av—There have been two Jewish Temples. The first was built by King Solomon in Jerusalem about 29 centuries ago. It was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The second Temple, built on the same site, was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. For the last 19 centuries Jews have prayed daily for its restoration. Both these Temples were destroyed on the 9th (of the month) of AV.

What are some of the rituals of Judaism?

Birth—Circumcision marks the entry of Jewish males into the covenant between God and the Jewish people. It is performed by a **mohel** (trained for this purpose) the eighth day after birth.

Bar And Bat Mitzvah—Are rites of passage into adulthood. For boys (**Bar Mitzvah**) the ceremony occurs at age 13. For girls (**Bat Mitzvah**), the ceremony occurs at age 12.

Marriage—Jewish weddings always take place under a "**Chupah**", a canopy held up by four poles. The **Chupah** is a symbol of harmony. The couple stands under it as though entering their own home.

The wedding ceremony includes the "**Erussin**" (which consists of two

blessings)

The reading of the **ketubah** (marriage contract) which is a statement of the husband intention to feed, clothe and care for his wife. After the ceremony the groom breaks a glass with his foot. This is to call to mind that no joy is complete as long as the Jewish people are in exile and the Temple is not rebuilt.

Death— Judaism regards excessive or prolonged mourning as undesirable. The Jewish mourning customs help people gradually to phase out their grief. By the time a year has gone by most people will no longer be actively grieving. As soon as a doctor has issued a death certificate, members of the **Chevra Kaddisha** (burial society) will prepare the body for burial. The body is wrapped in a plain linen shroud, and men are usually buried wearing the tallit in which they prayed during life. Once the body is ready it is placed in a simple, unpolished wooden box with no brass handles or internal padding.

What happens to someone after they die?

Jews think of life and death as different stages of existence. They think of people as being put into the world to fulfill a mission. Depending on the success of this mission, God either rewards or punishes the individual. Reward is understood as closeness to God; punishment is thought of as a cleansing process. Jews do not believe in hell as a place of everlasting torments. The Jewish hell is a kind of laundry, a process by which souls are cleanse of their sins so that they can eventually enter the presence of God.

Are there any similarities between Judaism and other religions?

Jesus Christ was a Jew. Jews and Christians share a common holy text; the old testament of the bible. Jews and Muslims recognize many of the same prophets.