

More than food, family and festivals

Judaism is the name of the religion, and its followers are known as Jews. Judaism began around 4,000 years ago in the Middle East (where Africa, Asia and Europe meet when the Prophet Abraham received a vision from God. Jews believe that there is only one God, with whom they have a special agreement called a covenant.



The story of the call of Abraham is found in chapters 11 and 12 of Genesis, and Abraham is considered the first patriarch of the Jewish people. Before his call, Abram (as he was originally known) and his wife Sarai (who later became known as Sarah) were old and childless. Abraham was 75 when he left his home and he became the first to teach the idea of one God (monotheism). As a result of his response to God, he became 'Abraham' which means 'Father of the people'. God promised Abraham that he would become the father of a great nation. This is known as the Abrahamic covenant (the promise God made to Abraham). Following this, at the age of 75, Abraham and his wife made the journey to Canaan (modern day Palestine, Syria and Israel). Here God blessed them with a child, Isaac. Abraham is known as the father of Judaism.

The covenant with Moses

Over a thousand years after Abraham's death, the Jews were living as slaves in Egypt. Jews believe that God chose the prophet Moses to lead them out of slavery and to the Promised Land. The escape of the Jews from Egypt is recounted in the Book of Exodus and is remembered by Jews every year in the festival of Passover.

Moses leads the Hebrew slaves to freedom. Moses was born to a Hebrew slave in Egypt but was brought up in the Pharaoh's household. He was expelled from Egypt after murdering an Egyptian who was being cruel to a Hebrew slave, but returned when commanded by God to lead the Hebrew slaves to freedom in the Promised Land.

God sent Moses to try to convince the Pharaoh to let the enslaved Jewish people go. After the loss of his first-born son, the Pharaoh finally agreed to let the Jewish people go. But he soon changed his mind, sending his army after the fleeing Jews. It was then that God parted the Red Sea allowing the Jews to pass before bringing the water back down onto the Pharaoh's men. God, who had promised Abraham that he would look after the Jewish people, is believed to have fulfilled his covenant by helping the Jews to escape from slavery in Egypt in this way. When Moses and his people reached Mount Sinai on the way to the Promised Land, God spoke to Moses. It was there that God made a covenant with Moses and the Jewish people that renewed the one he had made with Abraham. At the same time, God gave the Jews the Ten Commandments - a set of rules by which they should live.

Key terms

- Afterlife - Life after death.
- Benevolent – kind.
- Exodus – The Jewish escape from slavery under the pharaoh led by Moses.
- Genesis - The first book of the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) describing the 6 days of creation, God rested on the 7th day.
- Heaven - A place, or a state of mind, associated with God and the afterlife.
- Hell - A place or state of torment and punishment for those who have done wrong.
- Monotheist – Belief that there is only one God.
- Mortal - Being subject to death.
- Nicene Creed – A set of beliefs that ALL Christians have.
- Omnipotent – All powerful.
- Original sin - The transference of Adam and Eve's breach of God's trust to all of humanity.
- Purgatory - Purely Catholic belief. Where the soul goes to be cleansed of sin before going to Heaven.
- Qur'an - Muslim religious book
- Seal of Prophets – The title given to the Muslim prophet Muhammad.
- Terevah – Hebrew for forbidden (like haram in Islam).
- Ummah – the community of Islam (like the idea of the Church in Christianity).



What is the Torah?

The Torah is considered by Jews to be the holiest part of the Tenakh (Jewish scriptures). It was given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Because of this, many Jews see it as the direct word of God.

The Torah contains the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

The Torah contains many laws that guide Jews on how to live a life that pleases God. The Torah contains 613 laws. These are known by Jews as the mitzvot. Jews use the Torah as a guide for living. The Torah is read three times every week: on Mondays and Thursdays small sections are read and on Saturday (the Jewish holy day) a larger section is read. Over a year, the whole scroll is read. This is repeated each year.



Shabbat

The fourth of the Ten Commandments tells Jews that they must keep the Sabbath day holy (Exodus 20:8–10). To fulfil this commandment, Jews treat the period from sunset on Friday until sunset on Saturday as a weekly day of rest. This is called Shabbat. If the scriptures are interpreted strictly, no work, including tasks such as cooking and driving, should be done during this time.

The idea of a day of rest comes from the story of Creation in the Book of Genesis. After creating the universe over the course of six days, God rested on the seventh day. Shabbat is part of the deal between God and the Jewish people, so celebrating it is a reminder of the covenant and an occasion to rejoice in God's kept promises.

Pesach

Pesach, sometimes called Passover, is one of the most important Jewish festivals.

Jews remember how the Israelites left slavery behind them when Moses led them out of Egypt more than 3000 years ago.

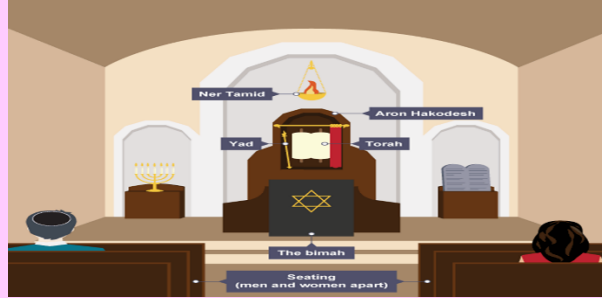
Moses went to see the Pharaoh many times, but each time he refused to release the Israelites. Moses warned the Pharaoh that God would send ten plagues on Egypt if the Pharaoh did not let them go.

The ten plagues were: water turned into blood, frogs, gnats, flies, and blight of the livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness and the death of each first-born child.



Kosher

The term kosher refers to foods which Jews are allowed to eat. Kosher means fit, and is the label used for all foods that Jews are permitted to eat. Kosher foods include: all, fruit, all vegetables, animals with split hooves that also chew the cud, some birds, eg chicken, duck, turkey are favoured, but birds of prey are prohibited, fish that have both fins and scales. Anything that is forbidden is known as tereifah or forbidden. Animals will only be considered kosher if they have been slaughtered in a certain way. They have to be slaughtered in a way that causes the least amount of pain to the animal. A rabbi must inspect the animals before they are killed and watch while it happens and then inspect the meat afterwards. This is to make sure that everything is done correctly and that there is nothing wrong with the meat. All the blood must be drained away. Jews don't eat meat without letting all the blood drip out of it first.



Internal features of a synagogue

All synagogues will be slightly different in design. Despite this, there will be many features common to all synagogues which represent the teachings and beliefs of the religion.

Aron Hakodesh (the ark) - where the Torah is kept, a cupboard, and will often have a curtain or door.

Ner Tamid – at the front of the synagogue above the ark, a lamp that is continuously kept burning and should not be allowed to go out.

The bimah - the raised platform found in the synagogue where the Torah is read. It is situated at the front, near to the ark..

The Ten Commandments - are read aloud in the synagogue three times a year, as well as during the festival of Shavuot.

Bitter herbs - such as romaine lettuce and endive. These represent the bitterness of slavery.

Beitzah - a hard-boiled egg as a symbol of mourning. This is to remember the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. It also has another meaning. Food usually becomes soft when cooked, but eggs become harder, so the egg is a symbol of the Jews' determination to keep their faith.

Charoset - A sweet brown paste made of fruit and nuts. This represents the mortar that the Israelites used for building bricks when they were slaves in Egypt.

Maror - Bitter herbs which are often made from horseradish. Like the Charoset, they are a symbol of the bitter suffering of the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt.

Karpas - Celery stalks or parsley are dipped into a little bowl of salted water during the Seder. Karpas is a symbol of the spring harvest and the salty water represents the Israelites' tears when they were slaves.

Z'roa - A lamb bone which represents the lamb that was sacrificed and brought to the temple the night before the Israelites left Egypt.

