

Frequently Asked Questions about Judaism

Thank you for visiting the Jewish Museum Milwaukee website. Our visitors often have questions about Judaism, so we have compiled a short list of questions and answers that you may find of interest. Questions are central to Jewish life, and Jews never really stop questioning. The answers provided below are just a glimpse of Jewish belief, and we urge you to consult more sources to learn even more answers to your questions. Please feel free to email us with more questions and feedback at educator@milwaukeejewish.org

LAWS AND CUSTOMS

Q: What is the Torah?

A: The Torah is the central book of the Jewish people. According to tradition, the Torah was given to the Jews from God on Mount Sinai. The Torah contains the history of the Jewish people, traditions and laws. Sometimes the Torah is called the “Tree of Life.” There are five books of the Torah:

- **B’reshit** - Genesis “In the beginning”
- **Sh’mot** - Exodus “The names of...”
- **Vayyikra** - Leviticus “...called”
- **Bemidbar** - Numbers “In the wilderness”
- **D’varim** - Deuteronomy “The words”

Q: What is Jewish law?

A: Jewish law is complicated because not all of the rules followed by Jews today are clearly written in the Torah. Instead, many laws are the interpretations of the Torah by scholarly rabbis. These interpretations are written in the Talmud, which is still studied and analyzed along with the Torah today. Therefore, when the term “Jewish law” is used, it does not necessarily equal “Biblical law.”

Q: What does *Shabbat Shalom* mean?

A: *Shabbat Shalom* is a common Shabbat greeting among Jews. *Shabbat* is the Jewish Sabbath, or day of rest. It starts on Friday night at sundown and extends until Saturday night at sundown. *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for “peace,” “hello,” and “goodbye.” *Shabbat Shalom* translates into “Good Sabbath”, “Sabbath Peace,” or “Happy Sabbath.”

Q: Why do some men wear a *kippah*, while others do not?

A: Many Orthodox and Conservative Jews cover their heads out of respect for God. More observant Jews believe that their heads should be covered at all times, while some Jews believe that the heads have to be covered only during prayer. Other, less observant, Jews consider wearing *kippot* during prayer optional.

ORIGINS AND DENOMINATIONS

Q: What are the origins of Judaism?

A: Jews trace their religion back to Abraham and his wife, Sarah. Abraham challenged the polytheistic beliefs of his father and the rest of Mediterranean culture around 1800 B.C.E. According to the Torah, God spoke to Abraham and commanded him to believe in one God and to live righteously. In exchange, God promised to make Abraham's descendants a great nation living in the land of Canaan. Abraham, therefore, is the patriarch of the Jewish people.

Q: Who was Moses? Was he the equivalent of Jesus for Christians?

A: Moses was an Israelite living in Egypt with other Israelites. A new pharaoh had come to power who disliked the Israelites and feared that they would become too strong. The Pharaoh decreed that all male Israelites would be killed. One mother, Yochevet, hid her baby boy, Moses, and sent him into the Nile River in a basket. Moses was found by the pharaoh's daughter, brought to the royal court, and raised as a prince of Egypt. With God's instructions, Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt back to the land of Canaan. This is the central saga of the Jewish people and is related in the book of Exodus. After fleeing Egypt, Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness. God gave Moses the Torah and Ten Commandments on Sinai.

Moses was one of many Jewish prophets over the centuries. In Judaism, prophets are not considered holy agents of God, as Christians regard Jesus. Instead, Jews consider prophets to be teachers who serve as examples to others: they are not a part of God any more than other Jews, but they help to convey God's messages to the Jews. Most Jews consider the age of prophecy to be over.

Q: What are the denominations in Judaism?

A: Judaism has a number of denominations in which religion is practiced in distinct ways. Members of these denominations share some common beliefs, but there are important distinctions as well.

- **Reform-** Reform Jews are connected to their Jewish heritage, but have modernized laws and traditional practices to conform to the experiences of modern daily life. The Reform movement started in Germany in the 19th century, as Jews started to assimilate into mainstream society. As an example of Reform

practice, Reform synagogues today may use musical instruments on Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath or day of rest, such as a guitar or piano, to make services more enjoyable. (In more traditional congregations, instruments are not played.) Jews from the Reform movement are willing to alter Torah laws to fit modern times. What particularly defines Reform Jews is the individual autonomy within the movement that allows congregants to choose what laws they wish to uphold and practice.

- **Conservative** – Conservative Jews believe that the Torah and other Jewish scriptures came from God, but were transmitted by man and thus contain a human component. Conservative Jews accept Jewish law or *mitzvot*, but believe that laws can be adapted, absorbing modern culture, while remaining faithful to core Jewish values. Conservative Jewish practice revolves around the values of Torah study, belief in God, Jewish Law, *Halakha*, Hebrew as the Jewish language of expression, the importance of Modern Israel, and devotion to world Jewry.
- **Orthodox** - Orthodox Jews believe that the Torah is the direct word of God, and God alone, without human influences. Orthodox Jews often go beyond the written laws of the Torah, relying upon additional rabbinic interpretation of these laws that is set forth in the Talmud. Jews from the Orthodox movement may dress more traditionally. For example, men often wear a kippah, a round headcovering or skullcap, and a tzitzit, a fringed prayer shawl, in public. Women wear long skirts and shirts past their elbows to show modesty and respect. Many Orthodox Jews are strict in their observance of Shabbat. For example, an Orthodox Jew considers playing an instrument in synagogue on Shabbat inappropriate. One must also realize, however, that not all Orthodox Jews are equally traditional. There is a spectrum of observance within Orthodox Judaism; some Orthodox Jews are more modern in their practices.
- **Reconstructionist** - The Reconstructionist movement is a modern branch of Judaism that developed in the United States based on the teachings of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. Reconstructionist Jews view Torah and Jewish teachings as a form of guidance, not absolute law. They believe that, as Jewish civilization has adapted to new situations throughout history, it also must continue to adapt to life in the modern era.

JEWISH LIFECYCLE EVENTS

Q: What is a circumcision or *bris*?

A: A *bris* or *brit milah* is the ceremony in which a male Jew is circumcised. The *bris* is a covenant between God and the Jewish people. The first *bris* occurred when God spoke to Abraham and commanded him to be circumcised: “And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and that will serve as a sign of the Covenant between Me and you,” (Genesis 17:11). Jewish boys are circumcised eight days after they are born according to Biblical law.

Q: What is a Bar Mitzvah?

A: *Bar Mitzvah* literally means “son of the commandment.” Similarly, *Bat Mitzvah* means “daughter of the commandment.” At the age of 13 for boys and 12 for girls, young adults are obligated to observe the commandments of the Torah as adult Jews. In Reform and Conservative synagogues, girls can have a Bat Mitzvah, but this is a relatively recent development. Most Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies are marked by the young adult reading from the Torah or participating in services in some other way, but this is not required. Many people think of parties when they hear about a Bar Mitzvah. The concept of a party after the ceremony is a more modern idea.

Q: Why are Jewish weddings held under a canopy or tent?

A: Jewish weddings occur under a *chupah*, or wedding canopy, made out of a fine cloth and supported by four poles. There are many explanations for this tradition. It represents the house the bride and groom will inhabit together, or perhaps the nomadic tent life of the ancient Israelites. It is interesting to note that Bedouin tribes in the Middle East also use canopies during weddings.

Q: Why does the groom break a glass during the wedding ceremony?

A: At the end of the Jewish marriage ceremony, the groom breaks a glass, making a loud noise. There are several possible reasons for this ritual. The breaking of the glass serves as a reminder of the sadness and despair for the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. It also symbolizes the sorrow that goes hand-in-hand with life’s joys. A third explanation is that the noise from the glass breaking was meant to frighten evil spirits away from the festive gathering.

Q: Why do Jews mourn their dead for seven days?

A: The seven-day mourning period, called *Shiva* (seven) in Hebrew, is only the first part of a thirty day mourning period. During *Shiva*, friends and family members come to the home of the deceased to comfort the immediate family. It serves as a time for those mourning to grieve together before starting to adjust to life without their loved one. Visitors paying condolences bring food for the mourners, and listen to them speak. Visitors also come to the house of mourning so that services can be held to mourn the dead. Traditional households in mourning cover all the mirrors in the house, and the mourners refrain from bathing, shaving, and cutting their hair. This is done so that they can give full attention to their internal grief and loss.

HEBREW AND LANGUAGE

Q: Why is Hebrew read from right to left?

A: There is no simple answer to this question. One possible explanation is that most people were right handed in biblical times and so it would have been easier to chisel

letters out of stone if they went from right to left. Other Mediterranean languages during this ancient period also read from right to left.

Q: What is the difference between Hebrew and Yiddish?

A: Yiddish is a language that evolved from biblical Hebrew during the medieval era in Europe, with predominantly German influences. By the 1850s, many of the Jews in Western Europe had stopped speaking Yiddish in order to integrate into mainstream society. Yiddish continued in Western Europe and among Jewish immigrants to the United States, where it still lives today, because some Jews continued to speak Yiddish in their homes and passed it on to their children.

Hebrew's roots can be traced back to biblical times. Hebrew was the language of liturgy and prayers, but was not a spoken language for thousands of years. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hebrew experienced a revival which led to the development of the Modern Hebrew language. David Ben Yehudah, a prominent Zionist in his time, created new Hebrew vocabulary to fit modern needs. This language is spoken today in Israel.

JEWISH HOLIDAYS

Q: What are the major Jewish holidays? What is their significance?

A: Judaism has many holidays, but some are more important than others.

- The most important Jewish holiday is often overlooked because it occurs weekly. **Shabbat**, the Jewish Sabbath, starts every Friday night and extends until the following night at sundown. Shabbat is meant to be a day of rest, since God rested on the seventh day of creation. For this reason, more observant Jews refrain from doing work of any kind on Shabbat. Traditionally a Shabbat dinner is shared with family and friends on Friday night. A special blessing is said over the wine and challah (bread). On Shabbat, many Jews go to services at synagogue or temple.
- **The High Holidays**, the holiest days of the year, are Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. **Rosh Hashanah** is the Jewish New Year. During Rosh Hashanah, Jews go to services and pray. Rosh Hashanah begins the process of repenting for sins of the past year. After Rosh Hashanah, there is a ten day period when Jews seek forgiveness from those they have offended in the past year.
- **Yom Kippur**, the Day of Atonement, begins on the tenth night of the New Year. Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year. Jews fast for twenty four hours on Yom Kippur so that they are not distracted from prayer by food or other frivolities. It is said that on Rosh Hashanah God can write one's name in the Book of Life if one is holy and good: on Rosh Hashanah the Book is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

- **Pesach** (Passover): Passover celebrates the escape of the Israelite slaves from slavery in Egypt. The holiday is eight days long. On the first two nights, families and friends gather together for a ritual dinner called a Seder, during which the story of the escape from slavery is retold. During Passover, Jews refrain from eating leavened bread. Instead, Jews eat matzah, cracker-like bread made from water and wheat. This custom is a direct Biblical commandment found in the Torah. The matzah reminds the Jews that when they hurried out of Egypt, they had no time for the dough to rise.
- **Shavuot**, Shavuot (Feast of Weeks, Pentecost) occurs forty-nine days after the second Seder. It commemorates the receiving of the Torah from God on Mount Sinai.
- **Sukkot**: Sukkot is a harvest holiday. Sukkot commemorates the forty-year journey through the desert taken by the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land of Israel. Jews build a small hut called a sukkah to represent the temporary dwellings used by the Israelites in the desert. Families eat meals, and even sleep in the sukkah during the seven day festival. On Sukkot, it is also traditional to shake a lulav (palm, willow, and myrtle branches) and an estrog (lemon-like citrus fruit) in the sukkah in all directions to indicate that God is everywhere.
- **Simchat Torah**: Simchat Torah occurs on the night following the last day of Sukkot. The final portion of the Torah is read, as well as the first portion. There is much festivity.

Q: Is Hannukah a major holiday for Jews?

A: Hannukah is not considered a major holiday in the Jewish calendar. The holidays listed above are considered more important because they are mentioned in the Torah, whereas minor holidays like Hannukah are not. It is a celebration of the triumph of the Jewish people over their Assyrian-Greek oppressors around 165 B.C.E. Hannukah is a post-Biblical holiday, unlike Passover and Sukkot. There are no special religious services for Hannukah, so Jews can go about their daily lives without taking time off from work or school. Hannukah is widely publicized in American culture as an equivalent of Christmas for Jews, but this is entirely false. The two holidays do not relate to one another in any way. Gift-giving during Hannukah is a recent phenomenon with roots among Eastern European Jews, who used to give gelt (coins) on the fifth night of Hannukah. In today's American society, some Jewish families exchange gifts on all eight nights of Hannukah.

OTHER ASPECTS OF MODERN JEWISH LIFE

Q: What does kosher mean?

A: Many people, Jews and non-Jews alike, are confused about the laws of kashrut, or the Jewish dietary laws. Foods that conform to these dietary laws are referred to as "kosher." One misunderstanding is that something is kosher if it is blessed by a rabbi.

Some people believe that kosher laws are the remnants of an ancient Jewish health code. In reality, the laws of *kashrut* are related to holiness, as described in the Torah. According to Jewish law, foods must be prepared in certain ways, and some foods may not be consumed at all. This is not to say that all Jews keep kosher, or that all Jews who do keep kosher do so in the same way. Jews today observe kosher laws to different degrees. Here are some of the highlights of *kashrut*:

- Only animals that have cloven hooves and chew their cud can be eaten. This is why pigs are not kosher and cows are kosher.
- Kosher animals must be ritually killed in order to meet standards. The animal must be killed quickly, with as little pain as possible.
- The blood of the dead animal must be drained out of the body before it can be consumed (Genesis 9:4). Blood is considered life and thus must be treated with respect, and therefore, cannot be consumed.
- The Torah states on multiple occasions that one must not boil a calf in its mother's milk: (Exodus 23:19, Exodus 34:26, Deuteronomy 14:21). Rabbinical interpretations extended this idea to avoiding all combinations of meats with dairy.
- Shellfish is unkosher because, according to the Torah, fish must have scales and fins (Leviticus 11:9-12; Deuteronomy 14:9-10) to be eaten.
- Some food is *parve*, meaning that it does not contain milk or meat. Examples of *parve* foods include fish, eggs, and bread made without dairy.

Q: What is the Jewish view of Jesus?

A: In general, Jews recognize Jesus as a historical figure. He was a Jew who taught about love and righteousness. His lessons were adaptations from Jewish sages and Torah. Jews do not regard Jesus as a prophet or as the Messiah.

Q: Do Jews believe in an afterlife?

A: The Jewish afterlife is unlike the idea of a Christian afterlife. Judaism places strong emphasis on living one's life to the fullest, and not concerning oneself so much with the world to come. By educating one's children and leaving behind a legacy, a Jew can be immortal in a sense. Tradition says that when the Messiah comes, the dead will be resurrected and their souls will return. Beyond that, answering the question of whether or not Jews believe in an afterlife is no simple feat. Since the Torah emphasizes laws governing life more than the afterlife, Judaism has no single belief one way or the other. According to some Jews, what happens in death is not as important. Judaism has no clearly defined state of heaven or hell. Other Jews believe that a sort of heaven and hell exist. Those in heaven would share a strong bond with God, while those in hell would relive the mistakes they made during life. Many other beliefs about an afterlife exist as well in Judaism.

Q: What is a Sephardic Jew? What is an Ashkenazi Jew? What is a Mizrahi Jew?

A: Ashkenazi Jews come from France, Germany, and Eastern Europe. Sephardic Jews trace their origins to Spain. Since the two groups developed in different places, differing customs and traditions emerged, which continue today. For instance, on Passover Ashkenazi Jews do not eat rice, corn, or beans because they consider these foods leavening agents similar to bread. Sephardic Jews, in contrast, consume these foods throughout Passover.

Mizrahi Jews are Jews descended from Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and North African Jewish backgrounds. Generally speaking, these Jews follow practices similar to those of the Sephardic Jews described above.

Q: What is Zionism?

A: Zionism is the desire of Jews to return to the national homeland of Israel. Ever since the Jews were expelled from Israel by the Romans in 135 C.E., there was a hope for the return to their homeland. In the late 19th century, this desire for a Jewish homeland became a political aspiration among European Jewry, as discrimination against them worsened. Leaders such as Theodore Herzl, David Ben-Gurion, and Golda Meir became active in the movement over the next few decades. In 1948, the Zionist dream of a Jewish homeland became a reality with the declaration of the state of Israel.

Works Cited

Kolatch, Alfred J. *The Jewish Book of Why*. New York: Penguin Compass, 2003.

Steinberg, Milton. *Basic Judaism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1947.

Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, its People, and its History*. United States: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 2001.

Prepared for the Jewish Museum Milwaukee by Samantha Bass