



Manchester
Metropolitan
University

Judaism

Disclaimer

This resource has been prepared to help staff and students in raising awareness, increasing knowledge and to assist their work at MMU.

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Key beliefs

There are approximately 12 million Jews in the world today. Jews believe there is only one God who created the universe and governs it. They believe they have a covenant with that God. In exchange for all the good that God has done for the Jewish people, they keep God's laws and try to bring holiness into every aspect of their lives. Jews believe that God appointed the Jews to be his chosen people in order to set an example of holiness and ethical behaviour to the world.

Almost everything a Jewish person does can become an act of worship. Because Jews have made a bargain with God to keep his laws, keeping that bargain and doing things in the way that pleases God is an act of worship. A religious Jew tries to bring holiness into everything they do, by doing it as an act that praises God, and honours everything God has done. For such a person, the whole of their life becomes an act of worship.

Worship elements

There are three main daily prayer services which include blessings called Amidah or Shemoneh Esrei and take place in the morning, afternoon and evening. On weekdays there are nineteen blessings given. The Jewish prayer book (it's called a siddur) has special services set down for this. Communal prayers can take place anywhere and do not require a Rabbi. In Orthodox Judaism certain prayers can only be said when there is a group of ten or more Jewish males.

Observant Jews will say a blessing over everything they eat or drink, and in the face of many natural events. Doing so acknowledges that God is involved in everything.

Places of worship

The Synagogue is a place for worship and study; with a number of separate rooms for worship, study and educational use. Other places which are significant in the Jewish faith are the Mikvahs (ritual; baths) and the Yeshivas (place for Jewish learning). In Orthodox synagogues men and women sit separately, and everyone (except young girls) has their head covered. In a Reform synagogue men and women can sit together.

Dress

Kippah is a rounded skull cap worn by Jewish men. Orthodox Jews keep their heads covered all the time.

Tzitzit fringes or tassels found on a tallit worn by practicing Jews.

Kittel white knee length belted over garment worn by Jews on high holidays and by service leaders on certain occasions.

Tephilin are cubic black leather boxes with leather straps that Orthodox Jewish men wear on their head and their arm during weekday morning prayer and contain parchment sections of the scriptures.

Tallitot traditional prayer shawls worn for morning service.

Wigs and scarves orthodox Jewish women wear a wig or have their hair covered with a scarf.

Food and drink

In Judaism there are strict dietary laws called Kashrut. Food which is permissible is called Kosher and foods which are not in accordance with Jewish law are called Treifah. These laws state that it is impure and forbidden to consume animals that eat other animals or roam the sea floor eating excretions of other animals. Animals that have split hooves and ruminants which chew the cud, like sheep, cows and deer are permitted as are certain fowl and birds. Eggs with blood spots may not be eaten. Fish with both fins are permitted and fruit and vegetables are acceptable as long as they are free from insects. Cooking with utensils previously used to make non kosher food is not acceptable. For meat to be kosher it must have been humanely slaughtered by a shochet.

Mixing meat and milk is not allowed. Separate utensils are kept for cooking the two types of food and a time lapse is observed between one type of food being consumed followed by another. Glass (not Pyrex) can be used for cooking both types of food. During Rosh Hashanah Hallah (or Challah) bread served comes as a round loaf, rather than the plaited loaf served on the Sabbath, so as to symbolise a circle of life and of the year.

Festivals and days of worship

The Sabbath - every week religious Jews observe the Sabbath, the Jewish holy day, and keep its laws and customs. In practical terms the Sabbath starts a few minutes before sunset on Friday and runs until an hour after sunset on Saturday, so it lasts about 25 hours. God commanded the Jewish People to observe the Sabbath and keep it holy as the fourth of the Ten Commandments. The idea of a day of rest comes from the Bible story of the Creation: God rested from creating the universe on the seventh day of that first week, so Jews rest from work on the Sabbath. Jews often call the day Shabbat, which is Hebrew for Sabbath, and which comes from the Hebrew word for rest.

Passover - one of the most important religious festivals in the Jewish calendar. Jews celebrate the Feast of Passover (Pesach in Hebrew) to commemorate the liberation of the Children of Israel who were led out of Egypt by Moses. The celebrations last for seven or eight days, depending on where you live; in Israel Passover lasts seven days, outside Israel Passover lasts eight days and the first two and last two days are observed as full days of rest.

Shavuot - is one of the Jewish harvest festivals, also known as the festival or feast of 'Weeks'. There is no set date for the two-day festival, but it takes place seven weeks (fifty days) after the first day of the spring festival of Passover. Prayers are said on Shavuot (especially at dawn) to thank God for the five books of Moses (collectively known as the Torah) and for his law. Some people also spend the first night of Shavuot studying the Torah.

Sukkot - commemorates the years that the Jews spent in the desert on their way to the Promised Land, and celebrates the way in which God protected them under difficult desert conditions. It coincides with the fruit harvest and marks the end of the agricultural cycle. Jews must create their own Sukkah, a simple hut which they eat and sleep in for 7-8 days and nights.

Rosh Hashanah - is the Jewish New Year festival and commemorates the creation of the world. It lasts 2 days. Rosh Hashanah is also a judgement day, when Jews believe that God balances a person's good deeds over the last year against their bad deeds, and decides what the next year will be like for them. The judgements made at Rosh Hashanah and the plans that God has in mind for a person's next year are only provisional. God is merciful and offers people a chance to sort out all the things they've done wrong; so during the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur everyone gets a chance to repent (teshuvah).

A lot of time is spent in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah, when there are special services that emphasise God's kingship. New Year isn't only celebrated in the synagogue, but at home too. A special meal is served, with the emphasis on sweetness. This falls on the first day of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar.

Yom Kippur - the most sacred and solemn day of the Jewish year, brings the Days of Repentance to a close. The special day is marked by Jews in several ways:

- They abstain from food or drink for 25 hours
- They do not wear perfume
- They do not have sex
- They do not wash
- They do not wear leather shoes

The most important part of Yom Kippur is the time spent in the synagogue. Even Jews who are not particularly religious will want to attend synagogue on Yom Kippur, the only day of the year with five services.

Hanukkah - or Chanukah is the Jewish Festival of Lights. It dates back to two centuries before the beginning of Christianity. The festival begins on the 25th day of Kislev and is celebrated for eight days. In the western calendar Hanukkah is celebrated in November or December. The word Hanukkah means rededication and commemorates the Jews' struggle for religious freedom.

Purim - commemorates the time when the Jewish people living in Persia were saved from extermination by the courage of a young Jewish woman called Esther. At Purim Jews read the story of Esther in the synagogue. It's usually an entertaining and rowdy occasion. The synagogue is crowded with men, women, and children. Some wear their best Sabbath clothes, but many dress up in colourful costumes and masks. It is customary to hold carnival-like celebrations on Purim, to perform plays and parodies, and to hold beauty contests. Purim is not subject to the restrictions on work that affect some other holidays; however, some sources indicate that Jews should not go about their ordinary business at Purim out of respect for the festival.

Purim is celebrated on the 14th and 15th days of Adar, the twelfth month of the Jewish calendar. Adar usually falls in March, and is synonymous with joy because it has traditionally been a month of hope and good luck for the Jewish people. The 14th day of Adar is the day that Haman chose for the extermination of the Jews. In leap years, when there are two months of Adar, Purim is celebrated in the second month of Adar, so it is always one month before Passover.

Texts

Judaism has a rich history of religious text, but the central and most important religious document is the Torah. Torah refers to the five books of Moses which are known in Hebrew as Chameesha Choomshey Torah. These are: Bresheit (Genesis), Shemot (Exodus), Vayicra (Leviticus), Bamidbar (Numbers) and Devarim (Deuteronomy).

Jews believe that God dictated the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai 50 days after their exodus from Egyptian slavery. They believe that the Torah shows how God wants Jews to live. It contains 613 commandments and Jews refer to the ten best known of these as the ten statements.

The Talmud is the comprehensive written version of the Jewish oral law and the subsequent commentaries on it. The word Talmud is derived from the Hebrew verb 'to teach', which can also be expressed as the verb 'to learn'.

The diversity calendar can be found at www.mmu.ac.uk/humanresources/equalities

This fact sheet has been produced using information found in the 'Faith Communities Navigator' published in 2007 by the Faith Regen Foundation and www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/zoroastrian with guidance from MMU Chaplains.