

Judaism

From our knowledge of the Old Testament we already know a lot about Jewish belief and practice. The importance of belonging to Abraham's family, circumcision, obedience to the law, veneration of the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (the Tanak) as God's word, celebration of the Passover and the Day of Atonement, the hope of an eternal messianic kingdom, and so on — all of these are found in Judaism today. But major changes have taken place in Judaism in the past 2000 years and what we see today is also very different to the Judaism of the Bible.

The Pharisees, who were a group of scholars, ordinary believers and some priests, emerged in the Hasmonean period (164 – 63BC). They stressed the need for personal purity through following a set of intricate rules that came to be known as the 'traditions of the elders.' For years they were no more than a minority reform movement within Judaism but that changed when the temple was destroyed in 70AD.

The rabbis had always taught that what counted most was personal devotion. Now, with the temple gone, that seemed the most sensible option. The widespread acceptance of their teaching was further boosted by the emergence of the synagogue. A synagogue is a gathering of Jews who meet, usually in a purpose-built space, to pray, hear the Torah, sing, and study. For the Pharisees, synagogues provided an opportunity to disseminate their views. By the early second century AD, with the temple gone, the role of the priests diminished and the synagogues having become indispensable the Judaism of the Pharisees (sometimes called Classical or Rabbinic Judaism) was what determined the beliefs and practices of the Jewish people.

God

God is one; there are no other gods besides him. He is eternal, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, exalted above the heavens and the earth, holy, supremely wise, loving, and merciful. He cannot and should not be represented by any physical object.

God demonstrates his almighty power and authority over all of nature and history by performing signs and wonders for the sake of his covenant people, the Jews.

Creation

The universe, created by God as an act of love, was intended to be a place where his creatures could flourish in their relationship with him. It reflects the wisdom, power, majesty, and goodness of God.

God cares for the world he created ruling over it with justice and compassion.

Man

Man, created in the image of God, was given a nature with two aspects that often conflict: the yetzer tov (conscience) is aware of God's Law whereas the yetzer ra (selfish desires) is not concerned with its standards. Man has the ability to follow the Law of God if he chooses to do so.

Man's Problem

Judaism does not believe in original sin. Each individual sins when he or she breaks the commandments of the Law and will be judged by God according to the sins he or she has committed.

The Solution to the Problem

Atonement for sins can be made by belief in God's mercy, prayer and obedience to the Law — this is how the Jews understand repentance. Even an extremely evil person can afterward atone for his sins by walking according to the Law of God.

Salvation is not thought necessary for there is a presumption that all Jews have a good standing with God because the covenant He made with them at Sinai is permanent and irrevocable. In other words, the Jewish people are assured happiness and peace in the next life just because they are Jews.

In addition, some would teach that the corporate sufferings of the Jewish people atone for the sins of every individual Jew.

The Final Outcome

Though it is never described at length, the Hebrew Scriptures speak of a shadowy realm called Sheol. Jews therefore believe that human existence does not end with death but they hold a variety of views concerning life after death including:

- That departed souls go to heaven.
- That departed souls are reincarnated
- That departed souls will be given a resurrection body when the Messiah comes to earth.
- That God torments wicked souls.
- That God annihilates the wicked.

What will happen to each person when God judges him or her after death is the consequence of how that person lived. Those who were generally obedient to the Ten Commandments will be in God's favour; those who were disobedient may suffer just retribution by God.

In any case, Judaism focuses mainly on this life rather than on the life to come.

How Do We Know These Things Are True?

The Hebrew Bible (the Tanak), in particular its first five books (the Torah), is the foundation of Jewish belief and practice. The Torah is perpetually binding on the Jewish people and, to a lesser degree, on the Gentiles.

It is taught that the Torah is two-fold. When God spoke to Moses at Sinai only part of that revelation was written down. The other part was passed on by word of mouth, first to Joshua, then to subsequent generations right down to the Pharisees. The 'traditions of the elders', therefore, are not simply man-made rules; they are the very instruction of God.

Around 200AD the oral traditions were written down in a single volume known as the Mishnah. It records the sayings and legal opinions of about 150 rabbis from the first and second centuries AD. Their statements are believed to preserve the instruction given to Moses.

The Mishnah, a holy book on par with the Tanak, has 63 chapters or tractates arranged in six topical divisions: agricultural rules; laws about appointed times — religious festivals and the like; commands relating to women; rulings about legal damages, regulations for the Temple and decrees on purity.

Two other sets of books are also revered. The Midrash is a vast body of works devoted to interpreting sections of the Tanak. In it ancient biblical texts are recast to have contemporary significance. In a similar way the Talmud — actually there are two: the Palestinian Talmud c400AD and the Babylonian Talmud c600AD — interprets the Mishnah.

Distinctive Practices

Five Annual Festivals

There are five main festivals in the Jewish calendar.

New Year (Rosh Hashanah). The Jewish New Year begins with the appearance of the new moon in the month of Tishri (September – October). It is a sombre day in which Israel is reminded of its duties as the people of God. New Year begins a ten day period of soul-

searching in which Jews assess their relationship with God and with one another. A synagogue service features the sounding of a ram's horn, the shofar, as a call to spiritual awakening.

The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Ten days after New Year the period of self-examination climaxes in the Day of the Atonement which symbolises God's forgiveness of his people. Sacrifices are no longer made. It is marked by prayer, confession of sin, abstaining from food, drink and sex, and a synagogue service.

The Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot). Five days after Yom Kippur, this feast recalls when Israel wandered in the wilderness of Sinai and lived in tents or tabernacles. Lasting for eight days, the most striking part of the festivities is the construction of huts that the faithful sit in to eat their meals.

Passover (Pessah). On the evening of 1st of Nisan (March – April), Jews begin a week-long celebration of God's rescue of his people from Egypt. The meal on the eve of the festival is called the Seder. Following a special service at the synagogue, families gather to eat special foods, each with its own spiritual significance: lamb to recall the sacrifice of the first Passover animal; bitter herbs to remember the suffering of Egypt; bread without leaven in imitation of the first Israelites who fled Egypt without time to bake leavened bread; and wine to mark the freedom and joy of God's deliverance. Various traditional prayers and blessings are said during the meal. Passover is also called the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The Feast of Weeks (Shavuot). Fifty days after Passover the Feast of Weeks celebrates the giving of the law at Sinai. Also called Pentecost, it is marked by special services at which portions of the Tanak are read. Many Jews spend the whole night reading and studying the Torah, reminding themselves of the great gift of God's instruction.

Other Holy Days

The Sabbath (Shabbat). The Sabbath commences at sunset on Friday evening and concludes when at least three stars are visible in the Saturday night sky. No work is conducted but it is more than a day off. It is a time for Jews to attend the synagogue, to eat special meals with family members, to say prayers, to light candles and, of course, to study the Torah.

Bar Mitzvah. This ceremony marks a teenager's transition into Jewish adulthood. The rabbis of the classical period declared that 13 was the age at which Jewish boys could understand and obey the dual-Torah.

Hanukkah. This rose to prominence in the Jewish community only recently — perhaps as a competitor to Christmas (both fall in December). Hanukkah means 'dedication', and the festival commemorates the rededication of the temple by Judas Maccabeus in 164BC after Antiochus IV Epiphanes had desecrated it. Candles are lit for eight days during the modern festival because, according to the rabbis of the Talmud, when Judas Maccabeus relit the sacred temple lamps, a single day's oil miraculously lasted eight days.

Prayers

The Shema. The Mishnah treats the Shema as its first topic, setting out in great detail when and how the prayer should be performed. Various introductory blessings are to be said in preparation then, with full concentration on the majesty of God, the faithful declare:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD, the One and Only.”

Deuteronomy 6:4

Thus the Jew proclaims that there is one God who has set his affection on one people, Israel. Then follows a statement about what it means to be the people of the One and Only God:

“You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your resources. Let these matters that I command you today be upon your heart. Teach them thoroughly to your children and speak of them while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you retire and when you arise.”

Deuteronomy 6:5-7

The importance of God's instruction is emphasised here, reminding the Jew that the chief sign of God's love for Israel is his revelation of the Torah and that the chief sign of Israel's love for God is devotion to its commands.

The Eighteen Prayers (Shemoneh Esrei). This set of prayers, dating from the second century AD, is also called the Amidah (standing) because of the position in which they are to be said. The Amidah along with the Shema is to Jews what the Lord's Prayer is to Christians.

Several major themes are captured in its statements — membership in Abraham's family, confidence in the afterlife, confession of sin, hope for the Messiah, denunciation of heretics, petition for the restoration of Jerusalem and so on. Recited daily, these prayers still play an important part in the life of traditional Jews.

The Thirteen Principles of Faith

The five major festivals, together with the Shema and the 18 Prayers, provide a good summary of Jewish liturgical life. The Thirteen Principles of Faith, composed in the 12th century provide a succinct summary of Jewish belief. They remain part of the weekday synagogue service.

1. I believe with perfect faith that God is the Creator and Ruler of all things. He alone has made, does make, and will make all things.
2. I believe with perfect faith that God is One. There is no unity that is in any way like His. He alone is our God. He was, He is, and He will be.
3. I believe with perfect faith that God does not have a body. Physical concepts do not apply to Him. There is nothing whatsoever that resembles Him at all.
4. I believe with perfect faith that God is first and last.
5. I believe with perfect faith that it is only proper to pray to God. One may not pray to anyone or anything else.
6. I believe with perfect faith that all the words of the prophets are true.
7. I believe with perfect faith that the prophecy of Moses is absolutely true. He was the chief of all prophets, both before and after Him.
8. I believe with perfect faith that the entire Torah that we now have is that which was given to Moses.
9. I believe with perfect faith that this Torah will not be changed, and that there will never be another given by God.
10. I believe with perfect faith that God knows all of man's deeds and thoughts. It is thus written (Psalm 33:15), 'He has moulded every heart together, He understands what each one does:
11. I believe with perfect faith that God rewards those who keep His commandments, and punishes those who transgress Him.
12. I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah. How long it takes, I will await His coming every day.
13. I believe with perfect faith that the dead will be brought back to life when God wills it to happen.

Divisions within Judaism

Not everyone in Israel still abides by the teaching of the classical rabbis. Classical Judaism, as described above, reigned supreme for almost 2000 years but in the 18th and 19th centuries three distinct Judaisms emerged.

Reform Judaism

In the early 1800s moves were made to change the synagogue service. They were intended to make it more inviting. The prayers and ceremonies were made shorter, choirs were introduced, services were no longer conducted in Hebrew and men and women were allowed to sit together. This interest in changing the ceremonies soon evolved into a desire to change the substance of Jewish belief to make it more suitable for new situations confronting Jews. The movement, which became known as Reform Judaism, established its own synagogues and rabbinical training schools.

The greatest change was the rejection of the oral Torah. Reform Jews regard the Mishnah and Talmud to be simply human wisdom that can be discarded to suit changing times. Secondly, Reform Judaism does not look forward to or pray for a revived Jerusalem temple, the coming of

the Messiah or a future resurrection of the dead. Thirdly, the food laws and Sabbath rules of Classical Judaism are considered too restrictive in a modern context, and so are declared obsolete. The same applies, fourthly, to some biblical moral laws. Homosexuality, for instance, is regarded by Reform Judaism as permissible. Reform, sometimes also called Progressive Judaism is the dominant form of Judaism today.

Orthodox Judaism

Not everyone was happy with Reform Judaism. By the middle of the 1800s many had denounced Reform Judaism as apostasy leading to the establishment of Orthodox Judaism. Orthodox Jews insist that they are the keepers of the historic Jewish faith. They revere the Tanak, the Mishnah and the Talmud. They adhere strictly to the rulings of the ancient rabbis concerning the handling of food, ritual washings, Sabbath keeping, the festivals, and so on. They also conduct synagogue services in Hebrew and prohibit the use of musical instruments in public worship. Orthodox Judaism is the official form of Judaism in the modern State of Israel.

Conservative Judaism

Disappointed with the approach of Reform Judaism, and wary of the separatism of the Orthodox, a middle position — Conservative Judaism — emerged around 1850.

Conservative Jews maintain the food laws, Sabbath rules, all the major festivals, belief in the Messiah, and commitment to preserving the Hebrew language. They also revere the Mishnah and Talmud. They part company with the Orthodox in believing that the Mishnah must be subject to analysis in the light of the changing times in which we live. So, for example, they allow women to become rabbis. However, Conservatives are less flexible with the teachings of the Tanak.

Some Conservatives are similar to Reform Jews, others are virtually Orthodox and most fall between the two extremes. Conservative Judaism is the 'broad church' of the people of Israel. During the early 20th century Conservative Judaism was the dominant form of Jewish faith. Now it has been supplanted by Reform Judaism.

Zionism

A fourth movement within Israel — Zionism — is not so much a faction as an enthusiastic stream among Jews of different kinds.

In the late 1800s the Austrian journalist Theodor Herzl argued that the Jews should be allowed to found their own state. The idea caught on and in 1897 the World Zionist Organisation was founded. It pressed the international community to find a region to which Jews could emigrate and in which they could establish a self-governing state. The British offered an uninhabited portion of Uganda and Argentina was put forward as another possibility. After some discussion, however, Zionists insisted that only Palestine would do.

In the 20th century, the anti-Semitism of Germany and elsewhere made the call for a Jewish homeland more urgent. Following the Second World War the United Nations resolved that the surviving Jews of Europe should be allowed to move to Palestine. In May 1948 the modern State of Israel was created. The effect of this home-coming on the local Palestinian population of the period was devastating. The Arab-Israeli war of 1948 – 1949 gained more land for the State of Israel and left more than half a million Palestinians displaced. The world is still reaping the consequences of those events.