**Judaism at a glance**

Judaism is the original of the three Abrahamic faiths, which also includes [**Christianity**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/) and [**Islam**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/). According to information published by The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, there were around 13.1 million Jewish people in the world in 2007, most residing in the USA and Israel. According to the 2001 census 267,000 people in the UK said that their religious identity was Jewish, about 0.5% of the population.

* Judaism originated in the Middle East over 3500 years ago
* Judaism was founded by [**Moses**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/history/moses_1.shtml), although Jews trace their history back to [**Abraham**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/history/abraham_1.shtml).
* Jews believe that there is only one God with whom they have a [**covenant**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/history/firstcovenant.shtml).
* In exchange for all the good that God has done for the Jewish people, Jewish people keep God’s laws and try to bring holiness into every aspect of their lives.
* Judaism has a rich history of religious text, but the central and most important religious document is the [**Torah**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/texts/torah.shtml).
* Jewish traditional or oral law, the interpretation of the laws of the Torah, is called *halakhah*.
* Spiritual leaders are called Rabbis.
* Jews worship in [**Synagogues**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/worship/synagogue_1.shtml).
* 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust in an attempt to wipe out Judaism.

There are many people who identify themselves as Jewish without necessarily believing in, or observing, any Jewish law.

**Jewish faith and God**

**The relationship with God**

Jews believe that there is a single God who not only created the universe, but with whom every Jew can have an individual and personal relationship. They believe that God continues to work in the world, affecting everything that people do. The Jewish relationship with God is a covenant relationship. In exchange for the many good deeds that God has done and continues to do for the Jewish People...

* The Jews keep God's laws
* The Jews seek to bring holiness into every aspect of their lives.

**Judaism is the faith of a Community**

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. Jewish life is very much the life of a community and there are many activities that Jews must do as a community.

* For example, the Jewish prayer book uses WE and OUR in prayers where some other faiths would use I and MINE.

Jews also feel part of a global community with a close bond Jewish people all over the world. A lot of Jewish religious life is based around the home and family activities. Many Jewish religious customs revolve around the home. One example is the [**Sabbath**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/holydays/sabbath.shtml) meal, when families join together to welcome in the special day. 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. And Jews don't only seek to obey the letter of the law - the particular details of each of the Jewish laws - but the spirit of it, too. 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. Being part of a community that follows particular customs and rules helps keep a group of people together, and it's noticeable that the Jewish groups that have been most successful at avoiding assimilation are those that obey the rules most strictly - sometimes called ultra-orthodox Jews.

**Note:** Jews don't like and rarely use the word *ultra-orthodox*. A preferable adjective is haredi, and the plural noun is *haredim*.

**History**

The history of Judaism is inseparable from the history of Jews themselves. The early part of the story is told in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). It describes how God chose the Jews to be an example to the world, and how God and his chosen people worked out their relationship. It was a stormy relationship much of the time, and one of the fascinating things about Jewish history is to watch God changing and developing alongside his people. God chose Abraham to be the father of a people who would be special to God, and who would be an example of good behaviour and holiness to the rest of the world. This was the beginning of Judaism as a structured religion The Jews, under God’s guidance became a powerful people with kings such as Saul, David, and Solomon, who built the first great temple.

From then on Jewish worship was focussed on the Temple, as it contained the Ark of the Covenant, and was the only place where certain rites could be carried out. Around 920 BCE, the kingdom fell apart, and the Jewish people split into groups. This was the time of the prophets. Around 600 BCE the temple was destroyed, and the Jewish leadership was killed. Many Jews were sent into exile in Babylon. Although the Jews were soon allowed to return home, many stayed in exile, beginning the Jewish tradition of the Diaspora - living away from Israel. The Jews grew in strength throughout the next 300 years BCE, despite their lands being ruled by foreign powers. At the same time they became more able to practice their faith freely, led by scribes and teachers who explained and interpreted the Bible.

In 175 BCE the King of Syria desecrated the temple and implemented a series of laws aiming to wipe out Judaism in favour of Zeus worship. There was a revolt (164 BCE) and the temple was restored.

The revolt is celebrated in the Jewish festival of Hannukah.

The **Talmud** is the comprehensive written version of the Jewish oral law and the subsequent commentaries on it. It originates from the 2nd century CE. The word Talmud is derived from the Hebrew verb 'to teach', which can also be expressed as the verb 'to learn'. The Talmud is the source from which the code of Jewish *Halakhah* (law) is derived. It is made up of the Mishnah and the Gemara. The Mishnah is the original written version of the oral law and the Gemara is the record of the rabbinic discussions following this writing down. It includes their differences of view. The **Torah** is the first part of the Jewish bible. It is the central and most important document of Judaism and has been used by Jews through the ages. 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).

**Inside the synagogue**

The synagogue is the Jewish place of worship, but is also used as a place to study, and often as a community centre as well. Orthodox Jews often use the Yiddish word *shul* (pronounced shool) to refer to their synagogue. In the USA, synagogues are often called temples.

**Segregation**

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.

**The service**

Synagogue services can be led by a rabbi, a cantor or a member of the congregation. Traditional Jewish worship requires a minyan (a quorum of ten adult males) to take place. In an Orthodox synagogue the service will be conducted in ancient Hebrew, and the singing will be unaccompanied. Few British synagogues now have a choir, but they are more common in the USA. In a progressive (Reform, Liberal) synagogue the service will be at least partly in English, there may a choir and instruments, and men and women can sit together.

**Clothing during worship**

**Hats and prayer shawls**

Everyone except unmarried women wears a hat in synagogue in order to show reverence to God. (And once unmarried women pass a certain age they usually wear a hat too.)

Jewish men always wear hats when they are saying prayers which mention God's name.

Observant Jewish men wear a hat almost all the time.

The most common hat for men in the synagogue is a small round cap called a yarmulke (Yiddish) or a kippah (Hebrew), but an ordinary homburg or street hat will be accepted.

Hats are always available for visitors, but a hair grip comes in handy to keep a kippah on.

Adult men (i.e. those over the age of 13) often wear a Tallit or prayer shawl for morning prayer. A Tallit has fringes (called tzitzit) on the edges to remind the wearer to observe God's commandments - as commanded by God in the Bible.