

BBC Religion packet: Judaism

Judaism at a glance

Judaism is the original of the three Abrahamic faiths, which also includes **Christianity** and **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**, although Jews trace their history back to **Abraham**.
- Jews believe that there is only one God with whom they have a **covenant**.
- 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**.
- 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**.
- 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

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.

Judaism is a family faith

Judaism is very much a family faith and the ceremonies start early, when a Jewish boy **baby** is **circumcised** at eight days old, following the instructions that God gave to **Abraham** around 4,000 years ago.

Many Jewish religious customs revolve around the home. One example is the **Sabbath** meal, when families join together to welcome in the special day.

Who is a Jew?

Jews believe that a Jew is someone who is the child of a Jewish mother; although some groups also accept children of Jewish fathers as Jewish. A Jew traditionally can't lose the technical 'status' of being a Jew by adopting another faith, but they do lose the religious element of their Jewish identity.

Someone who isn't born a Jew can convert to Judaism, but it is not easy to do so.

Judaism means living the faith

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*.

It's what you do that counts...

Judaism is a faith of action and Jews believe people should be judged not so much by the intellectual content of their beliefs, but by the way they live their faith - by how much they contribute to the overall holiness of the world.

The Jewish view of God

A summary of what Jews believe about God:

- God exists
- There is only one God
- There are no other gods
- God can't be subdivided into different persons (unlike the **Christian view of God**)
- Jews should worship only the one God
- God is Transcendent:
 - God is above and beyond all earthly things.
- God doesn't have a body
 - Which means that God is neither female nor male.
- God created the universe without help
- God is omnipresent:
 - God is everywhere, all the time.
- God is omnipotent:
 - God can do anything at all.
- God is beyond time:
 - God has always existed
 - God will always exist.
- God is just, but God is also merciful
 - God punishes the bad
 - God rewards the good
 - God is forgiving towards those who mess things up.
- God is personal and accessible.
 - God is interested in each individual
 - God listens to each individual
 - God sometimes speaks to individuals, but in unexpected ways.

The Jews brought new ideas about God

The Jewish idea of God is particularly important to the world because it was the Jews who developed two new ideas about God:

- There is only one God
- God chooses to behave in a way that is both just and fair.

Before Judaism, people believed in lots of gods, and those gods behaved no better than human beings with supernatural powers.

The Jews found themselves with a God who was ethical and good.

But how do Jews know this about God?

They don't know it, they believe it, which is different.

However, many religious people often talk about God in a way that sounds as if they know about God in the same way that they know what they had for breakfast.

- For instance, religious people often say they are quite certain about God - by which they mean that they have an inner certainty.
- And many people have experiences that they believe were times when they were in touch with God.

The best evidence for what God is like comes from what the **Bible** says, and from particular individuals' experiences of God.

God in the Bible

Quite early in his relationship with the Jews, God makes it clear that he will not let them encounter his real likeness in the way that they encounter each other.

The result is that the Jews have work out what God is like from what he says and what he does.

The story is in Exodus 33 and follows the story of the 10 commandments, and the Golden Calf.

Moses has spent much time talking with God, and the two of them are clearly quite close...

“The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.”

Exodus 33

But after getting the 10 commandments Moses wants to see God, so that he can know what he is really like. God says no...

“you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.

Then the LORD said,

There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”

Exodus 33

Two sides of God

Jews combine two different sounding ideas of God in their beliefs:

- God is an all-powerful being who is quite beyond human ability to understand or imagine.
- God is right here with us, caring about each individual as a parent does their child.

A great deal of Jewish study deals with the creative power of two apparently incompatible ideas of God.

Converting to Judaism

Converting to Judaism is not easy. It involves many lifestyle changes and about a year of studying.

Becoming a Jew is not just a religious change: the convert not only accepts the Jewish faith, but becomes a member of the Jewish People and embraces Jewish culture and history.

Conversion and Jewish law

Conversion to Judaism is a process governed by Jewish religious law. Conversions are overseen by a religious court, which must be convinced that the convert:

- is sincere
- is converting for the right reasons
- is converting of their own free will
- has a thorough knowledge of Jewish faith and practices
- will live an observant Jewish life

There are also two ritual requirements:

- a male convert must undergo **circumcision** - if they are already circumcised, a single drop of blood is drawn as a symbolic circumcision
- the convert must undergo immersion in a Jewish ritual bath, a mikveh, with appropriate prayers

The Sabbath is commanded by God

Every week religious Jews observe the Sabbath, the Jewish holy day, and keep its laws and customs.

The Sabbath begins at nightfall on Friday and lasts until nightfall on Saturday. 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.

A reminder of the Covenant

The Sabbath 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.

A gift from God

Most Jewish people look forward to Shabbat all week. They see it as God's gift to his chosen people of a day when they take time out from everyday things to feel special.

Shabbat is a time with no television, no rushing to the demands of the telephone or a busy work schedule.

People don't think about work or other stressful things.

It's an oasis of calm, a time of stillness in life.

Sabbath greetings

The traditional Sabbath greetings are Shabbat Shalom (Hebrew), or Gut Shabbos (Yiddish).

A family time

Shabbat is very much a time when families come together in the presence of God in their own home.

Singles, or others with no family around may form a group to celebrate Shabbat together.

Sabbath customs

In order to avoid work and to ensure that the Sabbath is special, all chores like shopping, cleaning, and cooking for the Sabbath must be finished before sunset on Friday.

People dress up for Shabbat and go to considerable trouble to ensure that everything is organised to obey the commandment to make the Sabbath a delight.

Sabbath candles are lit at sunset on a Friday. The woman of the house usually performs this ritual. It is an integral part of Jewish custom and ceremony.

The candles are placed in candlesticks. They mark the beginning of each Sabbath and represent the two commandments Zachor (to remember the Sabbath) and Shamor (to observe the Sabbath).

After the candles are lit, Jewish families will drink wine. Sabbath wine is sweet and is usually drunk from a special goblet known as the Kiddush Cup. The drinking of wine on the Sabbath symbolises joy and celebration.

It is also traditional to eat challah, a soft rich eggy bread in the shape of a braid. Challah is eaten on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays except for the Passover when leavened bread is not permitted.

Under Jewish law, every Jew must eat three meals on the Sabbath. One of the meals must include bread.

Observant Jews will usually eat challah at the beginning of a Sabbath meal.

Before the challah is eaten, the following prayer is recited:

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz.

This means:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.

Other blessings, prayers, songs and readings may also be used.

It is traditional, too, for parents to bless their children on Shabbat.

The blessing for daughters asks that they become like the four matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, while sons are blessed to grow up like Ephraim and Menasheh, two brothers who lived in harmony.

Some of the family will have been to synagogue before the Sabbath meal, and it is likely that the whole family will go on Saturday.

History of Judaism until 164 BCE

The Old Testament

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.

The Bronze Age

Jewish history begins during the Bronze age in the Middle East.

The birth of the Jewish people and the start of Judaism is told in the first 5 books of the Bible.

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.

God guided the Jewish people through many troubles, and at the time of Moses he gave them a set of rules by which they should live, including the Ten Commandments.

The birth of Judaism

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.

The kingdom declines

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.

Rebuilding a Jewish kingdom

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.

History of Judaism 63BCE-1086CE

Roman Times

For a period the Jewish people governed themselves again and were at peace with the Roman Empire. But internal divisions weakened the Jewish kingdom and allowed the Romans to establish control in 63 BCE.

In the years that followed, the Jewish people were taxed and oppressed by a series of "puppet" rulers who neglected the practice of Judaism.

The priests or Sadducees were allied to the rulers and lost favour with the people, who turned increasingly to the Pharisees or Scribes. These were also known as Rabbis, meaning teachers.

Year 1: CE

What is nowadays called the 'Current Era' traditionally begins with the birth of a Jewish teacher called Jesus. His followers came to believe he was the promised Messiah and later split away from Judaism to found Christianity, a faith whose roots are firmly in Judaism.

1 CE - 70 CE: Rabbinic Judaism

The Rabbis encouraged the Jewish people to observe ethical laws in all aspects of life, and observe a cycle of prayer and festivals in the home and at synagogues.

This involved a major rethink of Jewish life. Although the Temple still stood, its unique place as the focus of Jewish prayer and practice was diminished. Many synagogues had been founded in Palestine and right around the Jewish Diaspora.

Great teaching academies were founded in the first century BCE with scholars discussing and debating God's laws. The most well known of the early teachers were Hillel, and his contemporary Shammai.

70 - 200 CE: The destruction of the Temple

This was a period of great change - political, religious, cultural and social turmoil abounded in Palestine. The Jewish academies flourished but many Jews could not bear being ruled over by the Romans.

During the first 150 years CE the Jews twice rebelled against their Roman leaders, both rebellions were brutally put down, and were followed by stern restrictions on Jewish freedom.

The first revolt, in 70 CE, led to the destruction of the Temple. This brought to an end the temple worship and is still perceived by traditional Jews as the biggest trauma in Jewish history. It is marked by the fast day of Tisha B'av (meaning the ninth day of the month of Av).

A second revolt, in 132 CE, resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of Jews, the enslaving of thousands of others, and the banning of Jews from Jerusalem

200 - 700 CE: The Mishna and Talmud

Between 200 and 700 CE Judaism developed rapidly.

Following the twin religious and political traumas, the academies moved to new centres both in Palestine and in the Diaspora. A sense of urgency had taken hold and it was considered vital to write down the teachings of the Rabbis so that Judaism could continue.

Around 200 CE, scholars compiled the Mishna, the collection of teachings, sayings and interpretations of the early Rabbis.

The academies continued their work and several generations of Rabbis followed. Their teachings were compiled in the Talmud which expands on the interpretations of the Mishna and established an all-encompassing guide to life.

The Talmud exists in two forms. The first was finalised around the 3rd century CE in Palestine, and the second and superior version was completed during the 5th century CE in Babylon.

During this period Jews were allowed to become Roman citizens, but later were forbidden to own Christian slaves or to marry Christians.

In 439 CE the Romans banned synagogue building, and barred Jews from official jobs.

The Golden Age — The Jews in Spain

The years either side of 1000 CE were the golden age of the Jews in Spain.

Co-existing happily with the country's Islamic rulers the Jews developed a flourishing study of Science, Hebrew literature and the Talmud.

Despite an attempt to forcibly convert all Jews to Islam in 1086 CE, this golden age continued.

At around this time the first Jews are recorded in Britain.

Top

History From 1090 to 1600

The Crusades

The next Millennium began with the Crusades, military operations by Christian countries to capture the Holy Land.

The armies of the first Crusade attacked Jewish communities on their way to Palestine, especially in Germany. When the Crusaders captured Jerusalem they slaughtered and enslaved thousands of Jews as well as Muslims.

Following the example of the Romans earlier, they banned Jews from the city.

In Britain, the Jewish population increased, benefiting from the protection of Henry I.

The bad times return

The 1100s were a seriously bad period. Jews were driven from southern Spain by a Berber invasion. Serious anti-Jewish incidents began to occur in Europe:

- in France Jews were accused of ritually murdering a child
- in England Jews were murdered while trying to give gifts to the King at Richard I's coronation
- 150 Jews were massacred in York

- in 1215 the Catholic Church ordered Jews to live in segregated areas (ghettos) and to wear distinctive clothes.

Expulsions

In England the Jews faced increasing restrictions during the Thirteenth Century, and in 1290 they were all expelled from England.

Shortly afterwards the Jews were expelled from France.

In 1478 the Jews in Spain suffered under the Spanish Inquisition, and in 1492 Jews were expelled from Spain altogether. The same thing happened in Portugal in 1497.

50 years later in Germany, Martin Luther (founder of Protestant Christianity) preached viciously against the Jews.

Scholarship, literature, and mysticism

But it wasn't an entirely bad period for Judaism. Scholarship and literature flourished, with figures like Rambam, Luria, Levi ben Gershom, and Eleazar ben Judah.

The Jewish form of mysticism, known as Kabbalah reached new heights with the publication in Spain of the Book of Splendour, which influenced Jewish Spirituality for centuries.

Top

History from 1650 to 1860s

Jews return to Britain

This was a period of Jewish expansion.

Jews were allowed to return to England and their rights of citizenship steadily increased.

In 1760 the main representative organisation for British Jewry, The Board of Deputies of British Jews, was founded.

Jews were first recorded in America in 1648.

Hassidism

Poland and Central Europe saw the creation of a new Jewish movement of immense importance - Hassidism.

It followed the example of the Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760) who said that you didn't have to be an ascetic to be holy; indeed he thought that the appropriate mood for worship was one of joy.

The movement included large amounts of Kabbalistic mysticism as well, and the way it made holiness in every day life both intelligible and enjoyable, helped it achieve great popularity among ordinary Jews.

However it also led to divisions within Judaism, as many in the religious establishment were strongly against it.

In Lithuania in 1772 Hassidism was excommunicated, and Hassidic Jews were banned from marrying or doing business with other Jews.

Persecution in Central Europe

Towards the end of the 1700s Jews began to suffer persecution in central Europe, and in Russia they began to be restricted to living in a particular area of the country, called The Pale.

The birth of Reform Judaism

In the 19th Century another new movement appeared in Judaism.

This was Reform Judaism, which began in Germany and held that Jewish law and ritual should move with the times, and not be fixed.

It introduced many changes to worship, and customs, and grew rapidly into a strong movement. It continues to flourish in Europe and the USA.

Good news and bad news

As the 19th century continued many countries gradually withdrew restrictions on Jews—the UK allowed its Jewish citizens the same rights as others by 1860s.

But at the same time Jews came under increasing pressure in central Europe and Russia. There were brutal pogroms against Jews in which they were ejected from their homes and villages, and cruelly treated. Some of this persecution is told in the musical show Fiddler on the Roof.

In Israel, Jewish culture was having a significant rebirth as the Hebrew language was recreated from a language of history and religion into a language of everyday life.

The twentieth century

UK and USA

In Britain and America this was the century of Jewish immigration, with great numbers of Jewish people arriving to escape the pogroms in Poland and Russia.

The Jewish population of Britain increased by 250,000 in 30 years. It was at this time that the East End of London became a centre of Jewish life in Britain. However in 1905 the UK passed a law that slowed immigration to a mere trickle.

The birth of Zionism

The Zionist movement, whose aim was to create a Jewish state, was rooted in centuries of Jewish prayer and yearning to return to the land of Israel.

Political Zionism began in the mid-19th Century and towards the end of the century it gained strength as many Jews began to feel that the only way they could live in safety would be to have a country of their own.

In the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the British Government agreed that a national home for Jewish people should be established in Palestine. Following the First World War, the British governed the region in preparation for a permanent political arrangement.

Over the next few years Jewish immigration increased and important institutions were founded such as the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, and the Hebrew University.

The Holocaust

Jewish history of the 1930s and 1940s is dominated by the Holocaust, the implementation on an industrial scale of a plan to wipe the whole Jewish people from the face of Europe.

The plan was carried out by the Nazi government of Germany and their allies.

During the Holocaust 6 million Jewish people were murdered, 1 million of them children.

The events of the Holocaust have shaped Jewish thinking, and the thinking of other people about Jewish issues ever since. War crimes trials of those involved in the Holocaust continue to this day.

The tragedy affected much of the religious thinking of Jews, as they try to make sense of a God who could allow such a thing to happen to his chosen people.

The State of Israel

The second defining Jewish event of the century was the achievement of the Zionist movement in the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

There had been strong and paramilitary opposition to British colonial rule for many years, and in 1947 the United Nations agreed a plan to partition the land between Jews and Arabs. In May 1948 the British Government withdrew their forces.

Immediately, the surrounding Arab States invaded and the new Jewish State was forced to fight the first of several major wars. Notable among these were the 6-day war in 1967 and the Yom Kippur war in 1973.

The first steps towards a permanent peace came when Israel signed a peace treaty with Egypt in 1979, and with Jordan in 1994.

For most of its history Israel has had an uneasy relationship with the Arab states that surround it, and has been greatly sustained by the help and support of the USA, where the Jewish community is large and influential.

The 21st century began with great political uncertainty over Israel and its relationship with the Palestinian people, and this continues.

What is the Torah?

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).

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 10 statements.

The Torah is written in Hebrew, the oldest of Jewish languages. It is also known as Torat Moshe, the Law of Moses. The Torah is the first section or first five books of the Jewish bible. However, Tanach is more commonly

used to describe the whole of Jewish scriptures. This is an acronym made up from the first letter of the words Torah, Nevi'im (prophets), and Ketuvim (writings).

Similarly, the term Torah is sometimes used in a more general sense to incorporate Judaism's written and oral law. This definition encompasses Jewish scripture in its entirety including all authoritative Jewish religious teachings throughout history.

The word Torah has various meanings in English. These include: teaching, instruction and law. For Jews the Torah means all of these.

How is the Torah used?

The Torah scrolls are taken out from the Ark (Aron ha kodesh) and portions read in the synagogue three times each week. On Mondays and Thursdays small sections are read. The main reading is on the morning of Shabbat (Sabbath).

Over the course of the year the whole scroll is read in sequence. This begins from the end of Sukkot which is an autumn festival.

The special portions for the readings are called parshioth and are usually three to five chapters in length. The reader has to be very skilled to read from the scroll because the letters are written without corresponding vowels. They have to know the portion very well to avoid making mistakes. The reading is conducted using an ancient tune and is sung rather than spoken.

The scrolls are not directly touched when unfurled on the Bimah (raised platform in middle of the synagogue). A pointer or Yad (hand) is used instead. This is in the shape of a hand with an outstretched finger. The reading or chanting is performed by a person who has been trained in this task. However it may be carried out by the rabbi. It is a very great honour for a congregant to be asked to attend at a reading during a synagogue service. This is called having an Aliyah which is Hebrew for going up.

The weekly portion or Sedrah is followed by the recitation of part of another of the Jewish holy writings.

How is a Torah scroll constructed?

The Torah scrolls are entirely handwritten in Hebrew by a sofer (scribe) on parchment from a kosher animal. This is usually a cow. It can take up to 18 months to complete the whole process from the complex preparation of the animal skins to the writing of the final words. Great accuracy is needed when the sofer writes the scroll. If he makes any mistakes it can make the whole scroll pasul (invalid). The completed scroll is known as a Sefer Torah from sefer which is the Hebrew for book.

A Sefer Torah is so sacred to Jews it is said that if one is accidentally dropped in the synagogue the whole congregation must fast for 40 days. When Jewish communities have suffered persecution, great efforts would be made to preserve these scrolls. This demonstrates just how symbolically and physically important the Torah is to Jews.

Oral law

Alongside the written law Jews believe God also told Moses the spoken or oral law. This is known as the Torah she b'al pei or literally Torah from the mouth.

The letter Pei as well as being the Hebrew word for mouth is the 17th letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Pei has a numerical value of 80 which Jews believe is the age that Moses was when he led them out from slavery in Egypt.

Although given at the same time this law was to be passed down orally from generation to generation. It is the information Jews need to practise fully the commandments in the written law. It was codified in the 2nd Century C.E.

The Talmud

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 Talmud can also be known by the name Shas. This is a Hebrew abbreviation for the expression *Shishah Sedarim* or the six orders of the Mishnah.

History

Between the 2nd and 5th centuries CE these rabbinic discussions about the Mishnah were recorded in Jerusalem and later in Babylon (now Al Hillah in Iraq). This record was complete by the 5th Century CE. When the Talmud is mentioned without further clarification it is usually understood to refer to the Babylonian version which is regarded as having most authority.

The rabbi most closely associated with the compilation of the Mishnah is Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi (approx. 135-219 CE). During his lifetime there were various rebellions against Roman rule in Palestine. This resulted in huge loss of life and the destruction of many of the Yeshivot (institutions for the study of the Torah) in the country. This may have led him to be concerned that the traditional telling of the law from rabbi to student was compromised and may have been part of his motivation for undertaking the task of writing it down.

In addition to the Talmud there have been important commentaries written about it. The most notable of these are by Rabbi Shelomo Yitzchaki from Northern France and by Rabbi Moses Maimonides from Cordoba in Spain. They lived in the 11th and 12th centuries respectively. Both of these men have come to be known to Jews by acronyms based on their names. These are respectively Rashi and Rambam.

Rambam compiled the Mishneh Torah which is a further distillation of the code of Jewish Law and has come to be regarded by some as a primary source in its own right.

It is also worth mentioning another codifying work from the middle ages. This is the Shulcan Aruch (laid table) by Joseph Caro which is widely referenced by Jews.

Some Orthodox Jews make it part of their practise to study a page of the Talmud every single day. This is known as Daf Yomi which is the Hebrew expression for page of the day. The tradition began after the first international congress of the Agudath Yisrael World Movement in August, 1923. It was put forward as a means of bringing Jewish people together. It was suggested by Rav Meir Shapiro who was the rav of Lublin in Poland.

It is now possible to study the Talmud online.

The Mishnah (original oral law written down) is divided into six parts which are called Sedarim, the Hebrew word for order(s).

- Zera'im (Seeds), is about the laws on agriculture, prayer, and tithes
- Mo'ed (Festival), is about the sabbath and the festivals
- Nashim (Women), is about marriage, divorce and contracts – oaths
- Nezikin (Damages), is about the civil and criminal laws, the way courts operate and some further laws on oaths
- Kodashim (Holy Things), is about sacrificing and the laws of the Temple and the dietary laws
- Toharot (Purities), is about the laws of ritual purity and impurity.

Synagogue layout and services

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.