

RELIGIONFACTS

Just the facts on religion.



Judaism is one of the oldest religions still existing today. It began as the religion of the small **nation of the Hebrews and through thousands of years** of suffering, persecution, dispersion, and occasional victory, has continued to be a profoundly influential religion and culture.

Today, 14 million people identify themselves as Jews, and nearly 3.5 billion others follow belief systems directly influenced by Judaism (including Christianity, Islam, and the Bah'ai Faith). Modern Judaism is a complex phenomenon that incorporates both a nation and a religion, and often combines strict adherence to ritual laws with a more liberal attitude towards religious belief.

Beliefs of Judaism

The **central religious belief of Judaism is that there is only one God.** Monotheism was uncommon at the time Judaism was born, but according to Jewish tradition, God himself revealed it to Abraham, the ancestor of the Jewish people. Beginning with Abraham, God has always taken special care of the Hebrews (who would later become the Jews). After rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, God revealed **the Ten Commandments** to Moses, and many more religious and ethical guidelines in the Torah ("the Law"). **Many of the guidelines (*mitzvah*) emphasized ritual purity and the importance of remaining set apart from the surrounding polytheistic cultures.**



Aside from its staunch monotheism, Judaism has few essential beliefs. Jewish identity arises primarily from **belonging to an ancient people and upholding its traditions.** Dogma, while important, is secondary. Jewish **beliefs vary widely on theological matters** such as human nature and the afterlife.

Divisions in Judaism

Divisions within Judaism, known as **movements**, have developed in modern times as responses to secularism and modernity. **Orthodox Judaism** is the most conservative group, retaining nearly all traditional rituals and practices. **Hasidic** (or Chasidic) **Judaism** is a branch of Orthodox Judaism that arose in 12th-century Germany as a mystical movement emphasizing asceticism and experience born out of love and humility before God. At the opposite end of the spectrum, **Reform Jews** retain their Jewish identity and some traditions but take a liberal approach to many Jewish beliefs and practices. **Conservative Judaism** lies in the middle of the spectrum, taking a moderate approach in its application of Judaism to the modern world.



Jews of all movements **celebrate many special days** throughout the year and throughout each person's life. Major religious holidays include **Passover, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.** Hanukkah, historically a minor holiday, has become more prominent in the last century for Jews who live in areas that celebrate Christmas. **The Sabbath**, a day of rest and worship at the synagogue, is observed each Saturday. In Judaism, all days begin at sunset, so all holidays begin at sundown and end at sundown.

Events in Judaism

To recognize the role of God and the Jewish community in each person's life, numerous life cycle events are observed with traditional rituals.



At the first Sabbath after the **birth of a child**, the proud father is called forward in the synagogue to recite blessings for mother and child. Eight days after birth, baby boys are circumcised.

At the age of 13 (12 for girls), a boy becomes a **Bar Mitzvah**, or **Son of the Commandment** and girl becomes a **Bat Mitzvah**, **Daughter of the Commandment**. The occasion is marked by the youth's first public reading of the Torah in the synagogue (only boys may do this in Orthodox congregations), followed by a large and joyous celebration.



Jewish wedding ceremonies incorporate many ancient traditions and symbolic gestures, including the *Chuppah*, or wedding canopy the well-known breaking of glass. At Orthodox Jewish weddings it is considered a *mitzvah* (good deed) to entertain the bride and groom; some guests may wear costumes, shake tambourines, and even do acrobatics.

At death, a Jewish person's body is cared for by the *chevra kiddisha*, the **holy society**, who wash and prepare it for burial. The deceased is treated with great respect and never left alone. After burial, the deceased's loved ones enter a formal period of mourning, which decreases gradually over the course of a year. The dead is then remembered and honored each year on the anniversary of death.

In addition to these special days and ceremonies, the **study of the Torah** and other Jewish scriptures is considered very important, and many Jewish children attend Hebrew school so they can study it in its original language.

In everyday life, traditional Jews observe the laws of *kashrut*, eating only foods that God has designated "**kosher**." Among non-kosher, or prohibited, foods are pork, any meat that has not been ritually slaughtered, shellfish, and any meat that combines dairy with meat.

