

Jewish Beliefs

Religion is the foundation upon which the Jews base their whole society. In fact, much of Jewish culture is based directly on their religious beliefs. The central beliefs of Judaism are belief in one God, education, justice, and obedience.

Belief in One God:

Most importantly, Jews believe in one God. The Hebrew name for God is YHWH, which is never pronounced by Jews, as it is considered too holy. The belief in only one God is called **monotheism**. Many people believe that Judaism was the world's first monotheistic religion. It is certainly the oldest such religion that is still widely practiced today.

In the ancient world where most people worshipped many gods, the Jews' worship of only one God set them apart. This monotheism also shaped Jewish society. The Jews believed that God had guided their history through his relationships with Abraham, Moses, and other leaders.



Belief in Education:

Another central element of Judaism is education and study. Teaching children the basics of Judaism has always been important in Jewish society. Jewish boys – but not girls – studied with professional teachers to learn their religion. Even today, education and study are central to Jewish life.

Belief in Justice and Righteousness:

Also central to the Jews' religion are the ideas of justice and righteousness. To Jews, justice means kindness and fairness in dealing with other people. Everyone deserves justice, even strangers and criminals. Jews are expected to give aid to those who need it, including the poor, the sick, and orphans. Jews are also expected to be fair in business dealings.

Righteousness refers to doing what is proper. Jews are supposed to behave properly, even if others around them do not. For the Jews, righteous behavior is more



important than formal ceremonies.

Belief in Obedience and Law:

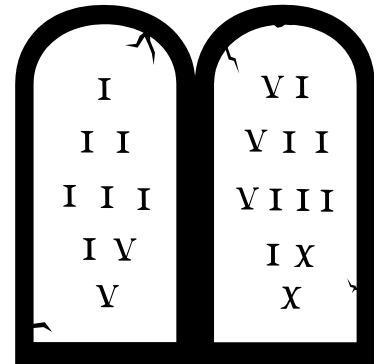
Closely related to the ideas of justice and righteousness is obedience to the law. Moral and religious laws have guided Jews through their history and continue to do so today. Jews believe that God gave them these laws to follow.

The most important Jewish laws are the Ten Commandments. The Commandments, however, are only part of Jewish law. Jews believe that Moses recorded a whole system of laws that God had set down for them to obey. Named for Moses, this system is called Mosaic Law.

Like the Ten Commandments, Mosaic Law guides many areas of Jews' daily lives. For example, Mosaic Law governs how people pray and celebrate holidays. The laws forbid Jews to work on holidays or on the Sabbath, the seventh day of each week. The Sabbath is a day of rest because, in Jewish tradition, God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. The Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown Friday and ends at nightfall Saturday, the seventh day of the week.

Among the Mosaic laws are rules about foods that Jews can eat and rules that must be followed in preparing them. For example, Jewish law states that Jews cannot eat pork or shellfish, which are thought to be unclean. Other laws say that meat has to be killed and prepared in a way that makes it acceptable for Jews to eat. Today, foods that have been prepared in this fashion are kosher (KOH-shuhr), or fit to eat.

In many Jewish communities today, people still strictly follow Mosaic Law. They are called Orthodox Jews. Other Jews choose not to follow many of the ancient laws. They are known as Reform Jews. A third group, the Conservative Jews, falls between the other two groups. These are the three largest Jewish groups in the world today.



Some of the laws are like the laws on the Code of Hammurabi and many modern-day laws. They explain what should be done in specific legal cases. Other laws give instruction on how to worship. They describe behavior on holy days that are still celebrated today.

Jewish Texts

The laws and principles of Judaism are described in several sacred texts, or writings. Among the main texts are the Torah, the Hebrew Bible and the Commentaries.

The Torah:

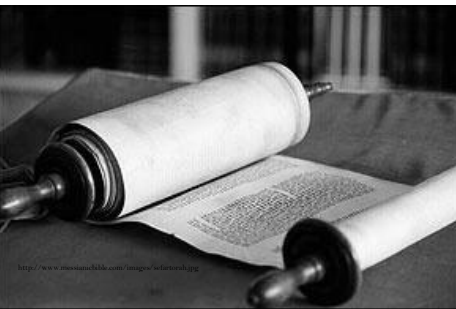
The ancient Jews recorded most of their laws in five books. Together, these books are called the **Torah**, the most sacred text of Judaism. The word Torah means “instruction.” In addition to laws, the Torah includes a history of the Jews from the creation of the world until the death of Moses.

Readings from the Torah are central to Jewish religious services today. Nearly every **synagogue** (SI-nuh-gawg), or Jewish house of worship, has at least one Torah. Out of respect for the Torah, readers do not touch it. They use special pointers to mark their places in the text.



The Hebrew Bible:

The Torah is the first of three parts of a group of writings called the Hebrew Bible, or Tanakh. The second part is made up of eight books that describe the messages of Hebrew prophets. **Prophets** are people who are said to receive messages from God to be taught to others. These prophets were religious leaders of their time and disturbed by the actions of people around them. The prophets reminded people of their relationship with God. They preached that the Israelites should only worship the one God of Abraham. They urged the people to treat one another fairly as God had commanded them.



The final part of the Hebrew Bible is 11 books of poetry, songs, stories, lessons, and history. Also in this final part of the Hebrew Bible are the Proverbs, short expressions of Hebrew wisdom. Many of these sayings are attributed to Hebrew leaders, especially King Solomon.

The third part of the Hebrew Bible also includes the Book of Psalms. Psalms are poems or songs of praise to God. Many of these are attributed to King David.

Commentaries:

For centuries scholars have studied the Torah and Jewish laws. Because some laws are hard to understand, the scholars write commentaries to explain them.

Many such commentaries are found in the **Talmud** (TAHL-moohd), a set of commentaries and lessons for everyday life. The writings in the Talmud were produced between 200CE and 600CE. Many Jews consider the Talmud second only to the Hebrew Bible in its significance to Judaism.

Dead Sea Scrolls:

Besides the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, and the Commentaries, many other documents also explain ancient Jewish beliefs. Among the most important are the **Dead Sea Scrolls**, writings by the Jews who lived about 2,000 years ago.

Until 1947 no one knew about the Dead Sea Scrolls. In that year, young boys looking for a lost goat near the Dead Sea found a small cave. One of the boys went in to explore and found several old jars filled with moldy scrolls.

Scholars were very excited about the boy's find. Eager to find more scrolls, they began to search the desert. Over the next few decades, searchers found several more groups of scrolls.

Careful study revealed that most of the Dead Sea Scrolls were written between 100BCE and 50CE. The scrolls included prayers, commentaries, letters, and passages from the Hebrew Bible. These writings help historians learn about the lives of many Jews during this time.



