



Rabbis conversing on a bench. By Alon Othnay. *Thinkstock*

Judaism

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Key Facts about Judaism

Founded: Approximately thirteenth century B.C.E.
Founder: The prophet Moses is most often identified as the founder
Place of Founding: Israel/Palestine
Primary Scripture: Torah, Tanakh
Global Followers: 13 to 15 million

Chapter Goals

- I. To acquaint students with the history associated with the emergence of Israel and the Jewish faith.
- II. To introduce students to the ways in which Judaism has evolved over time, producing differing expressions of the faith.
- III. To identify primary ritual traditions associated with the faith.
- IV. To encourage students to gain an understanding of the relationship that binds Judaism with other faith systems, with particular emphasis upon Christianity and Islam.

“The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice and the desire for personal independence — these are the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it.”

Albert Einstein¹

The Power of Stories

There is, perhaps, no more enduring image that may be associated with the Jewish faith than that of the wise, old rabbi, recognizing expressions of truth even within the most mundane events. Indeed, the Jewish tradition is filled with stories that seek to convey timeless truths. Such stories, from within the Jewish tradition, may be referred to as *Midrash*. The Hebrew word “**Midrash**” essentially means “story,” and refers to oral and written materials used to draw meaning from the system’s religious texts.

In one Jewish story that was told to me many years ago, a cunning fox sought to get into a farmer’s croplands that were surrounded by a fence. The fox identified one small opening in the fence, but could not fit through it. Thus, the fox decided to fast for three days to make its body very thin, so that it might squeeze through the opening.

The fox fasted and fasted, even as the animal lusted for the fresh food that was on display on the other side of the fence. Finally, the fox became so gaunt that it was able to manipulate its lean body through the fence opening. Once the fox had slipped through the fence, the animal proceeded to gorge itself on the available food. However, with a very full belly, the animal, again, attempted to pass through the fence in order to leave the garden. In so doing, the fox realized that it had once again become too plump to fit through the fence opening. The fox concluded that it could not escape the garden until it was once again thin. Thus, the fox began a second fast, and it was only when the animal was sufficiently hungry and thin, once again, that it was able to escape back through the fence.

An essential lesson to be taken from the story is that the only thing the fox was able to retain was its experience. In the same way, as humans move through varied life events, including the ultimate passage of death, the only thing that may be retained is the experience of spiritual development and insight.

The Mythic Origins of the Faith of Israel

Judaism is a diverse faith with adherents scattered across the globe. Estimates suggest that there are somewhere between thirteen and fifteen million Jews in the world today. The largest concentrations of members of the Jewish community reside in Israel and the United States, but members of this faith are present in scattered pockets across the globe. What binds these individuals? It may be argued that the common stories shared and embraced by members of the Jewish community create the strongest bond.

Stories are the life’s blood of the Jewish faith system. There are stories designed to speak to virtually every life crisis and mood. Further, there are stories, like the one above, that address a host of common life lessons. In modern debates about the faith, there is often divisive deliberation regarding the extent to which many of the stories of Judaism are “true.” Was there an ark? Did Moses really part the Red Sea? How could a **young boy** really kill a great and giant warrior?

While these questions are appropriate and relevant to the context of modern academic analysis of the histories of religious systems, they likely would have little relevance for many practitioners of Judaism throughout history. The primary purpose of many of the stories contained within the body of Jewish mythology was likely not to convey historical data. Instead, it served to shed light on the human condition

and experience. Stories of the great mythic figures of the faith, from **Abraham**, to David, to **Rabbi Gamaliel**, all communicate fundamental truths that may help us see and encounter the world in new ways.

When pieced together, the stories of Judaism seek to narrate the biographic tale of the emergence of a culture, a people and a nation. The Jewish community, even though it may be fragmented and spread across the globe, is defined through this narrative tradition. The shared story provides even Jews who speak diverse languages and lead very different lives grounds to identify around common ideals and a sense of purpose. The Jewish narrative, then, serves an important role in communal bonding and the cultivation of identity.

The Story of Judaism

The Jewish story essentially begins in a mythic period in the past, with a figure identified as Abram. Abram, whose name is changed to the more familiar Abraham during the course of his story, is one of the primary *patriarchs* of Judaism. The patriarchs are the founding male figures associated with the Jewish faith, the most important of which is Abraham. This group also includes Abraham's son **Isaac** and his grandson **Jacob**. Other figures, stretching all the way back in mythic time to the original human, Adam, may sometimes also be casually labeled as patriarchs, though the term has been formally used merely to refer to the three figures identified as the founders of what would become the Jewish community.

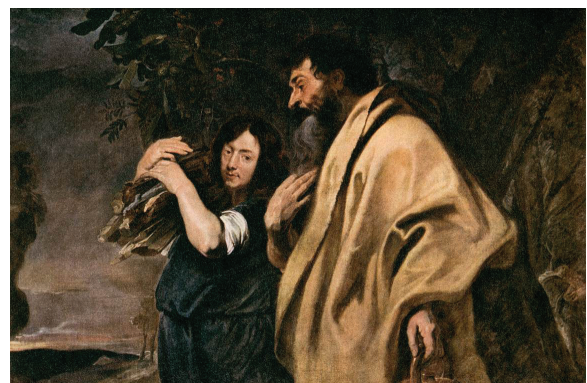
The patriarchs of Judaism share in the activity of establishing the foundation upon which the greater Jewish community is constructed. In addition, these figures provide members of the Jewish community models for engaging key events and challenges in life. Each of these figures is drawn from a period so distant in time that little evidence is available that could be used to historically verify claims made about them. In effect, then, they are essentially figures of legend. Yet, these figures are of no less importance to members of the Jewish community merely because their stories cannot be historically verified. Through the common stories associated with these figures, members of the Jewish community from across the globe and throughout time are bound together, and in their stories the faith community finds hope and strength.

Abraham as Founding Father

The narrative of Abram is familiar to many, even if they have had little association with the Jewish faith. Abram is identified as a *Hebrew* by race. The term Hebrew is sometimes mistakenly understood to describe the earliest Jewish communities. In fact, the term points to an ethnic race with a lineage extending back much earlier than the time of Abram. The word Hebrew identifies the descendants of the Biblical figure Eber, who was, by tradition, the great-great-grandson of Noah. Thus, by the time Abram was born, he is but one of many members of this ethnic group. Accordingly, Abram's descendants do not hold exclusive claim to the label Hebrew.



Orthodox icon of Abraham, circa seventeenth century. Public Domain



A painting of Abraham and his son Isaac, by Anthony van Dyck, circa 1617. Public Domain

Abram is introduced in the Book of Genesis, from the Jewish Torah, and by the time he appears, the senior patriarch is already quite old. From the beginning of the Abrahamic narrative, this central figure is depicted as one who is obedient to God, but who wrestles with a great personal longing. The basic dilemma confronting Abram, according to scripture, was one that has confronted individuals throughout history. What Abram desired most was offspring to carry on his familial line. For an unknown reason, however, he and his wife were unable to bear children.

In many cultures of the ancient world, the most important sign of wealth that one could hold was a male heir. Indeed, in certain ancient societies, a wife could be divorced merely for her failure to produce male children. Thus, in a sign of faith, Abram pleads with God to provide him a male heir. God responds by promising Abram that he will produce a male heir and God further asserts, “[l]ook toward the heavens, and the number of stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your descendants be.”² As the story unfolds, Abram gains not one, but two potential heirs, and this good fortune arrives with certain challenges.

The story of Abram is not isolated or unique. So important was the production of offspring that a motif developed in the ancient world concerning the intervention of the divine on behalf of those who were barren. Even before the writing of the Book of Genesis, the Ugaritic myth known as the *Epic of Aqhat* narrated the story of a figure named Danel, who was a faithful servant to the gods, but who longed for a son. Ultimately, his prayers convince the gods to give him an heir, who is a child named Aqhat.

The story of God’s promise to Abram of a son becomes complicated when the patriarch’s wife, Sar’ai, decides she is too old to bear a child and offers her handmaiden, Hagar, to her spouse as a surrogate. Abram has intercourse with **Hagar** and the union produces a son, who is named *Ishmael*. More than a dozen years after the birth of **Ishmael**, God appears again to Abram, who is now ninety-nine years old. God re-characterizes his original promise to Abram, declaring that the son promised would be carried by Sar’ai. God goes on to declare the existence of a special covenantal relationship with Abram and the patriarch’s household, to



Orthodox Jewish follower prays at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.
Thinkstock

be marked, in part, by the change of Abram’s name to Abraham and Sar’ai’s name to **Sarah**. God further declares that the covenant will bind his descendants through the line of his second son, who is to be named *Isaac*.

In one of the most dramatic episodes of the narrative, following the birth of Isaac, God calls upon Abraham to sacrifice his second son. Abraham displays a willingness to follow God’s command, but ultimately, having proven his steadfast loyalty, a substitute sacrifice is allowed and Isaac’s life is spared.

Through the narrative, Abraham becomes an example of obedience. One of the central themes of the text, then, is the message of the vital importance

of submissiveness to the commands of God. Abraham becomes a model for the entire Jewish community, due to his extraordinary faith. Of course, this is not the only message of the text.

The even greater messages have to do with the nature of the ongoing relationship between the Jewish community and God. The story identifies the Jewish community as a group singled out for a special relationship with the divine. This relationship manifests itself through both unique rewards and exceptional responsibilities. The relationship is represented through the covenant, binding the community with God. At the same time, the covenant serves as a reminder of the reciprocal nature of divine relationship. For many ancient societies, the gods were often seen as somewhat arbitrary figures, acting capriciously, upon their own impulses. Over time, the Hebrews cultivated an image of the divine as an entity desiring a relationship and willing to respond to the desires of mortal beings.

The story of Abraham continues as the covenant between the foundational patriarch and the divine is passed to Isaac, and, then, to Isaac’s own offspring, Jacob. This transference of the covenantal relationship through three generations represents the common connection of all members of the Jewish community to this divine compact.

There is, perhaps, another important message arising from this Biblical narrative, as well. Neither Isaac nor Jacob should have inherited anything from their respective fathers, at least according to popular custom within the Near East, because both were second-born sons. According to custom in the region, the eldest son was to inherit the property and position of his father. Yet, in the case of Ishmael and Isaac, God commanded that this traditional custom be broken. It was also broken in the case of Jacob and Esau. Esau was the elder brother, though the two were born only minutes apart as twins. Through trickery, Jacob is able to secure the birthright or inheritance from his father.

This disruption of the normal inheritance sequence is significant. Symbolically, the passage of the divine covenant through the lines of Isaac and Jacob displays the fact that this bond is so powerful it even overcomes secular and cultural demands.



Jewish youth carries the Torah scroll. Thinkstock

Jacob and His Sons

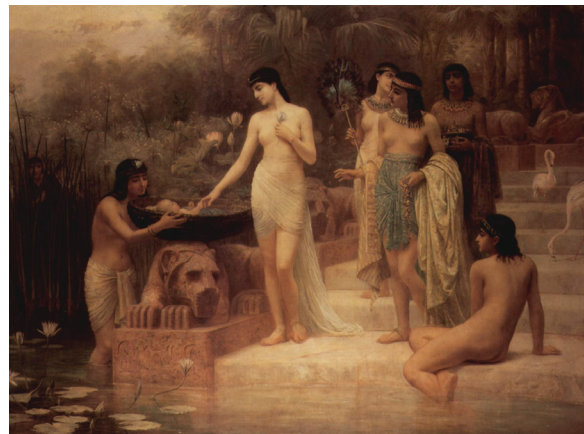
Jacob is an important figure in Jewish mythic history for yet another reason. At one point in his story, Jacob encounters a mysterious individual by night and the two engage in a fight. At the end of the fight, Jacob demands a blessing from the unknown individual. He is blessed and, likewise, given a new name. Jacob's name is changed to *Israel*, a word meaning "one who strives with God." Following the encounter, Jacob recognizes that he saw "God face to face" during the unusual encounter.³ The curious episode foreshadows Jacob's future role as the effective father of a race that will come to be known as the Israelite people.

Jacob went on to father twelve sons. These children of Jacob play an important role in the organization of the Israelite community. According to tradition, the twelve sons of Jacob serve as the patriarchs of individual Israelite tribes. These social groupings are sometimes referred to as the *twelve tribes of Israel*. This tribal structure comes to define both the Israelite community and individual Jewish identity. Perhaps, the best known of Jacob's sons is Joseph.

Joseph is said to have brought the growing Israelite community into contact with the great Egyptian Empire. According to the Jewish scriptural narrative, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, who were jealous of him. Joseph wound up in Egypt, where he proved to be an adept administrator and became an important leader in Egyptian society, despite his Hebrew ethnicity. In his capacity as an imperial administrator, Joseph welcomed his brothers and their families to take up residence in Egypt. In Egypt, the Israelites thrived to such an extent that the community's growth came to be viewed as a threat to the Egyptian political hierarchy. Thus, sometime after the passing of Joseph and his brothers, the Israelite community came under significant pressure from the Egyptian rulers and was forced into hard labor. It was under these conditions that a new Jewish champion emerged.

Out of Egypt

Perhaps, the other seminal figure of the early mythic period of the story of Judaism is **Moses**. Though, again, there appears to be little archaeological evidence available to support the claim that *Moses* was a historical figure, his story plays a



A painting of Moses being discovered as an infant, by Edwin Long, circa 1886. Public Domain

vital role in shaping the identity of the Jewish people. Through the story of Moses, the unique reciprocal relationship binding the Israelite people and God is reaffirmed and associated with a particular geographic location.

According to the Jewish scripture, Moses was born into a Hebrew household during the period of the enslavement of the Israelites by the Egyptians. It is unclear precisely when this enslavement may have taken place, but many religious historians seek to place these events during the twelfth century B.C.E., under the reign of Pharaoh Ramses II. Others have speculated that Moses might have been born under the reign of Amenhotep II, who held the title of pharaoh from approximately 1427 to 1400 B.C.E., and who is said to have had an elder son who disappeared from the historical record. It is speculated by some that his son may have been a victim of events associated with Moses' challenge to the leadership of the Pharaoh.⁴

According to the Book of Exodus, Moses was born as the unnamed Pharaoh was seeking to bring the growth of the Israelite population under control. When other means failed, the Pharaoh embarked upon a plan to kill the male children of the Israelite community, in an effort to reduce the size of the burgeoning group. In an attempt to save her child, Moses' mother placed her son in a small basket and set him afloat on the Nile River. The basket was discovered by the Pharaoh's daughter and Moses was brought into the Egyptian ruler's house and raised there as a member of the household.

Eventually, after growing to adulthood in the household of the pharaoh, Moses came to learn of his ethnic heritage and was called upon by God to challenge the Egyptian leader to release the Israelite people from slavery. After a series of difficult encounters between Moses and the pharaoh, culminating in the

issuance of a series of supernatural **plagues upon Egypt**, the Egyptian leader allowed the Israelites to leave his kingdom. Yet, in the climactic encounter, the Pharaoh sent troops to re-capture the Israelites after they had left his capital. In a scene made famous in the decades old film, *The Ten Commandments*, Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea, so the Israelites could escape the Egyptian troops. Once the Israelites were safely across the sea, the waters were closed, drowning the Egyptian soldiers.



This engraving shows the pharaoh's army being drowned in the Red Sea, circa 1728. Public Domain

The events recorded in Exodus are dramatic and, while they are not clearly corroborated by other historical sources, they have been seen as an important reminder to members of the Jewish faith of their unique relationship with God, and their status as a "chosen people." Once out of Egypt, the Israelites wandered for forty years in search of a new homeland. During this period, the Ten Commandments are given to Moses by God as an ethical guide for the Israelite community.

Eventually Moses leads the Israelites to the region now known as Greater Palestine, though he dies before they actually enter the realm. In the closing verses of the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses is identified as the greatest "prophet in Israel." With Moses' passing, the task of leading the Israelites into their new-found "**promised land**"

fell to Moses' successor, Joshua. As leader of the Israelite community, **Joshua** confronted many challenges, both from outside armies and internal community discontent. However, before he passed, he reminded the Israelites of their covenantal relationship with the divine:

... I am now old and well advanced in years. And you have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake, for it is the LORD your God who has fought for you. Behold, I have allotted to you as an inheritance for your tribes those nations that remain, along with all the nations that I have already cut off, from the Jordan to the Great Sea in the west. The LORD your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight. And you shall possess their land, just as the LORD your God promised you. Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or serve them or bow down to them, but you shall cling to the LORD your God just as you have done to this day.⁵

In this new promised land, the ancient Israelites are said to have settled and built a permanent community and a capital at Jerusalem. From this location, the great monarchs of Judaism ruled. This region, associated today with the modern state of Israel, served as the homeland for the Israelite people for centuries, until they were finally expelled by the Babylonian army in the year 586 B.C.E. This region became so deeply associated with the covenant established between the Israelite community and the god *Yahweh* that a part of the reciprocal bond was seen as a **perpetual grant** of the land to the offspring of those who arrived from Egypt.



Modern skyline of Jerusalem. *Thinkstock*

Judaism in History

Today, many take for granted the association between the Jewish community and the geographical area referred to as Israel. Yet, the Jewish community was not always a fixture of this region. Archaeological evidence seems to point to the existence of an identifiable group living in the hill country of Palestine by the eleventh century B.C.E. that resembled the Israelite community. Assuming these were the earliest members of the Israelite community rooted in this region, where did they come from? This is a question that has been asked by many scholars and there is no clear answer that seems to satisfy everyone.

There are three basic theories regarding the origins of this community. The first is that the Israelites existed as a community much earlier than the 11th century and they fled as a group from Egypt, arriving in the hill country of Palestine, where they established a cohesive society. In effect, this is a migration theory that broadly matches the story recorded in the Biblical narrative, though not all scholars embracing this position necessarily interpret the contents of the Book of Exodus in the same manner. The problem often associated with this position is that there is little archaeological evidence that seems to support the most important of the Biblical claims, including the placement of the earliest Israelites in Egypt.

A second theory argues that the Israelite community emerged from within the larger Canaanite society, as a political schismatic movement. This position is supported to some extent by the presence of certain evidence suggesting the existence of close early ties between the Israelite and Canaanite communities, including commonalities of language, custom, art and mythology. Still, others have argued that there are sufficient differences between the early Israelites and the Canaanites to raise doubts about this theory. A third position suggests the migration of an unknown nomadic community into the region and the combination of this group with factions of the Canaanite society formed a loose confederation that, over time, grew into an identifiable separate community.⁶

Just as ambiguities in the archaeological record make it difficult to determine the precise origins of the original Israelite community with certitude, the nature of the religious faith embraced by this community is a matter of some debate, as well.

Though Judaism would become a fiercely monotheistic religion, at some point, many scholars argue that the original faith of the earliest Israelites appears to have looked much like the polytheistic traditions of the Canaanite community. The early form of the faith embraced by the Israelites appears to have recognized the same basic deities present within the Canaanite pantheon, beginning with the father god, El. As scholar William Dever has observed:

The more we learn about official religion and especially about popular or folk religion in the entire biblical period, the more we see that it is an outgrowth of Canaanite



Moses addresses the Israelites in a painting by James Joseph Tissot, circa 1902. *Public Domain*

religion, no matter how much Yahwism eventually transformed it later in the Monarchy. The Israelite sacrificial system goes back to Canaanite culture. Even the liturgical calendar has a Canaanite and agricultural basis.⁷

Dever and other scholars have sought to better understand the ways in which Judaism has changed and evolved over time. It is certainly true that early Israelite custom and practice was much different than what is defined as Judaism today.

Much of the religious change over time has corresponded with political shifts within the Jewish community, according to scripture. The mythic story of the emergence of a formal Jewish community begins with a loose confederation of tribes living alongside each other. Eventually these tribes coalesce into a formal Jewish state. This singular community would come to be ruled by a **series of monarchs**, the first of whom was *Saul*. Following Saul, would be the warrior and mythic giant slayer *David*, who would come to be the most celebrated political leader to govern Israel. David was followed by his own son, *Solomon*, the last of the kings of a unified Israelite state. Most scholars place the reigns of these figures in the period of about 1070 B.C.E. to about 1000 B.C.E.⁸



A scale model of the second temple at Jerusalem. iStock

This time period is seen as an era of growth and prosperity. Perhaps, one of the most significant religious events associated with this period is the construction of the great temple at Jerusalem. During this time, the Israelite community attained its peak, in terms of regional influence and political might. Solomon is also said to have attracted tremendous new wealth into the Israelite nation, though the king is also viewed as flawed due to a personal sense of arrogance and greed. The monarch's reign is described in the Book of I Kings:

So King Solomon surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom. Now all the earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put in his heart.

Each one brought his present: articles of silver, gold, garments, armor, spices, horses, and mules, at a rate set year by year.⁹

Are the biblical stories of the unified kingdom verifiable based upon available evidence? Again, some recent scholarship has suggested that there may never have been such a unified confederation of the varying subgroups identified as foundational to the establishment of later Jewish culture.

Indeed, based upon their own research, scholars Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman have argued that even the great unifying figure of the Jewish scripture, David, may have been a Southern rebel leader, who instigated raids upon the Northern kingdom for the sake of extracting treasure from his wealthier neighbours, rather than a unifying king. Instead of serving as a historical record, such stories may have been apologetic texts designed to establish social cohesion and loyalty around a shared religious identity, the scholars argue.¹⁰

A Kingdom Divided

Following the death of Solomon, the larger community of Israelites descended into division and conflict. In effect, there was no leader capable of uniting the diffuse interests of both Northern and Southern tribes, and the futures of these communities had begun to diverge. The greater community of Israelites would come to be divided into two smaller regional political confederations. The first of these was the state of **Israel**, or the *Northern Kingdom*. The other state came to be called *Judah*, or the *Southern Kingdom*. Considerable tension defined the relationship between these two political groups over much of their history.

The Northern Kingdom would collapse in the year 722 B.C.E., as it was overrun by the armies of the Assyrian Empire. In large measure, those individuals who made up this community were absorbed by their captors or their lives were lost. The members of the Northern Kingdom have come to be called the “lost tribes,” due to our inability to track with specificity their ultimate fate. The collapse of the Northern Kingdom would leave its Southern brethren isolated in the region. It would also prompt members of the Southern community to be conscious of the consequences of failing to take steps to aggressively protect their culture.

In the year 586 B.C.E., the Southern Kingdom **came under assault** by the Babylonian Empire. Like the Israelites of the North, the Southern Kingdom would fall under the pressure applied by its adversary. The capital city of Jerusalem was destroyed as a part of this assault and the temple was destroyed.

Most of those who had played a leadership role within the Southern Kingdom were either killed as part of the assault or taken as captives back to Babylon. The removal of the inhabitants of Judah to Babylon is known as **the Exile**, and it is a seminal event in the history of Judaism because it reshaped the ways in which the community would understand itself and its place in history, going forward.

In the absence of a temple and a political infrastructure, the Israelites in Babylon re-considered their community structure and religious ritual. The worship of the deity Yahweh became a central element in the maintenance of a distinct culture for the Israelites, even as they built lives in captivity. One of the elements of practice that appears to have played a particularly important role during this period was the imposition of **Jewish Law**. The Jewish ritual law stems from commands contained in religious scripture and is traditionally attributed to revelations received by Moses. The law includes commands ranging from what one can eat to whom one may marry. During the time of the Exile, such religious law undoubtedly served to maintain distinction between the Israelites in captivity and other ethnic communities that surrounded them.

The great Babylonian Empire would fall to another regional power, Persia, only decades later, and in 538 B.C.E., captive members of the Israelite community were invited to return to their homeland. This period was a time of renewal for the community, which included a reconstruction of the city of Jerusalem and the great temple. Yet, while the reconstruction of Jerusalem was welcomed by the returning Jews, anxiety continued. The reconstituted state of Judah was not entirely independent, but, instead, it was occupied by a series of



Oil painting entitled, “Idolatry of Solomon,” by Sebastiano Conca, circa 1750. Public Domain



This painting, entitled, “The Flight of Prisoners,” by James Tissot, depicts Jews being taken captive by the Babylonian army, circa 1902. Public Domain

regional political powers, beginning with Persia, that served as overlords. The last of these great overlords was Rome, which began to exert control over the region as early as 63 B.C.E. Judah became a formal part of the Roman province of Judea in 6 C.E. After decades of tumult and violence, Rome **invaded Jerusalem** in 70 C.E., destroying the capital once again. Ultimately, Rome forced most of the Israelites from their capital as a part of this invasion, and they came to be dispersed throughout the globe over time. Again, the Israelite community was confronted with the challenge of adapting to a changed environment or facing the possibility of seeing Jewish identity absorbed within a diverse cultural landscape. One of the greatest challenges faced by the newly displaced Jewish community was to, again, make sense of a life lived in exile, away from their promised land.

The Israelite Prophets

In the time leading up to the overthrow of both the Northern and Southern kingdoms, particular individuals challenged aspects of the prevailing culture. These individuals have come to be known as the *prophets* of the Jewish scripture, and are also labelled by the Hebrew term *nabi*, meaning “voice.” These individuals were thought to be recipients of revelation from the divine. Through God-inspired insight, they were able to interpret events and, at times, see future events.

Of the prophets of the Jewish scripture, perhaps, the best known is Isaiah. This prophet is believed to have lived in the eighth century B.C.E. **Isaiah** called for political reform in the Southern state of Judah. He also called for an end to many pagan practices. Most of what is known about Isaiah comes from the biblical text bearing his name, though there has been significant controversy among scholars about the portion of the text that can be reliably attributed to the prophet. Isaiah challenges even the religious hierarchy, at times criticizing the ritual processes of the Israelite faith. Often, Isaiah depicts himself as an intermediary, merely reciting the revelations he received from Yahweh, rather than espousing personal views.

*Bring no more vain offerings;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations –
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.
Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
When you spread out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow’s cause.¹²*

The prophetic statements of Isaiah place great emphasis upon social justice, and often promote the interests of those with little voice in the community, including widows and the poor. Other “major prophets” include **Jeremiah**, **Ezekiel** and **Daniel**. There are a number of official “minor prophets” in the Jewish scripture, with the best-known likely being Jonah and Amos. At the same time, a wide set of Biblical characters may at times be referred to as prophets, ranging from Adam and Noah to Abraham and Moses.

Case Study – The Jewish Claim of Uniqueness

Perspectives:

The View from the West

A Chosen People

From Mark E. Hanshaw

One of the most striking elements of traditional Jewish theology is the emphasis it places upon the status and standing of its community as being “chosen” by God. From all the peoples of the earth, the Jews were singled out, based upon this claim, for a unique and special relationship with the divine.

While the Jewish emphasis upon chosenness is not wholly unique within the body of the world’s religions, such a strong and exclusive statement of the uniqueness of a community would necessarily seem to sprout from a rather robust dualistic viewpoint. If philosophical duality is interested in highlighting the disparities that distinguish one person from another or a whole community from that of its neighbor, it then provides the foundation necessary for one to be able to claim a special status.

Though the early Jewish community may have developed the notion of chosenness, hints of this same ideal may be seen at other places within Western religious, social and even political thought. John Adams, the second president of the United States, applied language similar to that of the Torah when he spoke of the uniqueness of the country he had helped to found. As he wrote in his personal papers:

I always consider the settlement of America with Reverence and Wonder—as the Opening of a grand scene and Design in Providence, for the Illumination of the Ignorant and the Emancipation of the slavish Part of Mankind all over the Earth.¹¹

The duality of Western religious theology can play an important role in helping to establish strong group identity. Indeed, it may be argued that the strength of the group identity of the Jewish community was what held the social group together during times of significant stress, including the period of the Babylonian Exile. At the same time, such duality may prompt division and tendencies toward exclusivism, as well.

The notion of chosenness offers a very powerful statement about the special status of a group within our world. Yet, it

offers an equally potent statement about those outside of the chosen group. Theologically, it generates a social hierarchy. And while outside groups may not embrace the theological viewpoint, such differentiation may make cross-cultural dialogue more challenging.

So, how might religions that tend toward a more non-dual interpretation of our world view such an ideal?

The View from the East

Uniqueness Within Cosmic Unity

From Lili Zhang

The mythology of the Judeo-Christian religious traditions relies heavily upon the ideal of divine covenant. This language of covenant intimates that God granted a special status and relationship to a specific group of people, and this ethnic community came to see itself as a “chosen” race.

Of course, the group chosen by God for this unique relationship is the Jewish community, though some Christian theologians have argued that their tradition is grafted into this chosen status through the person of Jesus. Yet, however one defines the parameters of this divinely chosen community, what is clear is that it creates firm and identifiable categories of insiders and outsiders and, in so doing, clearly prompts inter-group anxiety.

This notion of chosenness is quite foreign to most major Asian religions. Similar claims are not present in the dominant sects within Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, or Taoism. Perhaps, this is so precisely because the claim of chosenness is one that is inherently dualistic. The very claim by one group of having a chosen status strongly implies both differentiation and superiority as again those groups that are not similarly chosen. Here, then, we see an interesting typical byproduct of dualistic philosophies. Because they emphasize differentiation, dualistic systems likewise tend to prompt exclusivism. Outgroups are viewed with suspicion.

Asian religions on the other hand, are not particularly inclined toward mythologies of chosenness, at least in part due to their non-dual inclinations. Even a cursory review of the primary theological claims that tend to define major Asian religious systems exposes the challenge of such claims of exclusive relationship with the divine.

In dominant sects within Hinduism and Buddhism, the totality of the cosmos is seen as possessing the quality of sacredness. Thus, with all parts of the physical realm equality reflecting the quality of divinity, it would be difficult to justify a claim of ethic preference. At the same time, this non-dual

Continues

theological construct inclines these systems toward greater inclusiveness, rather than toward exclusivism.

Of course, taken to extremes, both inclusivity and exclusivity can prompt social challenge. As well, the mere inclination

of a religious culture toward inclusivity does not eliminate the possibility of conflict and violence. Yet, in a global age, we it is important for us to be aware of how specific types of religious claims can affect the broader social landscape.

The Birth of Rabbinic Judaism

Modern Judaism looks much different than the religion of the early Israelite community. Much of the character of modern Judaism is rooted in the remarkable changes that took place within the community during the period of Roman occupation of Jerusalem. Some of the changes began before the violent destruction of Jerusalem by Rome, though this event hastened many of the evolutions. Perhaps, the greatest reforms stemmed from the loss by Jews of connection with the city of Jerusalem.

With the destruction of the second temple, the community abandoned its reliance upon a clerical class to direct religious practice. Instead, a group of learned lay leaders emerged as the new organizing

force. These leaders came to be known as *rabbis*, or “teachers” of Torah. Yet, in this period, even the definition of what constitutes **Torah** was changing. Traditionally, the Torah was understood to be composed of the texts that were part of the Jewish scripture attributed to Moses. These included the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. During the period following the fall of Jerusalem to Rome, the concept was developed of the *Dual Torah*.

The Dual Torah is composed of both the *Written Torah*, referred to above in the form of the books of Moses, and an additional **Oral Torah**. The Oral Torah is a collection of teachings now contained in documents called the **Mishnah and the Talmud**. It was argued by Jewish leaders that the contents of



Orthodox Jewish scribe Shlomo Washadi makes copies of the Torah. *Public Domain*

the Mishnah and Talmud had been passed down orally through the community, but were only now being committed to writing. The **Mishnah** was completed in about 200 C.E. The much lengthier **Talmud** was completed in the fifth century. These volumes contain detailed considerations of the practice of Judaism and components of Jewish law. These volumes and their study have come to dominate rabbinic Jewish practice into the modern era.

Both the Mishnah and the latter Talmud seek to detail internal debates within the Jewish community concerning the requirements of the religious law and how such demands are to be applied in a lived context. These works take on many subjects, yet the topics are rooted, at least loosely, in ideas first cultivated within the Torah. An example may concern the ancient Jewish law of *Peah*. According to this law, as it is first articulated briefly in the Biblical Book of Leviticus, one is supposed to leave a small portion of cultivated crop land unharvested, so that those who lack food may come and claim the produce freely.¹³ Yet, what does this command mean in practice? What is required of one to meet this legal expectation?

The Mishnah offers an extensive discussion concerning the parameters of the law of *Peah*, eight chapters in length. It considers the amount of one's crop land that is to be left unharvested, how to replace damaged crops, and other similar issues. It also identifies the law as being so important that it is equated with the study of Torah. As the Mishnah asserts:

These are the things that have no measure: the Peah [corner of the field which, while harvesting, must be left for the poor], Bikurim [first-fruits that must be brought to the Temple and given to the priest, the appearance-sacrifice [brought to the Temple on Pilgrimage Festivals], acts of kindness, and the study of the Torah.¹⁴

The central worship center changed, again, during this period of Jewish development. Already, even before the destruction of the temple, a new sort of worship center had become popular. A **synagogue** was a community house of gathering. The purpose of the synagogue was to serve as a place wherein members of the community would assemble to engage in the study of Torah.

After the fall of the second temple, synagogues became central to the maintenance of the Jewish faith. Even today, the synagogue plays a vital role in bringing together members of the Jewish community for purposes of study, prayer and even relationship-building events.

It is not uncommon for a synagogue to serve as a venue for educational lectures, athletic leagues and many other activities, in addition to scheduled services of worship. As a worship space, the central features of the synagogue relate to the housing of the Torah scrolls. A special table is located at the center of the worship space and is designated for the reading of the Torah. Often, an elaborate cabinet or ark becomes the focal center of the worship space and serves as the container for the scroll.



Inside the synagogue in Pitigliano, Italy. iStock

Judaism in the Modern Era

The history of Judaism is a story of change. That change continues even into the modern era. Dramatic events have affected our very definition of Judaism. Today, Judaism is not really a single religious community. Instead, various subdivisions have re-shaped the nature of the Jewish community. Moreover, outside political events have had a significant impact upon the global community of Jews, especially since the twentieth century.

Modern Divisions within the Community

In general, there are three major modern sub-divisions that segregate individuals classifying themselves as Jewish. These three sub-divisions include *Reform*, *Conservative* and *Orthodox* branches of Judaism. Of course, in addition to these, there are other smaller branches of the Jewish community that have emerged in recent decades, as well. The three broad sub-divisions are all products of the nineteenth century and, in many respects, these groups have had a significant impact upon one another.

Reform Judaism

Though one might not suspect this from its name, *Reform Judaism* is actually the oldest of the three movements. Its foundations were laid in the very early part of the nineteenth century in Germany. Early Jewish reformists were concerned that members of their community had lost certain social and legal rights and standing within particular countries of Europe. Due to their losses of status, certain Jewish leaders sought to formulate a community response.

One possible response was for Jews to further isolate themselves from dominant ethnic and religious communities, but such a step



Reform Jewish service. Public Domain

would have led to further ostracism, making life very difficult. Another option was for Jews to adapt more to their cultural surroundings and seek further integration. This second possible solution provided the seedbed from which Reform Judaism sprouted.

Early leaders of Reform Judaism sought to reshape the prevailing Jewish faith tradition to create an environment within which one could live comfortably and balance her own faith practice with a general engagement of secular society. Among the reforms encouraged by this group was a rejection of much of the traditional Jewish Law, including such basic practices as circumcision, which was understood to prompt community suspicion and ostracism. The reformers also embraced scholarly critical research concerning the Hebrew Scriptures, leading to a reconsideration of claims concerning the revealed nature of these works.

The Reform movement gained modest popularity in Europe before migrating to the United States in the middle part of the nineteenth century. Within a few decades, the vast majority of Jews living in the U.S. embraced the Reform movement. The broad parameters of Reform Judaism were formulated at a **meeting of rabbis** in **Pittsburgh** in 1885. In part, the document crafted by this group asserted:

2. *We recognize in the Bible the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as the priest of the one God, and value it as the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction. We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domain of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age, and at times clothing its conception of divine Providence and Justice dealing with men in miraculous narratives.*
3. *We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.*
4. *We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.*
- ...
7. *We reassert the doctrine of Judaism that the soul is immortal, grounding the belief on the divine nature of human spirit, which forever finds bliss in righteousness and misery in wickedness. We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism, the beliefs both in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden (Hell and Paradise) as abodes for everlasting punishment and reward.¹⁵*

Dramatically, then, the document classifies much of the Jewish scriptural narrative as “primitive,” and likely disconnected from modern scientific understandings. It also formally rejects much of the body of Jewish law, and such theological concepts as bodily resurrection, and Heaven and Hell. This gives us a sense of the pragmatic approach of this form of Judaism. Many of the traditional assumptions associated with Judaism have been abandoned by the Reform movement, in favor of a re-imagined faith system that imposes fewer burdensome demands upon adherents, but seeks to open increased opportunities for community members to engage and integrate with secular society. Yet, it may be argued by some that Reform Judaism has gone too far in its reformation, leaving behind elements that are central to genuine faithful practice.

Orthodox Judaism

Another of the major sub-divisions of the modern Jewish community, **Orthodox Judaism**, was born as a response to the Reform movement. In effect, leaders of the orthodox movement believed that the Jewish reformists of the early nineteenth century had diverged too radically from the essence of the original faith. They sought to generate a form of Jewish practice that was in alignment with the central aspects of the faith tradition stemming back to the time of Moses and the establishment of Jewish Law.

Today, the Orthodox community is quite diverse. Because of the diversity that exists within the community, it is difficult to isolate the key beliefs and practices that provide Jewish orthodoxy with a distinct personality. Generally, however, there are a few observations that can be made concerning Orthodox Judaism.

Broadly, the community recognizes Jewish Scripture as the product of divine revelation stemming from the encounter between Moses and the deity Yahweh. Orthodox Jews embrace Jewish Law as a product of

divine revelation, serving to articulate the expectations of the divine for individuals. Accordingly, the tradition places significant emphasis upon the adherence to and interpretation of Jewish Law.

Orthodox Jews see the monotheistic god Yahweh as an activist deity who intervenes in the affairs of the earth and who established a specified covenantal relationship with the Jewish people. Some, but certainly not all, Orthodox Jews view the reestablishment of the nation of Israel as a divinely ordained event. As a part of this ideology, which is sometimes known as **Zionism**, many have called for a return by all Jews to Israel and for a reconstruction of the great temple at Jerusalem. This last goal is particularly challenging since the location where the Jewish temple once stood now houses an important Muslim mosque.

As might be expected, the relationship between the leadership of the Orthodox and Reform communities of Judaism has often been strained. An example of the depth of the suspicion felt by some Orthodox Jews toward their Reform brethren can be seen in the writings of one of the early leading figures in this struggle. **Rabbi S.R. Hirsch** was a vocal opponent of Reform Judaism and one of the founding figures in the Orthodox movement. In a widely read article written in 1854, he characterized Reform Judaism in this way:



Orthodox Jews in Vienna, circa 1915. Public Domain



Rabbi S.R. Hirsch

But behold! The prophet of the new message came into their midst with the cry of “religion allied to progress”; he filled the blank, pacified their conscience and wiped out their shame. With this magic word he turned irreligion into Godliness, apostasy into priesthood, sin into merit, frivolity into virtue, weakness into strength, thoughtlessness into profundity. By this one magic phrase he distilled the ancient world-ranging spirit of the Torah into a single aromatic drop of perfume so fragrant that in the most elegant party dress they could carry it round with them in their waistcoat pockets without being ashamed. By means of it, he carved out of the ponderous old rock-hewn Tablets of the Law ornamental figures so tiny that people gladly found room for them on smart dressing tables, in drawing rooms and ballrooms. By means of this one magic phrase he so skillfully loosened the rigid bonds of the old law with its 613 locks and chains that the Divine Word which until then had inflexibly prohibited many a desire and demanded many a sacrifice, henceforth became the heavenly manna which merely reflected everybody’s own desires, echoed their own thoughts, sanctified their own aspirations and said to each one: “Be what you are, enjoy what you fancy, aspire to what you will, whatever you may be you are always religious, whatever you may do—all is religion; continue to progress, for the more you progress the further you move from the ancient way, and the more you cast off old Jewish customs the more religious and acceptable to God will you be. ...”¹⁶

Hirsch’s mocking and sarcastic commentary calls into question the very validity of Reform Judaism. For Hirsch, the abandonment of such core elements of the traditional faith as the practice of Jewish Law had turned Reform Judaism into “irreligion” parading as faith. Only his Orthodox reform could salvage Judaism, he seems to argue.

Conservative Judaism

Conservative Judaism was founded in the middle of the nineteenth century, again, as a response to the Reform movement. In a sense, Conservative Judaism attempts to strike a balance between what its members have seen as excesses present within both the Reform and Orthodox movements. The name “Conservative” is

not meant to signify a particular theological position, but recognizes the intent of the community to conserve essential traditions associated with Judaism.

As is true of Reform and Orthodox Jewish communities, the Conservative movement is broad and the full range of beliefs held by its many members cannot be easily summarized. Still, it is possible to highlight some of the most common ideals associated with this branch of modern Judaism.

Conservative Jews unhesitatingly embrace the belief in a monotheistic God who is capable of acting within the world. In this sense, they share much with the Orthodox community. However, they stake out their own ground in regard to beliefs associated with the nature of the Hebrew Scripture. It is argued by many within the Conservative community that the Jewish Scripture was prompted through revelation, though its production was accomplished by human hands and is, therefore, potentially fallible. The community encourages critical scholarly examination of the Biblical narrative.

The Conservative community retains an embrace of Jewish Law as an essential tool in the development of individual ethics. At the same time, members of the community argue that the law cannot be strictly interpreted and should be allowed to change in order to accommodate altered secular circumstances. The community also embraces the notion of pluralism and is strongly critical of efforts to suppress free religious inquiry and cross-cultural engagement.

The Ritual of Life

As is true in many religious communities, periodic rituals serve a number of important roles within the Jewish community. These include serving as a continual reminder of the common story claimed by the broader

community and providing definition or order to the year, itself. There are many important ritual days on the Jewish religious calendar. Here, we consider a few of the most important of these special days.



Jewish adherent blows the shofar to mark the beginning of Rosh Hashanah. iStock

Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah is broadly referred to as the Jewish New Year. The term Rosh Hashanah means “beginning of the year,” and this special festival marks a period of introspection for members of the Jewish faith, during which time attention is to be given to individual failings and opportunities for renewal. The holiday is marked by the blowing of a *shofar*, or ram’s horn, to mark the commencement of

the period of reflection. The blowing of the horn is a call to repentance in the faith system. This is one of the most widely celebrated holidays in the Jewish faith and is instituted in chapter 23 of the Book of Leviticus, in the Jewish Scripture. Jews are not permitted to work on this holiday. Rosh Hashanah occurs sometime during the month of September on the Western calendar.

Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur is the “day of atonement” on the Jewish calendar. The holiday comes ten days after Rosh Hashanah and marks the day in which one seeks to compensate for failings committed during the prior year. According to tradition, during the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, God evaluates the deeds of all individuals and records these deeds. Ultimately, God’s judgement concerning the acts of individuals is set on Yom Kippur, though this day is also the last time one can repent for sins committed. Again, individuals refrain from work on this day and they also engage in a twenty-five-hour fast as a sign of collective repentance. This solemn day is, for many Jews, the most important religious festival day on the calendar. It is customary for individuals to dress in white on this day, as a sign of their desire to be cleansed of accumulated sin. This festival day falls in either September or October on the Western calendar.

Sukkot

To outside observers, **Sukkot** must be one of the more perplexing of the Jewish holy days. This festival comes five days after Yom Kippur and is often called the *Feast of Tabernacles*. The festival day serves to memorialize the forty years ancient Israelites spent wandering homeless in the desert, after fleeing the Egyptian army at the time of the Exodus. During that time, members of the community had to construct temporary living shelters, according to the Jewish Scripture. These may be called booths, and the word Sukkot is the Hebrew term referring to such temporary structures. During the festival, individuals build their own booths in yards, apartment balconies and anywhere space is available. Individuals may live in these structures during the period of the festival.

Hanukkah

Hanukkah is also called the Festival of the Lights. This eight-day festival serves as a reminder of the defilement of the temple at Jerusalem during the time of Roman occupation of the Jewish territory, and the ultimate re-capture and cleansing of the worship center by the Jews. The most prolific symbol of the holiday is a menorah, holding nine candles.

According to stories associated with the holiday, once the Jews re-claimed their temple, they had enough fuel to keep the oil lamp burning in the temple only one day, while it would take eight days to generate new fuel. Importantly, the lamp was never supposed to be extinguished. In what is termed a great miracle, the lamp in the temple is said to have burned for the full eight days on only one day's worth of fuel. Today, a candle is lit in the synagogue each day for a period of eight days to commemorate this event. The holiday falls within the month of December on the Western calendar and is, therefore, often influenced by Christmas traditions. More recently, Hanukkah has come to be associated with gift-giving in certain parts of the **world**.



Menorah with copies of Talmudic texts. iStock

Pesach

The holy day of **Pesach** serves as a reminder of events associated with the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, as they were led by Moses. The word Pesach means "Passover," and refers to the story from the Book of Exodus in which an angel of death was sent to Egypt to kill children of the members of the ruling class. The angel passed over the homes of the Israelites, which were appropriately marked, sparing them the pain of the mass execution, but no Egyptian homes were spared.

One of the most important rituals of the Passover holiday is the avoidance of leavened bread. Again, according to the story of the exodus from Egypt, Israelites were so rushed as they left Egypt they could not make leavened bread. Through this practice of avoiding the consumption of leavened bread, one may find a common bond with the plight of the ancient Israelites.

Another important ritual attached to this festival day is the **Seder** meal. A Seder is a communal meal in which the elements of the feast represent varying aspects of and experiences associated with the exodus of the Jews from Egypt. It is highly symbolic and includes a detailed liturgy. The festival day falls in the months of March or April on the Western calendar.



In a traditional Seder plate, each item symbolically recalls a circumstance of Jewish history. iStock

Judaism in the Modern World

Modern Judaism is frequently associated with the state of Israel. While this predominantly Jewish state controls a region once occupied by the early Israelite communities, it is a relatively contemporary political creation. The



Hanukkah celebration in the White House.
White House photo. *Public Domain*

modern state of Israel was shaped through negotiation and diplomatic struggle following the end of World War II. The state of Israel is carved out of a larger land mass known broadly as Palestine. The history of this region is complex, with a long series of great empires staking claim to portions of this territory over time, including Babylon, Rome, Byzantium, the Umayyads and the Abbasids. The last great empire to control the region was that of the Ottoman Turks, who occupied Palestine from the sixteenth century into the twentieth century.

Even as the influence of the once great Ottoman Empire was beginning to wane, a movement had begun to take shape that sought to encourage Jews to return to this historic region and take up

residence. Thus, several waves of Jewish immigrants began migrating into Palestine and, at the same time, political calls began to be made for the reconstitution of a formal Jewish state. Following the end of World War I in 1922, Britain was charged with the duty of governing the region. This “**mandate**” remained in place until the end of World War II, when the British government sought partition of the region into two states, with one being dominated by Jews and the other by Arab Muslims. Non-Jewish inhabitants of the region rejected the plan, but the **proposal was passed** by the United Nations General Assembly over these objections in 1948. War broke out almost immediately between Arab and Jewish fighters following the partition vote, but the new state of Israel was born and withstood its challengers.

Since this time, there has been ongoing struggle between the Jewish community of Israel and neighbouring Arab states over the question of control of the Palestinian region. Palestinians claim their long-held lands were wrongfully taken in order to create the new Jewish state. Jews claim both Biblical and historic ties to the region. To this day, tensions between Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews have remained high and repeated attempts to establish a satisfactory “two state solution,” involving the drawing of permanent borders and the political recognition of both Israeli and Palestinian as sovereign states have failed.

The Holocaust

In part, the demands for the creation of a new Jewish state may have gained some support, due to sympathies flowing from events associated with World War II. At the close of the war, the full extent of the assault upon Jews by the German **Nazi regime** began to be fully exposed. During the war, the Nazi Party of Germany, led

by Adolf Hitler, engaged in a **methodical plan aimed at destroying populations** that it deemed subversive. The greatest target of this campaign became the Jews of Europe.



The Nazi crematorium at the Buchenwald
Concentration Camp. *Public Domain*

It is estimated that between 1939 and 1945, more than five million Jews were killed as a part of this Nazi campaign. Others were caught in the net of this plot as well, including Russians, Gypsies, homosexuals, the physically disabled and additional communities. In all, it is estimated that between twelve and fifteen million individuals were slaughtered by the Nazi regime. Yet, no single group suffered more casualties than the Jewish community.

In their effort to carry out this genocide, the Nazi government authorized the construction of concentration camps. Several of these were equipped with gas chambers that allowed thousands of prisoners to be killed at one time. Many of the stories of the few survivors of these camps have been compiled by historians. They offer insight into the painful conditions confronted by prisoners.

It was late at night that we arrived at Auschwitz. When we came in, the minute the gates opened up, we heard screams, barking of dogs, blows from ... from those Kapos, those officials working for them, over the head. And then we got out of the train. And everything went so fast: left, right, right, left. Men separated from women. Children torn from the arms of mothers. The elderly chased like cattle. The sick, the disabled were handled like packs of garbage. They were thrown in a side together with broken suitcases, with boxes. My mother ran over to me and grabbed me by the shoulders, and she told me "Leibele, I'm not going to see you no more. Take care of your brother."¹⁷

Since the end of World War II, the largest communities of Jews have emerged in Israel and the United States. Each of these states claims to have around 5.5 million Jewish residents. At the same time, the definition of Judaism continues to evolve. Today, it is estimated that as many as half of those identifying themselves as Jews do not embrace ritual or religious traditions associated with the faith. Instead, they seek to claim Judaism as a cultural identity that brings them into community with others sharing a common heritage. These individuals are sometimes referred to as Humanistic Jews or cultural Jews.¹⁸

Even as some born as Jews have moved away from the religious practice associate with the community, certain branches of the Jewish faith tradition have become open to the admission of new members. Historically, one was designated as being Jewish because he or she had a Jewish mother. In other words, the status of being a Jew was communicated through birth and via one's maternal family line. Many Jewish communities today, however, will allow individuals who have no direct familial connection to Judaism to convert to the faith. The conversion process can be cumbersome and difficult, typically including extensive study of Jewish tradition, ritual submersion in water and, for males seeking to join more orthodox communities, undergoing circumcision. Still, the allowance for conversion represents a greater sense of openness within the modern Jewish community.¹⁹



Parade by Rabbis of a Torah scroll. Public Domain

Questions for Research and Reflection

1. A question long asked about Judaism is whether this tradition is better described as a culture or a religion. Which do you think is the better description and why?
2. It may be said that the loss of the first temple at Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. and the second temple in 70 C.E. were driving forces for change within the Jewish faith. What changes did these events prompt and why?
3. The personality of Judaism has been defined, at least in part, by the concept of covenant. Why is the idea of covenant so important in the faith tradition and in what ways does it provide Judaism with a distinct worldview?
4. In the modern era, the larger Jewish community has found itself divided, with the primary sub-groups being Reform, Conservative and Orthodox forms of Judaism. Investigate two of these sub-groups through research. What central differences can you find between them? What similarities continue to bind them?
5. The creation of the modern state of Israel has produced significant tensions within the region of Greater Palestine. Find recent articles in newspapers concerning the ongoing disputes between the Israelis and the Palestinians concerning national sovereignty and control of territories. What are the major obstacles to resolving this dispute? What, if any, possible solutions to these seem realistic to you and why?

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"Jewish Holidays," from the website *Judaism 101*, available at: <http://www.jewfaq.org/holiday0.htm>.

"What is a Humanistic Jew?" available at: <http://jewish.org/humanistic-judaism/>.

Endnotes

1. *The World as I See It*, New York: Citadel Press, 1956, p. 103.
2. Genesis 15:5 (NRSV).
3. Genesis 32:30.
4. For a brief discussion of this debate, see John Day, "The Pharaoh of the Exodus, Josephus and Jubilees," *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 45, Fasc. 3 (July 1995): 377-78.
5. Joshua 23: 2-8.
6. For a discussion of varying theories related to the development of the early Israelite community, see William Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.
7. See Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?*, at pp. 199-200.
8. For an interesting discussion of the archaeological evidence surrounding David and Solomon and some of the controversies related to Biblical accounts of their lives, see Robert Draper, "Kings of Controversy," *National Geographic Magazine* (December 2010), available at <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2010/12/david-and-solomon/draper-text>.
9. I Kings 10:23-26.
10. See Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *David and Solomon*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.
11. "Fragmentary Draft of a Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law, February 1765," *The Adams Papers*, Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, vol. 1, 1755–1770, ed. L. H. Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961, pp. 255-56.
12. Isaiah 1:13-17.
13. See Leviticus 19:9, 23:22.
14. Seder Zeraim, Tractate Peah, Chapter 1, available at www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Peah.1.1?lang=en&layout (an online, public access translation of the Mishnah), see also Jacon Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation*, New Haven: Yale Univ. press, 1988.
15. To view the full transcript of the statement issued by the rabbis at the Pittsburgh conference of 1885, see "Pittsburgh Platform," available at http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/pittsburgh_program.html.
16. See S.R. Hirsch, "Religion Allied to Progress," in *The Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*, Jerusalem: Feldheim Pub., 1996.
17. This personal statement of remembrance is from Auschwitz Concentration Camp survivor Leo Schneiderman, as preserved by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D.C. His story and others, as well as history related to the Holocaust, are available at the Museum website, at <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/>.
18. For a useful overview of the Jewish secular movement, see Sherwin T. Wine, *Judaism Beyond God*, New York: Ktav Pub., 1995.
19. For a detailed overview concerning the process of conversion within the Jewish faith, see the article, "The Conversion Process," produced by the Center for Conversion to Judaism, available at http://www.convert.org/Conversion_Process.html.

