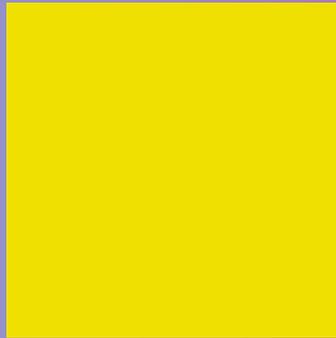


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JUDAISM

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# JUDAISM

## BEFORE WE START

1. Please write down five things that come to mind when you think of Judaism.
2. Please write down three questions that you would like to ask about Judaism.



Figure 1.1  
The interior of the  
synagogue Brahat ha-  
levana in Bnei Brak ,  
Israel.  
Source: © suprunvitaly /  
Adobe Stock

## 1.1 A LETTER FROM MOSHE: WITNESS MY LIFE AS A JEW

Hello! My name is Moshe, and I would like to tell you about my religion: Judaism! There are 14 million Jews all over the world. A lot of us live in Israel, but not every Jew is an Israeli! Jews living outside Israel are what we call the diaspora. I live in Europe, so I'm part of the diaspora! We are also the smallest monotheistic religion. Monotheism means believing in only one God. Although Judaism is the smallest monotheistic religion, it's actually the oldest one!

Some people find the terms 'Jew' or 'Judaism' a little bit complex. Someone is born as a Jew when their mother is Jewish. Few of us were not born by a Jewish mother, but converted to Judaism. Also, not all Jews look alike. We can even vary in how we live our Jewish life. Some Jews decided to assimilate into the cultures they lived in. As a result, they became less strict in following traditional customs and practices. These are liberal or Reform Jews. My family is orthodox or traditional. That means we keep close to our traditions. But there are even Jews who do not believe in God. Every Jewish community is unique!

Our main holy book is the Torah that God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. That's why it's also called the Five Books of Moses. Most of our texts are in Hebrew, but we also have some texts written in Aramaic and Greek. Our relation to God is the most important aspect of our lives. It is a covenant of love that guides our daily life. We believe that God loves us in a unique way, and this love gives us the task to love other people and do justice. Hearing God's word means actually doing God's word! A sign of this covenant is circumcision: every Jewish boy has to be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth.

Several rules guide our behavior towards God and other fellow humans. These are called mitzvot (commandments). The Ten Commandments are the most famous among them. But life constantly changes, and is now very different from life in ancient Israel, an area now made up of Lebanon, Israel, a part of Syria, and Jordan. That's why we need help to interpret these commandments in order to apply them in our lives. Rabbis, our religious leaders, discuss and teach these rules in the form of halacha, Jewish law. Halacha in Hebrew means 'to go', 'to walk', so Halacha refers to the Jewish walk of life!

A lot of halachic rules were written in important texts called the Talmud. Learning our traditions is very important for us. It's part of our education. However, every rule is founded on the Torah, as the expression of God's love for us, and every rule needs to be accepted by a majority of the community. And because our life and experiences keep changing, we never stop discussing these laws. Our tradition is not just repeating what our ancestors did, but learning what they thought, in order to learn things for our own lives! That way our tradition never becomes closed, but stays open.

A big part of our life takes place in the synagogue. 'Synagogue' is Greek and means 'house of assembly'. It's the place where we learn, pray, and celebrate feasts! In earlier times, we had a temple in Jerusalem. It was the center of our religious, cultural and economic life. Unfortunately, the Temple was destroyed in ancient times. The Wailing Wall is the only thing that's left of this destroyed temple. Me and my family go and visit Jerusalem once a year. This place makes me feel connected to my Jewish history, which is very important to me and my family. Some moments in our history are sad to think about. During the second world war there was the Shoah, in which the Nazi's killed many Jews. For me and my family, this event is a reminder to always keep going!

Rituals and feasts are very important in the lives of Jews. They celebrate our covenant with God. Let me tell you about two of my favorites. Firstly, there is Shabbat. Shabbat is a day of rest. It lasts from Friday evening to Saturday evening, because Jewish days begin at sundown. The Torah teaches us that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Imitating God, we also rest on the seventh day! This Shabbat is a special occasion: I turned thirteen this week, so we will celebrate my bar mitzvah! This means that I'm now a 'son of the commandment'. The ceremony will take place in the synagogue. I'm kind of anxious, because I have to read the parashah, the weekly Torah portion. What makes matters even worse is that it's written in ancient Hebrew. As if reading out loud in front of a full synagogue wasn't stressful enough! Luckily, there's a feast afterwards, and I'll get many gifts! My younger sister will be there too. According to our tradition, girls become adults at the age of twelve. That's when they become bat mitzvah, 'daughter of the commandment'.

Besides Shabbat, my favorite feast is Pesach, or Passover. Passover is known as the Festival of Celebration, when we remember our exodus from slavery in Egypt. God liberated us and under Moses' leadership brought us to the promised land. This event is the origin of our identity, during which God gave us the Torah! Passover is always in the spring, and it lasts eight days. The evening before we have Seder, a ritual meal during which we retell the story of Exodus. During Passover Seder, we only eat food that reminds us of ancient Israel. That means we can't eat anything with chametz, or leaven, because ancient Jews had to leave quickly and didn't have time to let their bread rise. My favorite part is the search for chametz the day before Pesach. This ritual search is always a lot of fun! It symbolizes getting rid of arrogance or pride in our house.

In short, Judaism is about the love of God, learning the Torah, doing good for others, and justice!

### Exercise 1: Quiz

What do you remember from Moshe's letter? Circle the correct answer.

1. Halaca

- a. Are the Jewish laws for a Jewish walk of life!
- b. Are the 613 commandments of the Torah
- c. Are enforced by rabbis
- d. All of the above

2. The synagogue is also known as the

- a. House of assembly
- b. House of learning
- c. House of prayer
- d. All of the above

3. On Shabbat Jews

- a. Connect with God and with their family
- b. Live a secluded life
- c. Get their final work done
- d. Eat food that reminds them of Ancient Israel

4. The word "monotheism" means
  - a. Believing in multiple Gods
  - b. Believing in only one God
  - c. The same as polytheistic
  - d. The Jewish walk of life
  
5. The Torah
  - a. Is the central Holy book for Jews
  - b. Contains the Five Books by Moses
  - c. Contains the written words given to Moses by God at mount Sinai
  - d. All of the above
  
6. A bar mitzvah celebrates
  - a. The twelfth birthday of a Jewish boy
  - b. The twelfth birthday of a Jewish girl
  - c. The thirteenth birthday of a Jewish boy
  - d. The thirteenth birthday of Jewish girl
  
7. Pesach is
  - a. a festival of sorrow
  - b. a festival of celebration where we remember the story of Passover
  - c. another word for Seder
  - d. the weekly day of rest or *Shabbat*



Figure 1.2  
Torah scroll with Kippah  
Source: © ollega /  
Adobe Stock

## Exercise 2: Following tradition

Moshe gives an important insight into how Jews understand tradition: “Our tradition is not just repeating what our ancestors did, but learning what they thought, in order to learn things for our own lives! That way our tradition never becomes closed, but stays open.”

Tradition plays a big part in Judaism, as the accumulated experience and knowledge, but also as the customs, habits, and commandments. Of course, not every Jew strictly adheres to the tradition. Within Judaism there are a lot of questions about to what extent we should follow the tradition. Having watched Moshe’s presentation, please make the following exercise in groups of two or four:

- a. Jews have their own view on tradition, as explained by Moshe. What is your opinion on their idea and practice of tradition?
- b. Does your family or society have similar practices that are seen as traditional? Discuss them among each other.
- c. Tradition can be authoritative in how it regulates the everyday, religious lives of the members of a religious group. Discuss among each other positive and negative aspects of being part of a tradition

### Exercise 3: Jewish ethics

Judaism places a big emphasis on justice and doing good towards others. Feasts often remind Jews of these, and other, obligations. Pesach, for example, is a feast that commemorates the exodus, departure, from slavery in Egypt. The story of this exodus is told in the Book of Exodus, one of the five books of the Torah.

Take a look at the following passage from the Book of Exodus and answer the following questions.

[9] You are not to oppress a foreigner, for you know how a foreigner feels, since you were foreigners in the land of Egypt.

- a. Who is the 'you' in this story? Why was this 'you' a foreigner in Egypt?
- b. What possible associations could someone reading this passage make, considering current situations and challenges?



Figure 1.3  
Hand holding a Star of David, a Jewish religious symbol against the Western wall of the Jewish Temple in the Old city of Jerusalem.  
Source: © Roman Yanushevsky / Adobe Stock

#### Exercise 4: Experiencing Shabbat

You have read or watched Moshe's description of Shabbat. Fill in the missing words:

**Ten Commandment – kiddush – covenant – challah – wash our hands – Torah – covenant – parashah – Kiddush Cups**

Today is a happy day. We are celebrating Shabbat: our weekly day of rest. On this day, we celebrate our ..... with God. We do this by laying down our work for one day, and reconnect with ourselves and our community. This way, we honor God who created the world in six days, and rested on the seventh. It's also one of the ..... . A Jewish day is from evening till evening, not from twelve till twelve. *Shabbat* begins on Friday evening, and lasts until Saturday evening. *Shabbat* is officially over the moment we can count three stars in heaven.

Because we can't work, we have to prepare everything beforehand. That means Friday is usually an extra busy day! Once the sun starts to set, my mother lights two candles for every family member that is present. And my dad speaks a prayer, to which everyone answers with 'amen'. This blessing is called ..... Everyone gets a little bit of wine, that we drink from ..... On this day, everyone wears beautiful, fancy clothes. We always eat fish, and sometimes chicken soup. It's a usually a big dinner with salad, potatoes, meat, and dessert! My favorite part, however, is eating a special braided bread called ..... It's white, and eggy, and very soft inside! My mother makes it for Shabbat. We have to ..... before. It's forbidden to eat bread with dirty hands. We eat the challah at the start of the dinner, by ripping of the pieces with our hands. It's a lot of fun to eat bread that way!

Every Saturday morning, there is a Synagogue service, where we read a portion of the ....., called ..... We read these portions three days a week, on Saturday, Monday, and Thursdays, but on Shabbat we read the biggest portions. By the end of the year we have read the Torah in its entirety.

## 2.6 GLOSSARY

### **Aramaic**

Aramaic is a language that originated in the ancient Near East. For example, Aramaic was spoken in regions that today are known as Iraq, Syria, Israel, Palestine, and Eastern Arabia. Aramaic and Hebrew are part of the same language family.

### **Circumcision**

Circumcision is a medical practice through which a piece of the foreskin of the penis is removed. In Judaism, this is taken as a corporeal sign or token of their covenant with God. In Genesis 17:10-13, God commands Abraham, the patriarch of the Jewish people, and all of his descendants to be circumcised. The circumcision is a very common practice, even among areligious Jews. Nowadays, this practice is carried out by someone from the medical field, and the potential pain of the operation is seriously minimized.

### **Covenant**

The covenant is another word for 'bond': the relation between God and his People, the Jews. This covenant implies rules about how Jews should act, and thereby it has consequences to how Jews orient themselves in life.

### **Diaspora**

Diaspora is the whole of Jewish people living outside of Israel. After the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, or during various periods of slavery, the Jewish people dispersed all over the world.

### **Exodus**

The term 'Exodus' has two meanings. Firstly, it refers to the Book of Exodus, the second book of the Torah. Secondly, it refers to the first part of this book: the Jewish people's exodus out of Egypt. The name Exodus comes from Ancient Greek and means "going out-" The Hebrew name is "Names", which refers to the opening words of the text.

### **Mitzvah**

Mitzvah is a synonym for a religious commandment or religious obligation. The plural of 'mitzvah' is 'mitzvot'.

### **Mount Sinai**

Mount Sinai is the place where the prophet Moses is said to have received the Torah from God. It is also the place where the Jewish people made their covenant with God. It is known as a sacred location.

According to the story in the Bible, the ancient Jews were slaves in Egypt, until God helped them escape. Afterwards, they wandered through the desert for 40 years, during which they reached Mount Sinai.

## **Talmud**

The Talmud is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism. Rabbinic Judaism claims that Moses received two things on Mount Sinai: the Written Torah, and the Oral Torah. The Oral Torah consists of the explanations and interpretations of the Written Torah. Torah means 'Law' or 'Teaching', therefore, the Oral Torah is the collection of oral laws or teachings that Moses received from God!

These explanations were transmitted word-to-mouth from Moses all the way to the rabbis. After a while, even these explanations needed further commentaries. All of the commentaries were collected by rabbis in books called the Talmud.

## **Torah**

The word Torah has a lot of meanings. It is the Hebrew word for 'Law' or 'Teaching'. It usually means the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Five Books of Moses or the Written Torah. These are the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. More generally, it can also mean all of the teachings of Judaism. See the section on the word 'Talmud' above!

## **Ten Commandments**

The Ten Commandments is a list of ten principles that have to be followed according to the Written Torah. Judaism believes that the Torah has many more commandments, but the Ten Commandments are often understood as being the basis of all the other commandments. The Ten Commandments also exist in Islam and Christianity!

## **Shoah**

The Shoah, also known as the Holocaust, was a horrific event in the years 1941-1945 during which many European Jews were killed by Nazi Germany. It is thought that approximately 6 million Jews were killed in this genocide. At the time, this accounted for almost two-third of the Jewish population in Europe.

## **Wailing Wall**

The Wailing Wall is another term for the Western Wall, the last remaining piece of the ancient Temple of Jerusalem. This Temple was the center of the religious, cultural and economic life of ancient Jews. The Temple was destroyed twice. The first time by the Babylonians, after which the Jews were enslaved in Babylonia. After a while they escaped, however, and they returned and rebuilt the Temple. Sadly, it got destroyed a second time, by the Romans.

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Prof. Dr. Luc Anckaert (°1962) holds degrees in Philosophy and Theology at the KU Leuven. He published books and articles on Rosenzweig, Levinas, Kafka, V. Grossman and biblical narratives, but also on biomedical topics. His book *A Critique of Infinity. Rosenzweig and Levinas* was awarded a golden medal by the Teyler Foundation. He teaches Jewish Philosophy at the KU Leuven.

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### DUC8 Consortium



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