



Equality Policy Unit

'everyone included, everyone involved'

Briefing note: **Judaism**

Judaism originated in the Middle East over 3500 years ago. It was founded by Moses, but Jews, like Christians and Muslims trace back their religious lineage to the Prophet Abraham. It is believed that he started the religion of Judaism by establishing a covenant with God.

Key beliefs

Jewish people believe that there is a single God who not only created the universe, but with whom every Jew can have an individual and personal relationship. They believe that God continues to work in the world, affecting everything that people do.

Judaism is a faith of action and Jews believe people should be judged not so much by the intellectual content of their beliefs, but by the way they live their faith - by how much they contribute to the overall holiness of the world. Almost everything a Jewish person does can become an act of worship. Because Jews have made a bargain with God to keep his laws, keeping that bargain and doing things in the way that pleases God is an act of worship.

Places of worship

Synagogue - the synagogue is a place of worship and study. There are a number of separate rooms for prayer, study and educational use. Most synagogues contain the following features: an ark where the Torah scrolls are kept, a platform from which the Torah is read and a lamp which is always lit - an eternal light. Other places which are significant in the Jewish faith are the Mikvahs (ritual baths) and the Yeshivas (place for Jewish learning).

Food and drink

In Judaism there are strict dietary laws called Kashrut. Food which is permissible is called Kosher; foods that are not are called Treifah. These laws state that it is impure and forbidden to consume animals that eat other animals or roam the sea floor eating excretions of other animals. Animals that have split hooves and ruminants which chew the cud, like sheep, cows and deer are permitted as are certain fowl and birds. Eggs with blood spots may not be eaten. Fish with both fins and scales are permitted and fruit and vegetables are acceptable as long as they are free of insects. Cooking utensils previously used to make non kosher food is not acceptable. For meat to be Kosher it must be humanely slaughtered by a shochet (religiously qualified slaughterer).

Mixing meat and milk is not allowed. Separate utensils are kept for cooking the two types of food and a time lapse is observed between one type of food being consumed followed by another.

Festivals and days of worship

There are a number of holy days within the Jewish faith and these days centre on the relationship between the history of the Jews and God. The main festivals are:

Shabat (Sabbath) this commemorates creation. It is the weekly day of rest lasting from shortly before sundown on Friday to shortly after nightfall on Saturday night. Every week religious Jews observe the Sabbath, the Jewish holy day, and keep its laws and customs.

Menorah



Passover (Pesach) one of the most religious festivals in the Jewish calendar, it commemorates the Exodus from Egypt by Moses. The celebrations last for seven or eight days depending where you live, the first two and last two days are observed as full days of rest.

Sukkot ("Tabernacles" or "Festival of booths") commemorates the years the Jews spent in the desert on their way to the Promised Land. It coincides with the fruit harvest and marks the end of the agricultural cycle, Jews must create their own Sukkah, a simple hut which they eat and sleep in for 7-8 days and nights.

Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) this celebrates the day that the world was created; it also marks the beginning of the atonement period that ends ten days later with Yom Kippur. This is God's time for judgement. Jews believe God balances a person's good deeds over the last year against their bad deeds and decides their fate accordingly.

Yom Kippur – The Day of Atonement is regarded as a sacred and solemn occasion, on which synagogue attendance is particularly important. On Yom Kippur Jews believe God makes the final decision on who will live, die, prosper and fail during the next year, and seals his judgement in the Book of Life. It is a day of fasting. Worship includes the confession of sins and asking for forgiveness, which is done aloud by the entire congregation.

Hanukkah – (Chanukah) is the Jewish Festival of Lights or Festival of Dedication. It is an eight day holiday. Hanukkah commemorates the 'Miracle of the Oil' - according to the Talmud, at the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem following the victory of the Maccabees over the Seleucid Empire, there was only enough consecrated olive oil to fuel the Menorah candelabrum in the Temple for one day. Miraculously, the oil burned for eight days - which was the length of time it took to press, prepare and consecrate new oil.

Texts

The Talmud - is the comprehensive written version of Jewish oral law and the subsequent commentaries on it. It is the source from which the code of Jewish *Halakhah* (law) is derived. The word Talmud is derived from the Hebrew verb 'to teach'.

The Torah - is the first part of the Jewish bible. It is the central and most important document of Judaism and has been used by Jews through the ages. Torah refers to the five books of Moses which are known in Hebrew as Chameesha Choomshey Torah. These are: Bresheit (Genesis), Shemot (Exodus), Vayicra (Leviticus), Bamidbar (Numbers), and Devarim (Deuteronomy). Jews believe that God dictated the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai 50 days after their exodus from Egypt.

Q For further information on faith dates and religious festivals follow this link: <http://www.equality.leeds.ac.uk/for-staff/good-practice-guidance/faith-calendar-and-dates-of-religious-festivals/>

*This information sheet was produced using the 'Faith Communities Navigator' published in 2007 by the Faith Regen Foundation, information about the Foundation is available here <http://www.thefrf.org/work/archive>. Acknowledgement is also given to information found on the BBC's Religious website, visit <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/>

