

What Is Judaism?

By Colleen Messina

According to Jewish tradition, in the ancient city of Ur, a boy named Abraham boldly hit clay statues with a hammer. They shattered. Bits of clay flew about the room. His father had made the clay idols, but Abraham didn't like them. He believed in one God. Abraham broke the statues when his father left him in charge of his store. He destroyed all the idols...except one.

Abraham did something mischievous next. He placed the hammer in the surviving idol's hands! Abraham's father was probably furious when he discovered what his son had done. Abraham blamed the last idol on the rampage, and his father said, "These idols can't do anything on their own, so you must have broken them!" Abraham then had a good argument for his belief in one God since his father had finally admitted that the idols were useless. He survived his father's wrath and became one of the patriarchs, or founders, of Judaism.



Judaism is an old religion and is based on the belief in one God. It is at the heart of both Christianity and Islam. It began with Abraham about 3,500 years ago. Abraham lived in what is now Iraq. When he grew up, he tended flocks of sheep and wandered around the desert looking for water and pastures. Jews believe that God spoke to Abraham and made a covenant, or bargain, with him. In exchange for their obedience, Jews believe that God made them his chosen people.

Abraham's people were called Hebrews, and later, Israelites. Being Jewish can mean different things to different people. For some, it means being born into a Jewish family and growing up with Jewish culture. For others, it also means following a way of life based on the values of the Torah. These laws apply to all parts of life, even food. The food that strict Jews eat is called *kosher*, which means fit.

The Torah is "the Law" of the Jewish faith. It is comprised of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Jews believe it is God's instructions to them. It promotes the sanctity of life, justice, and equality. Hospitality and charity towards others is also important. A Jewish teacher named Hillel in around 700 B.C. summarized the meaning of the Torah. One day a non-Jew came to him intending to make fun of the Torah. The non-Jew told Hillel that if Hillel could explain the Torah while the non-Jew balanced on one foot, the man would convert to Judaism. Hillel said, "What you think is hateful, don't do to your neighbor. The rest of the Torah is commentary." The man was so amazed that he became a Jew and a student of the Torah!

Jews also follow the Ten Commandments, and the story about these laws became a popular movie by the same name. The Ten Commandments include things that people should do, like keeping the Sabbath holy and honoring your parents. It also includes things that you should not do, like kill, steal, commit adultery, or worship idols. Jews must pray to only one God.

Prayer is an important part of worship in Judaism. Jews are supposed to pray three times a day. The Jewish prayer book is called a *siddur*, and the most famous prayer is the *Shema*. The first line of this prayer is, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." Reading the Torah is an important part of Jewish worship. Jews have many prayers for different occasions. Some prayers are said alone, while others are said in their synagogue.

The synagogue is the place of worship for Jews. Their Sabbath, or holy day, goes from Friday at sunset to the following Saturday night. A rabbi conducts their services. The word synagogue means "place of assembly" in Greek. There is no set type of architecture for a synagogue, and the outer style of the building often depends on where it is. In Budapest, Hungary, the Dohany Synagogue looks almost Islamic with its globe-shaped towers, while in China, the Kaifeng Synagogue looks like a pagoda.

Certain things are always the same inside a synagogue. The *bimah* is a raised platform where the Torah is read. A cupboard called the Ark holds the Torah scrolls. The Ark always faces Jerusalem. Men often wear a head covering called a *yarmulke* and a prayer shawl with tassels at both ends called a *tallit*. They also wear a pair of