

# Introduction to Judaism

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## I. INTRODUCTION: JUDAISM IS A RELIGION OF DEED, NOT OF CREED

On the whole, Judaism is a religion concerned far more about how one behaves than what one believes. It was not until the middle-ages that there was any attempt to express the fundamental beliefs of Judaism, and many historians believe that this was a reaction to the dogmatism found in Christianity and Islam.<sup>1</sup> Famously, Maimonides<sup>2</sup> issued a list of 13 dogmas of Jewish faith, which have gained wide support, but are by no means universally accepted (see the book referenced in footnote 1). Less expansive expressions of Jewish belief include the belief that God exists, God commands us, and that God holds us accountable for our actions.<sup>3</sup> A synopsis of Maimonides' dogmas, as well as the Declaration of Principles of the Union for Traditional Judaism (where I attended rabbinical school) are appended below as examples of differing views of Jewish beliefs. These are both more traditional expressions of Jewish beliefs. Less Orthodox/traditional forms of Judaism obviously differ from these dogmas. For further information on Jewish beliefs, see, for example:

- [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/articles\\_of\\_faith.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/articles_of_faith.html) which discusses the history of Jewish dogma, and lists some traditional statements of articles of faith, including those of Maimonides.

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent discussion on this issue, as well as debates on what Judaism actually believes, see Marc B. Shapiro, The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Moses Maimonides (AKA Moses ben (son of) Maimon, or by his acronym RaMBa"m) (1135-1204). Rabbi and philosopher. Authored a commentary on the Mishnah (a compilation of rabbinic teachings from the late 2nd century), a code of Jewish law known as the Mishneh Torah, and famed philosophical work, "The Guide to the Perplexed."

<sup>3</sup> My teacher, Rabbi Alan Yuter has expressed this as the basic statement of Rabbi Yosef Albo, 15<sup>th</sup> Century, author of *Sefer Ha'ikarim* – the Book of Jewish Fundamental beliefs.

- <http://www.utj.org/principles.html> which is the declaration of principles of the Union for Traditional Judaism, where I attended rabbinical school.
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish\\_principles\\_of\\_faith#Principles\\_of\\_faith\\_in\\_Modern\\_Judaism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_principles_of_faith#Principles_of_faith_in_Modern_Judaism) which discusses the varying principles of belief in modern denominations of Judaism.
- The discussion of Jewish denominations, below.

## II. THE THREE PILLARS OF THE WORLD: STUDY OF TORAH, SERVICE OF GOD, AND ACTS OF KINDNESS

"Simon the Righteous used to say: The world exists on three things: on study of Torah, on service of God, and on acts of kindness." (Ethics of the Fathers<sup>4</sup> 1:2). These three items are not only the pillars of the world, but the pillars of Judaism. Below we will discuss some basics of each element of Jewish life and how they work together.

### A) TORAH: THE STUDY OF JEWISH TEXT

"Torah" literally means "teaching" or "instruction." In Judaism, the word Torah can be used in several different ways. Sometimes it is used to refer to the Five Books of Moses, the first section of the Jewish Bible. Other times it refers to the entirety of the Jewish Bible. It can also be used to include both the Bible, referred to as "The Written Torah" or "Torah *shebichtav*" plus the Rabbinic writings, that were known as "*Torah shebe'al peh* - The Oral Torah," as much of that material was created over the years and passed down orally.

The Bible is broken into three major subdivisions. These are known by the Hebrew acronym תנ"ך - *TaN"Ch*. This breaks down as:

- ת *Ta* = תּוֹרָה = *Torah*. This refers to the Five Books of Moses. It is these five books that are combined in the Torah scroll.
- נ *Na* = נְבִיאִים = *Nevi'im* (Prophets). This refers to the books which discuss the life and times of the Prophets in Israel.
- כ *Ch* = כְּתוּבִים = *Ketuvim* (Writings). This includes a varied set of literature including prayers and psalms, philosophical explorations, and apocalyptic literature, and poetry.

Each of these three major subdivisions is further broken into individual books (see chart below).

In Judaism, study of the Bible is not only an intellectual exercise, but a spiritual exercise as well as a course in self-improvement. Studying the Torah teaches us how to fulfill the other two pillars of Judaism – the service of God and acts of kindness toward others.

Rabbi Tarfon and the elders were gathered in the attic of the House of Nitzah in Lud. This question was asked before them: Is study greater, or is deed greater?

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<sup>4</sup> *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers, is a part of the Mishnah, a Jewish law code created circa 200 C.E. *Pirkei Avot* is a collection of ethical sayings of the Rabbis.

Rabbi Tarfon responded and said: "Deed is greater." Rabbi Akiva responded: "Study is greater." They all answered and said: "Study is greater, because study brings one to deed."

Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 40b.

## The Books of The Jewish Bible

ת (Ta)  
תּוֹרָה = *Torah*

1. בְּרֵאשִׁית (Genesis)
2. שְׁמוֹת (Exodus)
3. וַיִּקְרָא (Leviticus)
4. בְּמִדְבָּר (Numbers)
5. דְּבָרִים (Deuteronomy)

נ (Na)  
נְבִיאִים = *Nevi'im* (Prophets).

### Former Prophets

1. יְהוֹשֻׁעַ (Joshua)
2. שׁוֹפְטִים (Judges)
3. שְׁמוּאֵל א' (I Samuel)
4. שְׁמוּאֵל ב' (II Samuel)
5. מְלָכִים א' (I Kings)
6. מְלָכִים ב' (II Kings)

### Latter Prophets

1. יְשַׁעְיָהוּ (Isaiah)
2. יֵרֵמְיָהוּ (Jeremiah)
3. יְחִזְקֵאל (Ezekiel)
4. *The Twelve "Minor" Prophets*

- a. הוֹשֵׁעַ (Hosea)
- b. יוֹאֵל (Joel)
- c. עָמוֹס (Amos)
- d. עֹבַדְיָה (Obadiah)
- e. יוֹנָה (Jonah)
- f. מִיכָה (Micah)
- g. נַחֲוִים (Nachum)
- h. חַבְקֻק (Habakuk)
- i. צְפַנְיָה (Zephaniah)
- j. חַגַּי (Chagai)
- k. זְכַרְיָה (Zechariah)
- l. מְלָאכִי (Malachi)

ך (Ch)  
כְּתוּבִים = *Ketuvim* (Writings).

1. תְּהִלִּים (Psalms)
2. מִשְׁלֵי (Proverbs)
3. אִיּוֹב (Job)
4. שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים (Song of Songs)
5. רוּת (Ruth)
6. אֵיכָה (Lamentations)
7. קֹהֵלֶת (Ecclesiastes)
8. אֶסְתֵּר (Esther)
9. דָּנְיָאֵל (Daniel)
10. עֶזְרָא (Ezra)
11. נְחֵמְיָה (Nehemiah)
12. דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים א' (I Chronicles)
13. דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים ב' (II Chronicles)

## ***B) SERVICE OF GOD***

Service of God has many elements, some of which are discussed below. Study of Torah teaches us how to perform this service. In turn, this service helps train us to perform acts of kindness.

Rav stated: The *mitzvot* (commandments) were only given in order to refine humanity with them. What does the Holy One, Blessed is He care whether one slaughters from the neck, or one slaughters from the nape? This demonstrates that the *mitzvot* were only given in order to refine humanity with them.

How does ritual observance refine humanity? Opinions abound. To some, ritual commandments are matters of blind faith. They train us to be obedient and do what we are supposed to do. By being so trained, we will also be better able to do what we are supposed to do when it comes to interacting with other humans and animals, and with our world. To others, the rituals are designed to instill values which we will then be able to apply to the civil context. Some ritual laws, in and of themselves may also have elements of kindness attached to them, for instance laws requiring humane slaughter of animals prior to eating meat. Some find the significance of these rituals as creating communal coherence and continuity, which in turn will allow the continuation of the Jewish people toward its fulfilling the goal of good deeds.<sup>5</sup>

Below is a brief discussion of some of the main points of service of God in Judaism.

### ***(i) Prayer***

Maimonides, in his section on Laws of Prayer in the Mishneh Torah, introduces the idea of prayer as follows:

It is a positive *mitzvah*<sup>6</sup> to pray each- day, as it is said (Exodus 23:25) "And you shall worship the Lord your God." From tradition the sages learned that this service is prayer, as it is said: (Deut 11:13, part of the second paragraph of Shema) "and to serve God with all your heart." The sages said: what is service with the heart? Prayer.

Thus, at its core, prayer is service of God through our hearts (i.e. emotions). Every day, there are at least three prayer services: *Shacharit*, the morning prayer, *Mincha*, the afternoon prayer, and *Ma'ariv* (AKA *arvit*), the evening prayer. On Sabbath and holidays, a fourth prayer service, known as *Musaf* is added.

The mainstays of Jewish prayer are the *Shema* and the *Amidah*. The *Shema* is a collection of 3 Biblical passages. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is a declaration that God is our only God, and instruction to love God, and follow Gods laws. Deuteronomy 11:13-21, describes a sense of

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<sup>5</sup> For further reflection on the question of the reason for ritual commandments, see my compendium, "Blind Faith or Rational Practice: Do Mitzvot Have Reasons, and Should We Investigate Them?" available online at [http://www.templeisraeloflb.org/rabbi/taamei\\_hamitzvot.pdf](http://www.templeisraeloflb.org/rabbi/taamei_hamitzvot.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Mitzvah: Literally "commandment." This is used to refer to any action that is required by Jewish law. However, it is often used more generally as meaning "a good deed."

reward and punishment for following or failing to follow God's laws. Numbers 15:37-41 commands the Jewish people to wear fringes on their garments (this is a source for the *talit*, often called the "prayer shawl") as a reminder of the commandments, and mentions that it is God who took the Jewish people out of Egypt. The *Amidah* is a prayer that praises God, then asks God about our needs, and then thanks God for what God does for us. On the Sabbaths and Holidays, the requests of God are replaced with a single blessing that speaks about that particular holiday.

### Blessings in the Amidah

#### Weekday Amidah:

#### Sabbath & Holidays:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. <i>Avot</i> (Forbearers)                   | 1. <i>Avot</i> (Forbearers)                        |
| 2. <i>Gevurot</i> (Powers)                    | 2. <i>Gevurot</i> (Powers)                         |
| 3. <i>Kedushah</i> (Holiness)                 | 3. <i>Kedushah</i> (Holiness)                      |
| 4. <i>Binah</i> (Insight)                     |  |
| 5. <i>Teshuvah</i> (Repentance)               |  |
| 6. <i>Selichah</i> (Forgiveness)              |  |
| 7. <i>Geulah</i> (Redemption)                 |  |
| 8. <i>Refuah</i> (Healing)                    |  |
| 9. <i>Birkat Hashanim</i> (Blessing the Year) | 4. <i>Kidush Hayim</i> (Sanctification of the Day) |
| 10. <i>Kibutz</i> (Ingathering)               |  |
| 11. <i>Mishpat</i> (Justice)                  |  |
| 12. <i>Minim</i> (Heretics)                   |  |
| 13. <i>Tsadikim</i> (Righeous)                |  |
| 14. <i>Yerushalayim</i> (Jerusalem)           |  |
| 15. <i>David</i> (Davidic Dynasty)            |  |
| 16. <i>Shema Kolenu</i> (Hear Our Prayers)    |  |
| 17. <i>Avodah</i> (Worship)                   | 5. <i>Avodah</i> (Worship)                         |
| 18. <i>Modim</i> (Thanksgiving)               | 6. <i>Modim</i> (Thanksgiving)                     |
| 19. <i>Shalom</i> (Peace).                    | 7. <i>Shalom</i> (Peace).                          |

#### **(ii) Sabbath (*Shabbat*) and Holidays**

Judaism celebrates each Saturday as the Sabbath. During the Sabbath, a Jewish person is expected to refrain from *melacha*, which is loosely translated as "work," but means far more than simply avoiding gainful employment. There are many categories of things that we do not do on the Sabbath. Most famously, not lighting flames on the Sabbath (for this reason, one who observes the Sabbath in a traditional style, will not drive a car on the Sabbath). Also, one is not allowed to cook on the Sabbath, and therefore one must prepare food in advance. The Sabbath is a time of rest and celebration. We spend more time in prayer on Sabbath, and people tend to attend services in the synagogue more on this day. The Sabbath is also celebrated with festive meals, which are begun with a blessing over wine, known as *Kiddush*.

Throughout the Jewish calendar, there are a number of holidays. There are three major Biblical holidays. On these holidays, there are certain days that have similar laws like the Sabbath, except that food may be cooked. These three holidays are also of agricultural significance, as they were held around the time of certain harvests in Israel:

- Passover, which commemorates the Jewish exodus from Egypt. This holiday is marked by the *seder*, a ritual meal in the first evenings of the holiday, which retells of the exodus. Also, we refrain from eating any “leavened” food, which essentially means any grain product that came into contact with water and was not baked into *matzas* within 18 minutes or so. So, things like breads and pastas, are not allowed.

- Shavuot, a harvest festival 49 days after the beginning of Passover. It is also said to commemorate the anniversary of God’s revelation at Mount Sinai, which included the giving of the 10 commandments.

- Sukkot (= Festival of Booths), a harvest festival at the end of the agricultural season in Israel. This holiday features the building of temporary huts, which are meant to replace our homes during this holiday. This commemorates the huts that the Israelites lived in during their trek from Egypt to Israel, the booths that people would build in their fields during the harvest, and the booths that people would live in while taking a pilgrimage to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem for the holiday.

In addition to these three festivals, there is Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, and then, ten days later Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement. This is understood as the season in which God judges each Jewish person and decides if that person is worthy of living another year (though, certainly God can change God’s mind either way during the year). Yom Kippur is a fast day, and therefore food preparation is forbidden, just like on Shabbat.

There are other minor Jewish holidays, with particular observances. They do not include the strictures of the Sabbath and the major holidays. They include Hanukah, which celebrates a military victory over the Greeks with the lighting of the Hanukah menorah for 8 days; Purim, which celebrates Mordechai and Esther saving the Jewish people from Haman’s genocidal plot, and Tisha b’Av, a fast day commemorating the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

### *(iii) Kosher – Jewish Dietary Law*

Another major aspect of Jewish practice is keeping Kosher. Keeping kosher really applies directly to the eating of meat. Dairy products that come from kosher animals and fruits and vegetables are all kosher by definition, though in modern times one has to worry if food that looks like it would not have any animal product might have some ingredient that is derived from an animal. **Only certain animals can be kosher. If the species is one that can be kosher, the animal (except fish) must be properly slaughtered, deveined, and salted to remove blood, and must have been healthy before the slaughter.** Thus, although a cow *can* be kosher, if it is not slaughtered properly, or it is found to have had a lung defect before its slaughter, it will not be kosher. As far as animals being kosher, the basic rules are:

- Land animals must have split hooves, and must chew their cud (i.e. have multiple stomachs). Thus, animals like cows, lambs and buffalo can be kosher.

- Bird: Certain birds are listed as unkosher in the Bible, and all other birds are kosher. The identity of each of the birds listed in the Bible are unclear, and, therefore, we don’t eat just any bird. Birds such as chicken and turkey are generally accepted as kosher (if properly slaughtered), while ostrich is not.

- Fish/sea creatures: Must have fins and scales. Thus, salmon, sole, etc. are kosher, while shark is not. Shellfish, mussels, and the like are not kosher, since they do not have fins and scales. Note that fish does not require a ritual slaughter.

Another major rule of keeping kosher is not eating any meat product with any dairy product (e.g. a cheeseburger or chicken parmigiana is out). After eating any meat product, we wait for some time before we eat dairy (1-6 hours depending on custom). This is to insure that any meat flavor left in our mouths, or stuck between our teeth will be gone.<sup>7</sup>

#### ***(iv) Other Jewish rituals***

There are many other Jewish rituals worthy of note, including life cycle events like circumcision, weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs, mourning ritual, etc. To learn more, see the “V. Recommended Resources” referenced below at p. 8.

### **C) ACTS OF KINDNESS**

“And the LORD commanded us all these laws, to have awe of the LORD our God for our everlasting benefit and to let us live as on this day.” (Deut. 6:24) The goal of Judaism is to benefit the world, through refinement of humanity. Thus, our ultimate goal is that the study of Torah, and the observance of ritual, will empower us to deal kindly with those around us. Judaism contains many rules and teachings to help us do what is right. It has much to say about these behaviors, including regulations covering these areas:

- Requirement of giving charity.
- Avoiding slander<sup>8</sup>, revenge and deceit.
- Treating workers fairly.
- Kindness to animals.
- Justice

### **III. IS IT BETTER TO BE A GOOD JEW OR A GOOD PERSON?**

If the goal of Judaism is to be an ood, moral, and ethical person, are the rituals really necessary? Why does one need to study Torah and serve God if they can just be a good person? These very common questions miss the point. The point of Judaism is that the study Torah and serve God are part of what helps us be the person we want to be. Asking whether it is better to be a good Jew or a good person is like asking whether it is better to be a good cook or to have the freshest ingredients. Every chef, no matter how skilled they are, benefits from using the best and freshest ingredients. You can't do your best cooking without the best ingredients! The study of Torah and service of God are ingredients in our own personal recipe that determines who we are.

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<sup>7</sup> The idea that this reason for this rule is to avoid the meat and the dairy meeting up in the stomach is misguided.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, in American law, one has an absolute defense to slander if one speaks the truth. In Jewish law, *lashon harah* – evil speech, includes telling the truth about someone in a way that might reflect negatively on that other person. Even when information is true, it should only be disseminated on a need-to-know basis, not just to make people think less of another person.

## IV. JEWISH DENOMINATIONS

Judaism is by no means monolithic. There are many major denominations, and different philosophies within each Jewish denomination. Here is a brief understanding of Jewish denominations, painting in very broad strokes. For more information (or at least more on my take on this subject), please see my compendium “Being a Halachic Jew: Why the Old Labels Just Don't Fit” available online at <http://www.templeisraeloflb.org/rabbi/halachic.pdf> as well as the resources referenced above in the section “I. Introduction: Judaism is a Religion of Deed, not of Creed.” on p. 1.

**Orthodox Judaism:** Orthodox Judaism believes in the divinity of the Torah. It perceives Jewish law as indicated through the Talmud to represent a binding and relatively immutable imperative. Orthodoxy tends to integrate modernity and modern beliefs into its practices at a slower pace than other movements.

**Conservative Judaism:** Conservative Judaism believes in divine revelation, though its current beliefs towards the Torah vary from a traditional view to the view that the Torah is a creation of four authors/schools of thought. Though the Conservative movement believes in the authority of Jewish law, the perception of how Jewish law interplays with modernity is different from that of Orthodoxy.

**Reconstructionist Judaism:** Reconstructionist Judaism sees Judaism as an evolving civilization whose practices are largely determined by its people. Belief as to the existence of, or nature of God is entirely up to the individual. In large part, Reconstructionist Jews see the Torah as a human work over many centuries.

**Reform Judaism:** Reform Judaism sees Torah and Jewish practice as divinely inspired, though subject to development and personal choice.

## V. RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- To Be A Jew (TBAJ) by Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin. A great book which summarizes many of the important facets of Judaism in a very readable manner. ISBN: 0465086241 (cloth), 0465086322 (paperback).
- To Pray as a Jew (TPAAJ) by Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin. A great guide to all prayer services – weekdays, Sabbath, and holidays. ISBN: 0465086284 (cloth) 0465086330 (paperback).
- The Temple Israel Website’s “Extras” section <http://www.templeisraeloflb.org/Extras.html> has many great resources. I find the Jewish Virtual Library <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.com> to be particularly excellent. They have a thorough glossary. Also, click on their “The Library” and then “Religion” and then “Judiasm” for lots of great pieces about Judaism.

## VI. CONTACT INFORMATION

If you would like further information, please feel free to contact me through Temple Israel of Long Beach at (516) 432-1410 or by e-mail to [RabbiNoahG@templeisraeloflb.org](mailto:RabbiNoahG@templeisraeloflb.org).