

TEACHER'S NOTES

RELIGION

FAST FACTS

JUDAISM

PEOPLE

Many Jews have lived away from the ancient Kingdoms of Israel and Judah (renamed as Palestine by the Romans) for centuries. By the time of the Roman occupation the **diaspora** (scattering of people with a common origin) was already well established, with Jewish communities living in Babylonia and throughout the Roman Empire. Following failed rebellions against Roman rule, in 70 CE and again in 132 CE, the Jews were expelled from Palestine and established communities in many other parts of North Africa, Asia and Europe. Despite much persecution throughout the succeeding centuries Jewish communities survived and spread further afield.

The diaspora led to the establishment of two major communities of European Judaism, each with their own traditions: the **Sephardim** in Spain and related areas and the **Ashkenazim** mainly in central, eastern and northern Europe.

Nineteenth century persecutions (*pogroms*) in eastern Europe led to the emigration of many Jews to Britain, Ireland and especially North America. Although there was always some Jewish presence in Palestine, from the beginning of the twentieth century an increasing number of Jews began to return to Palestine as settlers. This was intensified after the end of World War II with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

European anti-Semitism in the inter-World-War period under fascism and Nazism led to the *Holocaust* in which six million Jews (including one million children) perished in the death camps and gas chambers (along with members of other minority groups). Holocaust Memorial Day is now marked every year on 27 January (the date of the liberation of Auschwitz) with special reflective activities.

BELIEFS

Jewish faith in one God is expressed in **The Shema** (Hebrew for "hear"), which is recited each morning and evening. The words are from the Hebrew Scriptures (Deuteronomy 6:4,5):

Hear, O Israel!
The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!
And you shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart
and with all your soul
and with all your might.

The *Shema* teaches Jews that they are to strive for holiness by loving God, accepting his providence and submitting to his law, which involves keeping the 613 commandments (*mizvot*). The doorposts of Jewish homes normally have a *mezuzah* – a small decorative box with the words of the *Shema* inside.

Orthodox Jews look to a coming anointed leader, the *Messiah*, who will reign in Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Many attitudes towards the modern state of Israel and the future

of Jerusalem centre on this belief, which is held with great passion by some. Within Reform Judaism, however, the idea of the Messiah has been spiritualised to symbolise God's kingdom on earth of love, peace and righteousness – "a golden messianic age".

Hebrew dietary laws require the careful preparation of food according to biblical laws. It is only permitted (*kosher* – meaning proper or correct) to eat herbivorous animals – with a cloven hoof and that chew the cud: ox, sheep, goat, deer; also chicken, duck, turkey, goose, but not birds of prey. Animal slaughter is by specially trained kosher butchers – *shochtim* – who are well-versed in the biblical rules. Milk and meat must be kept separately and not cooked or served together and utensils must be washed and stored separately.

For observing Jews the Sabbath (*shabat*) involves no work or school; no housework or homework; no "kindling"; no shopping or preparing food; no money (pockets are emptied). Similar rules apply to major Jewish holy days.

COMMUNITIES

Jewish traditions are diverse, including:

- *Orthodox* (in various groups including "Ultra-Orthodox") – taking a strong position on the revelation of the Torah and a generally conservative approach to Jewish practices
- *Reform* – dating from the late 18th and early 19th centuries CE in Central Europe – taking more liberal views of the Torah and other issues (such as the role of women)
- *Conservative* – including the *Masorti* movement in the USA, Israel and the UK – which takes a middle position between Orthodox and Reform
- *Liberal and Progressive* – a more radical breakaway from Reform Judaism – including a significant minority of British Jews.

In addition to the modern Jewish "denominations", various movements and traditions have emerged within Judaism over the centuries including followers of the **Kabbalah**, a mystic tradition, and the **Hasidim**, a pietistic and ascetic movement commencing in the 18th century CE in eastern Europe. Each of these traditions has contributed to the shape of contemporary Judaism.

In 1771 the recorded existence of a "Jew Butcher" suggests that there was a Jewish community in Belfast. Growth took place from the 1840s and in 1871-2 the first purpose-built synagogue was established. From 1881 there were significant new arrivals, fleeing the Russian pogroms, and from 1903 they joined with the main Hebrew congregation. In 1898 a Jewish elementary school was established, followed in 1904 by a new synagogue. At around the turn of the century Sir Otto Jaffe, a prominent Jewish businessman, was twice Lord Mayor of Belfast. The present synagogue in North Belfast was opened in 1964 and by 1967 there were about 1,350 Jews living in Northern Ireland. In recent decades the small Jewish communities in other towns have almost entirely disappeared and the main community is centred in Belfast where numbers continue to decline.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

Worship in the synagogue (often referred to as *Shul*) is normally led by a *rabbi* (teacher) and, in larger synagogues, a cantor (*chazzan*) who sings some of the prayers.

During services the congregation faces the Holy Ark (*aron kodesh*), which is oriented towards Jerusalem. By the Ark the *Ner Tamid* (everlasting light) burns – symbolising the eternal presence of God. Two symbolic tablets of stone are placed above the Ark with the Hebrew words (or initial letters) of the 10 Commandments. Facing the Ark on an elevated platform

(*Bimah*) there is a reading desk from where the Torah is chanted and sermons are preached, symbolising the precept that the law is higher than humankind.

In Orthodox synagogues women and children (including boys who are not yet *Bar Mitzvah*) sit separately from the men, sometimes in a gallery. This practice is no longer common in Reform or Progressive synagogues (and even many Orthodox synagogues have only token divides).

The **Tallit** – prayer shawl – is worn by men at the morning service and all day on *Yom Kippur*. It is made from wool or silk and is normally white with black or blue stripes and fringes on each corner. (Outside the Orthodox tradition it is also worn by women.) The *yarmulka* (or *kippah*) – a skull cap – is worn by male Jews in the synagogue, but many Orthodox Jewish men wear it at all times.

Men taking part in weekday morning prayers often wear the **Teffilin** – leather boxes, sometimes called *phylacteries*, containing the words of the *Shema*. These are strapped to the arm (close to the heart) and the forehead (close to the mind), based on Exodus 13:1-16 and Deuteronomy 6:4-9: "...bind these words for a sign upon your hand and a frontlet between your eyes". They are not worn on the Sabbath or during festivals.

FESTIVALS

Chanukkah ("dedication"), an eight-day festival of lights, takes place in November/December. It celebrates the recapture and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 165 BCE by Judas the Macabee after it had been desecrated by the Greeks (1 Macabees 4:48-59). The menorah had been badly damaged so one was made out of spears. However, there was only one single jar of oil – enough for just one day – which was required in order to keep the *Ner Tamid* (everlasting light) burning. It took 8 days until more oil could be prepared, but the miracle was that the *Ner Tamid* kept burning throughout that time. In the home, a candle is lit on the *Chanukkiah* for each day of the festival. Gifts are exchanged and special oil-related foods are prepared such as doughnuts and *latkes* (fried grated potato cakes).

On Passover Eve the *Seder* meal is eaten, during which the story of deliverance from slavery is told in the words of the *Haggadah* (the Telling, the Story). After this a child asks the father to retell the Exodus story: "Why is this night different from all other nights?". Other questions are based on the symbolic food items that are placed on the seder plate to remind the faithful of the deliverance from Egypt: a roasted shankbone; a roasted egg; three loaves of unleavened bread; bitter herbs; a green vegetable dipped in salt water; *charoset* (a paste made from nuts, cinnamon, wine and apples).

Other festivals include:

Shavuoth: commemorating the giving of the Ten Commandments

Sukkot: the harvest festival of Tabernacles

Simhat Torah: the end and beginning of the annual cycle of Torah readings

Purim: the Festival of Lots (based on the Biblical story of Esther)

In the Jewish lunar calendar years can vary between 355 and 385 days but remains remarkably synchronised with the national calendar.

SCRIPTURES

The most important document for all Jews is the Bible (**TeNaKh**), including **the Law** (Torah), **the Prophets** (Nevi'im) and **the Writings** (Ketuvim). (*TeNaKh* is an acronym of these three names.)

For Orthodox Jews the Torah is the actual word of God, as written down by Moses. More liberal forms of Judaism interpret this concept less literally.

In Jewish worship the Torah is read aloud in Hebrew in 54 sections, spanning the year. The readings are from the Torah scroll using a *yad* (a silver pointer).

(The Hebrew Scriptures are also included in the Christian Bible, where they are known as *The Old Testament*.)

The Talmud (meaning study or learning) is a very large body of commentary and discussion written after the diaspora and based on the Torah and other scriptures. It includes judgements, opinions, descriptions of practices, etc.. For Orthodox Jews its study is a religious duty, although it is taken less seriously by the various non-Orthodox groups. The Talmud has had a tremendous effect upon Jewish life and schools of thought.

Bar Mitzvah A boy reaches adulthood in Jewish terms on his thirteenth birthday – when he becomes *bar mitzvah* (son of the commandment). After his birthday, usually on a Shabat, there is a special ceremony at which he is called forward to read in Hebrew from the Torah and the Prophets. This serves as a public announcement of his coming of age and he may now wear a *tallit* and the *tefillin* and read publicly from the Torah at synagogue services.

In Reform/Progressive (and even sometimes in Orthodox) communities girls may mark their achievement of adulthood at age twelve in a **Bat Mitzvah** (daughter of the commandment) ceremony. This is meant to encourage girls to have a more active role and takes a similar form to the *Bar Mitzvah*.