



Foundational Beliefs, Concepts, and Ideas

Conceptual Foundations

The Nature of God

One of the primary expressions of Jewish faith, recited twice daily in prayer, is the *Shema*, which begins “Hear, Israel: The Lord is our God, The Lord is One.” This simple statement encompasses several different ideas.

1. There is only one God.
2. God is one and is a single, whole, complete indivisible entity, who cannot be divided into parts or described by attributes. Any attempt to ascribe attributes to God is merely man’s imperfect attempt to understand the infinite.
3. God is the only being to whom we should offer praise.

God’s Names

In *Rabbinic* Judaism there are seven names for God. In the Hebrew Bible the name of God used most often is the *Tetragrammaton* YHWH. This name is frequently anglicized as *Jehovah* and *Yahweh*. In most English editions of the Bible it appears written as “the Lord” flowing from the Jewish tradition of reading it as *Adonai* (My Lord) out of respect.

In Jewish thought, a name is not merely an arbitrary designation or a random combination of sounds. The name conveys the nature and essence of the thing named. It represents the history and reputation of the being named and therefore a name should be treated with the same respect as the thing’s reputation. For this reason, God’s names, in all of their forms, are treated with enormous respect and reverence in Judaism. This may include not writing or spelling out the name in full using G-d instead of God in English or saying *Tt-Vav* (*tetveh*) to indicate the number 15 in numerology instead of *Yōd-Hē* (*Yahweh*). Jews are commanded to never say God’s name in vain and there is a prohibition on erasing or defacing a name of God.

13 Principles of Faith

The closest that anyone has ever come to creating a widely-accepted list of Jewish beliefs is *Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith*. These principles, which Rambam thought were the minimum requirements of Jewish belief, are as follows:

1. God exists.
2. God is one and unique.
3. God is incorporeal.
4. God is eternal.
5. Prayer is to be directed to God alone and to no other.
6. The words of the prophets are true.
7. Moses' prophecies are true, and Moses was the greatest of the prophets.
8. The *Written Torah* and the *Oral Torah* were given to Moses.
9. There will be no other *Torah*.
10. God knows the thoughts and deeds of men.
11. God will reward the good and punish the wicked.
12. The *Messiah* will come.
13. The dead will be resurrected.

Judaism focuses on relationships: the relationship between God and mankind, between God and the Jewish people, between the Jewish people and the land of Israel, and between human beings. The Jewish scriptures tell the story of the development of these relationships, from the time of creation, through the creation of the relationship between God and Abraham, to the creation of the relationship between God and the Jewish people, and forward. The scriptures also specify the mutual obligations created by these relationships, although various movements of Judaism disagree about the nature of these obligations. Some say they are absolute, unchanging laws from God (Orthodox); some say they are laws from God that change and evolve over time (Conservative); some say that they are guidelines that you can choose whether or not to follow (Reform, Reconstructionist). According to Orthodox Judaism, these actions include 613 commandments given by God in the *Torah* as well as laws instituted by the *rabbis* and long-standing customs.

Sacrifices



Figure 12: Havdalah

For the most part, the practice of sacrifice stopped in the year 70 C.E., when the Roman army destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, the place where sacrifices were offered. Jews stopped offering sacrifices because they didn't have a proper place to offer them. The *Torah* specifically commands the Jews not to offer sacrifices wherever they wish; they are only permitted to offer sacrifices in the place that God has chosen for that purpose. The last place appointed by God for this purpose was the Temple in Jerusalem, but the Temple has been destroyed. In Jewish practice, prayer has taken the place of sacrifices.

Today, the practice of making sacrifices is symbolically represented in Jewish Passover *Seder* plates (meal) by the *zroah* (shank bone of a lamb). The *Seder* meal takes place midway through the Passover ritual. The *zroah* is essential to the *Seder*, as a lamb was sacrificed the night before the Exodus.

In contemporary Jewish homes, some will still place a lamb shank bone on the *Seder* plate, but others will use one from a chicken (neck, wing, or drumstick). Jews who are vegetarian may place olives, grapes, unfermented grains, or beets onto their *Seder* plates in place of any bones.

The Sabbath

The *Sabbath* (*Shabbat*) is the most important ritual observance in Judaism. It is the only ritual observance instituted in the Ten Commandments. The *Sabbath* is primarily a day of rest and spiritual enrichment. The word *Shabbat* comes from a Hebrew root meaning to cease, to end, or to rest. All types of work that were needed to build the sanctuary (like sowing, kindling a fire, tearing, etc.) are prohibited, as well as any task that operates by the same principle or has the same purpose. In addition, the *rabbis* have prohibited coming into contact with any implement that could be used for one of the above purposes (for example, one may not touch a hammer or a pencil). They have also prohibited travel, buying and selling, and other weekday tasks that would interfere with the spirit of the *Sabbath*. The use of electricity is prohibited because it serves the same function as fire or some of the other prohibitions, or because it is technically considered to be fire. As with almost all of the commandments, all of these *Sabbath* restrictions can be violated if necessary to save a life.

The *Sabbath* ends at nightfall, when three stars are visible, approximately forty minutes after sunset. At the conclusion of the *Sabbath*, the family performs a concluding ritual called *Havdalah* (separation, division). Blessings are recited over wine, spices, and candles. Then a blessing is recited regarding the division between the sacred and the secular, between the *Sabbath* and the working days.

Prayers and Blessings



Figure 13: *Lia bat mitzvah*

In Judaism, prayer is largely a group activity rather than an individual activity, although it is permissible to pray alone and it fulfills the obligation to pray. Observant Jews pray in formal worship services three times a day, every day: at evening (*Ma'ariv*), in the morning (*Shacharit*), and in the afternoon (*Minchah*). Daily prayers are collected in a book called a *Siddur*, which derives from the Hebrew root meaning order, because the *Siddur* shows the order of prayers. Jews pray facing the city of Jerusalem (Israel).

The *Talmud* states that it is permissible to pray in any language that you can understand; however, traditional Judaism has always stressed the importance of praying in Hebrew. It is believed that through prayer the bond that has been created between Jews all over the world is maintained and strengthened.

A blessing (*berakhah*) is a special kind of prayer that is very common in Judaism. *Berakhot* are recited either as part of the synagogue services and as a response or prerequisite to a wide variety of daily occurrences. *Berakhot* are easy to recognize: they all start with the word *barukh* (blessed or praised).

Life and Death

In Judaism, life is valued above almost all else. The *Talmud* notes that all people are descended from a single person, thus taking a single life is like destroying an entire world, and saving a single life is like saving an entire world.

Of the 613 commandments, only the prohibitions against murder, idolatry, incest, and adultery are so important that they cannot be violated to save a life. Judaism not only permits, but often requires a person to violate the commandments if necessary to save a life.

Because life is so valuable, Jews are not permitted to do anything that may hasten death, not even to prevent suffering. Euthanasia, suicide, and assisted suicide are strictly forbidden by Jewish law. However, where death is imminent and certain, and the patient is suffering, Jewish law does permit one to cease artificially prolonging life.

Death, in Judaism, is not a tragedy, even when it occurs early in life or through unfortunate circumstances. Death is a natural process. Our deaths, like our lives, have meaning and are all part of God's plan. In addition, Jews have a firm belief in an afterlife, a world to come, where those who have lived a worthy life will be rewarded. In Jewish law, the human body belongs to its

Creator, to God. The body must therefore be “returned” in its entirety, just as it was given. Any violation of the human body is considered to be a violation of God Himself (self-mutilation as well as cremation are forbidden).

Mourning practices in Judaism are extensive, but they are not an expression of fear or distaste for death. Jewish practices relating to death and mourning have two purposes: to show respect for the dead and to comfort the living who will miss the deceased.

Bar Mitzvah / Bat Mitzvah

These terms denote both the attainment of religious and legal maturity and the occasion at which this status is formally assumed for boys at the age of 13 plus one day and for girls at the age of 12 plus one day. Upon reaching this age, a Jew is obliged to fulfill all the commandments. Jewish law fixed 13 as the age of responsibility considering this the time of physical maturity for boys (and 12 for girls). At this age, young people are thought to be able to control their desires.

Marriage

Marriage (*kiddushin*) and by extension the family is very important in Judaism. In Judaism, family and the home are thought to be great blessings. Traditionally, marriage was the union of a man and a woman.



Figure 14: Groom and Bride under a Contemporary Chupah

Same-sex marriage in Judaism in the last few decades has been a subject of much debate within Jewish denominations in Canada and across the Jewish diaspora. The traditional view that same-sex relationships are categorically forbidden by the *Torah* remains the current view of Orthodox Judaism, but not necessarily of Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative Judaism. These sects began changing their position on same-sex unions and LGBTQ inclusion a few decades ago. Reform and conservative synagogues in Canada and Manitoba have allowed and performed same-sex marriages in the last few years.

The importance of marriage is emphasized in the *Torah* and the *Talmud*. According to the *Midrash*, this is because when God created the first human it was in the form of one being, who had both male and female characteristics. Later, God separated the two aspects to form two separate entities, a man and a woman.

Wedding Ceremony

Wedding ceremonies and practices within the Jewish faith vary depending on regions, origins, and local customs. For example, the Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish communities have very different wedding ceremonies and traditions. As well, there are practices that are aligned with the three main Jewish sects, reformed, conservative, and orthodox. The nature of the wedding ceremony will be based on the synagogue in which the wedding is held. Reform Jewish ceremonies and Conservative Jewish ceremonies tend to be more liberal and modern; the Orthodox Jewish and Hassidic wedding ceremonies are the most traditional and follow strict patterns of practice.

The Ashkenazi Jewish wedding ceremony is relatively brief. Usually, the couple fasts the day before the marriage. Before beginning the wedding ceremony, the groom places a veil on his bride symbolizing modesty and his commitment to clothe and protect his wife.

The ceremony itself lasts 20–30 minutes, and takes place under a canopy (called a *chupah*), which represents the home that the new couple will share. Typically the ceremony proceeds as follows:

1. The *chatan* (groom) followed by the *kallah* (bride) are each escorted to the *chupah* by their respective parents.
2. When the groom reaches the *chupah*, the *chazan* (cantor) blesses him and asks God to bless the couple. When the groom arrives underneath the *chupah* he dons a *kittel* (white robe), which symbolizes spiritual purity.
3. Next the *kallah* circles the *chatan* seven times under the *chupah* symbolically building the walls of the couple's new home and alluding to aspects of the *Torah*.
4. This is followed by the actual wedding of the couple, the *kiddushin* and the *nisuin*.
5. For the *kiddushin*, the rabbi recites a blessing over the wine, and then a blessing acknowledging forbidden and permitted relationships in Jewish law. The first cup accompanies the betrothal blessing, and after these are recited, the couple drinks from the cup. As per Jewish custom, a *chatan* must give the *kallah* an object worth more than one *peruta* (a small unit of value); however, it has become customary for the *chatan* to give a ring. The man places the ring on the woman's finger and says "Be sanctified (*mekudeshet*) to me with this ring in accordance with the law of Moses and Israel."

According to Jewish law, this is the central moment of the wedding, and the couple is now married.

6. After the *kiddushin* is complete, the *ketubah* (marriage contract) is read aloud in the original Aramaic text. The contract is then signed by two *edim* (witnesses). The *ketubah* is the property of the *kallah* and she must have access to it throughout the couple's marriage.
7. The *nisuin* proceeds with the bride and groom standing beneath the *chupah*, and reciting seven blessings (*sheva brakhos*) in the presence of a *minyan* (prayer quorum of 10 adult Jewish men). The couple then drinks a second cup of the wine.
8. The groom smashes a glass (or a small symbolic piece of glass) with his right foot, to symbolize the destruction of the Temple.
9. The couple then retires briefly to a completely private room (*cheder yichud*) and are left alone for the first time. This time is also symbolic of the groom bringing his wife into his home.
10. *Yichud* is followed by a festive meal, which is followed by a repetition of the *sheva brakhos*. Exuberant music and dancing traditionally accompany the ceremony and the reception.

With respect to Orthodox Jewish weddings, men and women must sit separately and dance separately. As well, Orthodox Jewish weddings take place on Sundays, as opposed to Saturdays.

With respect to Hassidic weddings, men and women celebrate separately. Two receptions are held simultaneously, often in two rooms, or in one room separated by a partition. For almost the entire wedding reception and celebration, the women will converse, eat, dance, and celebrate with the bride, and the men will do so with the groom.

Divorce

In Judaism, Jewish marriage was traditionally and ideally intended to be for life but it has always been recognized and accepted that this is not always possible. The concept of a "no-fault" divorce has been accepted in Judaism for thousands of years.

Under Jewish law, a man can divorce a woman if she has faults or has transgressed in some way or for no specific reason. If the marriage breaks down and a divorce is desired, traditionally, the man has to give his wife a *Sefer k'ritut*, more commonly known as a *Get* (Aramaic name). A *Get* is the issuing of a bill of divorce from the husband to the wife. The *Get* (document of divorce) has to be presented at a *rabbinical* court (*Bet Din*) and approved. After a divorce, there are no restrictions on either partner remarrying.

While, it is possible for a man to refuse to give a *Get* to his wife, most Progressive Jews see this as unfair and will allow the woman to apply for a *Get*.

The *Get* is a dated and witnessed document wherein the husband expresses his firm intention to divorce his wife and sever all ties with her. The *Get* is usually written by an expert scribe acting as the husband's agent. Each *Get* is individually written to reflect the specific situation of the divorcing couple. The *Get* can be written in any language, as long as it contains the key words and phrases mandated by Jewish law. However, the almost universally accepted custom is to have it written in Aramaic.

Inequality of the Sexes

Within Judaism, with respect to divorce, the husband and wife are not equal in their powers. According to the *Talmud*, only the male can initiate a divorce, and the wife cannot prevent him from divorcing her. This has changed and, today, the requirement in the Jewish religious divorce process is the complete agreement of both parties to the proceedings even though traditionally it must be initiated and agreed to by the male partner.

For Orthodox women who feel the marriage has broken down or whose partner has broken their bonds of marriage, this inequality can be difficult. If the husband refuses to issue a *Get* and agree to a divorce they may be obligated by Jewish Law to remain with men who won't let them go. In the Orthodox Jewish community, when a *beth din* summons a husband to participate in the *Get* process, he can respond in one of three ways

- agree to the *Get*
- go to court and provide reasons for refusing and wait for the *rabbis'* decision
- ignore the request to appear

The *rabbinical* courts have limited powers to influence men who refuse to give their wives *Gets*. In Israel, the men can lose their driving privileges or be thrown in jail. In North America, however, the secular courts cannot interfere in Jewish divorce proceedings.

Marrying Gentiles or Non-Jews

Judaism has historically been a matrilineal faith (one's mother needs to be a Jew for that person to be considered one). As well, the *Torah* encourages Jews to marry within their religion; however, this is changing. For example, in Israel, a person who has a patrilineal connection to Judaism and can prove so, has the right to immigrate to Israel and receive citizenship.

Increasingly, in Canada and elsewhere, more Jewish men and women choose to marry non-Jews; however, in Orthodox families, this presents a challenge. Sometimes, when this occurs in an Orthodox family, the father may say *kaddish* (the memorial prayer said at funerals) to show that his child is now dead to him and the family.

Same-Sex Marriage and Judaism

Same-sex marriage in Judaism, as with Christianity and other religions, has been a subject of debate. The traditional view was that same-sex relationships were forbidden by the *Torah*. Today, this is still the position of Orthodox Judaism but not of Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative Judaism.

As the issue of same-sex marriage became a significant social and political issue in Canada and throughout the world and laws in several countries began to allow same-sex marriages, it has also become more prevalent in certain Jewish communities as well. Reform, Reconstructionist, and more recently Conservative Judaism have adopted more open and inclusive approaches to diversity of sexuality, gender identity, and expression. For example, in Winnipeg, the first known same-sex marriage in a Conservative synagogue took place in 2012.

Within the Orthodox community, there is a small, but increasing number of individuals and leaders who advocate for same-sex marriage as a secular institution. *Rabbi* Steven Greenberg, an American, is the first openly gay Orthodox *rabbi* and a well-known advocate among open-minded Orthodox and traditionally-observant Jews around the world.

Mysticism in Judaism

Mysticism and mystical experiences have been a part of Judaism that dates back to the beginning of the faith. For example, the *Torah* contains an abundance of stories of mystical experiences, ranging from visitations by angels to prophetic dreams and visions.

The mystical school of thought came to be known as *Kabbalah*. Generally, *Kabbalah* refers to Jewish mysticism dating back to the time of the second Temple. For many years, it was a carefully guarded oral tradition, but it became systematized and dispersed in the Middle Ages. The focus of the *Kabbalah* is the simultaneous transcendence and immanence of God, with the latter described in terms of the *sefirot* or attributes of God.

Kabbalah is one of the most commonly misrepresented and misunderstood aspects of Judaism. These result largely from the fact that the teachings of *Kabbalah* have been significantly distorted by mystics, occultists, and new age practitioners.

Hebrews or Jews?

In the section relating to early Jewish history, the terms Hebrew or Hebrews is used. Hebrews is a term which appears in the Hebrew Bible. It is usually taken to mostly refer to the Semitic-speaking Israelites, especially in the pre-monarchic period when they were still nomadic.

While today Hebrew usually refers to the language and Jews to the people, in some languages, Hebrews is still the primary term used to refer to the people. This is due to the negative connotations that the word Jew(s) has in such languages as Armenian, Italian, Modern Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian, Russian, Romanian, and others.

Notes