Judaism

Introductory profiles adapted from *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*

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"Sharing the Light," Thomas Hawk (2005), San Francisco, USA, from Flickr Creative Commons.

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Religion profiles are adapted from *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, a resource of the Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org/ocg).

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University
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"Star of David" by Knokton (2010) at Flickr Creative Commons.

Preface: How to Read These Profiles

In these religion profiles, our focus is on particular religious traditions with an emphasis on 1) their internal diversity, and 2) the ways that the traditions are always evolving and changing. Though we hope these profiles provide helpful introductions, this format is a bit misleading in that it can reinforce the idea that religions exist and develop in isolation from other social and historical forces, including other religions. While reading these profiles, please remember that religions always impact and are impacted by political, economic, social, and historical factors. Please see the Methods article for fuller explanation of these intersections and the Country Profiles for a demonstration of how to understand religious influences in particular social and historical contexts.

God, Torah, and Israel

Simply put, Judaism is the way of life of the Jewish people. In the English-speaking Western world, “Judaism” is often considered a “religion," but there are no equivalent words for “Judaism” or for “religion” in Hebrew; there are words for “faith,” “law,” or “custom” but not for “religion” if one thinks of the term as meaning solely the beliefs and practices associated with a relationship with God or a vision of transcendence. The Jewish tradition is much broader than this. As a way of life, it includes the social, cultural, and religious history of a widespread and diverse community, including people who do and do not think of themselves as “religious.”

Judaism embraces the intricate religious and cultural development of the Jewish people through more than thirty centuries of history, stretching from Biblical times to medieval Spain to the Enlightenment, and then to the Holocaust and the founding of the modern state of Israel. The result is an experience that reflects the elliptical relationship between religious practice and peoplehood. From a religious perspective Judaism is a theistic system, but from a peoplehood perspective, it is also the group memory of the manifold communities and cultures formed by Jews through the ages. It consists not only of *Torah* (divine revelation)

and *mitzvoth* (divine commandments), but also the diverse cultures of the Hebrew, Yiddish, and Ladino languages. It includes not only the visible markers of religious observance, such as the *kippah* or the *payot* or the *tzitzit*, but also the communal structures of the *kehillah*, the *mellah*, and the *shtetl*. It includes politics—whether in Poland, America, or Israel. And it includes the whole range of Jewish education and family life, food and festival, music and dance, and custom and humor.

A girl carries a covered Torah, USCJ.Program.Pix (2007), Flickr Creative Commons.

Judaism is perhaps best conceptualized as a triad with three points of reference: God, Torah, and the people of Israel (that is, the Jewish people). None is central; all are interdependent, with varying degrees of emphasis at various times. God is the God of Israel, the God of all creation, the one God. Torah embodies Judaism's intellectual culture, focusing on the study, understanding, and interpretation of sacred texts. Israel focuses on Judaism as a historical culture and the civilization of a particular people; the "peoplehood" of the Jews includes customs and foods, arts and music, dance and folkways that are part of a way of life. Judaism is critically concerned with the evolving relationship between God, Torah, and the Jewish people, a relationship described as a covenant. In the covenantal triad, God emphasizes the vertical relationship of the Jewish people to the Divine; Israel emphasizes the horizontal relationship Jews bear to one another, and Torah is both vertical and horizontal, for it defines the way of life of a whole people lived in relationship to God.

These three connotations of Judaism as a monotheistic system, as a literary tradition, and as a historical culture are sometimes viewed separately. For example, there are Jews who see themselves as culturally Jewish, but who are also non-religious or atheist, often identifying more strongly with Jewish "peoplehood" than with traditional understandings of God and Torah. Even so, all Jews would recognize that these three points of reference have shaped and guided Jewish experience through the ages.

The great symbols of God, Torah, and Israel have assumed varying positions of prominence throughout Jewish history, and our discussion of them necessarily unfolds within an ongoing historical framework. Such a historical approach is critical for an understanding of contemporary Judaism, for Judaism is a historical tradition—in which history is valued in and of itself. In many ways, Judaism has always been the sum total of all the history of its God, texts, and people.

God: Biblical Monotheism

The vision of a universal, singular God is arguably one of the greatest religious innovations of the Jewish tradition among the world's historic religious systems. Between 1500 and 500 BCE, the Israelite people of the ancient Near East began to articulate a radical new understanding of divinity. The ancient Hebrews were most likely "polytheistic," believing in numerous deities representing different forces of nature and serving various tribes and nations. Eventually, however, early Hebrew visionaries and prophets began to speak boldly of one God as the creator of all existence, a view we have come to call "monotheism." Expressing the multivalent nature of divinity as well as an insistence

upon the oneness of God, early Hebrew authors gave God names such as *Elohim* ("gods"), *Adonai* ("my lord"), and the unpronounceable YHWH, from the same root as the verb "to be," the etymological source of the name "Jehovah."

Through the visions and the voices of prophets, the God the Hebrews encountered was all-powerful and benevolent, merciful and just. Rejecting the anthropomorphic tendency of the time, the Hebrews did not represent God in any human form or earthly likeness, but as a universal God, engaged in a lasting relationship with humankind through the instruments of revelation, Torah, and a covenantal people, Israel. This emerging understanding of God would have profound implications for the history of Western religion.

A photography of Yemenite Jews in Jerusalem taken by missionaries between 1898 and 1911. Palestine Exploration Fund, Flickr Creative Commons.

Geographical context, of course, was essential to the development of ancient Israelite monotheism. Living in the land of Canaan, situated midway between the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt at the heart of the Fertile Crescent, the ancient Hebrews were exposed to the religious cultures of multiple world powers. While Mesopotamian deities, represented in the form of images, were numerous, Mesopotamian society was ordered by a permanent set of laws—the Code of Hammurabi—and not subject to the capriciousness of their many gods. Meanwhile, Egyptian religion posited an unchanging set of nature deities represented on earth by a divine ruler, the Pharaoh. The Hebrews, originating in Mesopotamia and enslaved for generations in Egypt, adopted elements of both world views. They rejected the idol worship of Mesopotamian religion while preserving the rational and just organization of its society, and rejected the human deification of the Egyptian Pharaoh while preserving the singularity of his rule: God alone is sovereign. Through negotiating the polytheism and idolatry of religious cultures at the time, the Hebrew concept of God drew in large part from the Israelites' Near Eastern neighbors.

Despite these continuities, there was something quite new in the Hebrews' understanding of God. Unlike the Mesopotamians or the Egyptians, the ancient Hebrews affirmed that their laws came directly from God. For example, God's gift of the Torah on Mount Sinai became pivotal in the Hebrew people's self-understanding. God was not an abstract concept or principle, but actively involved in history through revelation and covenant. Throughout Jewish history, the common thread has been God's relationship with humanity. Every Jewish theological concept of God has implications for the nature of human existence: God's creation of the universe, including the possibilities of good and evil, implies the existence of human free will and leads ultimately to a belief in human freedom and dignity. At the same time, God's covenant with the Jewish people and involvement in human history implies that individuals and societies exist for a reason, unfolding along a purposeful plan.

These themes, initially developed through oral literature, were soon compiled into the written record of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jews today continue to pride themselves on the fact that the "ethical monotheism" of Judaism is the basic building block of Western religion. The idea of one God unites broad human communities historically, religiously, and culturally to the present day.

Torah: Covenant and Constitution

Torah is the one Hebrew word that may provide the best lens into the Jewish tradition. Meaning literally "instruction" or "guidebook," the Torah is the central text of Judaism. It refers specifically to the five books of the Bible called the Pentateuch, traditionally thought to be penned by the early Hebrew prophet Moses. More generally, however, Torah applies to all of Jewish sacred literature, learning, and law. It is the Jewish way.

"Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue Torah," Steve Garfield (2008), Flickr Creative Commons.

According to the Jewish rabbinic tradition, the Torah in its broadest representation is God's blueprint for the creation of the universe. More specifically, the Torah is also the constitution of the Jewish people, the historical record of origins and the basic legal document passed down from the ancient Israelites to the present day. Torah provides the basis for the Jews' relationship to God as well as their interactions as a socio-political cultural group.

First recorded as an oral tradition and written in fragments, the Hebrew text of the five books of the Torah was edited over a period of centuries (generally thought to be from 1000 to 500 BCE), and canonized in its final form during subsequent generations. The first book, Bereshit, comes from the opening words of the text, "In the beginning." A later Latin translation called it Genesis. This collection of texts contains the story of God's creation of the world, the story of human origins, and the patriarchal narratives that comprise the story of Jewish origins. The subsequent four books are Shemot ("Names" or Exodus), Vayikrah ("And God called" or Leviticus), Bamidbar ("In the desert" or Numbers), and Devarim ("Words" or Deuteronomy). These books recount the story of the Jews' enslavement in Egypt, their liberation from Egypt under Moses, their sojourn in the desert, and their eventual return to the promised land, the land of Canaan.

The central event of these narratives, the climactic moment in biblical history, is God's gift of the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. Besides containing the history of God's relation with Israel, these five books are interspersed with 613 divine laws (*mitzvot*, meaning "commandments"). This divine law informs both ethical and ritual behavior, forming the basis of all subsequent Jewish law.

In addition to the five books of the Torah, the Hebrew Bible contains two more collections, Nevi'im ("Prophets") and Ketuvim ("Writings"). Prophets consists of ten books, beginning with the historical narratives of Joshua, Judges, Samuel I-II, and Kings I-II, and concluding with the prophetic oracles of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and a book of twelve minor prophets. These works span seven centuries, from the conquest of Canaan (c. 1250-1200 BCE) to the exile of the Jewish people to Babylon in the

sixth century BCE. The nine books of various genres which make up Writings are Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Megillot (the scrolls containing Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther), Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles I-II. In addition to its poetic and wisdom literature, Writings bring the history of the Jewish people into the fifth century BCE, the period of restoration, when the Jews returned to Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon. The Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim together comprise the Hebrew Scriptures, known by its Hebrew acronym Tanakh. With some revisions and rearrangements, the Tanakh was translated into Greek to become the Septuagint, the basis of the Christian "Old Testament." It is important to note that the Tanakh and the Old Testament are two different books with slight differences between them, primarily in the order and emphasis of the texts.

After the final compilation of the Torah, the book of Ezra notes that the first public reading of the text took place in 444 BCE, when Ezra the Scribe instituted the practice in Jerusalem. He also initiated a professional class of specialists in the transcription, illumination, and instruction of Torah. During the Roman Empire, these master teachers, now known as "rabbis," became the leaders of the Jewish community, and their seat of religious learning, the *yeshiva*, became a central institution of Jewish life. Jews have been reading, studying, and interpreting the text of the Torah ever since.

An Ethiopian Falasha Rabbi holds a Torah, Beany Wezelman (1966), The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, Flickr Creative Commons.

In Jewish communal worship today, the weekly Torah reading is the heart of the synagogue service. The scrolls of the Torah are kept in the holy ark, often covered with velvet, and when they are taken out to be read, they are lifted for all to see, carried with joy and reverence through the congregation, placed upon the reader's desk, and unrolled. Then weekly Torah portions are read by members of the congregation. Outside the synagogue, Torah study is an important activity of the Jewish school and home. Since it is considered by most religious Jews as the direct utterance of God and therefore sacred, study is as important as worship. For some Jews in the modern world, this commitment to study becomes pride in the vitality of intellectual life.

Israel: Jewish Nationhood

From the perspective of Jewish tradition, all Jews share a common ancestry descended from Abraham and his wife Sarah, and are therefore part of the same extended family. The Torah attributes this commonality to the patriarch Abraham: in his covenant with God, Abraham was promised that he would become the father of a great nation. Fulfilling the promise, they had a son, Isaac, whose own son Jacob was renamed Israel, literally "the one who struggles with God" (Genesis 32:29). Israel is the name of a person, a people, and a land.

The patriarch Jacob, renamed Israel, fathered twelve sons, the progenitors of the historic twelve tribes. First, they were known as *bnei yisrael* ("the children of Israel"). To this day, members of the Jewish community describe themselves metaphorically as a "tribe" and "family." Second, the children of Israel

(*bnei yisrael*) became the nation of Israel (*am israel*), following their liberation from slavery in Egypt and the uniting of the Israelite clans by the decree of God. Third and finally, the pivotal stage in the biblical account of nation-building was the inheritance of the promised land of Canaan, which thereafter became known as *eretz yisrael*, the land of Israel.

From a historical perspective, however, it may be more appropriate to highlight the transformation of the Jewish people from a loose confederation of tribes into a unified nation in the period of the Israelite monarchy, beginning in the late eleventh century BCE. After a period of political and social flux, King David (c. 1000-960 BCE) united the kingdom of Israel around his capital city of Jerusalem. David's son Solomon (c. 961-922 BCE) built a Holy Temple in Jerusalem, thereby unifying the rituals and worship of the Israelite tribes as well. Following Solomon's death, however, his warring sons divided the kingdom between the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah.

In 722 BCE, the Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and its population deported. These were called the ten "lost" tribes ("lost" to the rest of the Israelite world). While tragic, the Assyrian conquest helped solidify those who remained into a more cohesive Israelite polity. The subsequent fall of the Kingdom of Judah ("Yehudah" in Hebrew, or "Judea") similarly encouraged the surviving Israelites to develop a stronger, more cogent sense of identity in the face of violence and deportation.

This identity would soon face a severe challenge. In the year 586 BCE, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the holy Temple, and exiled the majority of the population. In exile, the Israelite people responded by developing a sense of unity transcending geopolitical divisions (i.e., a strong sense of peoplehood). Israelite religious leaders of this period drew upon their situation to express much of the writings of the Tanakh, transforming their socio-political context in exile in Babylon into narratives of Israelite trials in slavery, oppression, and politics. It was during the period of the Babylonian exile, which lasted several decades, that the Israelites first came to be called Judeans ("Yehudim" in Hebrew, the etymological root of the words "Judaism" and "Jewish").

Amulets attached to a headband worn during circumcision rituals in Tunisia, 1983. The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, Flickr Creative Commons.

Therefore, from both traditional and historical perspectives, the bond of peoplehood has informed Jewish identity throughout the centuries. The familial element has remained strong, emphasizing birth as one's entrance into the Jewish community. A Jew is defined by some Jewish laws as someone born of a Jewish mother; though the principle of matrilineal descent has been challenged in recent decades, the notion that Jewishness derives from family background forms a key component in the Jewish self-image. Conversion to Judaism is possible, but the concept of family heritage remains paramount: the convert is welcomed as a new, adopted member of the family. The male convert reenacts Abraham's covenant for men, including the *b'rit milah* (the covenant of circumcision), and is thus considered to have joined the people, not simply adopted the religion. Meanwhile, a female convert will be

regarded as the mother of Jewish children. King David himself was the product of such foreign lineage, having descended from the convert Ruth.

Post-Biblical Religion

When the nascent Jewish community returned from exile in Babylon circa 515 BCE, the Temple was rebuilt and rededicated. The Second Temple stood for approximately 500 years. During the Second Temple period, the religious practices that emerged during earlier Israelite Biblical history (particularly the Israelites' slavery in Egypt, kingship in Israel and Judah, and conquest and exile by the Assyrians and Babylonians) became further developed and refined into a more formal, post-Biblical Jewish identity. The development of what we know as Judaism today took place late in this period, as the religious leadership of the rabbis emerged.

After the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in the year 70 CE and during the subsequent exile of the Jews from the land of Israel once again, the rabbis confirmed and remodeled Jewish practice into some of the systems more contemporary Jews may recognize today. Translating the laws of the Torah into a new cultural language, the rabbis established a comprehensive ethical system that ordered the entire life of the Jewish people. Rabbinic Judaism is therefore built upon the Torah's commandments (*mitzvot* in the plural and *mitzvah* in the singular), encouraging Jews to serve God in manifold ways both ritual and ethical. The *mitzvot* concern both one's relationship with God and with other people. As one of the early rabbis put it: "The entire world stands on three things: the Torah, the service of God, and acts of loving kindness" (*Pirkei Avot* [*Ethics of the Fathers*] 1:2).

"Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur," Maurycy Gottlieb (1877), Wikimedia Commons.

The rabbis were deeply concerned with ethics and morality, drawing on the dictates of Torah and its prophetic calls for justice. An entire tractate of oral Torah tradition, the Mishnah, is devoted to rabbinic ethics. When Rabbi Hillel was asked to summarize the Torah, he wrote: "Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the entire Torah. The rest is commentary. Now go and study." This famous advice, preserved in the Babylonian Talmud, invokes the Biblical exhortation "to love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18).

As a whole, the great religious innovation of the rabbis was to adapt the divine service of the priesthood for the use of the entire people, thereby democratizing the obligations and the experience of a life of holiness. By transforming Biblical precedents into a practical religiosity, the early rabbis succeeded in transferring the locus of Jewish religion from the Temple in Jerusalem into the synagogue and home. For a community frequently in exile around the world, even into the twenty-first century,

Jewish holy time and space does not require the Temple itself, but exists in the framework of the *shul* (the Yiddish word for synagogue) and the observant Jewish home.

Interior painting of a synagogue in Isfahan, Iran. Horizon (2006), Flickr Creative Commons.

Given that a major contribution of the rabbis was to reconstruct Judaism and enable Jewish worship without its central Temple, a new institution was developed to take the Temple's place: the synagogue (*bet knesset*, or "house of assembly"). As a decentralized house of God open to all the people, the synagogue was a radical innovation in the history of religions, and eventually served as the model for both the Christian church and the Islamic mosque. Synagogues first arose in the Jewish Diaspora prior to the first destruction of the Temple and emerged as the main institution of Jewish life during the Rabbinic era. The synagogue's earliest function was as a meeting hall for the teaching of Torah, but the rabbis also developed the space for public worship and liturgy. As the synagogue replaced the Temple, the prayer service came to replace the sacrificial service of the Temple, both conceptualized as offerings to God.

Likewise, the holy space of the Temple was also replaced by the yearly cycle of Jewish holidays and the Jewish emphasis on sacred time. The major holidays during the Temple period were the three pilgrimage festivals of Sukkot, Pesach ("Passover"), and Shavuot. All originated as agricultural festivals, later reinterpreted to commemorate the liberation from slavery in Egypt (Sukkot and Pesach) and the receiving of the Torah at Sinai (Shavuot). Having lost the rituals of pilgrimage and sacrifice when the Temple was destroyed, the rabbis reimagined these observances for the synagogue and home. For Sukkot, they adopted and reinterpreted the folk custom of building outdoor huts, recalling the sojourn of the people of Israel in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt. For Pesach, they formalized the family feast to include a ritual retelling of the Exodus story in the Passover seder. Other holidays soon became centered in the synagogue and home: the new year cycle of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and Simchat Torah were all given extensive liturgical treatment. Rabbis developed additional holidays based on later historical experiences of the people of Israel: Purim celebrated the legendary rescue of Persian Jewry from destruction as described in the Book of Esther. Hanukkah was created to commemorate the victory of the Maccabees over the Hellenists in the second century BCE. In these cases, the rabbis gave new spiritual meaning to already popular celebrations, turning merrymaking into the sacred fulfillment of *mitzvot*.

A Yemenite Jewish Seder in Tel Aviv, Israel. Kluger Zoltan (1946), Government Press Office, Flickr Creative Commons.

The *mitzvah* of Shabbat (keeping holy the Sabbath or seventh day of the week) is an expression of both the sacrality of the Jewish home and synagogue as well as the significance of Jewish holidays and time. The weekly holy day of rest expresses the distinction between holy and profane. Building upon the Biblical injunction of Exodus 20:8 to "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy," the rabbis instituted an elaborate set of laws designed to emphasize the separateness between the Sabbath (a day of spiritual reflection) and the rest of the working week. To highlight the holiness of the day, rabbinical authorities adapted the priestly prohibitions against doing certain kinds of work during the building of the Temple. On Shabbat, therefore, the most observant religious Jews refrain from traveling long distances, carrying large items, lighting fires (or today, using electricity), creating anything tangible, or doing any number of other mundane tasks. The day is marked by special synagogue services, the public reading of the Torah portion, independent Torah study, and family meals.

Rabbinic Text

Traditionally, Judaism today is conceived as a timeless and ongoing conversation between the Jews and God, based on centuries of religious development and voluminous writings. These legal and interpretative texts, arguably the sum total of the discussion, argumentation, and writings of rabbis through the ages, is commonly called "rabbinic" literature. Rabbinic literature is a religious textual compendium developed over the history of the Jewish people, particularly in the Second Temple period and afterward.

The rabbis designated their literature the Oral Torah, as opposed to the finalized canon of the Written Torah. While the Torah refers mainly to the five books of Moses, it also refers more widely to all of Jewish sacred literature. To ensure the durability and relevance of the Biblical tradition, rabbis drew a distinction between the written Torah dictated by God to Moses on Mount Sinai and the unwritten Torah dictated by God to Moses verbally. According to rabbinic tradition, this second tradition was passed down orally, eventually developed in writing by the rabbis of the third century CE in Palestine and becoming known as the Mishnah.

Rabbi Capers Funnye, an African-American convert to Judaism, visits with Ethiopian Jewish children in Israel (2009), the Jewish Agency for Israel, Flickr Creative Commons.

Thought to be modeled on the curriculum of the post-Temple *yeshiva* (a school for rabbinic study), the Mishnah is the basic code of post-biblical Jewish law. The text's many sections concern the whole spectrum of individual and community life—laws of agriculture, prayers and benedictions, the observances of Sabbath and holidays, women and family law, property, inheritance, and criminal law, sacred things associated with the Temple, and ritual purity and impurity.

During the third to sixth centuries, the rabbis of the *yeshivas* in Palestine and Babylonia continued to study and debate the rulings of the Mishnah. Their deeply analytical discussions in the Aramaic vernacular of the day were preserved in the Gemarah (an elaboration of, or commentary on, the Mishnah). As a pair, the Mishnah and the Gemarah form the Talmud, of which there are two extant versions. The Palestinian Talmud was

finished in the early fifth century; the lengthier and more authoritative Babylonian Talmud was completed by the beginning of the sixth.

In addition to the Mishnah and the Gemarah, the Talmud contains material that could better be called folklore, history, ethics and philosophy. This is collectively called *aggadah* (or *haggadah*), constituting approximately one-third of the Babylonian Talmud. The rabbis also wrote complete works of biblical interpretation called *midrash*. The whole of the Talmud (the Mishnah and the Gemarah, as well as all of the Talmud's later appendices and elaborations) forms the bulk of rabbinic literature, or "oral Torah." This living tradition of scripture guaranteed the permanent relevance of the Torah and preserved the importance of the rabbi's role as scholar and interpreter of a living tradition for each generation. Rabbinic commentary on both the Torah and the Talmud continued throughout the centuries, and came to be incorporated into the study of the text.

Perhaps the most important legacy of the rabbis is the tradition of lifelong study. As the rabbis intended, the study of Torah and the Talmud are ongoing enterprises. Through study, debate, discussion, and appropriation by each generation, Judaism is indeed a living tradition.

Diaspora Community

Galut is the Hebrew word for "exile," and refers to the repeated exile of the Jewish people from their homeland in Israel. Some Jews have chosen to live outside Israel for centuries; in ancient times they formed communities in the Near East and eventually around the Mediterranean. But the Jewish community has also been driven into exile by force, notably to Babylonia (first after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and, later, in a far more devastating move after the Romans' near-total destruction of Judea in 135 CE).

Jewish children with their teacher in Samarkand (1910). Early color photograph from Russia, created by Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii, Flickr Creative Commons.

Exile in Babylonia gave rise to the first permanent Jewish community outside of Israel. Even after periods of restoration, most Jews chose to remain behind in Babylonia, having obeyed the instructions of the prophet Jeremiah, who advised the exiled community to "build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit, take wives and beget sons and daughters... and seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord on its behalf" (Jeremiah 29:5). The Jews assimilated into the culture in which they found themselves, while maintaining their separate identity as Jews and their adherence to Jewish tradition and culture. This interwoven pattern of assimilation and separatism would persist throughout the history of the Diaspora, a Greek term coined specifically for the dispersion of Jews throughout the Hellenistic (or "Greek-speaking") world.

Following the Hellenistic conquest of Palestine in 323 BCE, Jews flocked to Ptolemaic Egypt, especially the city of Alexandria, where a flourishing community would later produce the Septuagint (the Torah translated into Greek). The Alexandrian Jewish

philosopher Philo (25 BCE-40 CE) famously brought together much of Hellenistic and Jewish thought, lending a good deal of influence to Western theology and philosophy.

By 70 CE, following the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, Jewish communities could be found throughout the civilized world. It is estimated that they constituted as much as 10 percent of the Roman Empire, and up to 20 percent of its eastern half. Major Jewish communities existed in Rome, Antioch (Syria), Ephesus (Turkey), and Sardis (Asia Minor). Living in such widespread locales, Jews entered numerous occupations, including farming and horse breeding, crafts and manufacturing, business and trade, civil administration and the military. After the final defeat of Israel at the hands of the Romans in 135 CE, the pace of emigration from Israel quickened, and Jews continued to establish new communities even farther afield.

The communal structure of the early Diaspora set the pattern for later Jewish communities elsewhere in the world: within sovereign states, larger Jewish communities often had their own internal administration. In Poland, for example, Jewish communities were governed by a quasi-autonomous body called the *kehillah* ("community"). Within sovereign cities, the Jewish community was often assigned a separate status and occupied a special quarter. Hence, the Jews of North Africa developed the communal district called a *mellah*, whereas the Jews of Central Europe were compelled to live in a confined area called a ghetto, so named after the first of its kind in sixteenth century Venice. Still later, the Jews of Eastern Europe created a new form of community, a predominantly Jewish town called a *shtetl*. Echoes of these diverse communal forms may be seen today in Jewish socio-political organizations and in the local ethnic neighborhoods found throughout the world.

Hasidic Jewish boys from Blazowa, Poland (1938), Saul Davis, Flickr Creative Commons.

A statue of the Jewish theologian Maimonides in Cordoba, Spain. David Baron (2012), Flickr Creative Commons

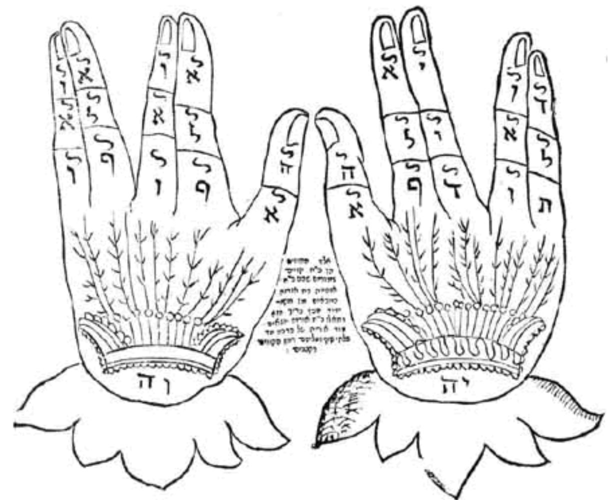
The communal expansion of the Diaspora also served to fragment world Jewry. Living apart in diverse regions over many centuries, Jews have taken on a multiplicity of cultural and even racial characteristics. Today, the most critical distinction is that between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, representing the two most historically significant communities. During the Middle Ages, the largest Jewish community in the world was in Spain under Muslim rule, arguably a Golden Age of Jewish life and freedom. This flourishing Jewish community was referred to by the Hebrew name for Spain, Sepharad. At the same time, the Jewish communities of France and Germany were developing a distinctive culture of their own in a community known as the Hebrew name for Germany, Ashkenaz.

Following the Christian reconquest of Spain and the ultimate expulsion of its Jews in 1492, Sephardic exiles spread throughout the port cities of the Mediterranean, Palestine, and northern Europe. In this new Sephardic Diaspora, Jews often came into contact with their Ashkenazi counterparts, also victims of expulsions and other forms of persecution. Both groups

maintained their own communities, strengthening their separate communal identities. Language was a key factor in creating the separation: Sephardic Jews preserved their culture in the Judeo-Spanish language of Ladino, while Ashkenazic Jews remained loyal to Judeo-German, or Yiddish. The split between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewry has only begun to be blended in the melting pot of the modern state of Israel, where Jews of various cultural and linguistic groups have begun to merge into one Israeli Jewish society. The establishment of modern Israel has ended nearly 2,000 years of Jewish exile and genocide, although not without controversy of its own regarding tensions with Palestinian peoples who lived for centuries on land that is now designated as belonging to Israel.

Kabbalah and Hasidism

Kabbalah is the term for the mystical tradition within Judaism. Mysticism may be broadly defined as an experiential, spiritual endeavor to encounter and invoke God in this world. Kabbalah also has a more specific meaning in Jewish history: it is an esoteric Jewish subculture running within and among the mainstream cultures of rabbinic Judaism, medieval Jewish philosophy, and modern rationalism. Kabbalah is primarily a mystical method of reading Jewish texts and practicing Jewish law, but Kabbalah also contains a messianic thread, incorporating the idea of a salvific God and a messiah figure. Messianism has existed as a religious subculture from the early rabbinic period and given rise to numerous messianic movements; messianic spirituality has remained a stream of Jewish tradition ever since.



The Shefa Tal or "Priestly Blessing," with references to Kabbalah, Wikimedia Commons.

Although Kabbalah's mystic tradition reaches back as far as the early rabbinic period, Kabbalah's central book, *The Zohar*, was written by Moses de Leon of Castille, Spain in 1286. After the end of the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry and the tragic expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, many Jews sought an explanation for their suffering in *The Zohar*, bringing Kabbalah to a new level of popularity.

"The Entrance to the Wailing Wall," Tivadar Kosztka Csontváry (1904), Wikimedia Commons.

In the late eighteenth century, *Hasidism* was founded in Eastern Europe partially as a response to earlier forms of Kabbalah. The founder of the movement, Israel Baal Shem Tov ("master of the good name"), was an itinerant preacher and mystic who reinterpreted earlier, more radical representations. The Baal Shem Tov and his disciples created a new Jewish religious culture in which prayerful communion was exalted over talmudic study, spiritual intention over ritual detail, and joy over melancholy. Hasidism, from the Hebrew word *hasid* ("pious follower"), was a movement of the common folk, stressing populism and social welfare at a time when

the official Eastern European Jewish community, the *kehillah*, was corrupt and declining. The Hasidic community was headed by a new type of rabbinic leader, the *tzaddik* or *rebbe*, who led by personal example, storytelling, and moral authority. Certain Hasidic leaders, such as the late Lubavitcher Rebbe (1902-1994), are claimed by some of their followers to be the messiah.

The mystical tendency in Judaism continues to resist the rationalist bias of modernity, with the perseverance of Hasidism today and recent resurgences of Jewish spirituality. The messianic aspect of the kabbalistic tradition has become part of modern Jewish life through the deep conviction that history, exile, and personhood has meaning and direction. For example, for some, contemporary Judaism's relationship with Israel is viewed as representing a fulfillment of messianic hope. Taken together, the kabbalistic idea of *tikkun olam* (repairing the broken elements of holiness in the world) finds its modern voice in Jewish movements of political, economic, and social change. Due in part to the influence of these mystical and messianic traditions, Jews joined cultural revolutionary movements of the nineteenth century in force. Today, many of the modern-day radicals who have attempted to fix the world have been Jews, from Karl Marx and Leon Trotsky to Emma Goldman and Abby Hoffman.

American ararchist activist Emma Goldman, 1910. Wikimedia Commons.

Modern Jewish Culture

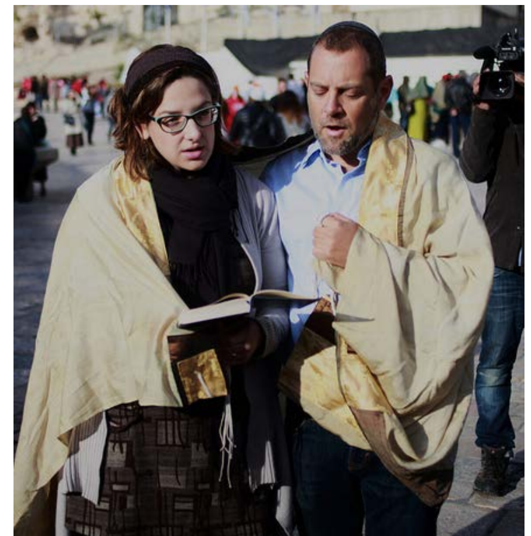
The philosophical endeavor to reconcile traditional religion with modern culture has long had a place in Jewish history. Philo of first-century Alexandria, Rav Saadia Gaon of tenth-century Babylonia, Maimonides of twelfth-century Spain and Egypt: many great Jewish thinkers have taken pains to integrate the Judaism of the Torah and the Talmud with the best of contemporary thought. Maimonides not only codified Jewish Law in his monumental work the *Mishneh Torah*, he also wrote *Guide for the Perplexed*, which addresses an educated audience perplexed by the contradictions of the Torah and Aristotelian philosophy. The book had a great influence on the development of Jewish intellectual traditions.

By the modern period, ideological syncretism became the norm for Jewish laity and scholars. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in cosmopolitan centers such as Amsterdam and Venice, many Jews began to participate in the life of the majority culture. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the promise of civil equality was held out to Jews in France, Germany, and other European nations on the conditions that they would assimilate into modern, mainstream customs. The argument was made that if only Jews would shed their particular customs and become members of Enlightenment society, they would finally find acceptance among the peoples of Europe.

A 19th century German Jewish family, from the Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews and Jewish History, Yivo Institute for Jewish Research.

Hence a new movement was born for the improvement of the Jews: the *Haskalah* ("the Jewish Enlightenment"). Centered in Berlin and fathered by the German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, the Haskalah was one of the first important movements of Jewish modernity. While preserving the essentials of Judaism, it sought to change the public image of the Jew through secular education. Its motto, "Be a Jew at home and a German in the street," became the underlying ethos of modern Jewish acculturation. Out of the Berlin Haskalah emerged the academic group *Wissenschaft des Judentums* ("the science of Judaism"), which hoped to improve the image of Judaism through scientific research and objective analysis of Jewish sources. The Wissenschaft movement was the fountainhead of all contemporary academic Jewish studies. The Haskalah and Wissenschaft movements soon altered the nature of Judaism itself, and a third movement was born: Reform Judaism.

Reform Judaism originated in Germany in the early nineteenth century and has served as the foundation for many subsequent Jewish responses to modernity. In Hamburg in 1818, a group of reform-minded Jews started a synagogue which they called a temple, a name once reserved for the Temple in Jerusalem in the expectation of return, but now applied to a place of worship in Germany where Jews had put down roots as citizens. By mid-century, the Reform movement gained the leadership of more radical German Jews like Rabbi Abraham Geiger and Rabbi Samuel Holdheim. The more moderate Historical School (today called Conservative Judaism) was founded by Zecharias Frankel; the neo-Orthodox trend (today's modern Orthodox Judaism) was first championed by Samson Raphael Hirsch. Even the Hasidic world found a modernizer in the Musar movement of Israel Salanter. To varying degrees and in diverse ways, they all represent the attempt to reshape traditional Judaism in order to conform more closely to the universalist ethos of Enlightenment-influenced Western Christianity, so that Jews might integrate more easily into the modern nation-state.



Women are challenging gender segregation at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Tal King (2013), Flickr Creative Commons.

Other Jewish responses to the modern world include new cultural and political ideologies. As the Haskalah spread eastward, for example, the movement took on a more literary character. The spread of modern Jewish literature in Hebrew and Yiddish literary movements was one outgrowth of the Russian Haskalah. Another was the rise of new forms of political Jewish expression, including *Zionism*, *Diaspora Nationalism*, and *Bundism*. Zionism referred to the idea of the restoration of the Jewish homeland in Palestine. The theory of Disapora Nationalism held that the Jews of Eastern Europe might form their own autonomous polity based upon the Yiddish language and secular political principles rather than traditional Judaism. Bundism was the Jewish socialist movement born in response to the anti-Semitism of "internationalist" socialism. While Diaspora

Nationalist and Bundist movements would not have the same success as Zionism, they were important expressions of a distinctively Jewish secularism. Secular Jewish culture lives on today in phenomena such as the Yiddish revival, Klezmer music, and many other areas of Jewish arts and letters.

Zionism and Israel

The Jewish tradition of peoplehood, in combination with the age-old yearning to return to *Zion*, have produced the modern ideological movement of Jewish nationalism: *Zionism*. Its great achievement has been the establishment of a modern Jewish state in Israel. Zion (the ancient Hebrew name for the holy mountain top in Jerusalem) came to symbolize the cherished homeland of Israel, and Zionism became the modern coinage for the new politics of Jewish national revival. Indeed, for many Jews the modern rebirth of Israel is the fulfillment of centuries of remembrance. We see this remembrance expressed in Psalm 137:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there, we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
'sing us one of the songs of Zion!'

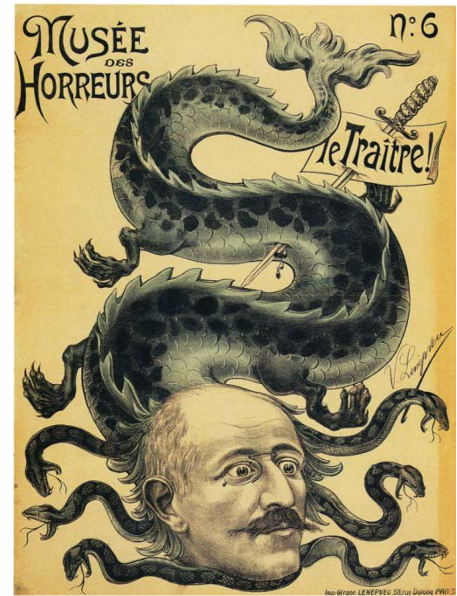
How shall we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy!

Engraving by Ephraim Moshe Lilien, for the 5th Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland in 1901. The Hebrew inscription at the bottom is the prayer "May our eyes behold your return in mercy to Zion." Wikimedia Commons.

Every year, the ritual Passover *seder* concludes with the acclamation, "Next year in Jerusalem!" Throughout Jewish history, the overwhelming majority of the global Jewish community has lived in the Diaspora, but Jews from around the world have made pilgrimages to Israel, and there has always been some Jewish presence in the land of Israel. As a religious movement, Zionism emerged from traditional Jewish commitments and religious passions. As a modern political ideology, Zionism can be described as the secularization of the religious value of Jewish peoplehood.

Adapted from On Common Ground (www.pluralism.org/judaism)

The birth of “Political Zionism” is often dated to the 1896 publication of playwright and journalist Theodore Herzl’s *Der Judenstaat* ("*The Jewish State*"). An assimilated Austrian Jew, Herzl was shocked into recognizing the Jewish problem in Europe by the anti-Semitic Dreyfus Affair, which saw French army captain Henry Dreyfus, a nominal Jew, tried and imprisoned in 1894 for selling French military secrets to the Germans, even though it became clear he was convicted on “evidence” of a forged document. Herzl’s timely manifesto motivated the convening of the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897. Subsequently, several waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine succeeded in creating a societal infrastructure of settlements there. The youthful immigrants included many pioneers of the Labor Zionist wing of the movement, who hoped to establish a new Jewish utopia based on communitarian and socialist ideals. These founders of the state were the predecessors of contemporary Israel’s Labor Party and other leftwing groups. Opposed to them were the more nationalistic and militarist Revisionists, predecessors of the modern right-wing Likud party.



An anti-Semitic lithograph of Alfred Dreyfus created by V. Lenepveu in 1900. MCAD Library, Flickr Creative Commons.

Britain’s Balfour Declaration of 1917 gave Jews the world over hope for a state of their own. The British promise of statehood set off a renewed burst of Jewish immigration and political activity, arousing the resentment and opposition of the native Arab population. Fearing greater hostility, the British government began to restrict Jewish immigration. The cause of Zionism then became the fight to subvert the British through illegal immigration and other underground activity. As anti-Semitism escalated in Europe through the 1930s, the cause took on an ever greater sense of urgency.

Soldiers in the first Arab-Israeli War (1948). Muni Hod Hasharan, Wikimedia Commons.

In the years following the end of World War II, a series of dramatic political and military events led to the establishment of Israel: the United Nations partition plan of November 1947, the outbreak of the first Arab-Israeli war and Israel’s victory, the Declaration of Independence of the new state on May 14, 1948, and the United Nations’ vote of recognition in 1949. Yet these were only the highlight acts of a much greater Jewish moment.

The establishment of Israel was more than a political event; it was a cultural watershed. One of the great achievements of the Zionist movement was the regeneration of the Hebrew language. For centuries, Hebrew had been preserved only as the classical language of the scriptures and the liturgy (*siddur*). Its revival as a modern, spoken language was a significant achievement. When the exiles gathered in their newly established state, Jews from many nations found a common culture and a common language in place to welcome them. The establishment

of Israel had at long last created a haven for Jews in danger. Holocaust survivors, Jews from Arab countries, Soviet Jews, Ethiopian Jews, and many other refugees found both safety and unity in the new homeland. Moreover, the creation of a modern Jewish state re-established the reciprocal relationship between the Diaspora and Israel that had existed in ancient times.

Now, as then, Jews around the world continue to live in their adopted countries while looking to Israel as their spiritual center. Contemporary Jews' relationships with Israel are complex, however, particularly on the subjects of Israel's foreign policy and recognition of Palestinian concerns in the region. Many Jews within Israel and throughout the world support Palestinian sovereignty and a two state solution and have vigorously criticized Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and other measures that diminish Palestinian self-determination. Many other Jews support Israeli control of the region and justify this stance through ancient claims to homeland and/or as necessary for security and self-preservation in light of Palestinian protests and longstanding tensions with Iran. Even in the face of these internal differences, Jews around the globe maintain a vibrant love of Jewish peoplehood and seek to find meaningful and sustainable political solutions to a secure Jewish homeland.

Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust

"The Eternal Jew," an anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda film (1940), James Vaughn, Flickr Creative Commons.

Though external to the Jewish tradition, the phenomenon of anti-Semitism is central to the Jewish experience. In the early Diaspora, Jews' unusual monotheism, iconoclastic approach, and communal coherence often evoked social tensions with neighbors in the ancient world. With the rise of Christianity—first an offshoot of Judaism, then a more formal competitor in the Roman world—anti-Jewish hostility was given strength through some interpretations of New Testament writings, including the Gospels of John and Matthew (in John 19:15, for instance, the chief priests and the Jews cry out for Christ's crucifixion and in Matthew 27:25 the crowd calls for Christ's death saying, "His blood be on us and our children!"). Such writings, although unique to their own context, authorship, and socio-political perspective, would lay the foundation for centuries of negative stereotyping. The image of the Jew as a traitorous sinner and killer of Christ was later embellished with ethnocentric and racist accusations of Jewish economic exploitation, well-poisoning, child-killing, sexual depredation, conspiring for world domination, and other heinous claims.

The equating of Jews with evil practices continued through the European Enlightenment and the post-Emancipation period. In response to the civil equality granted the Jews, anti-Jewish reactionaries questioned the wisdom of opening the doors of society to such a non-assimilated community; they accused the Jews of disloyalty and of creating a state within the state. How to incorporate the Jews into the modern state, or whether to do so at all, became the "Jewish question" of nineteenth-century European politics. Toward the end of the century, a new political movement gave an extreme answer: the Jews must be eliminated from society. This movement was termed anti-Semitism, influenced in its most extreme form by pseudoscientific theories of race and eugenics which labeled Jews the inferior "Semitic" race. The movement reached a climax at the end of the nineteenth century with the Dreyfus Affair in France and the publication of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a Russian forgery circulated

as the minutes of a meeting in which Jews conspired to take over the world. Though anti-Semitic fervor declined for a time at the beginning of the twentieth century, anti-Semitism would soon return with greater force.

The defeat of Germany in World War I and resulting submission at Versailles created a degraded German economy and struggling society. Anti-Semites in Germany soon began to lay the weight of these plights at the feet of the German Jewish community. These accusations quickly built the foundations of the anti-Semitic National Socialist German Workers' Party, abbreviated in German to "Nazi." Led by Adolf Hitler and quickly rising to assert control over German politics and law, the Nazis' anti-Semitic bigotry and ultra-conservative fascism raised the stakes of anti-Semitism higher than ever before, producing the most horrifying results. Throughout their history, Jews had suffered periodic persecutions, expulsions, and even massacres, but nothing could prepare them for the Nazi onslaught.

In 1933, Adolf Hitler announced a boycott of Jewish businesses in Germany. Rachel Esther, Flickr Creative Commons.

During the 1930s the new German regime enacted a series of debilitating anti-Jewish laws, essentially revoking the European emancipation of the previous century. On November 9-10, 1938, hundreds of synagogues and Jewish stores were destroyed by German mobs in a rampage that came to be called *Kristallnacht*, the "Night of Broken Glass." Following their invasion of Poland, the Nazis began the systematic destruction of European Jewry, first through imprisonment in ghettos that led to widespread starvation and disease, then through mass shootings and gassings, and finally through the construction of death camps throughout German territory in Europe. In the end, over six million Jews were killed, roughly two-thirds of the Jewish population of Europe or one out of every three Jews in the world. In Poland and Lithuania, where centuries of Jewish life and culture came to an abrupt end, 90 percent of the Jewish community was killed. The enormity of the genocide is expressed in English as the *Holocaust* (from a Greek word meaning "all-burned") and in Hebrew as the *Shoah* ("catastrophe").

While many economic, social, and political factors influenced the rise of the Nazi party and the widespread genocide of the Holocaust, European anti-Semitism played a key role. Jews today continue to live with anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, which has reached a central place in Jewish history and belief. To the biblical commandment "Thou shalt have no other God before you" (Exodus 20:2), many Jews have added another: "Never forget." Jewish scholars have reevaluated the Jewish relationship to God, Torah, and Israel in light of the modern experience. Historians of Judaism and European history have written countless texts and arguments interpreting the Holocaust. Jewish community leaders and politicians are vigilant in fighting contemporary manifestations of anti-Semitism, so that such a cataclysm will never happen again. Even non-Jewish social activists apply the lessons of the Holocaust to other cases of inhumanity in the world today. And countless Jewish homes and synagogues balance

remembrance of the Holocaust with the joy and celebration of building a renewed spiritual life around the rich customs and traditions of the Jewish community.

A complicating factor in identifying contemporary representations anti-Semitism, however, is that some people (Jews and non-Jews alike) readily associate criticism of Israel's policies regarding Palestine with anti-Semitism while other Jews and non-Jews vigorously challenge that assessment and assert that Israel (like other nation states) must be held accountable for alleged human rights violations. Sadly, what is beyond dispute is that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is exacerbating tensions across the globe as communities, factions, and nation states declare allegiances in this longstanding and seemingly intractable struggle that cannot be divorced from the long history of anti-Semitism and the complex consequences of colonialism.