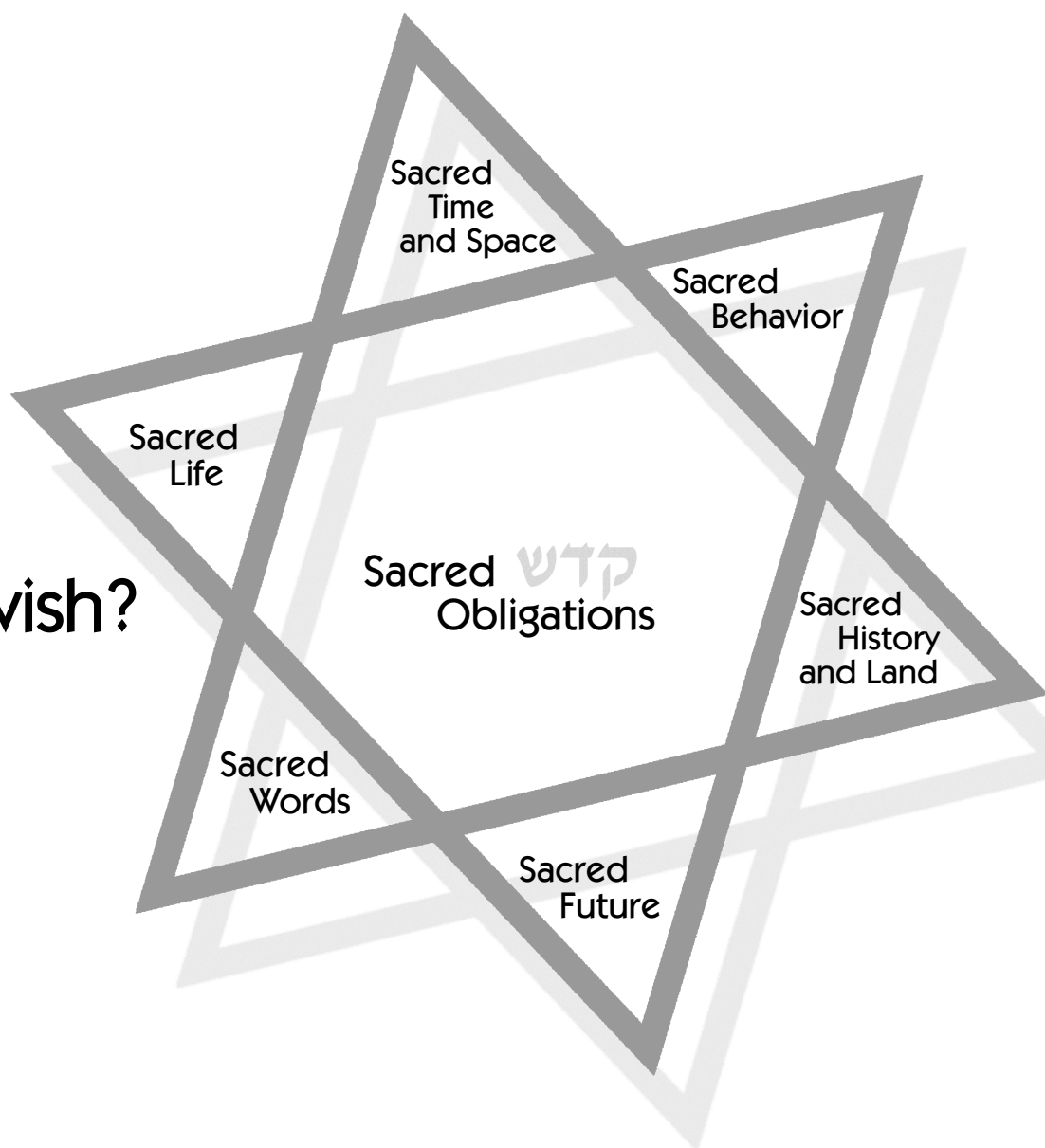


# What's Jewish?



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This book is made possible by a gift  
From Dr. Daniel H. Ninburg and Dr. Ronnie Beth Bush  
In honor of the centennial of the American Jewish Committee  
1906 - 2006

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# Introduction

*What's Jewish* is an accessible introduction for those who want to know more about what Jews have inherited from their millennia-old past and how Jews live their lives today within the orbit of sacredness. The key phrase here, in Hebrew, is *kedusha*, meaning sacredness, the ability to move a thought or activity from common to unique and meaningful. *Kedusha* also carries a sense of separation and uniqueness. This explains why the Jewish community may seem ethnocentric: Peoplehood, perhaps even more than religious life, is at the core of Jewish identity. What “Jewish” means may be hard for others to understand because it is as much about sociology and geography as about theology. Many aspects of being Jewish have nothing to do with faith. No Jew is able to fulfill every single possible expression of Judaism. And there are many different ways that Jews understand their obligations.

A huge question that roils the Jewish community is “Who is a Jew?” In the Bible, an Israelite is the child of an Israelite father. Later, at about the time of Jesus, a Jew became defined as the child of a Jewish mother or one who converts to Judaism. Today, most Jews follow this matrilineal definition; other Jews believe that the child of a Jewish father also is automatically Jewish (although some would say that the child must be brought up as a Jew as well). We are a small people, some thirteen million worldwide, with a passionate commitment to our heritage and the roles that Jews must play in the world. Jewish life is experienced through family and community. To ensure our continuity and vitality, the Jewish community overwhelmingly calls for in-marriage, and most rabbis will not perform interfaith weddings. Jews are not known to evangelize or proselytize. The model of conversion derives from the Book of Ruth in the Bible. Ruth is a Moabite who says to her Israelite mother-in-law: “Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God” (Ruth 1:16). All those who adopt the story of the Jewish people as their own, proclaim their faith in God, and affirm a willingness to live as a Jew, and who accept the fate and want to be part of the future of the Jewish people are welcomed as Jews.

Today, there are a variety of Jewish religious expressions, including the four denominations of Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and Reform. Each of

these denominations trains rabbis and supports synagogues and schools. There are other Jewish spiritual groups, including New Age on one hand and *Hasidim* (the ones you see in long coats and wide-brimmed fur hats) on the other. Some Jews experience Judaism powerfully through artistic expression. Jews also organize themselves in many ways, creating social service agencies, philanthropic Federations, Jewish defense agencies, Israel advocacy groups, and myriad social and recreational groups as well. Many Jewish citizens of Israel, by serving in the army, working the soil, and being productive builders of the Jewish homeland, see their life in Israel as a fulfillment of their Jewish responsibility.

There are Jews living on every continent, speaking dozens of languages. There are white Jews and black Jews, brown Jews and Chinese Jews. Some Jews cover their heads, while others do not; some follow the dietary laws of *kashrut*, while others see these laws as outdated. Jews are more “secular” than most other Americans. While the overwhelming majority of Jews celebrate a core of holidays and life-cycle events, only a minority of Jews attend the synagogue regularly. Jews disagree about many things, whether policies of the government of the State of Israel or how their synagogue or Jewish institution should be run. Yet most Jews know at least some Hebrew, and all Jews face toward Jerusalem, in the heart of Israel, when they pray. There is a sense that “all Jews are responsible, one for the other.” And there is also a powerful teaching that the heirs of Abraham and Sarah are expected to be partners with God in doing good, as God declared, “I have singled him [Abraham] out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of God by doing that which is just and right”(Genesis 18:19).

Judaism does not fall into the usual religious, ethnic, or national categories that identify people. Judaism incorporates religion, culture, history, language, land, and mission. Whatever the unique circumstances at different times in history, in Israel and in the Diaspora (which includes Jews around the world, on every continent), most Jews were united by a sense of peoplehood—the idea that Jews everywhere are bound together by inextricable ties of mutual commitment and extended family obligation, deriving from millennia of Jewish experience, and the belief that they share a common destiny.

Peoplehood is more than a slogan for Jews. It expresses a deep sense of solidarity between and among Diaspora Jews and their Israeli brethren. Israel represents a spiritual homecoming after 2,000 years of wandering and exile. Thus American Jews feel a fundamental attachment to Israel beyond just an ideological affinity for a fellow democratic state. And given the historic conditions of the establishment of Israel after the mass murder of six million Jews in World War II, the creation of the

State of Israel plays an almost redemptive role, a powerful response to the suffering of the Holocaust.

The ancient Jewish teaching that all Jews are responsible for one another implies a strong imperative for action. Israel, its land, culture, language, institutions, and people are a major resource for world Jewry, providing Jews everywhere with a vital sense of peoplehood and self-confidence. The Diaspora, in all its diversity and with all its material, cultural, and political capacities, is a major resource for Israel, by reason of which Israel is both sustained and exerts an influence over a realm vastly greater than its narrow borders.

The American Jewish-Israeli relationship exemplifies the concept of Jewish peoplehood. Beyond the concept of mutual responsibility for one another's well-being, American Jewry and Israel form interdependent entities as part of a united Jewish people. The overwhelming majority of American Jews were not born in Israel and have never lived there; many have never even visited. Yet the two communities are bound in a web of social, economic, philanthropic, religious, and cultural ties.

In particular, the organized Jewish community in the United States has used its political clout to defend Israel through lobbying, media, and fund-raising efforts, in ways that have been a model for other ethnic and national-origin groups. This does not mean that all Jews support all the policies of the State of Israel. As a democracy, Israel tolerates—even encourages—political dissent. Israelis express a wide range of views on issues such as peace policies, military strategies, the role of minorities, and the definition of who is Jewish. American Jews also reflect that diversity and argue long and hard about specific policies affecting Jews and Israel. However, criticism of Israeli policies is always carefully distinguished from challenging Israel's place in the community of nations; when it comes to Israel's security, the Jewish community's commitment is overwhelming.

Some Jews would call themselves religious, others secular; some are believers and others agnostics or atheists. For other faith communities, a Jewish atheist seems to be a clear contradiction, but it makes sense to most Jews. We are all part of the Jewish people, and heirs of texts, traditions, and values that are rich in meaning. Being Jewish is about having a memory that is collective as well as personal. Every Passover, the holiday of liberation from Egypt, Jews are told that right now, at this time, each one is obligated to remember that he or she was a slave in Egypt and has just been liberated. Sharing in a Jewish past and a Jewish destiny binds all Jews. For many, a common history and identity, even more than belief, are at the core of what being Jewish is all about.

Blessed to live in an age of increased freedom, in which pluralism, human rights, and democracy are valued, contemporary Jews are fully engaged in the civil and political lives of the countries in which they live. This involvement is a result of many factors, both religious and historical. Jews are a minority and identify with other minorities. Since democracy and a pluralist society have provided the healthiest environment for Jews and other minorities, our community continues to promote those values and fight against any majority that seeks to impose its will on others. And because of the oppression we experienced under the domination of other religions, Jews tend to be strong supporters of a church-state separation that protects all communities from religious coercion. Most Jews came to America as poor immigrants. The memory of painful immigration and poverty remains strong among Jews, so we tend to support legislation that protects immigrants and the poor. In fact, Jewish tradition commands us to care for the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the homeless because we remember that we were once slaves in Egypt (Exodus 22:20-21, 23:9).

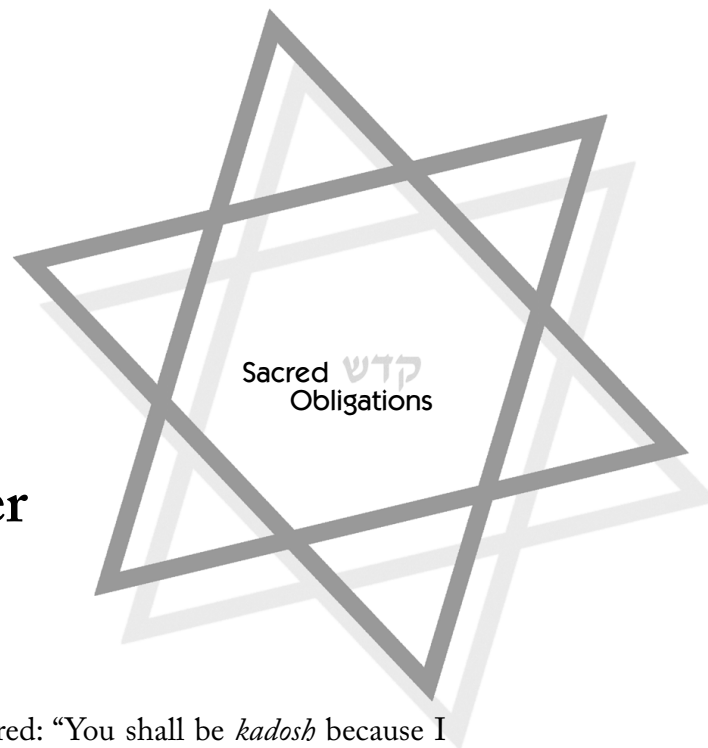
Most important, Jews are only a generation removed from the Holocaust, the Nazi destruction of six million Jews. So the most powerful phrase heard in the Jewish community is: "Never again!" Never again will we suffer as we did during World War II, and we will fight to protect our people wherever they are, even as we defend the State of Israel. "Never again" also commands us to serve as a witness to the suffering of others, so that never again should any people suffer as we did at the hands of the Nazis.

All of this helps to explain why Jewish organizations work hard to fight against prejudice and inhumanity and to ensure an ever greater expansion of liberty for all peoples here and abroad. The American Jewish Committee is one of the oldest Jewish organizations committed to defending the rights of Jews and the security of the State of Israel, even as it reaches out to ethnic, national-origin, and religious partners to work together to create a better America. We hope that the readers of this booklet will both learn about us and join with us as fellow citizens committed to the words of the prophet Amos:

Seek good and not evil, that you may live ...  
let justice well up like water  
righteousness like an unfailing stream.

(Amos 5:14, 24)





## Sacredness at the Center

### *Kedusha*: Seeking the Sacred

Jews are directed to be like God, to be *kadosh*/sacred: “You shall be *kadosh* because I your God am *kadosh*” (Leviticus 19:2). Not one group or one type, but every Jew is expected to be part of “a kingdom of priests and a people who is *kadosh*” (Exodus 19:6). There is a democratic distinctiveness to these texts, especially striking for an ancient community. All members of the society are expected to strive to be godlike through the ways they live their everyday lives. *Kedusha*—sacredness—provides a pathway, a new range of meanings by which to understand human action.

The rabbis of the Talmudic period (200-500 C.E.), also known as the Sages, teach:

“Go follow after God.” What can that mean? Is it possible for a mortal to follow after God’s Presence? This verse comes to teach us that we should follow after the attributes of the Holy One, praised be God. As God clothed the naked, so you should clothe the naked. The Bible teaches that the Holy One cared for the sick, so you should care for the sick. The Holy One comforted those who mourn; you should comfort those who mourn. The Holy One buried the dead, so you should bury the dead.

(Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 14a)

*Kedusha*, the capacity for making all of life sacred, is not a feeling. Judaism views sacredness as a process, moving from the commonplace to the unique. “Common” in this sense does not mean profane or evil, but rather refers to what is normal, regular, expected. Common is the culture in which Americans live much of our lives, shopping at malls and going to movies and fast-food joints. There is nothing wrong with commonness, but its product is complacency. The common life seeks contentment rather than consciousness of the fate of the world or one’s role in changing it.

Jews are directed to achieve *kedusha*, exhorted to strive for different goals. *Kedusha* focuses on common, everyday actions that can be raised to the sacred. It is

neither esoteric nor mysterious. It does not associate holiness with special feelings or experiences available only to people who are mystical or dedicated enough to discover it. Making life *kadosh* means that every action, every interchange, each decision and word spoken can be common or can be elevated to be more godlike: more beautiful, more meaningful, constructive, life-affirming, and nurturing. If we took the principles of *kedusha* seriously, then the whole world would look different, and *tikkun olam*, which means truly repairing the world, would be possible. *Kedusha* is a way of seeing the world, rejecting the common and easy paths, and seeking to be more godlike. Even Jews who do not believe in God tend to follow the principles of *kedusha*, of sensing our obligation to work to make the world better.

### ***Mitzva*: Experiencing Obligation in Life**

Judaism imagines a world in which each and every action has the potential for *kedusha*—if only people would look. Each action or obligation that brings more *kedusha* into the world is called a *mitzva*. Doing a *mitzva* is the key that allows each person to tap into *kedusha* and to experience the sacred. The rabbis provided the simple formula of a blessing to mark the observance of an act of *kedusha*:

Blessed are You, Source of the Universe, who has made us *kadosh* through the *mitzvot*, and obligates us to....

The sages who constructed these blessings some two thousand years ago saw them as a way to focus a person's attention on the miracles of existence. Not to do so, in the view of some Torah scholars, would be a kind of spurning of gifts:

Our Rabbis have taught: It is forbidden to enjoy anything of this world without a blessing, and if anyone enjoys anything of this world without a blessing, that person commits a sacrilege [a kind of stealing].

(Babylonian Talmud, *Brakhot* 35a)

The obligations required by the system of *mitzvot* are myriad, from how we conduct our business to kindling candles to illumine the Sabbath, from eating *matza* on Passover as a reminder of liberation to the ways we speak about other human beings. According to Jewish tradition there are 613 positive and negative *mitzvot*. There is considerable literature discussing exactly how these *mitzvot* are to be carried out, but among Jews there are many differences in actual practice. Nevertheless, for all Jews, *mitzva* is the way to elevate the common to the sacred, making life something new, extraordinary, and wondrous. *Mitzva* is also the human part of renewing the covenantal relationship with God. The word *mitzva* is also used in a

less religious way to describe the just and good activities we do. To do good is to do a *mitzva*, even among secular Jews.

The link between a *mitzva* and *kedusha* means that any action is potentially sacred. This is best expressed in a surprising hierarchy of values discussed by the rabbis:

Greater is one who is obligated and fulfills the obligation than one who is not obligated yet (voluntarily) fulfills the obligation.

(Babylonian Talmud, *Kiddushin* 31a)

For most of us, this seems exactly backwards. Certainly, the person who has no responsibility to do something good, but does it voluntarily, should be superior to the person who feels coerced into compliance with the law. But *kedusha*, sacredness, is not merely a product of a particular activity at a particular moment. It is the willingness to commit one's whole life to a web of relationships, obligations, and purpose. By valuing commitment over whim or passion, Judaism learned to regard the person who accepts ongoing responsibility as the greater hero and role model. Sometimes a *mitzva* is done poorly or without great meaning. One may sometimes cut corners or even ignore an obligation. But because any one action is part of a larger scheme, a response to hearing and accepting the *brit*, which is the covenantal relationship established between God and Israel at Mount Sinai, the intent is to elevate a range of life's common behaviors to the sacred.

### ***Emuna*: What Jews Believe**

The place that faith, *emuna*, plays in Judaism is different than in other religions. Judaism tends to be more focused on the actions of *mitzva* than on faith alone. There are Jews with a deep and abiding faith in God; there are Jews who argue with God (starting with the biblical story of Abraham); and there are Jewish humanists and atheists. There is no catechism in Judaism. For this reason, talking about what Jews believe is very complicated.

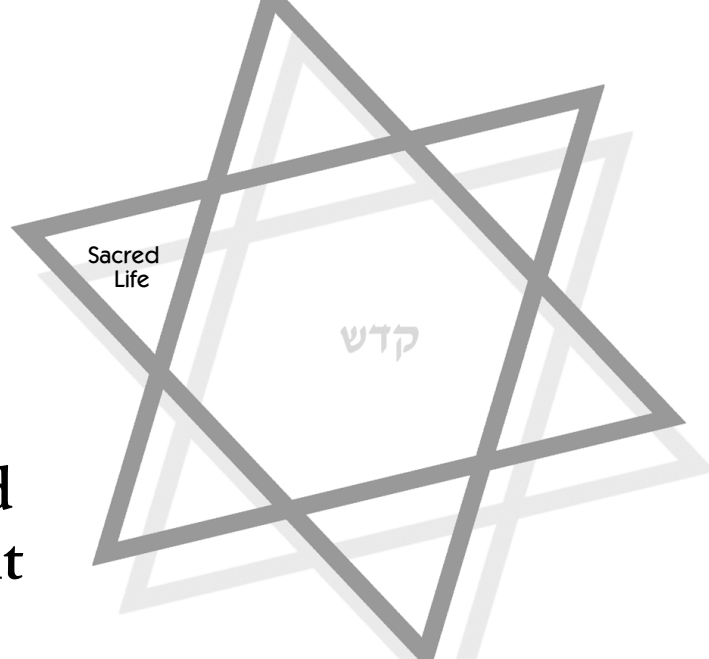
Jewish tradition includes a variety of beliefs, many of which resonate with other religions. We speak of one unknowable God, infinite and yet present, Creator of the universe and beyond nature. Our prayers are filled with expressions of God's love. Central to Judaism is the belief that God is working in history, affecting human events. Rabbinic Judaism contains texts that speak of heaven and hell, the eternality of the soul and bodily resurrection, and many of these concepts are found in the liturgy. The core prayer of the traditional worship service speaks of God as "giv-

ing life to the dead,” and the thirteenth principle of faith of the great sage Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) is the belief in the resurrection of the dead at the end of days. While there are many different views in the tradition as to the nature of life after death, the strongest image is not personal, but communal. The messianic dream envisages a Jewish return home to Israel, where we will all be reunited, a time of peace for all humanity. The connections among grace, karma, or faith and personal salvation or resurrection, which are at the core of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, are not the focus of Judaism. Jews are not expected to do good deeds or to believe so that they will get a place in heaven. The tradition says that “the reward for doing a *mitzva* is the opportunity to do another *mitzva*” and that one good deed brings on another.

Because the world is not yet perfect and Judaism maintains that the Messiah will herald that perfection, the Jewish people do not see Jesus as the Messiah or as divine; most view him as one of many teachers, preachers, and rabbis who lived within the Jewish world at that time. Ironically, although Christians and Muslims were deeply influenced by Jewish beliefs in the hereafter, most Jews tend to be agnostic (questioning) about what happens after we die.

If we can speak of Jewish faith today, two phrases stand out: “*L’haim*”—to life—focuses Jews on the obligation to live life fully. Whatever comes later, we are to immerse ourselves deeply in our roles as partners with God in this world. And the second phrase, “*Ani ma’amin*,” comes from Maimonides, who states, “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah. And even though he may tarry, I still believe.” Jews are expected to believe passionately in the future, that the world can be redeemed, and that we are part of the redemptive process.

## Sacred Life: Being an Image of God and Living in Covenant



At the core of Judaism is the concept that each human being is created in the Divine image (see Genesis 1:27). The rabbis of the Mishna (the written version of the millennia-old Oral Tradition) amplify these words when they teach (in Mishna Sanhedrin) that:

To save one life is to save the whole world, since each life is of infinite value.

Because all humans descend from the same first human being, every human being is equal to the next.

The Holy One stamps the Divine on each human, yet each one is different; God is found in human diversity and the infinite value of human uniqueness.

In a further elevation of human life, one great teacher, Rabbi Tanhuma (second half of the fourth century C.E., Palestine), explains: Our sages teach us accordingly that any act of disrespect of another human being is, in fact, an act of disrespect to God.

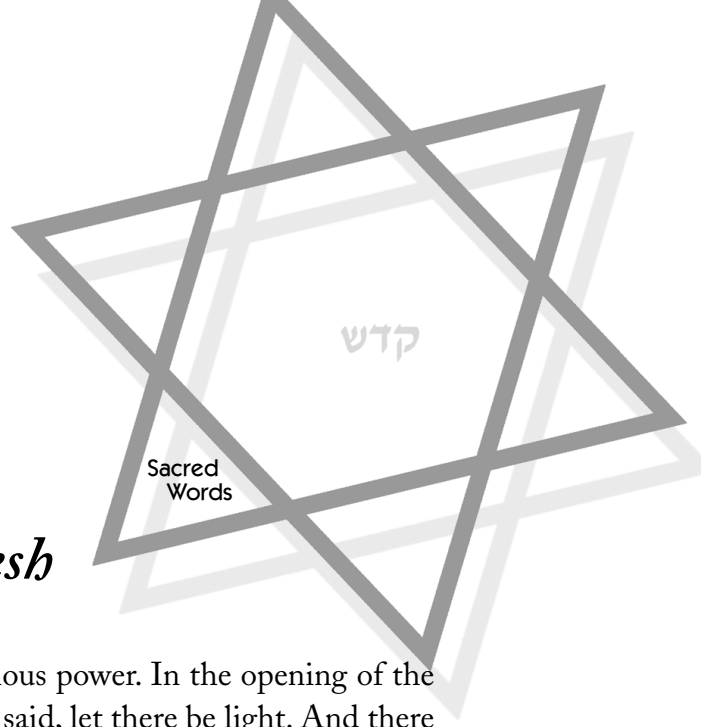
But human beings are not alone. We are always in relationship. After the Flood, God affirms Divine care for Noah—and, through him, all humanity. Judaism considers all those who accept the basic principles of respect for life and a commitment to a just society to be part of the eternal covenant with God (as symbolized by the rainbow). The Noahide covenant, God's promise to humanity after the Flood, consists of seven commandments given to Noah that are binding on both non-Jews and Jews. Judaism sees this covenant as the affirmation of God's care for all humanity. The respect for the value of each unique human being and the belief that all human beings are in covenantal relationship with God and with each other are at the core of Jewish faith. You don't have to be Jewish to be loved by and in relationship with God.

In Exodus 19, God amplifies the covenant by staking a special claim on the children of Israel. At Mount Sinai, God states: "I have brought you to me on eagles'

wings.... Now if you obey me faithfully and accept my *brit*/covenant ... you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a *kadosh*/holy nation” (Exodus 19:4-6). Israel thus became the chosen people, selected as God’s partner. While some Jews today reject the concept of chosenness, all Jews accept the unique role Israel is to play in the world. Our tradition is expanding, teaching that when we meet another human being, *panim el panim* (face to face), we are in the presence of the Divine. To honor and care for our fellow human beings is to give honor to God.

So fundamental is this Jewish principle of what it means to be human that every single action, each behavior and gesture, needs to be judged in its light. Our people have understood this from its beginnings. Abraham battles with God to protect the sinful residents of Sodom from destruction. The Exodus story that moves from slavery to redemption grounds us in the truth that no human being should be so degraded. The historical experience of Jews as an oppressed minority, including genocidal attacks in different periods of our history, has fortified the value of protecting human life and fighting injustice. Through millennia, often under unbearable conditions, Jews have kept alive this core value, constantly widening its application in the hope that the final Exodus would liberate all human beings to experience themselves as images of God.

The idea of *covenant* means that we accept an unconditional relationship in which neither party walks out on the other, no matter how deep the disappointment, unless the relationship is so destructive that it robs one or both partners of their *tzelem elohim*, image of God, qualities. Members of this covenantal community must be willing to listen to each other, to respect diversity and to tolerate deep disappointments while still remaining committed to the relationship. Judaism validates debate and disagreement, as in the axiom, “Ask two Jews, get three opinions.” The affirmation of Jewish faith begins with the words, “*Shema Israel*” (Listen, community of Israel). Being Jewish today means that, even in disagreement, we unconditionally love our fellow Jews and accept responsibility for each other. And now, we reach out further, to embrace those of other faiths, ethnicities, and national origins, to create a wider community and to seek covenantal relationships with them.



## Sacred Texts: *Sifrei Kodesh*

In Jewish tradition, the word is a vehicle of enormous power. In the opening of the Torah, words are the agent of Creation: “And God said, let there be light. And there was light” (Genesis 1:3). Speech is a unique Divine gift given to human beings. Moreover, the Torah itself is Divine revelation in words. Therefore the books of our heritage are called Sacred Scriptures. After the Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 C.E., studying *sifrei kodesh*, the sacred books, acquired even greater meaning as a form of sacred service. This also explains the great Jewish focus on education: You have to be literate and educated to read sacred books, and, in the modern world, to read the books that send you to college.

### The *Tanakh*: The Jewish Bible

The three sections of the Jewish Bible are: Torah, *Nevi'im*/Prophets, and *Ketuvim*/Writings.

#### *The Torah*

Also called the Five Books of Moses, or the Pentateuch, the Torah tells the story of why the world was created and how the Jewish people came into being (all found in the Book of Genesis or *Bereshit*). The rest of the Torah tells the story of the great movement of Abraham and Sarah’s descendants from slavery to freedom, the covenantal encounter of the Israelites at Mount Sinai, and the desert wanderings. Included are the laws and rituals that form biblical Israel’s understanding of *Avodat Kodesh*—how to live a sacred way of life. These texts are familiar to many Jews because a portion of the Torah is read as a part of the worship service on every Shabbat and two other days of the week.

#### *Nevi'im or Prophets*

This section begins with the stories of Joshua and how the Israelites came to live in the Land of Israel and build the First Commonwealth. It brings us all the way to the

destruction of the Temple and Babylonian exile, including the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Some of the most powerful and beautiful words of the Bible come from Prophets, including Isaiah's messianic vision of a perfect world in which all people will come to the mountain of the Lord: "Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and they will stop learning violence and warfare" (Isaiah 2:4). And there are the words of Ezekiel, who speaks to the exiles in Babylonia, telling them that they must not lose hope; God will renew the covenant and the dry, dead bones will come alive and return to the Land of Israel. The Israeli national anthem, *Hatikva*, echoes this prophecy of hope. Three major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) and twelve minor prophets, including Jonah and Micah, emphasize that to be human means to "Do justice, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). When a child reaches the age of religious maturity and becomes a bar or bat mitzva, it is customary for the bar/bat mitzva to be honored with reading a section from Prophets.

### *Ketuvim or Writings*

This collection of sacred texts includes the soaring poetry of Psalms and Proverbs, as well as the love poetry of Song of Songs and the fantastic story of Esther. There are thirteen separate books in this section, with the final books telling the remarkable story of the destruction and exile in Babylonia to the renewal of the Jewish people both outside the Land of Israel as well as in the rebuilt Jerusalem, where the Second Temple was built. The first time we find reference to the Jewish people reading the Torah in public is in the Book of Nehemiah—a practice that continues to this day in synagogues on Sabbath, weekdays, and holidays.

### **The Mishna**

During the period when Rome conquered the Land of Israel, and especially following the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, Jews struggled to find ways to practice *Avodat Kodesh*/sacred devotion. The offering of animal sacrifices in the Temple had ended, but the Jewish people was so in love with the *brit*/covenant that they looked to the sources of their heritage for new expressions of Jewish life. Institutional prayer was one of the main forms of devotion that replaced the Temple service. The Jewish prayer book is called a *siddur*. Jewish leaders—we call them the rabbis—continued to teach Jewish texts and their requirements for holy living. They also discussed other possible ways to expand sacredness or *kedusha* in the world. Those teachings and discussions, which took place in Hebrew in the Land of Israel in the early centuries of the Common Era, were edited into a book with six parts



called the **Mishna**. Much of the Mishna speaks about the Temple ritual and sacrifices, but the specifics of Judaism as a way of life and teachings that have their source in Torah—celebrating the Shabbat and holidays, keeping the dietary laws of *kashrut*, providing ways for human beings to get along, live honestly and respectfully with each other—are found in the Mishna. A Jewish approach to life is found in the words of Rabbi Hillel: “If I am not for myself, who am I? And if I am only for myself, what would I be? And if not now, then when?” (*Ethics of the Fathers* 1:14).

## The Talmud

Exiled by the Romans from the Land of Israel in the first centuries of the Common Era, the Jewish people experienced a shift in the center of Jewish life to Babylonia (even though Jewish life continued in the Land of Israel). For hundreds of years, Judaism flourished and the expansion of *kedusha* continued. Whole new schools emerged that studied the Jewish written tradition (the Tanakh) and the oral tradition (the Mishna) and additional sources that had not been included in the Mishna. These legal texts were accompanied by interpretations and commentaries on the Tanakh and an abundance of legends and lore. All these served as the material for discussions of how Jews could sustain the *brit*/covenant in the Diaspora.

These additional clarifications, commentaries, narratives, conversations, and debates make up the **Gemara**, written mostly in the spoken language of Aramaic and edited over hundreds of years. Eventually, the Mishna and Gemara were codified in the fifth century C.E., creating a massive manuscript of many tractates called the Babylonian Talmud. (There is also a smaller Jerusalem Talmud.) In the Talmud we see the emergence of Judaism as a world religion and also a way of life filled with sacred rituals, prayers, life-cycle and holiday celebrations, philosophy, and moral values. The Talmud is not the end, but a beginning. Over the next 1,500 years, Jews continued to debate and discuss the laws and traditions, expanding the ways Jews fulfilled the covenant. There are many commentaries still read today that were written by rabbis in Germany and Morocco, Egypt and Constantinople, Poland and the Land of Israel. Even today, scholars, rabbis, and ordinary Jews continue the very Jewish process of discussion and debate first developed in the Mishna and Talmud.

## Kabbala and the Zohar

Following the expulsion from Spain in 1492, Jewish mysticism, Kabbala, spread throughout the Jewish world. These mystics believed that, through study and prayer and deeper understandings of God, the shattered vessel of this world could be made

whole. Deep piety, belief in many emanations of God, mantra-like recitations of sacred words and ecstatic dance and song affected many Jews and Jewish communities. The central book that inspires and expresses Kabbala to this day is the Zohar, written in Hebrew and Aramaic. It is framed as a commentary on the Torah, yet its goal is to reveal hidden and mystical wisdom. Many Jews today respond to Kabbala and the Zohar with newfound interest in mystical understandings of the meaning of their own lives, in life after death, and in the connections between heaven and earth.

### **Rabbis and Scholars**

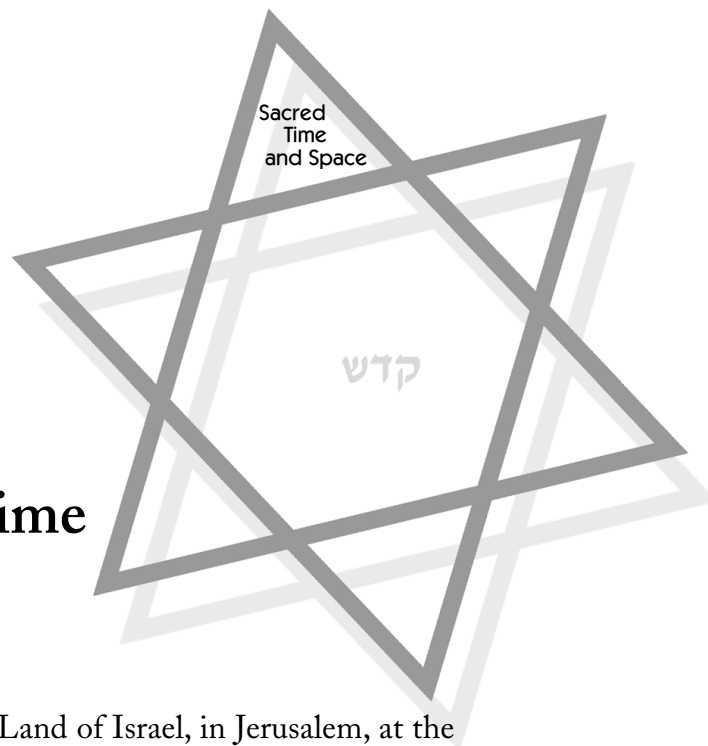
While all Jews are commanded to study the sacred texts, those who become expert in them are called rabbis. Rabbis are the learned teachers and leaders of the Jewish people. Over the centuries, their leadership has consisted of interpreting the texts, rendering judgment in cases between Jews, teaching and writing about Judaism, giving sermons, leading prayer services, and comforting and guiding congregants. Some of these roles—such as leading in prayers, witnessing at a wedding, and comforting those in pain—may be fulfilled by any Jew, but rabbis' depth of knowledge makes them a communal resource. The different denominations within Judaism have different schools and training requirements for their rabbis, but all of them involve studying from the sacred texts.

### **Sacred Language**

Jews have spoken many different uniquely Jewish languages, such as Palestinian Aramaic, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and Yiddish, but Hebrew remains the sacred language. When Jews living in the Land of Israel began imagining an independent Jewish state with schools, universities, and newspapers, they decided that the language must be Hebrew—and so the 3,000-year-old language of the Bible became the living language of the State of Israel.

### **Jewish Literature**

Jewish authors speak “Jewish” in a sense, and provide resources for Jews to understand themselves and express their values. Especially for those who do not identify with the more traditionally religious side of Judaism, Jewish writers, authors, and playwrights often express a profound understanding of what is Jewish today. Also, Jewish periodicals and newspapers help unite the community and provide a voice for Jewish issues and concerns.



## Sacred Space/Sacred Time

### Sacred Spaces

Once, the most sacred space for Jews was in the Land of Israel, in Jerusalem, at the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Temple in Jerusalem, inside of which was the Holy of Holies. To this day the Land of Israel remains the sacred center of the Jewish people; however, after the Temple was destroyed, three spaces that could be created anywhere became sanctified: the house of prayer, the study hall, and the home. In fact, the home is called a *mikdash me'at*, the small sacred sanctuary. That is why the Jewish family became the center of Jewish life. Today we look for further spaces where we can generate sanctity—Jewish camps, pilgrimages to Israel, offices of Jewish organizations, Jewish activities on university campuses, Jewish book clubs, and so on. The territory of *kedusha* is ever expanding.

### *The Synagogue*

Historically, Jews gathered in the *Beit Knesset*, which means house of gathering. We call this place a synagogue today, where Jews come to pray, to study, to connect socially, and to celebrate life-cycle events. The synagogue has a rabbi as the senior clergy, often with a cantor who chants the liturgy. There will be a school attached to the synagogues with educators. There is also a board of lay leaders who set policy along with the professionals. The synagogue remains the core sacred space in the Jewish world.

### *Communal Institutions*

Jews have built an extraordinary network of social and human service, health, and educational institutions. There are Federation and fund-raising campaigns that raise over a billion dollars a year to underwrite family services, hospitals, youth and community centers, camps, and schools (both all-day parochial schools and afternoon or weekend schools).

## Sacred Time

### *Shabbat*

A key to the understanding of Judaism is Shabbat, the most important holiday, which is celebrated every week. Shabbat celebrates liberation—from the obligations of the regular week and from a life that is burdened. In recalling that we once were slaves, we realize that even today we can be slaves to material objects and needs. Shabbat allows us freedom and reminds us of its importance. For one day every week, Jews can feel what life in the “perfect” world would be. Shabbat starts at sundown Friday night and ends at sundown Saturday. Festive family and community meals, prayers, singing, and study are all part of Shabbat. Shabbat is meant to be “different.” On Shabbat, observant Jews avoid going to work, watching television, shopping or going online, to be able to focus on the meaning of our lives and on the relationships that are so important to us. A Jewish writer named Ahad Ha’am (1856-1927) observed: “More than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews.”

### *Celebrations of Freedom*

The core story of the Jewish people is: We were slaves in Egypt, and we were freed to be partners with God in affirming human dignity and transforming the world. Pesach/Passover is the spring holiday that celebrates this story. It lasts for seven or eight days (depending upon which traditions you follow) beginning with the family celebration of the Seder around the table, which is at its heart. The Seder involves retelling and reenacting the story of the Exodus “as if you yourself came out of Egypt.” One of the best-loved Jewish rituals, it combines storytelling, singing, asking questions, and eating special foods.

Shavuot comes seven weeks later, a reminder that freedom brings us to Mount Sinai and a covenant with God to accept the obligations of living according to the Divine plan as a nation of priests and a sacred people. And Sukkot is celebrated in the fall, when the tradition is to live for a week in a fragile hut outdoors, remembering the long journey in the desert, remembering the poverty and vulnerability and anxiety, along with the hope of making it to the Land of Israel. (Many Jews not only eat in the *sukkah*, the temporary hut, but also sleep and study there, but most Jews celebrating the festival today just eat their meals in the *sukkah*.)

### *Days of Awe*

Two connected holy days are not historically based, but are solely inner-directed. Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, coming in the fall, begins a process of rebirth:

It is the birthday of the world and a time to reflect on who we are and what our lives mean. Jews attend intense and lengthy services in which we are called on to look at ourselves and our practice. *Teshuva* (often inadequately translated as repentance, but which literally means “returning,” reflecting Judaism’s view of human beings as inherently good) is the process of “becoming” ourselves by changing the negative parts of our lives. For ten days, we confirm this self-investigation. On Yom Kippur, the final day of this ten-day period of introspection, Jews abstain from food, sex, and work, and participate in long services with little sleep, until we feel ourselves truly in a new place. We emerge with a new commitment to life, to positive change, to doing good in the world.

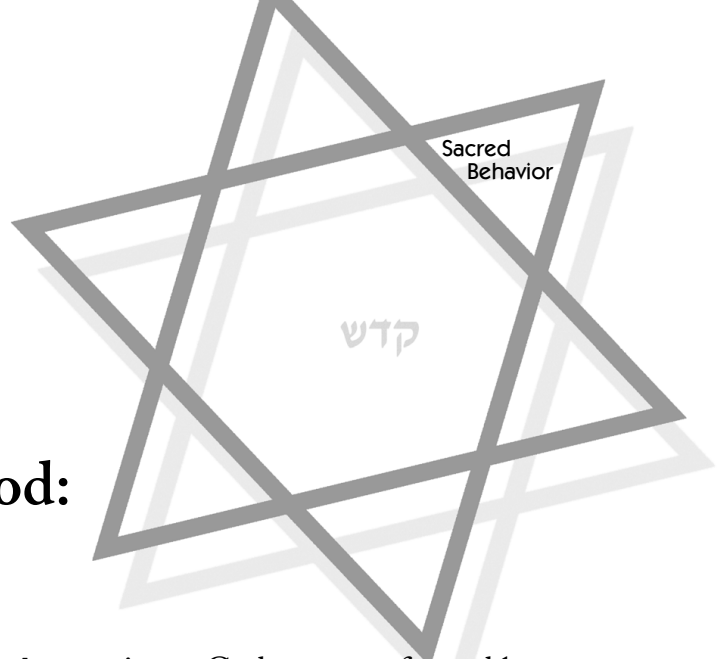
### *Additional Sacred Commemorations*

Jews think a lot about history. In fact, we are commanded to remember our past in order to strengthen our sense of being in covenant with God as well as our common identity and to learn the moral lessons of our experiences.

Our religious memories can be found in other sacred days:

- Tisha B’Av (the ninth of the month of Av) allows us to relive, to some degree, the terrible destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the Jewish state millennia ago—a tragedy that opened the way for nearly two thousand years of homelessness, dispersion, and suffering. The destruction is described in the books of Kings and Chronicles, but the experience of *hurban*, of devastation, is poetically captured in the Book of Lamentations, which is read with a haunting tune, while sitting on the floor, on this evening.
- Purim is based on a magical story, told in the Book of Esther, of a genocidal threat by Haman, the grand vizier of Persia, to the Jews in the Persian Empire, which was thwarted by the Jewish Queen Esther. It is celebrated as a fun-loving, merry-making festival, even though it describes the kind of exterminatory threat that Jews faced many times in their history.
- Hanukkah celebrates the victory for religious and national freedom of the Maccabees against the Syrian Greeks in about 165 B.C.E. and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem, celebrated with eight days of candle-lighting, song, and family celebrations.
- Yom HaShoah, to commemorate the Holocaust that took place in Europe under Nazi rule in the 1940s, is observed shortly after Passover, to recall the Warsaw Ghetto uprising that began at Passover 1943.

- Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrates the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948.
- Yom Yerushalayim celebrates the reunification of the city of Jerusalem in June 1967.



## Sacred Service to God: *Avodat Kodesh*

In the days of the Temple in Jerusalem, *avoda*—service to God—was performed by the priests with animal or harvest offerings from the common folk. When the Temple was destroyed, the importance of sacred activity called *mitzvot* (Divine commandments) became even more significant than before. Here are some of them:

### Sacred Prayer

Jewish prayer takes place three times a day, facing Jerusalem, either as part of a ten-person *minyan* (prayer group) or alone. Many Jews wear the words of the Torah in boxes (*tefillin*) on their foreheads and arms when they pray to remind them that they are servants of God. Prayer services in the synagogue also include a public reading of Torah every Shabbat, and special selections on holy days, fast days, and Monday and Thursday mornings.

### Sacred Food

Judaism has a long tradition of reverence about eating, limiting what we eat, when we eat it, how we cook it, and what foods are to be eaten together. The original diet of humanity as described in the Torah was vegetarian. After the biblical story of the Flood, meat eating was allowed as a concession, but the Torah specifies that if an animal is eaten, then Jews must choose from a very limited set of domesticated animals, fowl, and fish. For example, pig and shellfish are forbidden. In addition, we don't eat hunted food, and there is a special way of slaughtering the animal known as *shekhita*, the purpose of which is to ensure that the animal is killed as painlessly as possible. We don't eat meat with milk (based on the prohibition not to cook an animal in its mother's milk, since milk is life given by a mother animal), and the blood must be drained because blood is a life force that belongs to God—we can't consume it. And before one eats, it is a *mitzva* to recite a blessing, reflecting that the food is a gift.

## **Sacred Speech**

Jews are challenged in their relationships with others to always see the person or group in front of them as “images of God.” Hurtful speech (*lashon hara*) is forbidden. Listening to the unique voices of others is mandated. Hearing pain and responding with compassion is a *mitzva*.

## **Sacred Study**

Learning is at the core of being Jewish. Literacy is a *mitzva*. The study of sacred texts remains a precious gift. Bar and bat mitzva, the ceremony that celebrates reaching physical and religious maturity, usually includes the public reading of the Bible. In America, the Jewish passion for learning has expanded to include a university and even post-bachelor degree education. Many Jews learn about their tradition by taking Jewish studies courses at universities, and lifelong learning is the ideal.

## **Sacred Business**

One Jewish tradition is that when we stand before God at the end of our lives in this world, we will be asked how we conducted our business practices. There is no separation between making money and doing justice or between how workers are treated and following Jewish law. Good Jewish business is ethical, sacred business.

## **Sacred Imitation**

The key to Jewish tradition is to walk in God’s ways, to emulate God’s goodness. Like God, we are expected to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, lift up the down-trodden, heal the sick, and bring glory to the Jewish people. Sacred behavior also means looking out for the orphan and widow and stranger, and caring for one’s parents. A student once asked the rabbi, “If everything is for a purpose, why are there atheists in the world?” The rabbi answered that if someone is hungry or needy, it is forbidden to say that God will provide. Rather, we should act as if there were no God and help the needy. Secular Jews take this principle to heart and, along with observant Jews, have built a remarkable network of institutions and organizations dedicated to improving the world.

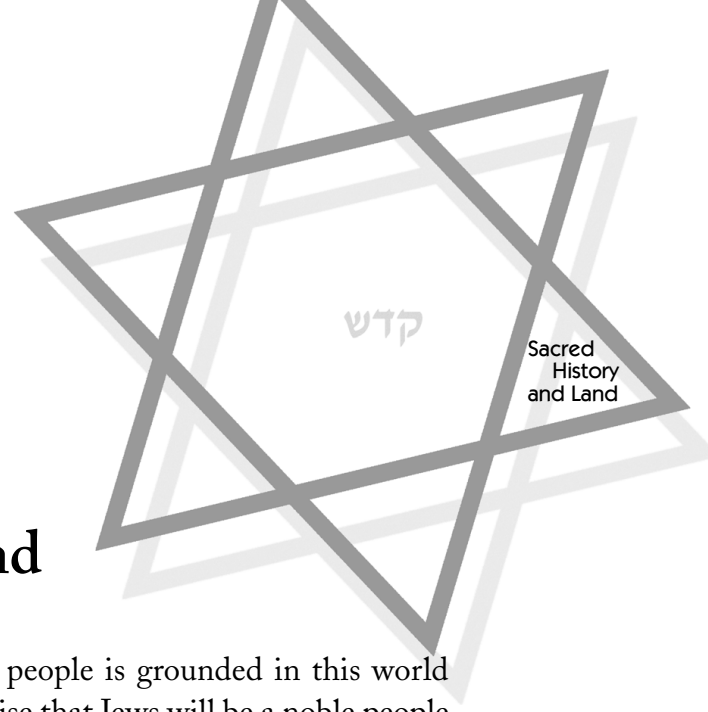
## **Sacred Practice**

Jews are in training all the time to be partners with God in transforming the world. Training comes in many different forms. It can include lighting candles on Shabbat



and holidays or eating *matza* on Passover as commanded in the Torah, or placing the words of the Torah in a *mezuzah* on our doorway. Even the mundane can be made sacred by reciting blessings before eating food or even after going to the bathroom.

At birth, Jewish newborns are covenanted, the male through circumcision. At puberty, Jewish children actively enter the covenant as mature partners through the ceremony of bat or bar mitzva. Weddings are called *kiddushin*, an ancient sacrament. Life's great moments are often accompanied with a blessing, expressing gratitude for having been "sustained in life and brought to this day." Often heard at festive occasions is the phrase "*L'haim*," which means "to life!" But death is part of sacred practice too. Funerals are conducted promptly and simply (a wooden casket with no nails), and followed by a period during which the immediate relatives are consoled by their community. This time of intense mourning, which lasts seven days, is referred to as "*shiva*." During the eleven months after the passing of a close relative and on the anniversary of the death, it is customary to recite the Kaddish prayer, which is an affirmation of God's sovereignty, with a *minyan* (prayer quorum).



## Sacred History and Land

The *brit*/covenant between God and the Jewish people is grounded in this world and in history itself. The Torah contains the promise that Jews will be a noble people in their own land and be a blessing to the entire world.

### Israel

Liberated from slavery in Egypt followed by a covenantal encounter at Sinai, the Jewish people came home. The Land of Israel is where the Jewish people established its national identity and character, with a Jewish government and the Temple in Jerusalem. The great beliefs of Judaism—monotheism, human responsibility, seeking sacredness by being a partner with God—all grew out of the Jewish experience in the Land of Israel. Exile was seen as punishment for sin, but the promise of return voiced by the prophets convinced Jews to pray for a return to Israel during 1,800 years of exile. In 1948, the State of Israel was reestablished as the great miracle, the right of the Jewish people to pursue its national liberation and state-building. Although there is great debate about specific policies of the government of the State of Israel, the overwhelming majority of world Jewry connects with the State of Israel as a central component of Jewish identity and as a fulfillment of an ancient promise to the Jewish people. To visit Israel, to help sustain its growth and vitality, to advocate for its defense—all would be considered sacred behaviors in support of the Jewish homeland.

### The Shoah (Holocaust)

To understand Jews today is to realize the central sacred memory of the Shoah (the Holocaust), which was the murder of six million Jews in Europe and the destruction of the Jewish communities of Europe. Genocide of this magnitude, in the heart of Western civilization, remains an unparalleled example of human brutality. Coming to grips with such loss remains an open and painful issue for the Jewish community.

Two responses to the Holocaust are most often heard:

1) Jews can never again allow themselves to be so vulnerable. Defense of the State of Israel, battling anti-Semitism, and defending Jews around the world are high priorities for the Jewish people.

2) Jews must bear witness to justice and protest discrimination, racism, prejudice, and unjust attacks on any people anywhere in the world. Jews feel commanded to engage in humanitarian efforts to prevent another Holocaust against any group from ever occurring.

## **Diaspora**

The dream of the Jewish people was to return to the Land of Israel. Since the first exile in 586 B.C.E., there have been Jews living in other countries. By the time of the destruction of the Second Temple in the first century of the Common Era, the majority of Jews lived in communities around the world. During some of the best times, Jews became active members of the societies in which they lived, serving in such roles as political leaders, entrepreneurs, teachers, and artists. But for most of their history, they lived in self-contained and self-governing communities. For the last few hundred years following the Enlightenment and emancipation, Jews have become integrated into many of the countries in which they lived while remaining identified as Jews, as part of a distinct community. Today, there are almost as many Jews living in Israel as live in North America. And there are still vibrant Jewish communities around the world representing about 20 percent of world Jewry. Jews in America have a vital role to play as citizens working to ensure pluralism and democracy in a society that respects the uniqueness of all those who live within its borders.



# A Sacred Future

## Jewish Tradition

Judaism passionately envisions a perfect world where all human beings will come to the mountain of God, where nations will not lift up sword against others, where each human will live in peace and with dignity. To get there, Judaism has a pathway:

### *Tzedaka*: Doing God's Justice

There is an imbalance in a world where some human beings live well and others suffer. The *mitzva* of *tzedaka*, which translates as working for a just and compassionate world, must be fulfilled daily. Making philanthropic contributions, helping people in need, working for justice in our country and around the world are all ways of fulfilling the *mitzva* of *tzedaka*. Jews are known as great fund-raisers and givers.

### *Mipnei Darkei Shalom*: Following the Path of Peace

The Talmud (Gittin 59b) says that “the whole purpose of the Torah is to promote “*darkei shalom*,” the paths of peace, as it is written in Proverbs 3:17: “[The Torah’s] ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace.”

*Shalom*, peace, is a core Jewish value. Maimonides (in *Hilkhot Melakhim* 10, 12) explains that we achieve this goal through caring for the vulnerable, the poor and needy, not only of our own community but of all people. Indeed the Torah commands us to show special love for the stranger. Caring for the stranger in our midst is a reminder that Jews were strangers in the land of Egypt. Jews are reminded that our past experience of marginalization and suffering must not lead us to egocentricity or ethnocentricity, but to care for and feed all people who are hungry, clothe all who are naked, provide protection for all human beings, *mipnei darkei shalom*—because Judaism is committed to the path of peace.

## Messiah and a Messianic Age

We are going somewhere and are commanded to be partners with God in getting there. Judaism has always believed that a perfect world is possible, even though we now live in a broken world. Some of the prophets spoke only of a Messianic age and others of a Messianic personality from the House of David who would restore sovereign and just rule in the Land of Israel and usher in an age of universal peace. However, no matter how far we may appear to be from a perfect world, we all have the obligation to do whatever we can to bring our world closer to that vision. Maimonides states that one must daily declare belief in the coming of a messianic redemption, even though it be delayed, and that to give up on the dream that the world can become perfect is to abandon faith. Ironically, in the contemporary world, secular Jews have moved forcefully to cause positive change. They seem not to be willing to wait for the God in which they do not necessarily believe, and so they take on themselves messianic responsibility to transform the world.

## Tikkun Olam

We have a dream where peace and not war is the norm, where health overcomes sickness, where human rights and social justice create a world of equality rather than prejudice. The Jewish mystics described this idea of perfecting our world with the words “*tikkun olam*,” which literally means repairing the world.

Judaism takes its belief in humans as an image of God to its ultimate conclusion—that all human beings must be partners with God in bringing on the redemption, knowing that how we live our lives really has cosmic meaning. Some Jews, not seeing God as responsive, have replaced belief with action and have entered the political arena, labor unions, and civil rights and human rights organizations to bring the world closer to perfection. In this, Jews of all types—observant or secular, believing or atheist, cultural or national—are committed to the enterprise of building a more just and inclusive America and perfecting the world.

## Jewish Speak: Some Words to Know

### A

#### **Aliya (ah-li-AH)**

Hebrew: ascension. 1) Reading from the Torah (or reciting a blessing over the reading) during services, which is considered an honor (generally referred to in English as having or getting an *aliya*.) 2) Immigrating to Israel (generally referred to in English as making *aliya*).

#### **Avoda (Ah-vo-DAH)**

Hebrew: work or worship. In the Bible, *avoda* is the sacrificial service performed at the Holy Sanctuary by the priests. Later, *avoda* refers specifically to prayer, and more generally, to study and acts of lovingkindness. Today, there are Jews who understand *avoda* as serving the Jewish people in Israel or defending Jews around the world, as well as involvement in repairing the world for all human beings.

### B

#### **Bar Mitzva (Bahr Mitz-VAH)**

Hebrew: son of the commandment. When a Jewish boy reaches age thirteen, he is consequently obligated to observe the commandments. Also, the ceremony marking a boy's coming of age religiously.

#### **Bat Mitzva (Bat Mitz-VAH)**

Hebrew: daughter of the commandment. A girl who reaches age twelve or thirteen is consequently obligated to observe the commandments. Also, a ceremony marking a girl's coming of age religiously.

#### **Beit Knesset (Beyt K'NESS-et)**

Hebrew: house of assembly. A house of prayer. A Hebrew term for a synagogue or temple.

#### **Beit Midrash (Beyt Mid-RAHSH)**

Hebrew: house of study. A place set aside for study of sacred texts, such as the Torah and the Talmud, generally a part of the synagogue or religious school.

#### **Beit Mikdash (Beyt MikDAHSH)**

The Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The First Temple was built by King Solomon, as recorded in the Book of Kings. It was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. Following the return of Jews from Persia, the Second Temple was built and later rebuilt by King Herod. The Romans destroyed the Second Temple in 70 C.E. The Western Wall in Jerusalem is the only remaining part of that Temple and is a holy site for Jews.

### **Brit**

Hebrew: covenant. The first covenant between God and all humanity follows the Flood. The unique *brit* for the Jewish people begins at Mount Sinai and is reconfirmed at covenanting moments throughout Jewish history.

### **Brit Mila (BRIT Mi-LAH)**

Hebrew: covenant of circumcision. The ritual circumcision of a male Jewish child on the eighth day of his life or of a male convert to Judaism. Frequently referred to as a *bris*.

## **C**

### **Chai (see Hai).**

### **Conservative**

One of the major movements of Judaism. Conservative Judaism accepts the binding nature of Jewish law, but believes that the law can change. There are several Conservative rabbinical seminaries, including the Jewish Theological Seminary and the University of Judaism, and many Conservative synagogues across America.

## **D**

### **Diaspora**

The dispersion of the Jews outside of the land of Israel from the Babylonian captivity (586 B.C.E.) on, or the lands to which they spread. The chief dispersion from Israel took place after the last Jewish uprising against the Romans in 135 C.E. The Hebrew term for this dispersion/exile is “*galut*” (pronounced gah-LOOT).

## **E**

### **Emuna (Eh-moo-NAH)**

Hebrew: faith or belief. The twelfth-century sage Moses Maimonides formulated thirteen principles of faith, and other medieval Jewish philosophers created their own lists of cardinal beliefs, but Judaism has no one catechism of belief.

### **Erev**

Hebrew: evening. The evening, marked by sunset, is the part of the twenty-four-hour cycle when a Jewish day begins, because of the description of creation in Genesis 1, “There was evening, there was morning.” Thus, if a Jewish calendar says that Yom Kippur is on September 25, then *erev* Yom Kippur, the first part of Yom Kippur, falls on the evening of September 24.

## G

### **Gemara (Ge-mah-RAH)**

Hebrew: the finishing. A commentary on the Mishna, recording the many debates and discussions that took place among the rabbis of Babylonia (and Palestine, for the Jerusalem Talmud) in the third to sixth centuries. The Gemara and Mishna together make up the Talmud.

## H

### **Haftara (haf-ta-RAH)**

Hebrew: conclusion. A reading from the Prophets, read after the Torah portion every Sabbath morning and on holidays.

### **Haggada**

Hebrew: the telling. The text read during the Passover Seder, telling the story of the holiday and praising God for liberation from slavery.

### **Hai (rhymes with Hi!)**

Hebrew: living or life. Because Judaism is so life-oriented, the word is often used as a Jewish symbol in jewelry and other designs. Donations to charity are often made in multiples of eighteen, the numerical value of *hai*. The expression “*l’haim*,” meaning “to life,” is often said when toasting at a wedding or other event.

### **Halakha (ha-la-KHA)**

Hebrew: the path that one walks. Jewish traditions or law. The complete body of rules and practices that many Jews follow, including biblical commandments, commandments instituted by the rabbis, and binding customs. There is great diversity concerning what *halakha* is today.

### **Hanukka (kha-noo-KAH)**

Hebrew: dedication. An eight-day holiday celebrating religious liberty and national freedom as part of the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem during the war against the Syrian Greeks.

### **Hasidism (ha-sid-ism); hasidic (hah-SID-ic), hasidim (hah-SID-im)**

From the word “*hasid*” meaning “pious.” A branch of Orthodox Judaism, founded in the eighteenth century, which emphasizes devotion to prayer and commandments and maintains distinctive styles of dress and practice, according to their place of origin. *Hasidim* follow a *rebbe*, who is both a rabbi and a spiritual and personal guide.

### **Havdala (Hahv-da-LAH)**

Hebrew: separation, division. A ritual marking the end of Shabbat or a holiday.



## I

### **Israel**

1) The land that God promised to the matriarchs and patriarchs and their descendants. 2) The northern kingdom of the Hebrews that was home to what became, after the Babylonian conquest, the “ten lost tribes.” 3) Alternate name for Jacob. 4) A country in the Middle East located in the ancient homeland that has a predominantly Jewish population and government. 5) The Jewish people.

## J

### **Jewish**

From the name “Judah,” the fourth son of Jacob and Leah, and the progenitor of King David and the Davidic line; when the kingdom of David split, it was the kingdom of Judah that was preserved until 586 B.C.E. and from which the Jews descended. Jewish refers to both the people and religion of the Jews.

## K

### **Kabbala (Ka-bah-LAH)**

From a root meaning “received.” The Jewish mystical tradition and a body of esoteric works dating from the twelfth century on interpreting God, creation, and the Torah in a mystical way.

### **Kadosh (Ka-DOSH)**

*Kadosh* is anything that is sacred. *Kiddushin* refers to the sacredness of the wedding ceremony. *Kaddish* is a prayer recited to remember those who have died. *Kiddush* is the prayer recited over wine to celebrate the Shabbat and festivals.

### **Kashrut (Kash-RUT)**

From a root meaning “fit,” “proper” or “correct.” Jewish dietary laws. Jews who follow these rules are said to be “keeping kosher.”

### **Kedusha (Ke-du-SHA)**

Hebrew: sacredness. The Jewish concept of being able to move a thought or activity from common to unique and meaningful.

### **Ketuvim (Ke-too-VIM)**

The third section of the Tanakh (Bible), which includes a rich collection of psalms and proverbs, stories and love poetry.

### **Kippa (Ki-PAH)**

The skullcap head covering worn by Jews during services, and by some Jews at all times, also known in Yiddish as a *yarmulke*.

## L

### **Lashon Hara (La-SHOWN Ha-RAH)**

The Jewish tradition is very concerned about the ways people talk to each other. *Lashon hara* is a general category that refers to hurtful, negative, defaming speech. The sages claim that *lashon hara* is like murder, destroying reputations and causing unnecessary conflict among and between people. It is to be avoided.

### **L'haim (L'KHA-yim)**

Hebrew: To life! An expression often used after saying the *kiddush*, the blessing on wine, at weddings, and whenever festive events occur.

## M

### **Magen David (mah-GEN dah-VID)**

Hebrew: shield of David. The six-pointed star, composed of two triangles, commonly associated as a symbol of Judaism, often worn as a necklace or ornament. It is at the center of the flag of the State of Israel, and the Magen David Adom corresponds to the Red Cross.

### **Mashiah (mah-SHI-ahkh); Messianic Age**

Hebrew: literally, the anointed one; broadly, the Messiah. According to tradition, a man from the House of David will be chosen by God to put an end to all evil in the world, rebuild the Temple, bring the exiles back to Israel, and usher in the world to come. Today, some Jews imagine a perfect age of peace and freedom.

### **Menora (me-NOH-rah)**

A candelabrum. Usually refers to the nine-branched candelabrum used to hold the Hanukka candles. Can also refer to the seven-branched candelabrum used in the Temple. It is now a symbol of the State of Israel.

### **Mezuza (m'zoo-ZAH)**

Hebrew: doorpost. A case attached to the doorposts of Jewish houses, containing a scroll with passages of Scripture written on it. A *mezuza* on the right side of the door is an easy way to recognize a Jewish home.

### **Midrash (MID-rash)**

From a root meaning “to study,” “to seek out” or “to investigate.” Stories elaborating on incidents or text in the Bible, to derive a principle of Jewish tradition or provide a moral lesson.

### **Mikdash Me'at (Mik-DAHSH m'AHT)**

Hebrew: the small sacred place. Refers to the unique role of the Jewish home as a place of study and love in which God is present.

**Minyan (min-YAHN)**

The quorum necessary to recite certain prayers, consisting of ten adult Jews; in Orthodox synagogues, only men are included.

**Mishna (MISH-nah)**

An early written compilation of Jewish oral tradition, the basis of the Talmud. It was edited in the Land of Israel in the third century C.E.

**Mitzva (Mits-VA); pl: Mitzvot (mits-VOHT)**

Hebrew: obligation. Any of the 613 commandments that many Jews observe. It can also refer to any Jewish religious obligation, or more generally to any good deed.

**N**

**Noahide Covenant**

The covenant between God and all the peoples of the world after the Flood affirming that God will not destroy humanity and that all people will respect the seven Noahide commandments, which are: no murder, sexual depravity, idolatry, theft, eating live animals or blaspheming God, and having a just court system.

**Nevi'im (Neh-vi-iM)**

The prophets of biblical Israel, such as Isaiah, Jonah, and Jeremiah. Also, the second third of the Tanakh, which tells the story of the Jewish people from the death of Moses to the return to Jerusalem after the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians.

**O**

**Orthodox**

One of the major movements of Judaism. Orthodox Jews believe that Jewish law comes from God and cannot be changed. There are many Orthodox seminaries and synagogues throughout North America. Orthodox Judaism includes Hasidism, Modern Orthodoxy, and traditional Orthodoxy.

**P**

**Pesach**

The springtime festival celebrating the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, called Passover in English. Its central concept is that we each must see ourselves as if we personally were slaves in Egypt and now are free human beings.

**Pluralism**

A core rabbinic principle that “*elu v’elu divrey elohim hayyim*” (literally, “these and those are the words of the living God”). This means that many different and con-

tradictory voices can all be the word of God. God is found in diversity rather than in a singular truth.

### **Prayer**

Prayer is a central part of Jewish life. Observant Jews pray three times daily and say blessings over just about every day-to-day activity. Prayer can be recited in private, in a synagogue, or wherever Jews find themselves.

### **Purim**

A holiday celebrating the rescue of the Jews from extermination at the hands of the chief minister to the King of Persia. The Book of Esther, which tells this story, is read, and costumes are worn.

## **R**

### **Rabbi**

A religious teacher and person authorized to make decisions on issues of Jewish law. Rabbis also perform many religious functions—ministering to the sick, counseling on weddings and funerals, and serving as a spiritual guide. When Jews speak of things said or decided by “the rabbis,” they refer to matters that have been generally agreed upon by authoritative Jewish scholars over the centuries. Today, there are both male and female rabbis in the Jewish world.

### **Reconstructionism**

One of the major movements of Judaism. Reconstructionism focuses on the people of Israel and rejects the concept of Jews as the “chosen people.” Has a seminary and synagogues throughout America.

### **Reform**

The largest Jewish movement in America. Reform Jews believe that Jewish law was inspired by God and one can choose which laws to follow. The Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion is the Reform seminary with branches in several cities. There are Reform synagogues throughout America.

### **Rosh Hashana (ROSH ha Sha-NAH)**

Hebrew: first of the year. The Jewish New Year. Celebrated for one or two days, it is a time of introspection and repentance. Most Jews go to synagogue on these days.

## **S**

### **Sanhedrin (San-Hey-drin)**

From a Greek word meaning a high court of law. In the Mishna the rabbis speak of the Sanhedrin, the high court, consisting of seventy-one members as a legislative body deciding matters of law. In the sixteenth century there was an attempt to revive the Sanhedrin in the Land of Israel. In 1806 Napoleon convened an assem-

bly of seventy-one Jewish notables called a Sanhedrin to answer his questions about Jewish law.

**Seder (SAY-der)**

The family home celebration conducted as part of the Passover observance, in which Jews relive the experience of slavery and Exodus from Egypt. The family and guests read the Haggada, sing songs, and retell the story of liberation. Special foods are eaten which do not contain flour that has risen or grains such as barley.

**Shabbat (shah-BAT)**

Seventh day of the week, the day of rest. Commemorating the completion of creation, the Jewish Sabbath provides spiritual enrichment and abstinence from work. Some Jews will not use money, electricity, drive, or watch TV on Shabbat.

**Shabbat Shalom (sha-BAHT sha-LOHM)**

A general, all-purpose Shabbat greeting meaning, “Have a peaceful Sabbath.”

**Shalom (Sha-LOHM)**

Hebrew: Peace, a core principle of Judaism. Jews are expected to walk in paths of peace and reconciliation. This means that decisions, large and small, should reflect an attempt to reduce violence and suffering, *mipnei darkei shalom*, for the sake of peace.

**Shekhina (sh'-khi-NA)**

The Divine Presence of God, in its immanent form, generally represented in mystical terms as the feminine, loving quality of God.

**Shekhita (Sh'-khi-TAH)**

The way a kosher animal must be ritually slaughtered so that the pain and fear of the animal is minimized, after which the blood that symbolizes the life force is drained. The person who slaughters the animal, the *shokhet*, must recite a blessing so that he remains sensitized to the fact that he is taking a life.

**Shema (sh'-MAH)**

One of the most important Jewish prayers, stating that God is one. It is taken from a verse in the Torah that begins “*Shema Israel*—Listen, people of Israel.”

**Shiva (SHI-vah)**

Hebrew: seven. The seven-day period of mourning after the burial of a close relative. During this time the community visits, comforts, and attends to the needs of the mourners.

**Shavuot (Sha-voo-OT)**

A harvest festival celebrated seven weeks after Pesach. It is the holiday of the covenanting of the people of Israel during God’s revelation at Mount Sinai. In English, it is sometimes known as Pentecost.

### **Shoah (Show-AH)**

The Hebrew word for Holocaust, specifically the destruction of six million European Jews by the Nazi regime during World War II. The phrase “Never again” has become a mantra of contemporary Jews, implying both the need for self-defense and a commitment to try to protect all human beings from genocidal attacks.

### **Siddur**

From the Hebrew root for order. The prayer book of the Jewish people. There are many types of *siddurim* (plural), including some for the Shabbat, some for weekdays, and special ones for holidays. Jews from Spain and the Arab countries and those from other parts of Europe have different liturgical traditions reflected in their *siddurim*. Each Jewish denomination publishes a *siddur* that reflects its own understanding of Judaism, but the core of the text is the same for all Jews.

### **Sifrei Kodesh (Sif-RAY KO-desh)**

The sacred texts of the Jewish people, including the Tanakh, the Talmud, and later books written by rabbis and scholars.

### **Simhat Torah (Sim-KHAHT To-RAH)**

A joyous holiday celebrating the end and beginning of the cycle of weekly Torah readings.

### **Sukkot**

One of the three pilgrimage festivals, Sukkot commemorates the wandering in the desert and the final harvest. Also known as the Feast of Tabernacles or the Festival of Ingathering.

### **Synagogue**

From a Greek root meaning “assembly.” The most widely accepted term for a Jewish house of worship. The Jewish equivalent of a church, mosque or temple.

## **T**

### **Talmud**

The most significant collection of the Jewish oral tradition interpreting the Torah, it is comprised of the Mishna and the Gemara. In its standard printed form, it usually includes later commentaries running along the sides of the main text.

### **Tanakh (tah-NAHKH)**

Acronym of Torah (Law), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings). Written Torah; what Christians call the Old Testament.

### **Tefillin (Te-fi-LIN)**

Leather boxes secured to the forehead and the arm by leather straps, worn by many Jews while praying each morning except Shabbat. The boxes contain sections of the

Torah that remind Jews to live a just and good life. The box for the arm is placed on the weaker arm to remind us that our strength comes from following God's ways.

### **Temple**

1) The central place of worship in ancient Jerusalem, where sacrifices were offered. The First Temple was built by King Solomon, and the Second Temple was built following the return from Babylonian exile. 2) The term commonly used for houses of worship within the Reform movement.

### **Ten Commandments**

Judaism holds that God gave the Jews 613 commandments, not merely ten. (Of course, in practice, there are many more Jewish things to do than 613.) The biblical passage known to most people as the Ten Commandments is called by Jews the *Aseret ha-Dibrot*, ten phrases. While very significant and meaningful, these words are not considered more important than the other sacred words and texts of Jewish tradition.

### **Teshuva (t'-Shoo-VAH)**

Hebrew: return. Often inadequately translated as repentance, but literally meaning "return," reflecting Judaism's view of human beings as inherently good, *teshuva* is the process of "becoming" ourselves by changing the negative parts of our lives. Coming in the fall, the high holy days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are a time when Jews attend intense, lengthy services during which we are called upon to introspect, look at our lives, and do *teshuva*.

### **Tikkun Olam (Ti-KOON oh-LAHM)**

Hebrew: repairing the world. The Jewish belief that humans, being created in the image of God, must be partners with God in bringing on the redemption of the world.

### **Tisha B'Av**

The ninth day of the month of Av. A fast day commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Temples, as well as other tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people.

### **Torah**

In its narrowest sense, Torah is the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, sometimes called the Pentateuch. In its broadest sense, Torah is the entire body of Jewish teachings.

### **Tzedaka (Tze-da-KAH)**

Hebrew: justice, righteousness. *Tzedaka* is the *mitzva* of working to ameliorate the conditions of suffering in the world, the imbalances between those who have and those who are needy. Jews are expected to be involved on a daily basis in caring for those in need and changing the conditions of injustice. Jewish philanthropy is called *tzedaka* rather than charity, because this is not an episodic *mitzva*, but an ongoing obligation.

**Tzelem Elohim (TSE-Lem E-loh-HIM)**

The concept that each and every human being is created in God's image and is therefore deserving of infinite value, dignity, uniqueness, and equality.

**W**

**Western Wall**

The western retaining wall of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, which is as close to the site of the original sanctuary as Jews are allowed to go today. Commonly known as the Wailing Wall, it is Judaism's holiest site.

**Y**

**Yetzer Hara (YAY-tser ha-RAH)**

Hebrew: the evil impulse. The selfish desire for satisfaction of personal needs, which can lead a person to do evil if not restrained by the *yetzer hatov*, the impulse to do good.

**Yetzer Hatov (YAY-tser ha-TOHV)**

Hebrew: the good impulse. The moral conscience, which motivates us to follow the Jewish traditions and obligations to do good.

**Yiddish (YID-ish)**

The international language of Ashkenazic Jews, based primarily on German, with words taken from Hebrew and many other languages, and written in the Hebrew alphabet. There are many dialects of Yiddish.

**Yishuv (YI-shoov)**

Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel.

**Yom Ha'atzmaut (YOHM hah'ahts-mah-OOT)**

Israeli Independence Day, which usually takes place in May, commemorating the declaration of the Jewish state in 1948.

**Yom HaShoah (YOHM hah'shoh-AH)**

Holocaust Remembrance Day, which usually takes place in April, commemorating the beginning of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

**Yom HaZikharon (YOHM hah'zi-kah-ROHN)**

Israeli Memorial Day, which usually takes place in May, a day before Yom Ha'atzmaut.

**Yom Kippur (YOHM ki-POOR)**

Hebrew: Day of Atonement. A day set aside for fasting, depriving oneself of pleasures, and repenting from the sins of the previous year.



## What Happened When

|           |                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| B.C.E.    | (Before the Common Era - Jews don't use B.C. or A.D.)                                                                                                                      |
| ca. 1800  | Time of Abraham and Sarah, founders of the Jewish people                                                                                                                   |
| ca. 1300  | Exodus from Egypt/Covenant affirmed and Torah given at Mount Sinai                                                                                                         |
| 900s      | Reigns of King David and King Solomon / First Temple built in Jerusalem                                                                                                    |
| 900s-600s | Period when the major prophets preached and taught in Israel and Judea                                                                                                     |
| ca. 930   | Israel split into two kingdoms: the northern called Israel and the southern called Judea. The family of King David continues to rule in Judea.                             |
| 720       | Destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians. These Israelites become the Ten Lost Tribes.                                                               |
| 586       | Destruction of Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom, exile to Babylonia                                                                                                      |
| 538-398   | The return of Judean exiles to the Land of Israel, where the walls of Jerusalem are reconstructed, the Second Temple built, and a new common-wealth established            |
| 166-160   | Revolt of the Maccabees and rededication of the Temple—miracle of Hanukka. A Jewish state is reestablished under the Hasmonean descendants of the Maccabees.               |
| 63        | Rome annexes Israel and Jerusalem; Judea loses its independence.                                                                                                           |
| 19        | Herod rebuilds the Temple, including the walls whose ruins are still seen today.                                                                                           |
| C.E.      | (Common Era)                                                                                                                                                               |
| 70        | Second Temple destroyed by Romans; a school of Torah study established by Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai in Yavneh becomes the alternative to an independent state.              |
| 132-135   | Rebellion of Bar Kokhba, last major attempt by Jews to regain independence until 1948; massive exiles from Land of Israel, where Hadrian prohibits the practice of Judaism |
| ca. 200   | Mishna compiled by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi                                                                                                                                     |

|                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ca. 390                    | Jerusalem Talmud completed                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| ca. 500                    | Babylonian Talmud completed                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 800s                       | The prayer book ( <i>siddur</i> ) as we know it becomes widely used. Jewish life in the home, synagogue, and study hall is practiced much as we know it today.                                                                                              |
| 1000s                      | Great biblical scholar Rashi in France writes commentaries on both Tanakh and Talmud. Christian Crusaders massacre European Jews on way to Holy Land.                                                                                                       |
| ca. 950-1150               | Golden Age of Jewish life in Muslim Spain, with a flowering of Hebrew poetry, philosophy, and grammar                                                                                                                                                       |
| 1131                       | Moses Maimonides, the great Jewish scholar, born in Spain, later moves to Egypt                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 1475                       | Beginning of Hebrew printing                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 1400s                      | The Inquisition launched to find secret Jews among New Christians. Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal; mass forced conversions; later massacre of secret Jews in Lisbon. Jews leaving Iberian Peninsula go to Holland, Italy, Turkey, and the New World. |
| 1500s                      | Rise of Kabbala, Jewish mysticism, and Jewish codes of conduct, especially in Safed, Israel. Jews are a majority in the holy towns of Jerusalem, Safed, Tiberias, and Hebron.                                                                               |
| 1654                       | First Jews arrive in New Amsterdam (now New York City) from Recife, Brazil.                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| late 1700s-<br>early 1800s | Emancipation begins; Jews obtain political rights in Europe.                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 1807                       | European Sanhedrin meets to answer Napoleon's questions and declare their allegiance to the Republic.                                                                                                                                                       |
| 1848                       | Beginning of large German Jewish immigration to U.S.                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 1873-1898                  | Institutions of Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism founded in America.                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 1880s                      | Massive waves of East European Jewish immigration to U.S. begin (1881).                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 1897                       | First Zionist Congress held in Basel, Switzerland.                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

|             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1901        | Theodor Herzl meets with Turkish sultan.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 1882-1903   | First <i>aliya</i> (Jewish groups returning to the Land of Israel); the <i>yishuv</i> (Jewish settlement) is established, creating an internal government for Jews in the Land of Israel.                                                                                                     |
| 1917        | British Mandate begins in Palestine; Balfour Declaration commits Britain to a Jewish homeland in Palestine, later endorsed by League of Nations.                                                                                                                                              |
| 1936        | Peel Commission recommends to British government the partitioning of Mandatory Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state. Arabs reject the plan, which is never implemented.                                                                                                                  |
| 1933-1945   | The Holocaust (Shoah in Hebrew) decimates European Jewry; Nazis and their accomplices systematically murder six million Jews.                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 1946        | The United States becomes the world's largest Jewish population center.                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 1947-48     | United Nations endorses a Jewish and an Arab state. Palestinian Arabs and neighboring Arab states reject plan. Jews accept plan and State of Israel declared in May 1948; War of Independence follows immediately; the ingathering of the exiles from around the world to Israel accelerates. |
| 1960s       | Jews play a significant role in the U.S. civil rights and peace movements.                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 1967        | Six-Day War; reunification of Jerusalem                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 1973        | Yom Kippur War                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 1970s-1980s | Soviet Jewry movement to liberate Jews and bring them to Israel. Anwar Sadat visits Jerusalem. Peace with Egypt.                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 1993        | Oslo Accords signed by Yitzhak Rabin for Israel and Yasir Arafat for the Palestinians.                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 1994        | Peace treaty signed between Jordan and Israel.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 2000        | Israel offers most of Judea and Samaria (West Bank) and all of Gaza for Palestinian Arab state. Offer rejected by Arafat, and second intifada starts.                                                                                                                                         |
| 2004        | 350th anniversary of Jewish arrival in America                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 2005        | Intifada ceasefire established.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

# About the American Jewish Committee

## Background

In 1906, a small group of American Jews deeply concerned about attacks against Jews in Russia created the American Jewish Committee (AJC) to defend the rights of Jews around the world. It was the first such organization in the United States. The group determined that the best way to protect Jews in Russia and other countries would be to work toward a world in which all peoples are accorded respect and dignity.

Almost 100 years later, that founding mission continues to guide AJC's efforts to promote pluralistic and democratic societies where all minorities are protected. From our inception, we have combated bigotry, fanaticism, and totalitarianism, and sought to strengthen human rights and democratic values the world over as the most effective way to safeguard the Jewish future. AJC's uniqueness has been its ability to anticipate emerging trends, develop proactive policy initiatives, and mobilize support for their implementation.

With thirty-three U.S. chapters and twenty-one international posts, we are an international think-tank and advocacy organization that anticipates and acts on trends and problems, particularly in these key areas of concern:

- Combating anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry;
- Promoting pluralism and shared civic values;
- Protecting human rights and combating abuses;
- Asserting Israel's right to live in peace and security with its neighbors;
- Safeguarding and strengthening Jewish life.

## Mission

To safeguard the welfare and security of Jews in the U.S., in Israel, and throughout the world.

To strengthen the basic principles of pluralism around the world, as the best defense against anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry.

To enhance the quality of American Jewish life by helping to ensure Jewish continuity and deepen ties between American and Israeli Jews.

Both the breadth of our interests and the manner in which we pursue them differentiate AJC and contribute to our success. We prefer to work quietly and behind the scenes, in cooperation with other organizations to advance mutual interests. We work in a manner that gains trust, earns access, and, most importantly, produces results that strengthen democracy, pluralism, and mutual understanding.

### Selected Historical Highlights

- ▶ In 1913, AJC successfully persuaded the New York state legislature to end racial and religious discrimination in public accommodations.
- ▶ Helped Catholic parents win the right to send their children to parochial schools in 1925.
- ▶ Played a central role in adding the human rights clauses to the UN charter in 1945.
- ▶ Took a leading role in the historic case of *Brown v. Board of Education* banning school segregation in 1954. The Court's opinion quoted research by Professor Kenneth Clark, commissioned by AJC, on the psychological damage caused by segregated schooling.
- ▶ Played an instrumental role in the 1965 Second Vatican Council's historic declaration condemning anti-Semitism and, later, asserting the kinship of Judaism and Christianity.
- ▶ In December 1987, AJC's Washington representative coordinated the historic mass mobilization for Soviet Jewry that brought 250,000 supporters to demonstrate in Washington on behalf of Soviet Jews.
- ▶ Lobbied Congress to strengthen the Immigration Reform Act of 1986 to diminish stereotyping, legalize undocumented workers, and promote the integration of immigrants into American life.
- ▶ Released a comprehensive survey of Saudi schoolbooks in 2003, revealing intolerance of the West, Christianity, and Judaism.
- ▶ Persuaded the German government to provide pensions for concentration camp survivors.
- ▶ Filed an amicus brief with the U.S. Supreme Court in support of the University of Michigan's 2003 affirmative action cases, arguing that diversity provides a rich educational experience and prepares students for success in a pluralistic democracy.

David M. Elcott, Ph.D., is the U.S. director of interreligious affairs of the American Jewish Committee and author of *A Sacred Journey: The Jewish Quest for a Perfect World*, as well as numerous articles and monographs.

Roselyn Bell, AJC's director of publications, served as editor of this piece.



***The American Jewish Committee***

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New York, NY 10022*

*The American Jewish Committee publishes in these areas:*

*Hatred and Anti-Semitism   Pluralism   Israel  
American Jewish Life   International Jewish Life   Human Rights*

*www.ajc.org   February 2005*