

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
SMALL GROUP MINISTRY
Aspects of Judaism
Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA

Opening Words & Chalice Lighting:

What is the Jew? What kind of unique creature is this whom all the rulers of all the nations of the world have disgraced and crushed and expelled and destroyed; persecuted, burned and drowned, and who, despite their anger and their fury, continues to live and to flourish. What is this Jew whom they have never succeeded in enticing with all the enticements in the world, whose oppressors and persecutors only suggested that he deny (and disown) his religion and cast aside the faithfulness of his ancestors?

The Jew - is the symbol of eternity. He is the one who for so long had guarded the prophetic message and transmitted it to all mankind. A people such as this can never disappear. The Jew is eternal. He is the embodiment of eternity.

- *Leo Tolstoy – Essay: What is the Jew?, 1908*

Check-in: *What is on your mind today?*

Focus Readings:

How The Jews Survived

How on earth, I wondered, had the Jews, scattered across the face of the globe and subject to persecution such as has been visited on no other people, managed to survive, while great empires – The Assyrian, the Egyptian, the Greek, the Roman, the British – had all withered and died?

Over the course of the past 2,000 years, the Jews have been expelled from virtually every European country. They were kicked out of the German states six times; out of parts of Italy five times; out of France four times. They were massacred by the Babylonians, the Romans, the Crusaders, the Poles, the Russians and, most recently, the Germans. They have to keep thinking of moving from the countries where they live.

For many centuries, Jews could not own land, belong to guilds or go to university. In Germany and Russia, they were not allowed to travel without special permission. They were routinely blamed for everything, from the death of Jesus to the Black Death. This is surely the most astonishing story of survival against all the odds in the whole of human history. Yet they have not merely survived, they have flourished. "There are only about 13 million of us", says Ed Koch, three times Mayor of New York. "That is less than a third of one per cent of the world's population, and yet, coming from the loins of the Jewish people, you have Moses, Jesus, Marx, Freud and Einstein, the seminal thinkers of the modern world. Not to mention 116 Jewish Nobel Prize winners".

But how did the Jews, this tiny people with no homeland, manage to survive the multiple traumas of two millennia?

The crucial factor was the genius of the rabbis of old. In the long centuries after the Babylonian exile 2,500 years ago, they succeeded in creating a marvelously shockproof survival capsule for a religion whose followers had no firm land base; and who, from the moment the Roman Emperor Constantine became Christian, were forbidden to swell their ranks by making converts.

"The Jews in Babylon", said the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, "reflected long and hard about what it would take to survive in exile. "After all, they had already lost 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel, who'd chosen to assimilate when they were conquered by the Assyrians. So the rabbis who came after them knew what was at stake, because so many of their brothers and sisters had simply abandoned their people and their faith. They came to the conclusion that: "We have got to

create a survival mechanism that will enable our people to keep their faith and identity in a diaspora".

Jews were told, through the dietary laws of kashrut, what was kosher (fit to eat) and what was not. That, in itself, put an immense social barrier between themselves and non-Jews. They were told that every male child must be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. Not satisfied with the Ten Commandments of Moses, they were given no fewer than 613 mitzvot to observe.

Religious Jews were – and are – expected to say as many as 100 different blessings every day. Jews everywhere were encouraged to live within walking distance of a synagogue. And the family was to be the primary unit of survival, and celebrating in the home the Sabbath and the festivals.

As the Jews moved out of their ghettos and into mainstream society over the past two centuries, they have been faced with different problems. In an open society, mixed marriages are shrinking Jewish communities.

Can Judaism survive tolerance and kindness as successfully as it survived persecution?

~Abridged from The Daily Telegraph

Focus Questions:

1. Do you believe that the Jewish people have been discriminated against, more than other religions, over the years? If so, why do think that is so, and has it molded the Jewish religion?
2. How much do you feel that you know about Judaism? What has been the primary source of the information that you have?
3. Have you, personally, any Jewish friends / acquaintances? How has this affected your concept of the Jewish faith and the Jewish people?
4. In any of the readings or the 'At-A-Glance' information was there anything that surprised you? Do you believe what you heard / read?

Check-out/Likes & Wishes: *Did this session help you grow spiritually?*

Closing Words & Extinguishing Chalice:

If my theory of relativity is proven successful, Germany will claim me as a German and France will declare that I am a citizen of the world. Should my theory prove untrue, France will say that I am a German and Germany will declare that I am a Jew.

~ Albert Einstein

I marvel at the resilience of the Jewish people. Their best characteristic is their desire to remember. No other people has such an obsession with memory.

~ Elie Wiesel

Judaism At-A-Glance

History

Tradition has it that Judaism started with Abraham around 2000 BC. Constant warfare with neighboring peoples apparently resulted in a large number of Hebrews being enslaved by the Egyptians, which set the stage for the singular event of Jewish history, the Exodus: Moses led the captive Hebrew population into Palestine. The Hebrews organized themselves into 12 tribes, with warrior-priest chieftains, referred to in the Bible as Judges. In 1006 BC, David established Jerusalem as the capital. His successor Solomon had a temple built in Jerusalem to contain the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was a gold-covered wooden box that presumably contained the tablets of the Law that Moses received from G-d Mt. Sinai. The Hebrews were originally polytheistic, even animistic. They believed in spirits and animal sacrifice was the tradition.

In 587 BC the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Palestine, destroyed most of Jerusalem, including the Temple. At this time Isaiah developed a new image of Yahweh. His G-d was the only G-d, and he was the embodiment of love and kindness. And his ultimate victory over the evil of this world would be brought about by a Messiah.

In 63 BC, Pompeii conquered the area and made Judea a part of the Roman province of Syria. Over time, the government of Palestine, mostly Roman-appointed Jews, would degenerate into incompetence and corruption. Emperor Vespasian sent his son Titus with Roman legions to Palestine. In 70 ad, Titus ordered the Temple destroyed and the Jews dispersed - the Diaspora. Millions of Jews spread throughout the Empire, which already contained some seven million Jews -- roughly 7 % of the Empire's population.

Jewish Texts

Torah: In its most limited sense, 'Torah' refers to the Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. But the word 'Torah' can be used to refer to the entire Jewish bible (the body of scripture known to non-Jews as the Old Testament and to Jews as the Tanakh or Written Torah). For Jews, there is no 'Old Testament'. The books that Christians call the New Testament are not part of Jewish scripture.

Talmud: The Talmud is a huge collection of doctrines and laws compiled and written before the 8th Century, A.D., by ancient Jewish teachers. The Talmud, which often cites the Old Testament, is the basic book of Jewish law.

Beliefs

The core of Jewish belief are the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. They are a key tenet of other major world religions: notably both Christianity and Islam. The Ten Commandments (or Decalogue) and are in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. Below is an abbreviated Jewish version.

1. I am the Lord Your G-d, who has taken you out of the land of Egypt
2. You shall have no other gods but me
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your G-d in vain
4. You shall remember the Sabbath and keep it holy
5. Honor your mother and father
6. You shall not murder
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. You shall not bear false witness
10. You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor

Practices

There are many Jewish rituals. It is a key way that the religion has lasted. Below are a few:

- **Circumcision:** A ritual circumcision (brit milah) takes place on the eighth day of the baby boy's life. A parallel naming ceremony (brit bat) also occurs on the eight day of life.

- **Bar Mitzvah:** At the age of 13, a Jewish male marks his entry into the community as an adult. The Bat Mitzvah (for women) was first celebrated in the twentieth century.
- **Wedding:** The wedding ceremony (Kiddushin) takes place under a wedding canopy (huppah) and incorporates the ritual breaking of a glass underfoot, an act that commemorates a sad event in the Jewish history, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.
- **Kosher.** 24% of Jews follow some form of kosher diet. Meat that is kosher comes from animals that chew a cud and have cloven hooves (such as sheep and cows), and that are killed in accordance with special slaughtering procedures. Kosher meat must be prepared in such a way as to remove all traces of blood. Seafood is considered kosher if the animals caught have scales or fins. Poultry is kosher if it is slaughtered and prepared in the same manner as meat. Kosher dietary guidelines prohibit the consumption of dairy products at the same time, or immediately before or after, a meal including meat products. Separate cooking and serving utensils are required for dairy and non-dairy meals.
- **G-d.** Generally, practicing Jews do not write the name of the deity because of the laws delivered by Moses which are found in Deuteronomy 12:3-12:4. In this passage, the Jews are instructed to destroy anything and everything associated with their rival's gods, and they are not to let this happen to their own.

Branches of Judaism

Judaism is a vibrant and diverse faith with many strands, a tradition that is continually rediscovering itself in both new and old expressions. Here are the current branches of Judaism:

Orthodox: Take a fundamental approach to the dictates of the Law, seek to pass along existing traditions without changing them, and strive to incorporate the dictates of their faith into a wide range of daily activities and social interactions.

Conservative: Acknowledge the need to make some accommodations to external society, but nevertheless grant an important, and usually dominant, role to the traditions of the path.

Reform: Do not see the dictates of the Hebrew Bible as specific, binding regulations on daily contact with others, but rather seek to honor tradition and faith by making religious observance accessible to contemporary practitioners.

Symbols

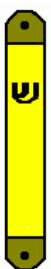
Judaism has a number of symbols. Here are a few of the better known.



One of the oldest symbols of the Jewish faith is the **Menorah**, a seven-branched candelabrum used in the Temple. The kohanim lit the menorah in the Sanctuary every evening and cleaned it out every morning, replacing the wicks and putting fresh olive oil into the cups. The illustration at right is based on instructions for construction of the menorah found in Exodus 25,31-40



The **Star of David**, known in Hebrew as the Shield of David or Magen David is a generally recognized symbol of Jewish identity and Judaism. Its shape is that of a hexagram, the compound of two equilateral triangles. The hexagram has been in use as a symbol of Judaism since the 17th century, with precedents in the 14th to 16th centuries in Central Europe, where the Shield of David was partly used in conjunction with the Seal of Solomon (the pentagram) on Jewish flags.



The **Mezuzot** is placed on the doorposts of Jewish. In Deut. 6:4-9 G-d commands Jews to keep his words constantly in their minds by writing them on the doorposts of the house. The words of the Shema are written on a tiny scroll of parchment, along with the words of a companion passage, Deut. 11:13-21. On the back of the scroll, a name of G-d is written.

The scroll is then rolled up and placed in the case, and the letter Shin is written on the outside of the case.

Calendar

Rosh Hashannah: The Jewish New Year. It is on first and second day of the Hebrew month Tishrei, roughly in the middle of Sept to the middle of Oct. Work is not performed.

Yom Kippur: Is the most important Jewish holiday and is on the tenth day of Tishrei, shortly after Rosh Hashannah. It is the Day of Atonement. From sundown until sundown, believers, forgo food and drink, do no work and repent for misdeeds of the year just past.

Sukkot: The harvest celebration known as the Feast of Booths and is in late October.

Chanukah (Hanukkah): The Festival of Lights celebrates the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrians in the second century BC. It is early to mid December and is often misrepresented as the Jewish Christmas.

Purim: In late Feb to early March, Purim commemorates the deliverance of Persian Jews from destruction as laid out in the book of Esther. It is preceded by a day of fasting, but is a time of merrymaking.

Pesach (Passover): Honors the delivery of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. G-d instructed the Israelites to have a feast before the departure from Egypt. With no time to prepare bread it would be unleavened. Exodus also reports that G-d arranged for the Angel of Death to destroy the first borns of the Egyptians and to 'pass over' the marked houses of the Israelites. It is in late March or Early April and is for seven / eight days.

Common Misconceptions

Jews are an ethnic group. Judaism is a religion not an ethnicity. There are Jews in as many ethnicities as any other religion.

Jews believe they are 'the chosen people'. This is false. Some other religions refer to the Jews as the "chosen people" but they do not refer to themselves or their religion in that manner. Jewish people believe that all people are equal.

You can't convert to Judaism: Many people convert to Judaism. If you believe in the tenets of the religion you can convert. Different denominations have different methods of conversion.

Jewish rejection of Jesus. This is not true. What is true is that the Jewish people don't worship Jesus, just like the Christian people don't worship Mohammed or his teachings. The Jewish people believe in the Messiah, but that he has yet to come.

Jews killed Jesus. History tells us that the Romans were the ones who had Jesus crucified, which was a common practice until the Roman Empire adopted Christianity under the Emperor Constantine. It is highly unlikely that a minority religious group facing persecution themselves would have any say in the matters of the Roman Empire.