

Taking a Look at Jewish Religious Beliefs

Judaism was the first tradition to teach *monotheism*, the belief that there's only one God. As Judaism evolved, the idea of God evolved, too, focusing on One unknowable, universal, image-less Being, Who, because the universe is framed in Love, requires justice of human beings.

Judaism tends to focus more on the way in which you practice and live in the world than it does on analyzing the nature of God. In fact, biblical monotheism is usually called "ethical monotheism" because of the very strong linkage of right acts to the belief in one God. While some religious traditions consider belief alone to be adequate, Judaism isn't one of them; to Jews, belief is most significant in light of the actions motivated by that belief.

What is unique, perhaps, to Judaism is the notion of arguing with God. For example, in the Bible, Abraham argued with God for the sake of the righteous citizens in Sodom and Gomorrah. He didn't just say, "Whatever you say, God" — he bargained! It's like the whole stage was set for a particular kind of exchange with the Divine. Jews are even called the "Children of Israel" because of the Biblical story of Jacob who wrestled with an angel and got his name changed to Israel, which means "one who wrestles with God."

While the idea of a complete surrender to faith, a surrender to God, is harmonious with many Christian and Muslim faiths, it's much less comfortable for most Jews, who are traditionally taught to question in order to learn more deeply. Judaism tends to encourage individuals to explore their own personal relationship with God. For those people who are comfortable with the idea of surrender, God-wrestling is not an easy concept.

God's name

Some Jews see God as an external force, a Being outside of the universe Who listens to prayers, controls lives, creates miracles, and judges. But that doesn't mean that God looks like us. In fact, Jewish thought is very clear on this: Any reference to God being like a human should be taken as poetic metaphor — as though it were followed by the phrase, "so to speak."

Some Jews say God contains the Universe, but is infinitely greater. Other Jews say God is the universe, and the universe is God. Some folks say all these ideas are true. The one thing Jews won't argue about, period, is that God is ultimately unknowable and, therefore, un-namable.

Most traditional Jews won't write out the word "God," so many Jewish books and periodicals print it "G-d." Just as the name of God isn't supposed to be pronounced, some Jews extend this restriction to writing names of God. Also, it ensures that a name of God won't be defaced or erased if the paper is ripped up, soiled, or thrown away.

The two most frequently used names for God are the unspeakable YHVH (usually translated "Lord") and the word *Elohim* (usually translated "God").

The Tanach: The Hebrew Bible

The five books of the Torah appear as the first of three sections of the Hebrew Bible, which contains 39 books reflecting texts that were gathered over almost 2,000 years. Another name for the Hebrew Bible is the *Tanach*, which is actually an acronym made up of the first letters of the names of each of the three sections: "T" is for *Torah*, "N" is for *Nevi'im* ("Prophets"), and "Ch" is for *Ketuvim* ("Writings").

If you want to sound like a *mayven* (expert), don't call the Hebrew Bible the "Old Testament." The *Old Testament* is a Christian term based on the idea that there is a *New Testament* that supersedes the Hebrew Bible.

Jews prefer to call their Bible either the Hebrew Bible, or simply the Holy Scriptures. What Christians call the New Testament is usually referred to in Jewish settings as the Christian Bible.

Jewish "fundamentalism" doesn't focus on the "literal truth" of the Bible as some other forms of religious fundamentalism do. While many traditional Jews believe that the Tanach expresses the Word of God, very few Jews would argue that the literal meaning of the words is the right one. An important rabbinic teaching says that there are 70 interpretations for every word in Torah — and they are all correct! Jewish tradition talks of four dimensions of meaning: the literal, the allegorical, the metaphorical, and the mystical.

Studying different interpretations is called *hermeneutics*, and it's an important part of the Jewish understanding of Torah. Hermeneutics is why five different rabbis can make five different sermons on the same topic. More fundamentalist Jewish groups don't focus on an exclusive interpretation of the Torah text as much as on a very strict application of ritual practice.

Basic Behavior Principles from the Torah

Historically and in the present, the heart of the faith is carried and communicated through the way, the path, and the teachings of Torah.

The word *Torah* refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, which are written on a scroll and wound around two wooden poles. On one level, the five books narrate a story from the creation of the world to the death of Moses, around 1200 B.C.E. On a deeper level, the Torah is the central text that guides the Way called Judaism (the word Torah derives from the verb "to guide" or "to teach").

The five books are named Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

- **Genesis (*Bereisheet*, "In the beginning"):** Deals with the creation of the world, the patriarchs and matriarchs (like Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, and so on), and concludes with the story of Jacob, Joseph, and the eventual settlement of the Hebrew people in Egypt.
- **Exodus (*Sh'mot*, "Names"):** Tells of the struggle to leave Egypt, the revelation of Torah on Mount Sinai (including the Ten Commandments), and the beginning of the journey in the wilderness.
- **Leviticus (*Vayikra*, "And He called"):** Largely deals with levitical, or priestly, matters, concerning the running of the Sanctuary, although some incredible ethical teachings are in this book, as well.
- **Numbers (*Bamidbar*, "In the wilderness"):** Begins with taking a census of the tribes and continues with the people's journey through the wilderness.
- **Deuteronomy (*D'varim*, "Words"):** Consists of speeches by Moses recapitulating the entire journey. Deuteronomy concludes with the death of Moses and the people's entrance into the Promised Land.

The *Sefer Torah* (Torah scroll) is the most important item in a synagogue, and it "lives" in the *Aron Kodesh* (the Ark or cabinet, which is sometimes covered with fancy curtains and decorations). A portion of the Torah is read in every traditional synagogue each week, on Mondays, Thursdays, Shabbat (Sabbath), and on holidays.

The Torah is a guidebook for Jewish living — requiring a lifetime of study to learn and to refine your actions and personal qualities. While it contains hundreds of commandments of all kinds, there are some basic principles that guide personal behavior. These six are the most important prescriptions from the Torah for a healthy, spiritually sound life:

- **Good works or *ma'asim tovim* (mah-ah-seem toe-veem):** Always be on the lookout for opportunities to do good things for others and for yourself. Get up on the right side of the bed, be nice, and always be the one who does the right thing.

- **Acts of kindness or *gemilut chasadim* (geh-meh-loot khah-sah-deem):** Look at the world through eyes of compassion, empathize with the challenges of others, and look eagerly for opportunities to be kind to everyone, especially to those less fortunate than you.
- **Hospitality or *hachnasat orchim* (hakh-nah-saht ore-kheem):** Invite family members, friends, and acquaintances to your home, be generous and gracious hosts, make sure your guests are comfortable, and treat them the way you'd like to be treated.
- **Charity or *tzedakah* (tzeh-dah-kah):** Give generously to charities and to individuals who are in need. Make it a regular habit. Some sages say that there is no good deed more important than giving charity.
- **Visiting the sick or *bikkur cholim* (beer-khoor khoh-leem):** Visit and/or call people you know who are ill and be sensitive to their needs. Know that visiting a sick person is part of their healing process and makes a big difference.
- **Evil speech or *lashon hara* (lah-shone ha-rah):** Be careful with what you say, don't be verbally abusive, don't embarrass someone publicly, don't lie, and know that words can be cruel weapons.

The Ten Commandments According to the Torah

The Ten Commandments may be the most well-known part of the Torah. Interestingly, two versions of the Ten Commandments exist in the Torah: one in the book of Exodus and one in the book of Deuteronomy. The Ten Commandments according to Jewish tradition also differ from the Ten Commandments of various Christian denominations. The following Ten Commandments are from the book of Exodus in the Torah:

1. I am the Lord your God.
"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery."
(Exodus 20:2)
2. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol.
"You shall not recognize other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth." (Exodus 20:3–4)
3. You shall not take the name of God in vain.
"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain." (Exodus 20:7)
4. Remember and observe the Sabbath and keep it holy.
"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant, your animal or your stranger within your gates." (Exodus 20:8–10)
5. Honor your father and mother.
"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you." (Exodus 20:12)
6. You shall not murder.
"You shall not murder." (Exodus 20:13)
7. You shall not commit adultery.
"You shall not commit adultery." (Exodus 20:13)
8. You shall not steal.
"You shall not steal." (Exodus 20:13)
9. You shall not bear false witness.
"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." (Exodus 20:13)
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or house.
"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Exodus 20:14)