

9

Judaism: beliefs and teachings

9.1 The nature of God: God as One

■ The concept and nature of God

The belief in one God is the most basic principle in Judaism. Like Christianity, this makes Judaism a **monotheistic** religion. Jews believe that it is God who has had the major effect and influence on the world and their place within the world. Although there are important people in the history of the faith, there has never been any suggestion that any of them have been a part of God or a god themselves. It is God who is the source of all Jewish morality, beliefs and values, which affect Jews' decisions about how to live correctly.

Jews believe that this overwhelming importance and significance of God is seen in his role as the creator. In addition to being the creator, God also sustains his creation by caring for people and requiring loyalty in exchange. Jews believe that God has given laws to his people, and is the true judge of how people follow these laws.

Jews believe that they can see the work of God in history, and that by carefully studying history they can learn more about God. The historical content in the Tenakh (also commonly spelled Tanakh – the Jewish scriptures) is considered important for what it reveals about God. The idea of seeing God at work, and learning more about him, is also extended into the present and the future because Jews believe God is constantly at work.

While Judaism is a monotheistic religion, there is considerable diversity in how the faith is practiced and how the Jewish scriptures are interpreted. You will learn more about some of these differences in the following pages.

■ God or G-d?

Some Jews prefer not to write the word God. They use G-d instead as a sign of respect. When written in Hebrew, God's name can never be erased or destroyed. The Hebrew letters of the name for God are YHWH, and this is never said out loud by Jews. When it appears in scripture or liturgy, instead of saying it, Jews substitute the Hebrew word 'Adonai', which means 'my Lord'. Any book containing the Hebrew name of God is treated with respect and is never destroyed or thrown away. When it is too old to be used it is kept in a special place in the synagogue before being properly buried in a Jewish cemetery.



▲ Old Jewish books containing the Hebrew name of God, stored in a synagogue in Israel

Objectives

- Understand the concept and nature of God for Jews.
- Understand the Jewish belief that God is One.

Key terms

- **monotheistic**: a religion that believes there is only one God
- **Shema**: a Jewish prayer affirming belief in the one God, found in the Torah

Research activity

While Jews and Christians both believe in only one God, Christians believe that God consists of three distinct Persons. Read pages 70–71 to find out more about this.

Some Jews think it is acceptable to write the word God, as they view it as a title, not a name. It is important to note that God and G-d refer to exactly the same one God and not different gods or parts of God.

■ God as one

For Jews, monotheism is not just the belief there is only one God; it is a way of viewing the world and all the contents of the world that they believe God created. It is God who is ever present in people's lives; every sight they see, sound they hear, and experience they are aware of is regarded as a meeting with God. This is the true meaning of the idea that God is One and is best expressed in the first two verses of the **Shema**, an important Jewish prayer that derives from passages in the books of Deuteronomy and Numbers. It begins with an expression of the unity of God, and the way humankind should respond to this belief:

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Deuteronomy 6:4–5

The reference to loving God with all your heart implies that God requires total loyalty, just like loyalty is needed in a full loving relationship. The mention of the soul shows that Jews need to have spiritual dedication to the one God.



▲ The Shema prayer being recited in a synagogue. Many Jews put their hand over their eyes while saying the first line, to avoid distractions.

For Jews, God is a single, whole, indivisible entity who cannot be divided. He is infinite and eternal, beyond the full understanding of humankind. This makes him the only being who should be praised.

Activities

- 1 What does the term monotheism mean?
- 2 Explain fully the Jewish belief that God is One.
- 3 Write out the first two verses of the Shema.
- 4 Explain what you think the Shema means to Jews.

Discussion activity

'It is God who is the source of all Jewish morality, beliefs and values, which affect Jews' decisions about how to live correctly.'

With a partner, discuss what you think this means to individual Jews who are keen to follow their faith properly. After five minutes, compare your conclusions with two other people.

Extension activity

Read the next part of the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:7–9. What instructions does this give about ways in which the Shema should be used?

★ Study tip

You are allowed to write G-d rather than God in your exam and will not be penalised for doing so. Whichever version you choose, it is respectful to use an upper case G.

Summary

You should now understand key Jewish beliefs about the concept and nature of God, including the belief that God is one.

9.2 The nature of God: God as creator

■ Jewish beliefs about creation

The **Torah** begins with these words:

“When God began to create heaven and earth ...”

Genesis 1:1

So right from the very start of the Torah, the belief that God is the **creator** is established. Jews believe that God created the universe out of nothing, exactly how he wanted it to be.

The book of Genesis tells how God took six days to create the universe and everything in it. Many **Orthodox** and **ultra-Orthodox Jews** believe that this is a literal truth and that it happened around 6000 years ago. They reject scientific theories of evolution. Other Jews accept that an evolutionary theory may be correct and that the universe is much older, but that God made everything happen. They still believe that God is the creator, but do not take the creation story in Genesis literally.

According to the creation story, it took four days for God to get the universe fit to support life and a further two days to create all living creatures. On the seventh day, God rested and made it a holy day. Jews remember this every week between sunset on Friday to night time on Saturday during the observance of **Shabbat**. In doing so, Jews are regularly reminded of God's importance and role in the creation of everything.



▲ The earth seen from the moon

■ Evil and free will

Jews believe that in order for God to have the ability and power to create the universe, it is essential he has characteristics that no other living being has. Jews believe that God is:

Objectives

- Understand the Jewish belief that God is the creator and the sustainer.
- Understand how this relates to the concepts of evil and free will.

Key terms

- **Torah:** (1) the five books of Moses, which form the first section of the Tenakh/Tanach (the Jewish Bible) (2) the Jewish written law
- **creator:** the one who makes things and brings things about
- **Orthodox Jews:** Jews who emphasise the importance of following the laws and guidance in the Torah; they believe the Torah was given directly by God to Moses, so should be followed as closely as possible
- **ultra-Orthodox Jews:** Jews who are even more committed than Orthodox Jews to strictly following the laws and guidance in the Torah
- **Shabbat:** the Jewish holy day of the week; a day of spiritual renewal starting shortly before sunset on Friday and continuing to night time on Saturday
- **omnipotent:** almighty, having unlimited power; a quality of God
- **omniscient:** knowing everything; a quality of God
- **omnipresent:** being everywhere at all times; a quality of God

- **omnipotent** – all powerful
- **omniscient** – all knowing
- **omnipresent** – being everywhere at all times.

Jews believe that God is the creator of everything; there is no concept in Judaism that evil was created by the devil. They believe that God, as the only creator, must have created evil himself. However, he also gave people the free will to choose what they know is right, and to reject evil as being completely against God.

Jews believe that in order for people to have free will, they have to be able to make their own choices between good and bad, which is why evil needs to exist. Being able to *choose* to do good also makes the act of doing good more significant.

Some find it difficult to accept that God created the potential for evil – particularly when remembering events such as the Holocaust, when Jews faced extreme persecution – but it is considered to be a necessary consequence of giving humans free will.

The belief in one God who creates everything, including the potential for evil, is reinforced in Isaiah 45:6–7.



▲ 'God saw all that He had made, and found it very good' (Genesis 1:31)

■ God the sustainer

Jews believe that God not only created the universe but also sustains it. This means that God provided sufficient resources on the planet to feed and provide for all species. The fact that resources are distributed unequally, so that some have less than they need, is a result of human free will, granted by God. Those who follow Jewish teaching by helping to provide resources for others who have too little are helping to fulfil God's plan for the world he created.

Research activity

Read pages 14–17 and 24–25 to find out how Christians view God as the creator of everything. Summarise the similarities and differences between Jewish and Christian beliefs in God as the creator.

★ Study tip

The three words beginning with omni, meaning 'all' – omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent – are important words to remember when referring to Jewish beliefs about the nature of God.

Activities

- 1 Carefully explain the Jewish belief that God is the creator.
- 2 Why can it be difficult to accept that God created evil as well as good?
- 3 Explain what it means when Jews call God 'the sustainer'.

“I am the **LORD** and there is none else, I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe – I the **LORD** do all these things.”
Isaiah 45:6–7

Discussion activity

With a partner, discuss what Isaiah 45:6–7 means in regards to the Jewish belief in one God.

Summary

You should now understand what it means when Jews call God 'the creator' and 'the sustainer'. You should also understand Jewish beliefs about evil and free will.

9.3 The nature of God: God as lawgiver and judge; the divine presence

■ God as lawgiver

In order to help people to exercise their free will in the way he would like them to, God gave the Jews many laws that he expects them to obey. The foundation for these laws are the **Ten Commandments**. God gave these to Moses after he rescued the Jewish slaves from Egypt, probably in the thirteenth century BCE. They were originally inscribed on two tablets of stone and Jews still consider these laws to be of great importance.

Altogether the Torah contains 613 laws that govern how people should behave. These are called **mitzvot** and they form the basis of the Halakhah, which is the accepted code of conduct for Jewish life. By obeying these various laws, Jews believe they are doing what God requires of them and fulfilling his will on earth.

In providing the Ten Commandments and the other mitzvot, Jews believe that God has set the basis of his relationship with his people, and that that is the purpose of God being the lawgiver.



▲ Studying and obeying the mitzvot in the Torah is very important to Jews

■ God as judge

Jews believe that God not only gave them laws to follow, but also judges them for how well they follow those laws. They believe that God judges everyone – whether they are a Jew or not – based on their actions, behaviour and beliefs. Jews believe that God's judgements are fair and always tempered by his loving, **merciful** nature; the qualities of justice and mercy are perfectly balanced.

For Jews there are two main times when God's judgement happens. The first is once a year during the festival of Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish new year), when God judges people for their actions over the past year and decides what the coming year will bring them. This festival offers Jews

Objectives

- Understand the Jewish belief that God is the lawgiver and judge.
- Understand the concept of the divine presence (Shekhinah).

Key terms

- **Ten Commandments:** ten laws given by God to Moses over 3000 years ago
- **mitzvot** (singular **mitzvah**): Jewish rules or commandments
- **merciful:** the quality of God that shows compassion or forgiveness to humans, even though he has the power to punish them
- **Shekhinah:** the divine presence of God
- **Temple:** the centre of Jewish worship at the time of Jesus; the meeting place between God and the priest

Links

For more on Moses and the Ten Commandments see pages 224–225.

Links

For more on mitzvot see pages 230–231.

★ Study tip

Wherever you see a link to another section of the book, try to find the time to look at it, as it will provide useful background information and help you to understand the topic in more depth.

the chance to reflect on their behaviour over the year, repent for their wrongdoings and pray for goodness and happiness for themselves and their families.

Many Jews also believe they will be judged after death, when God determines where they will spend their afterlife.

■ The divine presence (Shekhinah)

The word **Shekhinah** does not appear in the Tenakh, but its meaning is present in many passages. Shekhinah means 'God's manifested glory' or 'God's divine presence'. It refers to the presence of God on earth.

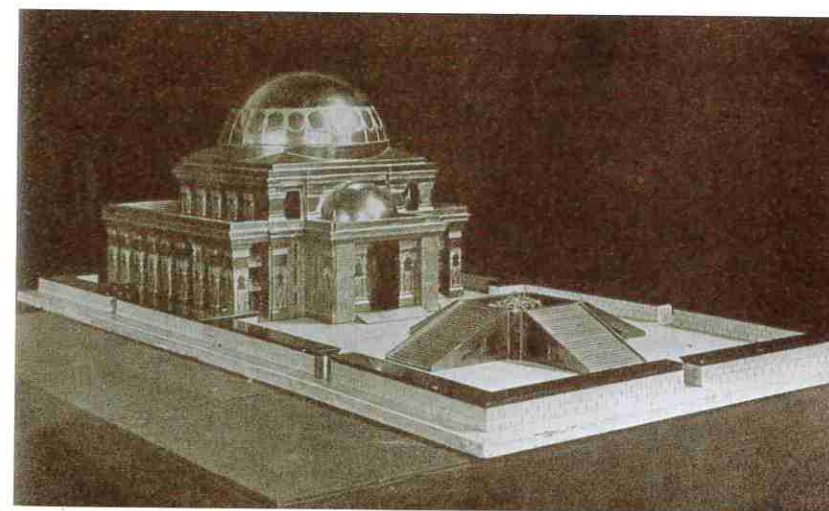
Many Jewish writings refer to the Tabernacle – a portable structure, similar to a tent – as being the early dwelling place for the divine presence of God. The Jews carried the Tabernacle with them on their journey after their exodus from Egypt, through the wilderness, to the conquering of the land of Canaan.

At times, the Tenakh mentions that the Jews were led on this journey by a pillar of fire or a cloud, which were also possible manifestations of the Shekhinah. So the Shekhinah is associated with God's presence among his people and their experience of the Spirit of God. It is seen as a sign of his power and glory.

After Canaan was conquered, the Tabernacle was replaced with Solomon's **Temple** in Jerusalem in the tenth century BCE. Several of the prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, made reference to the presence of God in the temple.

“ In the year that King Uzziah died, I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; and the skirts of His robe filled the Temple. Seraphs stood in attendance on Him. ”

Isaiah 6:1–2



▲ An early twentieth-century model of Solomon's Temple

A small number of Jews believe that the Shekhinah is the feminine presence of God, because in Hebrew Shekhinah is a feminine word.

Research activity

Over the centuries, there were two temples built or rebuilt on Temple Mount: Zerubbabel's Temple and Herod's Temple. Find out when and why they were built, and who built them. Then find out about the Holy of Holies.

Discussion activity

With a partner, discuss what might be meant by the feminine presence of God.

Activities

- 1 Carefully explain God's role as lawgiver.
- 2 Explain how laws help people to use their free will responsibly.
- 3 Explain the Jewish belief in the Shekhinah. Exodus 40:34–35 gives an example that will help you.

Summary

You should now understand how Jews view God as the lawgiver and judge, and understand the meaning of Shekhinah.

9.4 Life after death, judgement and resurrection

■ Jewish customs surrounding death

Jews believe that because it is part of God's plan, death is an inevitable part of life. Judaism teaches that Jews should not die alone, although of course this is not always possible to achieve. The dying person's family should make every effort to visit and look after them, and ensure there is always somebody with them. It is considered to be an act of great kindness to be present at the time of death and to close the dead person's eyes. Upon hearing of a death of a loved one, Jews make a blessing to God:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, the True Judge.”

Intense mourning follows a person's death, especially while waiting for their burial, then for seven days after the burial, followed by a further 30 days of lesser mourning.

Jews follow these traditional customs to show respect to the dying person, and to show they accept that God has taken their loved one's life.

■ Jewish beliefs about the afterlife

There is little teaching about life after death in the Jewish holy books, and beliefs about it have developed over the centuries. This has led to differences between Jews in their ideas about what happens after death. Some believe that life after death will be a physical life, while others believe it will be spiritual.

Heaven and Sheol

Teachings about the afterlife imply that the good will enter paradise (Gan Eden) while others will go to a place sometimes referred to as Sheol. This is seen as a place of waiting where souls are cleansed. Even though many Jews believe that those who follow their faith properly will be judged good enough for heaven, there is no clear teaching about what heaven is like. It is believed that heaven will be with God, but it is not known whether it is a state of consciousness, or an actual physical or spiritual place.

Judgement and resurrection

Some Jews believe they will be judged by God as soon as they die; this view is supported for example by Ecclesiastes 12:7, which suggests that **judgement** happens upon or shortly after death.

Objective

- Understand what Jews believe about what happens after death.

Key terms

- **judgement:** the belief that God judges a person based on their actions, and either rewards or punishes them as a result
- **resurrection:** rising from the dead or returning to life
- **rabbi:** a Jewish religious leader and teacher

Links

To learn more about mourning rituals see pages 254–255.



▲ Graves in a Jewish cemetery marked with the Star of David – a symbol commonly used to represent Judaism

Some believe that God will judge everyone on the Day of Judgement, after the coming of the Messiah. This is when God will decide who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. This is the view taken in Daniel 12:2.

Daniel looks forward to a time of **resurrection** at some point in the future. In Judaism, resurrection is the idea that at some point after death, people will rise from their graves to live again. However, many Jews reject the idea of resurrection, whether physical or spiritual. They have no firm view on what happens after death.

One of the reasons for the lack of agreement about the afterlife is that Jews believe the present is more important, and they should focus on living in a way that is pleasing to God. The idea that it is best to focus on the present rather than the afterlife is told in the following story by Rabbi Benjamin Blech (a contemporary American **rabbi**):

“A very wealthy man, not known for his piety, stood in a long line of those waiting to have their lives assessed by the heavenly court. He listened attentively as those who were being judged before him recounted both their spiritual failings and achievements. A number of them seemed to have the scales weighted against them until they suddenly remembered acts of charity they had performed, which dramatically tipped the scales in their favour. The rich man took it all in and smiled to himself.

When it was his turn, he confidently said, ‘I may have committed many sins during my lifetime, but I realise now what has the power to override them. I am a very wealthy man and I will be happy to write out a very large cheque to whatever charity you recommend.’

To which the court replied, ‘We are truly sorry, but here we do not accept cheques – only receipts.’”

Rabbi Benjamin Blech, ‘Life after death’, www.aish.com

“Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence.”

Daniel 12:2

“And the dust returns to the ground As it was, And the lifebreath returns to God Who bestowed it.”

Ecclesiastes 12:7

Activities

- 1 Why do you think Jews prefer to focus on this life rather than the next?
- 2 Do you agree that this is a good idea? Explain your reasons.
- 3 Explain different Jewish views about judgement after death.
- 4 Why do you think there are few references to life after death in the Tenakh?

Discussion activity

With a partner, discuss what, if anything, you think happens after death.

★ Study tip

If you are writing about a topic like resurrection or judgement, try to include different views to show that some Jews believe one thing while others believe differently.

Summary

You should now understand what Jews believe about life after death, including different views on judgement and resurrection.



▲ Jews believe they should focus on living in a way that is pleasing to God, for example by observing the mitzvot or helping the poor; here Jewish volunteers are putting together kosher food packages

9.5 The nature and role of the Messiah

■ Origins of the Messiah

In the twelfth century Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, also known as Maimonides, compiled the 'Thirteen Fundamental Principles of Jewish Faith', based on the Torah. The twelfth principle is 'The belief in the arrival of the **Messiah** and the Messianic era.' The nature and role of the Messiah is the cause of great debate among many in the Jewish community.

The word Messiah means 'anointed one', and was originally used in the Tenakh to refer to the kings of Israel. The first king of Israel was Saul, who lived around the eleventh century BCE. In anticipation of Saul being made king, the prophet Samuel anointed him to show that he was chosen by God:

“ Samuel took a flask of oil and poured some on Saul's head and kissed him, and said, 'The LORD herewith anoints you ruler over His own people.' ”

1 Samuel 10:1

Samuel also made a prediction about Saul which came true immediately:

“ The spirit of the LORD will grip you, and you will speak in ecstasy along with them; you will become another man. And once these signs have happened to you, act when the occasion arises, for God is with you. ”

1 Samuel 10:6–7



▲ Saul is anointed by Samuel

Objectives

- Understand the nature and role of the Messiah.
- Consider different beliefs about the Messiah.

Key terms

- **Messiah:** 'the anointed one'; a leader of the Jews who is expected to live on earth at some time in the future
- **Messianic age:** a future time of global peace when everyone will want to become closer to God, possibly through the intervention of the Messiah

Activities

- 1 Explain different Jewish beliefs about the role of the Messiah.
- 2 What do Jews believe the Messianic age will be like?
- 3 If the Messiah came this year, what do you think Jews would want him to do? Explain your reasons.
- 4 Explain why the belief in the Messiah might provide comfort to Jews in bad times.

■ The nature of the Messiah

Today, many Jews use the term 'Messiah' to refer to a future leader of the Jews. There is no suggestion in Judaism that Saul is connected to the coming Messiah, especially as he disobeyed God once he became king. However, the way that God changed Saul is also likely to apply to the future Messiah. The Messiah is expected to be a future king of Israel – a descendent of Saul's successor, King David – who will rule the Jews during what is known as the **Messianic age**.

Jews who believe in the future Messianic age debate about what it will be like and when it will come. Some believe the dead will be resurrected and live in a time of peace in a restored Israel. The prophet Micah describes it as a time when war will end and people will live in universal peace and harmony:

“ And they shall beat their swords into plowshares/ And their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up/ Sword against nation; They shall never again know war. ”

Micah 4:3

Orthodox Jews believe that in every generation there is a descendent of King David who has the potential to be the Messiah. If the Jews are worthy of redemption, this person will be directed by God to become the redeemer and will rule over all humanity with kindness and justice. He will also uphold the law of the Torah and will be the ultimate teacher of it. In addition, he will rebuild the temple in Jerusalem and gather all Jews back to the land of Israel. He will usher in world peace and unite humanity as one. Each of these expectations is outlined in the Tenakh.

In contrast, many in Reform Judaism reject the idea of a Messiah. Instead of believing in one specific person who will unite the world in peace, they believe that everyone should work together to achieve that peace. They still believe in a future Messianic age, but one that is achieved through people's collective actions, including observance of religious obligations, rather than as the result of the leadership of one person.

Although Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah, Jews firmly do not. This is because Jesus did not fulfill the expectations that the Jews have for their Messiah, especially in his observance of Torah law and because Jews do not believe he established the Messianic age.

The belief in the coming of the Messiah has provided some hope and comfort for Jews facing persecution and hardship. Many Jews murdered in the death camps during the Second World War went to their deaths proclaiming their belief in God and in the coming of the Messiah.

Summary

You should now understand the nature and role of the Messiah. You should also have considered different Jewish beliefs about the Messiah.

Discussion activity

'People should work together to establish peace on earth rather than waiting for the Messiah to do it.'

With a partner, discuss whether you agree with this statement and give reasons that support and oppose your opinion.

Research activity

Research the differences between Jewish and Christian beliefs about the Messiah.



▲ The star of David appears on the flag of Israel and is named after the king from whom the Messiah will be descended

★ Study tip

When writing about the Messiah, remember that different groups of Jews have different beliefs about the Messiah's role and importance.