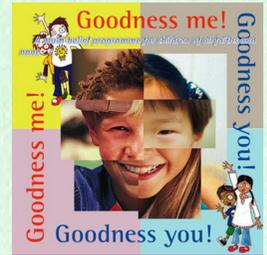


# JUDAISM

## SUPPORT MATERIALS - GMGY - BELIEFS & RELIGIONS



People adhere to religious traditions in different ways. Not all Jewish people will adhere to all of the practices mentioned in this material. If there is a child in your class that follows this religious tradition it is important that the child's parents or guardians are the primary source of information about that child's beliefs and practices.

### INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM

Judaism is the original of the three Abrahamic faiths, which also include Christianity and Islam. Judaism originated in the Middle East over 3500 years ago. Jewish identity and religion have their origins at the time of Moses, although Jews trace their history back to Abraham. Judaism has a rich history of religious text, but the central and most important religious document is the Torah. Jewish traditional or oral law, the interpretation of the laws of the Torah, is called *halakhah*.



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### THE BELIEFS OF JUDAISM

Jews believe that there is a single God who not only created the universe, but with whom every Jew can have an individual and personal relationship. They believe that God continues to work in the world, affecting everything that people do.

The Jewish relationship with God is a covenant relationship. In exchange for the many good deeds that God has done and continues to do for the Jewish people they keep God's laws and seek to bring holiness into every aspect of their lives.

Jews believe that God appointed the Jews to be his chosen people, as part of this covenant, in order to set an example of holiness and ethical behaviour to the world. Jewish life is very much the life of a community and there are many activities that Jews must do as a community. For example, the Jewish prayer book often uses 'we' and 'our' in prayers where some other faiths would use 'I' and 'mine'.

Judaism is very much a family faith and the ceremonies start early, when a Jewish boy baby is circumcised at eight days old, following the instructions that God gave to Abraham around 4,000 years ago. Many Jewish religious customs revolve around the home. One example is the Sabbath meal, when families join together to welcome in the special day. Jews believe that a Jew is someone who is the child of a Jewish mother; although some groups also accept children of Jewish fathers as Jewish. Jews often maintain that one can't lose the technical 'status' of being

a Jew by adopting another faith, even if they are practising another religion. Someone who isn't born a Jew can convert to Judaism. Judaism is a faith of action and Jews believe people should be judged not so much by the intellectual content of their beliefs, but by the way they live their faith; by how much they contribute to the overall holiness of the world.

### SOME JEWISH CUSTOMS

#### **The Sabbath**

The Sabbath is commanded by God. Every week religious Jews observe the Sabbath, the Jewish holy day, and keep its laws and customs. While there are many restrictions, it is meant to be a day of relaxation, to be enjoyed. The Sabbath begins at nightfall on Friday and lasts until nightfall on Saturday.

#### **Circumcision**

Circumcision is an initiation rite for Jewish newborn baby boys. This usually takes place in a ceremony called a brit (or bris) *milah* witnessed by family and community members. Brit (or bris) *milah* is Hebrew for 'covenant of circumcision'. The ritual is an ancient practice that has been carried out by Jewish parents for more than 3,000 years.

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### Tefillin

*Tefillin* are cubic black leather boxes with leather straps that Orthodox Jewish men wear on the head and the arm during weekday morning prayer. Observant Jews consider wearing tefillin to be a very great mitzvah (command). The boxes contain four hand-written texts from the Bible, in which believers are commanded to wear certain words on the hand and between the eyes.

### Kippah/Yarmulke

Clothing worn by Jews usually varies according to which denomination of Judaism they adhere to. Orthodox Jewish men always cover their heads by wearing a hat or a skullcap known in Hebrew as a kippah or in Yiddish as a yarmulke (pronounced 'yamaka'). Liberal or Reform Jews see the covering of the head as optional. Most Jews will cover their heads when praying, attending the synagogue or at a religious event or festival.

Married women also cover their heads by wearing a scarf, hat or wig. The most common reason (for covering the head) is a sign of respect and fear of God. It is also felt that this separates God and humankind: by wearing a hat you are recognising that God is above all mankind.



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### JEWISH FESTIVALS

Jewish holidays are celebrated on fixed dates in the Jewish calendar, but this calendar varies in relation to the calendar used in the west. The Jewish calendar is a lunar calendar adjusted to the solar calendar by adding an extra month in certain years. This means that the holidays move around a bit with relation to western dates but stay in the same season. The Jewish day begins at sunset, which means that all Jewish holidays begin the evening before their western date.

Click [here](#) to see the interfaith calendar for dates for the following festivals.

#### Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year, when Jews believe God decides what will happen in the year ahead. The synagogue services for this festival emphasise God's kingship and include the blowing of the shofar, a ram's horn trumpet. This is also God's time for judgement. Jews believe God balances a person's good deeds over the last year against their bad deeds and decides their fate accordingly.

The ten days beginning with Rosh Hashanah are known as the Ten Days of Repentance, during which Jews are expected to find all the people they have hurt during the previous year and apologise to them. They have until Yom Kippur to do this.

#### Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement is regarded as a sacred and solemn occasion, on which synagogue attendance is particularly important. On Yom Kippur Jews believe God makes the final decision on who will live, die, prosper and fail during the next year, and seals his judgement in the Book of Life. It is a day of fasting. Worship includes the confession of sins and asking for forgiveness, which is done aloud by the entire congregation.

#### Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles

The book of Exodus tells the story of the Israelites' journey to the 'Promised Land'. Sukkot commemorates these years spent wandering the desert, living in makeshift dwellings. For the duration of the festival Jewish families live in temporary huts called *sukkot* (singular: *sukkah*) that they build out of branches and leaves.

Each day they hold celebrations with four types of plant: branches of palm, myrtle, willow and a citrus fruit called an *etrog*. Sukkot is intended to be a joyful festival that lets Jews live close to nature and know that God is taking care of them.

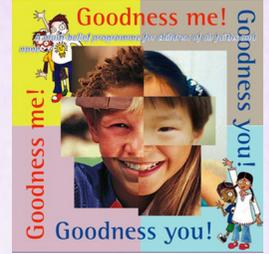
#### Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah

Shemini Atzeret is an extra day, or two days outside of Israel, after the end of Sukkot. Some Jews spend some time in their *sukkah*, but not as much, and without some of the rituals.

*Simchat Torah* means 'rejoicing in the Torah'. Synagogues read from the

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Torah every week, completing one read-through each year. They reach the end on Simchat Torah and this holiday marks the completion of the cycle, to begin again with Genesis. This is celebrated by parading with the Torah scrolls, singing and dancing. Simchat Torah is the second day of Shemini Atzeret outside of Israel, while in Israel it is all one day.

### Hanukkah, or Chanukah

The story of Hanukkah is that of the 'miracle of the oil'. In 164 BC a group of Jews called the Maccabees recaptured Jerusalem from the occupying Syrian Greeks. When they came to rededicate the temple, they had only enough sacred oil to light the menorah (seven-branched candlestick) for one day.

It is said that the candles stayed lit for eight days despite this. During the eight days of Hanukkah, Jews light one extra candle on a special nine-branched menorah, also called a chanukkiya, each night.

They say prayers and eat fried foods to remind them of the oil. Children may be given gifts, coins, chocolate money and/or special spinning tops called dreidels.

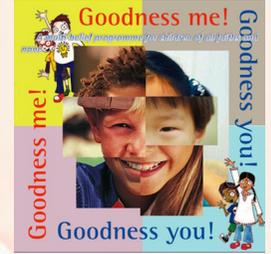
### Tu B'Shevat

Tu B'Shevat is the Jewish New Year for trees. The Torah forbids Jews to eat the fruit of new trees for three years after they are planted. The fourth year's fruit was to be tithed to the temple.

Tu B'Shevat was counted as the birthday for all trees for tithing purposes,

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like the beginning of a fiscal year. On Tu B'Shevat Jews often eat fruits associated with the Holy Land, especially the seven plants mentioned in the Torah: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates. Planting trees is another tradition.

### Purim

Purim celebrates the events told in the Book of Esther, in which a wicked Persian nobleman named Haman plotted to murder all the Jews in the land. The Jewish heroine Esther, wife of the king Ahasuerus, persuaded her husband to prevent the massacre and execute Haman. Because Esther fasted before going to the king, Purim is preceded by a fast. On Purim itself, however, Jews are commanded to eat, drink and celebrate. Almsgiving is also a very important Purim tradition. The Book of Esther is read in the synagogue and the congregation use noisemakers, rattles and boos to drown out Haman's name whenever it appears.

### Passover

This is one of the most important Jewish festivals. During Passover, Jews remember the story of the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt.

God unleashed ten plagues on the Egyptians, culminating in the death of every family's eldest son. God told the Israelites to sacrifice lambs and mark their doors with the blood to escape this fate. They ate the lambs with bitter herbs and unleavened bread (unrisen bread without yeast).

The unleavened bread, the bitter herbs and a bone with some meat on it are displayed to represent the sacrifice at the family meal, called the Seder,

eaten by Jews on the first two nights of Passover. There are blessings, songs and other ingredients to symbolise parts of the story. During the meal the adults explain the symbolism to the children.

### Shavuot

Shavuot, or the Festival of Weeks, is a harvest festival. Historically, at this time of year the first fruits of the harvest were brought to the temples.

Shavuot also marks the time that the Jews were given the Torah on Mount Sinai. Shavuot is marked by prayers of thanks for the Holy Book and study of its scriptures. Customs include decorating synagogues with flowers and eating dairy foods.

### Tisha B'Av

This is a day of commemoration for a series of tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people, some of which coincidentally happened on this day, for example the destruction of the first and second temples in ancient Jerusalem. Other tragedies are commemorated on this day, such as the beginning of World War I and the Holocaust. As Tisha B'Av is a day of mourning, Jews observe a strict fast and avoid laughing, joking and chatting. Synagogues are dimly lit and undecorated and the Torah draped in black cloth.

### The Talmud

The Talmud is the comprehensive written version of the Jewish oral law and the subsequent commentaries on it. It originates from the second

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century CE. The word Talmud is derived from the Hebrew verb 'to teach', which can also be expressed as the verb 'to learn'. The Talmud is the source from which the code of Jewish law is derived.

### **The Torah**

The Torah is the first part of the Jewish bible. It is the central and most important document of Judaism and has been used by Jews through the ages. Torah refers to the Five Books of Moses. These are: Bresheit (Genesis), Shemot (Exodus), Vayicra (Leviticus), Bamidbar (Numbers), and Devarim (Deuteronomy).

Jews believe that God dictated the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai 50 days after their exodus from Egyptian slavery. They believe that the Torah shows how God wants Jews to live. It contains 613 commandments and Jews refer to the 10 best known of these as 'the 10 statements'.

The Torah is written in Hebrew, the oldest of Jewish languages. The Torah scrolls are taken out from the Ark (Aron ha kodesh) and portions read in the synagogue three times each week. On Mondays and Thursdays small sections are read. The main reading is on the morning of Shabbat (Sabbath). Over the course of the year the whole scroll is read in sequence. This begins from the end of Sukkot, which is an autumn festival.

## THE SYNAGOGUE

The synagogue is the Jewish place of worship, but is also used as a place to study, and often as a community centre as well. In Orthodox synagogues, men and women sit separately and everyone (except girls and unmarried women) have their heads covered. In a Reform synagogue men and women can sit together. Synagogue services can be led by a rabbi, a cantor or a member of the congregation.

The yeshiva, an academy of rabbinic learning, is another institution of importance in Judaism. Since Judaism has always depended on the interpretation of an immense volume of legal texts, study has always had a significant role. The close connections between the yeshiva and the synagogue are evident in the Yiddish word for synagogue, shul, which means school.

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### AT A GLANCE...

**Sacred text:** The Torah and the Talmud

**Clergy/leaders:** Rabbis

**Special place:** Synagogue

**Special people:** Moses, Abraham, Isaiah, Joshua, David, Joseph

**Symbol:** Star of David



**Theism:** Monotheism

**Practices:** Circumcision at birth, bar/bat mitzvah at adulthood, observing Sabbath, wearing tallit and tefilin, prayer services, kashrut (Jewish dietary laws)

**Beliefs:** There is one God, who chose the people of Israel and who requires worship, ethical behaviour, and rituals. A Messiah will come.