

## **Jewish faith and God**

### **The relationship with God**

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...

- The Jews keep God's laws
- The Jews seek to bring holiness into every aspect of their lives.

### **Judaism is the faith of a Community**

Jews believe that God appointed the Jews to be his chosen people in order to set an example of holiness and ethical behavior 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 uses WE and OUR in prayers where some other faiths would use I and MINE.

Jews also feel part of a global community with a close bond Jewish people all over the world. A lot of Jewish religious life is based around the home and family activities.

### **Judaism is a family faith**

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.

### **Who is a Jew?**

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. A Jew traditionally can't lose the technical 'status' of being a Jew by adopting another faith, but they do lose the religious element of their Jewish identity.

Someone who isn't born a Jew can convert to Judaism, but it is not easy to do so.

### **Judaism means living the faith**

Almost everything a Jewish person does can become an act of worship.

Because Jews have made a bargain with God to keep his laws, keeping that bargain and doing things in the way that pleases God is an act of worship.

And Jews don't only seek to obey the letter of the law - the particular details of each of the Jewish laws - but the spirit of it, too.

A religious Jew tries to bring holiness into everything they do, by doing it as an act that praises God, and honours everything God has done. For such a person the whole of their life becomes an act of worship.

Being part of a community that follows particular customs and rules helps keep a group of people together, and it's noticeable that the Jewish groups that have been most successful at avoiding assimilation are those that obey the rules most strictly - sometimes called ultra-orthodox Jews.

**Note:** Jews don't like and rarely use the word *ultra-orthodox*. A preferable adjective is *haredi*, and the plural noun is *haredim*.

### **It's what you do that counts...**

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.

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## **The Jewish view of God**

### **A summary of what Jews believe about God**

- God exists
- There is only one God
- There are no other gods
- God can't be subdivided into different persons (unlike the [Christian view of God](#))
- Jews should worship only the one God
- God is Transcendent:
  - God is above and beyond all earthly things.
- God doesn't have a body
  - Which means that God is neither female nor male.
- God created the universe without help
- God is omnipresent:
  - God is everywhere, all the time.
- God is omnipotent:

- God can do anything at all.
- God is beyond time:
  - God has always existed
  - God will always exist.
- God is just, but God is also merciful
  - God punishes the bad
  - God rewards the good
  - God is forgiving towards those who mess things up.
- God is personal and accessible.
  - God is interested in each individual
  - God listens to each individual
  - God sometimes speaks to individuals, but in unexpected ways.

### **The Jews brought new ideas about God**

The Jewish idea of God is particularly important to the world because it was the Jews who developed two new ideas about God:

- There is only one God
- God chooses to behave in a way that is both just and fair.

Before Judaism, people believed in lots of gods, and those gods behaved no better than human beings with supernatural powers.

The Jews found themselves with a God who was ethical and good.

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## **God in the Bible**

### **But how do Jews know this about God?**

They don't know it, they believe it, which is different.

However, many religious people often talk about God in a way that sounds as if they know about God in the same way that they know what they had for breakfast.

- For instance, religious people often say they are quite certain about God - by which they mean that they have an inner certainty.
- And many people have experiences that they believe were times when they were in touch with God.

The best evidence for what God is like comes from what the **Bible** says, and from particular individuals' experiences of God.

### **God in the Bible**

Quite early in his relationship with the Jews, God makes it clear that he will not let them encounter his real likeness in the way that they encounter each other.

The result is that the Jews have work out what God is like from what he says and what he does.

The story is in Exodus 33 and follows the story of the 10 commandments, and the Golden Calf.

**Moses** has spent much time talking with God, and the two of them are clearly quite close...

The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.

#### **Exodus 33**

But after getting the 10 commandments Moses wants to see God, so that he can know what he is really like. God says no...

you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.

Then the LORD said,

There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.

#### **Exodus 33**

### **Two sides of God**

Jews combine two different sounding ideas of God in their beliefs:

- God is an all-powerful being who is quite beyond human ability to understand or imagine.
- God is right here with us, caring about each individual as a parent does their child.

A great deal of Jewish study deals with the creative power of two apparently incompatible ideas of God.