 Note: The term "G-d" is used in this essay to respect the Jewish prohibition against spelling the name of G-d in full.

Early History of Judaism

Circa 2000 BCE, the G-d of the ancient Israelites established a divine covenant with Abraham, making him the patriarch of many nations. From his name, the term Abrahamic Religions is derived; these are the three religions which trace their roots back to Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The book of Genesis describes the events surrounding the lives of the four patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Moses was the next leader. He led his people out of captivity in Egypt, and received the Law from G-d. After decades of wandering through wilderness, Joshua led the tribes into the Palestine, which they believed to be the Promised Land, driving out the Canaanites through a series of military battles.

The original tribal organization was converted into a Kingdom by Samuel; their first king was Saul. The second king, David, established Jerusalem as the religious and political center. The third king, Solomon built the first temple there.

Division into the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah occurred shortly after the death of Solomon in 922 B.C.E. Israel fell to Assyria in 722 B.C.E.; Judah fell to the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. The temple was destroyed. Some Jews returned from captivity under the Babylonians and started to restore the temple in 536 B.C.E. Alexander the Great invaded the area in 332 B.C.E. From circa 300 to 63 B.C.E., Greek became the language of commerce, and Greek culture had a major influence on Judaism. In 63 B.C.E., the Roman Empire took control of Palestine.

Three religious sects had formed by the 1st century C.E.: Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes. Many anticipated the arrival of a Messiah who would drive the Roman invaders out and restore independence. Many mini-revolts led to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 C.E. Jews were scattered throughout the known world. Their religion was no longer centered in Jerusalem and they were prohibited from setting foot there. Judaism became decentralized and stopped seeking converts. The local synagogue became the new center of Jewish life, and authority shifted from the centralized priesthood to local scholars and teachers, giving rise to Rabbinic Judaism.

The period from the destruction of the temple onward gave rise to heavy persecution by Christians throughout Europe. The Christians held the Jews responsible for the execution of Jesus. In the 1930s and 1940s, Adolf Hitler and the German Nazi party drew on centuries of anti-Semitism (and upon their own psychotic beliefs in racial purity) when they organized the Holocaust, the attempted extermination of all Jews in Europe. About 6 million were killed in one

of the world's greatest examples of religious and racial intolerance.

The Zionist movement that started in the nineteenth century was one of the responses to persecution. Its initial goal was creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The state of Israel was formed on May 18, 1948 following the Second World War. Currently, there are about 18 million Jews throughout the world and approximately 7 million of them live in North America.

Jewish Texts

The Tanakh is composed of three groups of books:
• the Torah Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.
• the Nevi'im, the Prophetic books of Isaiah, Amos, etc.
• the Ketuvim, the "Writings" including Kings, Chronicles, etc.

The Talmud contains stories, laws, medical knowledge, debates about moral choices, etc. It is composed of the material that originates from two main sources:
• the Mishnah – 6 chapters containing a series of laws from the Hebrew Scriptures, arranged about 200 C.E.
• the Gemera (one Babylonian and one Palestinian) – an assembly of comments from hundreds of Rabbis from 200 - 500 C.E., along with a passage from the Mishnah.

Jewish Belief and Practice

• G-d is the creator and absolute ruler of the universe.
• Judaism affirms the inherent goodness of the world and its people as creations of G-d. Believers are able to sanctify their lives and draw closer to G-d by fulfilling mitzvot (divine commandments). No savior is needed as an intermediary.

• The Jews are G-d's chosen people.
• The Ten Commandments, as delineated in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuterotomy 5:6-21, form the core of Jewish practice.
• The need to follow the many dietary and other laws of the Torah.
• Boys reach the status of Bar Mitzvah (literally son of the commandment) on their 13th birthday; girls reach Bat Mitzvah (daughter of the commandment) on their 12th birthday. This means that they are recognized as adults and are personally responsible to follow the Jewish commandments and laws; they are allowed to lead a religious service; they are counted in a "minyan" (a quota necessary to perform certain parts of religious services); they can sign contracts; they can testify in religious courts; theoretically, they can marry, although the Talmud

recommends 18 to 24 as the proper age for marriage.

• Observation of the Sabbath (the day of rest), starting at sundown on Friday evening
• Strict religious discipline governs almost all areas of life
• Regular attendance at Synagogue
• Celebration of the annual festivals that include:
The Passover, which is held each Spring to recall their deliverance out of slavery in Egypt. A ritual Seder meal is eaten in each observing Jewish home at this time. Some Passover dates are: 1998 - 11th April, 1999 - 1st April, 2000 - 20th April ,
The 10 days from Rosh Hashanah (New Year) to Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) which are days of fasting and penitence. Some Rosh Hashanah dates are 1998 - 21 September, 1999 - 11th September, 2000 - 30tth Spetember
• Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies are commonly held to recognize the coming-of-age of a Jewish youth. Shortly after their birthday, (13th for a male; 12th for a female), they recite a blessing during a Saturday Shabbat service. In most cases, they might handle additional functions, like reading the assigned text from the Torah, or leading the congregation in prayer. etc.. They often make a speech which, by tradition, starts with "Today I am a man." The youth's father often recites a blessing in appreciation for no longer being burdened with the responsibility of his child's sins. Within Orthodox and Chasidic practice, women are not allowed to take leadership roles in religious services. For them, a Bat Mitzvah celebration is basically a party.

Jewish Sects

There are five main forms of Judaism in the world today:
• Conservative Judaism: This began in the mid-nineteenth century as a reaction against the Reform movement. It is a main-line movement midway between Reform and Orthodox.
• Humanistic Judaism: This is a small group, mainly composed of atheists and agnostics, who regard mankind as the measure of all things.
• Orthodox Judaism: This the oldest and most conservative form of Judaism. They attempt to observe their religion as close to its original forms as possible. They look upon every word in their sacred texts as being divinely inspired.
• Reconstructionist Judaism: This is a new liberal movement started by Mordecai Kaplan as an attempt to unify and revitalize the religion. They reject the concept that Jews are a uniquely favored and chosen people.
• Reform Judaism: A liberal group that follows the ethical laws of Judaism but leaves the decision whether to follow or ignore the dietary and other traditional laws to the individuals' discretion. They use modern forms of worship.

(Our thanks to the Religious Tolerance Organisation of Ontario for the Information on this page…)

Holy Days in Judaism

1. 1st of Tishri, Rosh Hashanah; "Head of the Year", The Jewish New Year, and the anniversary of the completion of creation.
2. 10th of Tishri ,Yom Kippur; "Day of Atonement", A day of fasting and praying which occurs 10 days after the first day of Rosh Hashanah. The holiest day in the year.
3. 15th of Tishri, Sukkot; "Season of our rejoicing; Feast of Tabernacles", The Feast of Booths is an 8 day harvest festival; a time of thanksgiving. This was considered the most important Jewish festival in 1st cent.
4. 25th of Kislev, Hanukkah, Chanukah; "Feast of Dedication", The Feast of Lights is an 8 day Feast of Dedication. It recalls the war fought by the Maccabees in the cause of religious freedom.
5. 14th of Adar, Purim; "Feast of Lots", The Feast of Lots recalls the defeat by Queen Esther of the plan to slaughter all of the Persian Jews, circa 400 BCE.
6. 15th Nissan, Pesach; "Passover" , The 8 day festival recalls the exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt circa 1300 BCE. A holiday meal, the Seder, is held at home.
7. 6th of Sivan; 50 days after Pesach, Shavouth; "Festival of Weeks", Pentacost (a.k.a. Feast of Weeks) recalls God's revelation of the Torah to the Jewish people.