

Comparative Religions

A Computer Database & Handbook

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SAMPLE ENTRY: JUDAISM

- Worldly Authorities (p. 1)
- Supernatural Beings/Powers (p. 5)
- Morality and Salvation (p. 6)
- Rituals (p. 9)
- Communities (p. 11)

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WORLDLY AUTHORITIES

Cultural Background

The roots of Judaism trace back to about the 20th Century B.C., in "Canaan" (in and around modern Israel and Lebanon).

Geographically, this has always been a land of dramatic contrasts—at the edge of the "endless" Mediterranean Sea, lush, fertile farmlands are "blessed" by the Jordan and other rivers, running down from rugged mountains "reaching to the heavens" and coursing through wilderness areas of harsh, "cursed," "trying" deserts.

Culturally, this area—at the crossroads of the Old World—had been influenced by Egyptians (and, through them, even sub-Saharan Africans), Hittites (an Indo-European people from modern-day Turkey and northern Syria), and

Semites (the ancestral race of both Jews and Arabs as well as of ancient Mesopotamians).

Even at this ancient time in Canaan, as throughout the "Fertile Crescent," there were well-established beliefs in divine law and justice, prophets, and the "cosmology" of the universe (as in the story of Noah and the many other awe-inspiring accounts of "The Flood"—this event, recorded by a variety of some of the world's very first written literature, was almost certainly a result of the melting of glaciers at end of the last Ice Age, ca. 7,000 years ago). As in most other areas of the world, religion was typically polytheistic; and ironically, the early Jewish people were probably polytheistic, too (with a supreme god eventually becoming worshiped as the one and only God).

Founder

The "Patriarch" [Founding Father] of the Jewish people was Abraham, who probably lived sometime in the 18th to 16th Centuries B.C. (Judaism is more than a religion—it is a culture, some might say a race, of people).

According to originally oral, eventually written Biblical stories, this Semitic man was born at Ur, one of the world's very first cities, in ancient Babylonia (where the Tigris and Euphrates

rivers come together).

With his father, Terah, he moved to Haran, in northern Mesopotamia. After the death of his father, Abram (as he was then known) was instructed by God to migrate to the land between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea, "Canaan" [in and around modern Israel and Lebanon], where he would build an altar to God at the town of Bethel.

Abram and his wife, Sarah, were childless and very old. So that they might leave an heir, Sarah gave Abram an Egyptian serving-maid, Hagar, who bore Abram a son, Ishmael (Such practices were not unusual, amongst those who could afford it, and not considered amoral in those days in that part of the world.). However, God promised Abram that he and Sarah would together be parents and that their ancestors would be more numerous than the stars in the sky: God changed his name from Abram [High Father] to Abraham [Father of Many Nations]. Although ridiculed by others for making this claim, Abraham and Sarah indeed "had the last laugh" (if you will): She bore him a son, whom they named Isaac [One Who Laughs] and whom God insisted was the true heir of Abraham.

Growing up with his thus favored half-brother, Ishmael became jealous; and Sarah had Abraham banish him and his mother to the desert, where God would save them with the miraculous gift of a spring. The descendants of the eventually 12 sons of Ishmael—also claiming Abraham as their Patriarch—would be many of the tribes of Arabs.

Having been promised and miraculously

delivered by God, Isaac was lavished with special attention by Abraham. However, God then instructed Abraham to make a human sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah. Despite his anguished reluctance, Abraham obeyed God's will and led the unknowing Isaac to the altar. At the last moment, with Abraham's dagger poised to strike, God miraculously provided an animal to sacrifice in Isaac's stead: Isaac's life was spared, Abraham's faith had been tested and found strong, and God's "Covenant" with Abraham was sealed—the heirs of Abraham, the Jewish people, would be the "Chosen People," with special blessings from and responsibilities to God.

Before he would die (at a biblically old age), Abraham would arrange for Isaac to be married to the kind Rebecca, from his native Mesopotamia; and Abraham would also successfully implore God to spare his innocent nephew Lot, captured by one of the four invading armies he had defeated, from the fiery destruction of the sinful cities of Sodom and Gommorah.

Sacred Writings

Sacred writings are especially important to the Jewish people: They believe that the will of God is for people to learn from the scriptures and apply their lessons. However, Jewish oral traditions would not be committed to writing until ca. 1000 B.C.—millennia after Noah, centuries after Abraham—during a period of considerable Jewish strength and at least temporary stability.

The Old Testament of the Christian Bible consists of the sometimes prophetic, often lyrical, usually historical, and always ethical and exquisitely literate writings of the ancient Hebrew Bible, whose first 5 books, the "Pentateuch," or "Five Books of Moses," or "Torah" (The generic term "torah" referring to all Jewish writings and oral traditions taken together.) are the most important writings in Judaism: They chronicle the ancestry, history, and laws of the Jewish people reputedly from the Creation of the World until the death of Moses, in the 13th Century B.C.

In addition, Orthodox and Conservative Judaism regard as sacred the "Talmud," containing Jewish ethics, law, history, and stories. The Talmud is composed of the "Mishnah" (considered traditionally as laws given to Moses, transmitted orally for centuries, and committed to writing by scholars ca. A.D. 200) and also the "Gemara" (interpretations written down in the 3rd through 5th Centuries A.D.).

Legacy of Leadership

The ultimate authority for the Jewish people has always been "The Covenant with God," promising to bestow upon them blessings as long as they are reverent and faithful to Him: As His "Chosen People," the Jews have not only special blessings from but also special responsibilities to God. The Covenant was originally made with Abraham, the Patriarch of the Jewish people, and re-confirmed with his son Isaac and Isaac's son Jacob, who (after reconciling with his twin brother, Esau, whom he had cheated out of his birthright) would come

to be known as "Israel."

The families of the 12 sons of Israel became the 12 Tribes of Israel, the Hebrew people. Jacob's favorite son, Joseph, was sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous half-brothers. However, he eventually gained the favor of Pharaoh for his interpretation of dreams, which would accurately predict an upcoming famine. During the famine, Joseph reunited his family with him in Egypt, whose grain reserves he had been charged by Pharaoh to fill during the good years. At first free and respected, the "House of Israel" would eventually suffer the fate of bondage, enslaved by the Egyptians to help build magnificent stone temples and monuments.

Generations later, the promised deliverer, Moses, led the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt through warfare and other hardships in the wilderness and eventually back to the "Promised Land," of Canaan (Historically, this "Exodus" may have occurred over decades or even centuries, in or about the 13th Century B.C.).

Shortly after gaining their freedom, Moses had given the Israelites laws from God, from high atop Mount Sinai: These included not only "The Ten Commandments" but also many, detailed dietary and other ritual rules—the "Mosaic" law of the Jewish people.

For centuries, the Israelites would be at war with other peoples, all fighting for the limited fertile lands in the region; and their unity, under such "Judges" as Deborah and Samson, would be sorely tested.

Eventually, ca. 1000 B.C., the 12 tribes of Israel would unite under one king, Saul, whose more able successor, David, would conquer the city of Jerusalem and make it the capital of the ancient nation of Israel. The famously wise and wealthy, yet headstrong son of David, Solomon, would have the First Temple built in Jerusalem.

However, the kingdom would soon be divided by religious and political turmoil into the northern kingdom of Israel, consisting of 10 tribes, and the southern kingdom of Judah, consisting of 2 tribes. By the 9th and 8th Centuries B.C., there arose an unjust distribution of wealth, with most Jews poor. During these trying times, Isaiah and other Prophets preached social morality; the unity of all peoples under one God; the dire consequences of not remembering God's word; and a hope for future peace, as through a "Messiah" from God.

In the subsequent centuries, the divided Israelites would be conquered by Assyrians, Babylonians, Alexander the Great, Syrians, and Romans; and although some of their number would be reunited—as after the Persians freed them from their Babylonian Captivity in 538 B.C. or when Judas Maccabaeus led the Jews to victory over the superior forces of the Syrians in 165 B.C.—the Jewish people would become dispersed (in a "diaspora") throughout the Western world, virtually always condemned to the fate of a minority people wherever they settled. By the Middle Ages, Jews were often confined to "ghettos" and often prohibited by the law of the Christian authorities to engage in any occupation but money-lending, which the New Testament condemned but the local economies

required.

After having lost their independent nation-state, the Jews would find leadership often in their religious, philosophical, literary, and scientific scholars. Jewish schools developed in Palestine and Babylonia in the first few centuries A.D. Jewish scholars helped keep alive much classical knowledge from ancient civilizations during the Dark Ages of Medieval Europe, thus helping make possible the eventual Renaissance of Western civilization. The "Golden Age of Spain," ca. A.D. 1000 to 1300, owed much to Jewish scholasticism (However, in gaining independence from the Muslim Moors in the late 15th Century, Spanish Christians used the Inquisition to persecute all "non-conformers," including Jews, many of whom were forced to flee or to convert, or at least feign conversion, to Christianity.).

As culminations of the Age of Reason, the American and French Revolutions helped promote ideas of freedom of religion and equal justice under law; and with such input as by the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, Jews would win rights to full citizenship in many of the new democracies in the Western world. Indeed, in the late 19th Century, Jewish culture flourished, in the "Haskalah" [enlightenment].

However, in Russia and Poland (where "Hasidism" had arisen in the 18th Century as a joyous counterpoint to previous oppressions), organized "pogroms" persecuted countless Jews in the 19th Century.

And in the 1930s, Adolph Hitler and his Nazi

fascists would convince the majority of Germans that many or most of their dire economic problems—actually the result of the enormous war reparations for World War I and the worldwide effects of the Great Depression—were the fault of the Jews (perhaps because of this minority group's medieval tradition of money-lending, as mentioned above, although the exact reasons for the national madness of Nazism are beyond comprehension, let alone rationalization): By the end of World War II, the Nazi Holocaust had methodically murdered about 6 million of the 10 million Jews who had lived in Europe.

With no nation of their own since ancient times and now with little organization left in Europe, the Jewish people in 1947 were guaranteed by the United Nations a state of their own back in Palestine; and the next year, the "Zionist" movement, dating back to 1897, fulfilled its dream, of a modern State of Israel.

Despite conflicting claims—ancient and modern—to particular tracts of land by both Jews and Arabs and the subsequent constant state of tension and outright warfare that has existed, Israel has become a prosperous, democratic homeland for virtually any of the world's Jews in need of a haven or just fellowship; and its political leadership is often a reflection of the often-changing, conservative to liberal religious leadership of Judaism.

Although there is no single leader of the Jewish people, many Jews still wait for the promised Messiah and a newly glorious Israel.

SUPERNATURAL BEINGS/POWERS

The Immortal Aspect of Mortals

Although later Jewish scholars, especially after contact with the ancient Greeks, thought of the soul as separate from the body, traditional Hebrew theology considered the body and soul as one.

Judaism teaches belief in an afterlife, with good souls going to Heaven and evil souls, to Hell. However, Heaven is elucidated more fully than Hell; and Jewish morality is more concerned with doing right for the sake of doing God's will than for the sake of some reward or punishment in an afterlife.

Deities and Other Immortals

Like other peoples in the ancient Middle East, the first Hebrews were probably polytheistic, although probably worshiping one god as superior to all others. However, according to the sacred literature (committed to writing, from oral traditions, ca. 1000 B.C.), the Hebrew people were always monotheistic; and indeed, Judaism was the first major religion in the world to express faith in the existence of just one, supreme God. Historically, strict Jewish monotheism (especially amongst the common folk) probably did not come about until ca. 600 B.C., after the urging of the great Prophets, who said that the God of Israel was not only one but also the God of all mankind—another first for at least a Western religion (This universal "brotherhood," as children of one God, forms the basis for the ancient Jewish recognition of

inalienable human rights—another historical first, for political as well as religious theory.).

Regardless, Judaism concentrates more on understanding God's law than trying (in vain) to understand the nature of God himself. Although in the first book of the Torah, Genesis, man is said to be created in the "image" of God, it is not clear whether this refers to a material or spiritual image (although a male, fatherly image has typically been invoked for God, beginning in the ancient, patriarchal society). Indeed, a traditional Hebrew name for God (other than the Biblical term "Elohim") is "YHWH" ["Yahweh"], or "JHVH" ["Jehovah"]: These letters, by actually spelling nothing, mean "nameless" (although a lack of vowels was typical of writings in ancient Semitic languages)—that is, not even the name of God is comprehensible to, let alone pronounceable by, us mere mortals. Perhaps most telling, God is said to refer to Himself as simply "I am" or "I am that I am": Reminiscent of Eastern religions, Judaism might be said to consider the Creator of the Universe as the ultimate reality of the Universe—omniscient, omnipresent.

The Universe and the Realm of the Supernatural

According to Judaism, God is the Creator of the Universe.

Early Hebrew thought considered Heaven as but the home of God: After death, all man-souls (body and spirit inextricably united)—both good and evil—went to sleep in the underworld of "Sheol," neither a punishment nor a reward.

However, after contact with the ancient Greeks, Jews came to think of Heaven as the home not only for God but also for the souls of the good in an afterlife, before their eventual resurrection—accompanied by their bodies—in a God-ruled paradise on Earth, or re-created Earth.

Although modern Judaism also teaches that the souls of evil-doers go to Hell, this "Gehenna" is even less well elucidated than Heaven: Suffice it to say, this is a realm of damnation and torment.

Overall, Jewish thought is more concerned with doing right for the sake of doing God's will than for the sake of achieving some reward or punishment for oneself in an afterlife.

MORALITY AND SALVATION

Morality

Judaism concentrates primarily on God's law [the torah]—as embodied by written and oral traditions—even more so than on the nature of God Himself (although His very existence, as the sole Supreme Being, is key to Jewish morality). The Covenant God made with his faithful servant Abraham, the Hebrew Patriarch, established the Jews as His "Chosen People"—special not only in the sense of being the first people to worship Him and only Him but also in the sense of being held to a higher standard of conduct than other people, to set a shining example in the world of how God expects us to worship Him and treat others.

From atop the awesome Mount Sinai, the lawgiver Moses received from God "The Ten

Commandments," written on 2 stone tablets (later destroyed by Moses, during a rage over the people's sinfulness during his absence on the mountaintop, but later restored by God and carried in the "Ark of the Covenant," eventually deposited in the Temple at Jerusalem). The original version of The Ten Commandments, translated from the ancient Hebrew language, was most likely the following:

"I. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

"II. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

"III. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

"IV. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

"V. Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

"VI. Thou shalt not kill.

"VII. Thou shalt not commit adultery.

"VIII. Thou shalt not steal.

"IX. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

"X. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor's."

Also according to tradition, the Israelites received from Mount Sinai the "Mosaic Law," filled with details of codified law and typically "eye for an eye" punishments (including capital punishment, by stoning, for such offenses as adultery or blasphemy) as well as various rituals (as concerning cleanliness): The 12 Tribes of Israel, although at this and later points stateless, have ever since in effect been one nation, under one rule of law (the consequence of being under one and only one God).

The social conscience at the heart of Jewish culture extends beyond the Jewish people, however. Since the trying time of the Prophets, Judaism has taught that we are all children of the same, one God, made in His image (at least spiritually), and thus we are all entitled to be treated with equal respect and justice.

Consequently, Judaism has been marked by a

tendency towards religious tolerance and away from missionary zeal. In addition, the Jewish concept of "universal brotherhood" laid the foundation for the concept of universal human rights to be found in such secular belief systems as the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights. Ironically, the Jewish peoples themselves, almost always a minority group wherever they settled, have been the subjects of the most offensive acts of intolerance, violent and otherwise, since the troubled time of the Prophets through the Nazi Holocaust.

One more concept central to Judaism and consequently Western —and arguably world—civilization is that of free will: Individual people as well as entire peoples have the freedom to choose good—that is, the will of God—over evil—disobedience to God. This has been a moral of countless Biblical stories, starting with Adam and Eve.

Judgment

Although Mosaic Law prescribes various punishments to be meted out by religious leaders for violators of the law and although various Jewish leaders, such as the ancient "Judges," have enforced such disciplines strictly, the ultimate judge of our actions according to Judaism is God Almighty—all knowing, all just, all powerful.

Forgiveness is possible, according to Biblical stories, if repentance is sincere—typically after a period of soul-searching trials. Mercy is a Jewish ideal.

Finally, it must be remembered that as His "Chosen People," the Jews can expect blessings from God if and only if they uphold the higher standards He expects of them.

Worldly Rewards and Punishments

The worldly consequences of Jewish morality are a society of learning, justice, tolerance, and mercy for all peoples, although enforced by strict disciplines, especially for the "Chosen People."

Although modern Judaism professes belief in a system of rewards and punishments in an afterlife, Jewish morality is more concerned with doing right for the sake of doing God's will than for the sake of some otherworldly consequences. Therein, however, lies a philosophical controversy: If God has promised blessings for His faithful and the concept of an afterlife is not all-important (Indeed, before contact with the ancient Greeks, the Hebrews thought of death as simply a sleep.), does that not mean that those who suffer during life are being punished for their sins? Perhaps. However, as beautifully elucidated in the story of Job and horrendously demonstrated by the Nazi Holocaust, "bad things do happen to good people" (to paraphrase a modern book): Oppressions should be considered as tests of faith, often simply the consequence of others exercising their free will wrongfully. In the end, it is perhaps the fate of the entire Jewish people—and, by extension, the fate of all God's children—that is to be considered most important: This would help explain how God's "delay" in answering the prayers of generations of Hebrew slaves in Egypt could be taken as something other than a sign of

God's displeasure with the Hebrews, despite untold suffering by individuals—in the end, God did set His entire people free.

Finally, some Jews today look for the coming of a Messiah and/or a "Messianic Kingdom," a worldly paradise (perhaps of a re-created Earth) in which the Jewish people will unite to triumph over their enemies and, with God's blessings, establish lasting peace and justice for all peoples.

Otherworldly Rewards and Punishments

Jewish morality is more concerned with doing right for the sake of doing God's will than for the sake of some otherworldly rewards or punishments. However, Judaism has developed a coherent metaphysics.

Early Hebrew thought considered Heaven as but the home of God: After death, all man-souls (body and spirit inextricably linked together)—both good and evil—went to sleep in the neutral underworld of "Sheol." However, after contact with the ancient Greeks, Jews came to think of Heaven as the home not only for God but also for the souls of the good in an afterlife, before their eventual resurrection—accompanied by their bodies—in a God-ruled paradise on Earth, or re-created Earth, after the coming of a "Messiah" [Anointed One] (Some Jews believe such a "Messianic Kingdom" will come without the appearance of an individual Messiah, as leader.).

In addition, since contact with classic Greek traditions, Judaism has held that evil souls go to the hell of "Gehenna," a poorly elucidated realm

of damnation and torment.

RITUALS

Sacred Symbols/Objects/Places

The symbol of Judaism is the 6-pointed "Star of David" (a.k.a. the "Magen David" [Shield of David]), formed from 2 interwoven triangles.

Each Jewish community has its own "synagogue," often called a "temple," for worship services and sometimes schooling and socializing. Within the "sanctuary" of the synagogue, there is an "ark" [a chest containing the scrolls of the Torah], an "eternal light" [an oil lamp burning as a reminder of everlasting God], a "menorah" [a multi-headed candlestick], and a tablet with the first 2 Hebrew words of each of the Ten Commandments.

Frequent Rituals

"Orthodox Judaism," as the most traditional and strict sect, obeys to the letter the ancient Mosaic Law, which they believe to have been given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai (For example, Orthodox men always wear "yarmulke" skull caps, in deference to the Lord above.). "Reform Judaism" is characterized by an emphasis on ethics rather than on ritual; and "Conservative Judaism" is something of a compromise between the Orthodox and Reform sects.

"Kosher" [ritually correct] foods are those in keeping with the ancient dietary laws: Pork or shellfish are not kosher, nor are meals with both meat and milk, nor is meat that is from animals

not slaughtered (ritually) humanely. Orthodox Jews obey these Biblical laws strictly, and other Jews often obey them traditionally. From a practical standpoint, many of the dietary and other Mosaic laws, especially concerning cleanliness, have undoubtedly served as beneficial codes of public health, especially in ancient times (well before formal microbiological theory).

The "Sabbath" is the traditional day of rest, family, and worship—it is the seventh day of the week according to the Hebrew calendar (starting Friday at sundown and lasting until Saturday at nightfall). Orthodox Jews observe the Sabbath strictly, as by not working, carrying money, or even traveling.

Rituals performed in a Jewish home include saying daily prayers (three times a day for Orthodox Jews); observing the Sabbath, as by lighting candles and blessing wine and bread; and celebrating holidays, typically family affairs.

Reform Jews usually meet for services in the community synagogue only on the Sabbath and holidays, whereas the other sects meet in their synagogues daily.

Services in a synagogue are led by any male over 12 years old or, in most Conservative and Reform synagogues, by any woman. The congregation typically faces off towards Jerusalem. Wisdom is read from the Torah, and prayers are chanted from the "siddur." Orthodox men and women sit separately and chant mostly in Hebrew, but Conservative and Reform men and women sit together and chant much if not mostly in their everyday language. In

Conservative and Reform synagogues, a specially trained "cantor" chants prayers and may also lead a choir; and before or after the service, the cantor may teach classes. However, the main teacher of a synagogue, providing spiritual guidance and sometimes giving sermons in Conservative and Reform synagogues, is the well-educated "rabbi" [teacher].

Occasional Rituals

8-day-old boys are ritually circumcised—symbolizing God's Covenant with Abraham, who first performed this hygienic practice.

The rite of passage into adulthood is the "bar mitzvah," for 13-year-old boys. Additionally, in some Conservative and Reform congregations, there is a "bat (or bas) mitzvah" for girls becoming women.

A Jewish marriage is performed under a "huppa" canopy (and can later be dissolved by divorce).

Jewish rituals for death involve a quick burial, a week of "Shiva" mourning for the family (with a prayer for God but not of death), and annual memorials.

Jewish holidays are celebrated in both the home and the synagogue, as both family and community occasions.

The High Holidays of Judaism are "Rosh Ha-Shanah" and "Yom Kippur," both celebrated during "Tishri," the first month in the ancient Hebrew calendar (typically in September or October).

For Rosh Ha-Shanah, a ram's horn is sounded, ushering in the New Year of the Jewish calendar, commemorating the creation of the world by Almighty God, and reminding people of their behavior in the past year—for which they are judged.

After Ten Days of Penitence, beginning with Rosh Ha-Shanah, there is Yom Kippur: For this Day of Atonement, Jews fast and (especially in synagogue) apologize to God for their sins of the previous year and pledge to God to be good in the new year.

The "Pilgrim Festivals" (so named because of the ancient tradition of making pilgrimages to Jerusalem during these holidays) commemorate the Exodus of Jews from slavery in Egypt to freedom in Canaan: "Passover," or "Pesah," celebrated at home with the "Seder" feast, commemorates the passing over of the Jews from slavery in Egypt; "Shavuot," or "Pentecost," commemorates Moses receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai; and "Sukkot," the harvest festival, commemorates (via dinners in huts built within the home) the wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness before entering the "Land Flowing with Milk and Honey."

Amongst the other Jewish holidays are "Hanukkah" [the Feast of Lights], commemorating the ancient triumph over the intolerant Syrians. One by one, day by day, candles are lit in the Hanukkah "menorah" [branched candlestick].

With readings from the Book of Esther, "Purim" commemorates the escape of Jews from danger

in Persia.

COMMUNITIES

Distribution

Judaism is more than a religion—it is a culture, some might say a race, of people. Judaism does welcome converts to their faith, from all races of God's children, although undoubtedly as a consequence of being a minority group wherever they have settled, the Jewish people have not developed missionary activities—their communities have tended to keep to themselves whenever possible.

Although scattered throughout the world, the major communities of Jewish people are in North America (especially in the cities on the East and West Coasts of the U.S.), Europe (despite the Nazi Holocaust), the Middle East, and Africa (In particular, the East African nation of Ethiopia has been home to many black Jews since at least the time of Solomon, legendary father—via the Queen of Sheba—of an ancient king of Ethiopia.).

The modern State of Israel is the world's only nation with a population consisting of a Jewish majority—it thus serves as a haven for refugees from religious or racial persecution (and from war and famine, as in modern Ethiopia).

By virtue of its first stating the principles of universal human rights, by virtue of its scholars helping to maintain the ancient classics through the Dark Ages of Medieval Europe, and by virtue of many of its notables subsequently adding

much on their own to the arts and sciences, Judaism has profoundly influenced Western—and undoubtedly world—civilization down through the millennia.

Social Order

Although stressing the "universal brotherhood" of people as children of the one God, Judaism is organized on a local basis, with no international leader or governing body. This has been the case ever since the 12 tribes of ancient Israel were divided and conquered, their descendants scattered throughout the Western world.

The center of each Jewish community is its "synagogue," often called a "temple." Here Jews periodically gather for worship services and, in some cases, for schooling and socializing.

The spiritual leader of a synagogue is the "rabbi" [teacher], who provides not only teaching for youngsters but also guidance for Jews of all ages. In order to acquire their familiarity with the complexities of Judaism and the rich traditions of ancient Jewish culture—as well as much information from other fields of knowledge—rabbis are trained in special colleges/seminaries, run by the various sects of Judaism.

Special training, in song as well as theology, is given to "cantors," who chant prayers, sometimes lead choirs, and teach classes in Conservative and Reform synagogues.

Sects

Although clearly independent religions,

Christianity and Islam evolved mainly from Judaism.

The three major branches of modern Judaism are "Orthodox," "Reform," and "Conservative" Judaism.

Orthodox Judaism is the most traditional and strict sect. Its members pray three times every day and observe to the letter the Mosaic Laws, as governing diet and observance of the Sabbath, as well as the interpretations of Biblical law gathered together in the Talmud. Orthodox men are always seen wearing "yarmulke" skull caps, in deference to the Lord above.

Reform Judaism was founded in the early 19th Century by Jews who placed more faith in the Hebrew Bible than in the much later Talmud, which they consider a scholarly work but not a divine revelation. Reform Judaism is characterized by an emphasis on ethics rather than on ritual.

Conservative Judaism arose in the mid 19th Century as something of a compromise between the other, often feuding sects. Conservative Jews do respect the authority of both the Torah and the Talmud; but they look at the ancient writings from a modern point of view and do not perform all the traditional rituals.