

Judaism Fundamentals

By [Rabbi Joel Goldstein](#), Syracuse Hillel Chaplain

What is Judaism?

Judaism can be cultural or ethnic, something that you inherit from your parents or are born into. It is also something that you can convert into as a religion which is evidenced by a series of beliefs and practices, however, these beliefs and practices are not standard and can change based upon the type of Jew. Generally, most Jews are **Rabbinic** who follow a certain interpretation of the Jewish bible (also referred to as the Old Testament by Christians). There are Jews who are not Rabbinic as well, but they are much smaller groups.

What are core beliefs and practices of Judaism?

Judaism is evidenced through a variety of beliefs and practices, which differ among the various Jewish groups. At its core, Jews believe in monotheism, that there is one single God. There are many ways that Jews practice their faith:

- **Sabbath** (also known as Shabbat) – the recognition of the Sabbath, a 25-hour period of rest on Saturday, the seventh day of the week. Traditionally, there are 39 categories of work that Jews are to refrain from mostly tied to making food, clothing, or a house.
- **Passover** – held in the spring, the recognition of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt where they were enslaved.
- **Shavuot** – a celebration of the giving of the Torah (the first five books that were delivered to the prophet Moses).
- **Sukkot** – a recognition of the end of harvest as well as the time that the Jews sat in booths in the desert on their way to Israel.
- **Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur** – the celebrations of the new year and the Day of Atonement, both which are times of forgiveness and repentance. Yom Kippur is accompanied by a 25 hour fast from food and water that is recognized by most Jews.

What is the difference between Judaism and Christianity?

Judaism is a religion of the **Jewish bible**; which Christians refer to as the Old Testament. Conversely, Christianity focuses on the New Testament of the bible in a supersession manner. Many early Christians were Jews who believed in Jesus. As Jesus' disciple Paul further built out Christianity the distinctions between it and Judaism were formed.

What race are Jews?

Most Jews originated in the Middle East and then migrated to other areas of the world. The majority of Jews in the United States are white due to their European origins. There are also Jews that are of African descent including Ethiopia and Central Africa.

How does a Jewish person dress?

Most Jews dress like everyone else. Some male Jews wear head dresses such as a yarmulke, these can vary in look and size based on region. Ultra-Orthodox Jews who have essentially frozen time in the 19th century of Europe also dress from that timeframe.

What is kosher?

Kosher is a large set of dietary practices that Jews adhere to such as not eating any mammal that does not have split hooves and chews its cud, per instructions in the Jewish bible. Kosher meat must also be prepared in a particular way; all animals are killed in a specific manner that is reminiscent of the way animals were given as a sacrifice to the temple that once stood in Jerusalem. Also, per the Jewish bible, Jews also do not eat milk and meat together (note: fish is not considered meat).

What is Anti-Semitism?

Anti-Semitism is prejudice or hatred toward Jews. This hatred is due to a variety of reasons such as Jews being the antithesis of Christianity in Europe and being seen as the killers of Jesus. In addition, European anti-Semitism has been tied to the fact that Jews simply have different cultural and religious practices than other people and are therefore seen as outsiders, which lends to prejudice and hatred. A rise in anti-Semitism occurred in Muslim countries in the mid-20th century related to the founding of the state of Israel.

To-date, the most significant outcome of anti-Semitism has been the Holocaust, a Jewish genocide that was led by Adolf Hitler in Germany during World War II. According to the University's Jewish rabbi, Joel Goldstein, Germany was the culmination of thousands of years of anti-Semitism, combined with modern technology, and the rise of nationalism. Hitler was the first person to say that he wanted to kill all the Jews and put it into action killing millions including three million Jews in Poland alone.

What is Zionism?

Primarily, **Zionism** is the result of the understanding Jews have that they will be hated everywhere and therefore, they should create a state for themselves in their traditional land of origin, Israel. Some oppose the idea of Zionism on anti-Semitic grounds, although not all criticism of Israel is necessarily anti-Semitic or anti-Zionist.