

Are You Curious?
34 answers to questions often asked about Judaism

CUSTOMS

- 1 Why is Shabbat on Saturday?
- 2 What don't we call it "Old Testament"?
- 3 Why don't Jews eat pork?
- 4 Why do Jews bury their dead so quickly?
- 5 Is it a synagogue or temple?

CONCEPTS

- 6 Do Jews believe in immortality?
- 7 What is Reform, Conservative and Orthodox?
- 8 What does the word Rabbi mean?
- 9 Is Judaism a race or nationality?
- 10 What does "The Chosen People" mean?

CEREMONIES AND SYMBOLS

- 11 What is Bar/Bat Mitzvah?
- 12 What is a Bris?
- 13 What is Confirmation?
- 14 What is the Star of David?
- 15 What is a Mezuzah?

CHRISTIANITY

- 16 Do Jews believe in Jesus?
- 17 Who killed Jesus?
- 18 Is Jesus in the Jewish Bible?
- 19 What do Jews believe about the Messiah?
- 20 Do Jews observe Christmas?

CONVERSION

- 21 Is Judaism a missionary movement?
- 22 Do Jews accept intermarriage?
- 23 Are there many converts?
- 24 How does one convert to Judaism?
- 25 Is the convert accepted?

LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE

- 26 What is the Jewish Bible?
- 27 What is the Talmud?
- 28 Do all Jews speak Hebrew?
- 29 Why is Hebrew written from left to right?
- 30 Is Yiddish the same as Hebrew?

ISRAEL

- 31 Are all Jews citizens of Israel?
- 32 What is Zionism?
- 33 Is Israel like a Jewish Vatican?
- 34 How large is Israel?

1) WHY IS SHABBAT (Weekly Sabbath) ON SATURDAY?

The Jewish Sabbath follows the Biblical account of creation which tells that after six days, God rested on the seventh day. The word “sabbath” or *Shabbat* in Hebrew is related both to the root “rest” and the root “cease”, and may also be the source of the Hebrew number *sheva* or seven. Sunday has never been the Sabbath, always regarded as the first day of the week, confirming Saturday as the Sabbath. We see this identification as early as the New Testament (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1), and as often as every wall calendar.

2) WHY DON'T WE CALL IT “OLD TESTAMENT”?

When Jews speak of the Bible or Hebrew Scriptures, referring to the 39 books which Christians call the Old Testament, we often use the Hebrew acronym *Tanach* for **T**orah, *N'vee-eem*/Prophets, *K'tuveem*/Writings. We do not use the term “Old” Testament because it implies that a newer, better or more authentic scripture follows it, which of course Jews do not believe. (for more, see question # 26)

3) WHY DON'T JEWS EAT PORK?

Pork and shellfish fall into the category of prohibited foods according to the dietary laws of Leviticus chapter 11. These dietary laws are accepted as binding by traditional Jews. While a great number of Reform Jews abstain from these and other prohibited foods, the Reform Movement makes no statement concerning the dietary laws.

4) WHY DO JEWS BURY THEIR DEAD SO QUICKLY?

The custom developed in antiquity that burials should take place as soon as practically possible for reasons of sanitation. This custom has continued in Judaism in order to minimize the amount of suffering born by the mourners. We do not share the view that delaying a funeral increases the honor shown to the dead.

5) IS IT A SYNAGOGUE OR A TEMPLE?

The term “synagogue” (Greek for house of gathering) and “temple” are used interchangeably. The Hebrew identification *Beit K'nesset* means house of assembly. The term “church” is never used to signify a Jewish house of worship.

6) DO JEWS BELIEVE IN IMMORTALITY?

The concept of immortality has varied from one period to another. Also, the specifics of definition vary from one branch of Judaism to another. Nevertheless, Judaism has affirmed some kind of immortality since the 2nd C BCE. Orthodoxy expects the bodily resurrection of the dead with the coming of the Messiah. Reform Judaism does not affirm this belief. It looks upon immortality as the eternal existence of the soul which God has created. Living in the memories of friends and family, and remembered in deeds of righteousness and lovingkindness, our dead continue to live with us and within us.

7) WHAT IS REFORM, CONSERVATIVE AND ORTHODOX?

The basic difference between Reform Judaism and Orthodox Judaism has to do with our views of *halachah* (traditional Jewish law) and change. Orthodox Judaism adheres strictly to *halachah*, believing it to be of Divine origin and therefore eternally binding. Reform believes that *halachah* is a human creation and therefore subject to interpretation. Orthodoxy maintains that all of Judaism, as portrayed in Rabbinic texts, is unchanging. Reform Judaism maintains that certain aspects of Judaism are eternal, such as love for God and respect for one's neighbor. Reform affirms, however, that there are many religious ideas and practices which are and should be changed to meet contemporary needs.

8) WHAT DOES THE WORD ‘RABBI’ MEAN?

Originally as the term developed in the 2nd C, it was a title meaning “my teacher”. For most of Judaism today, it is an earned degree stating that one is capable of performing tasks necessary to lead a congregation.

9) IS JUDAISM A RACE OR A NATIONALITY?

Judaism is not a race. The word “semitic” cannot be correctly used to distinguish a race of humans. It may only be used to distinguish a group of languages. In much the same way that the Romance languages are related to each other through Latin. So too, the Semitic languages: Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, etc are related to one another. Judaism is also not a nationality. Nationality refers to the country of one's civil allegiance. It sometimes is used to refer to the land of one's birth or origin. In none of these cases can Judaism be called a nationality. Judaism is not entirely a religion. To define Judaism as a religion would be to leave several important factors out of the picture. Judaism began with a specific group of people who at one time constituted a nationality. When the first nation of Israel ceased to exist in the 6th C. BCE., the people continued to be connected by many ties that are not directly related to religion, but which are related to a people. Thus, in Judaism we find that in addition to the religious aspirations which constitute the primary focus of our existence, there is also a common religious language, a common literature, a common history of a people, and a common folklore and social mores. Among the latter, for instance, would be a Jewish cookbook. A cookbook, while unthinkable for a

religion is appropriate for a people. Judaism also has a prayerbook, which while unthinkable for a people, is appropriate for a religion. Judaism may properly be called a religious heritage, or a religious family.

10) WHAT DOES “THE CHOSEN PEOPLE” MEAN?

Hebrew Scripture speaks of a Covenant between God and the descendants of Abraham. The terms of the Covenant place responsibility upon the Jewish People to observe the *mitzvot* (Commandments) established by God. In this way the Jews become a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6) toward the ultimate goal of realizing the kingdom of God on earth. No special rewards follow from this responsibility except that God shall then be recognized, and God's will accomplished by the establishment of universal fellowship, justice and peace. (“On that Day the Lord shall be One and His Name shall be One” Zechariah 14:9)

11) WHAT IS BAR/BAT MITZVAH?

The *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony (a boy becomes “Bar” Mitzvah and a girl becomes “Bat” Mitzvah) has its roots in the 15th C as a ritual occasion declaring a 13 year old boy to be a formal and legal adult. Fully responsible for himself, the “adult” was required to observe religious law with the rest of the community. As a *bar/son* of the *mitzvah/commandment*, the newly responsible Jew would lead the worship service of the congregation, demonstrating his scholarship by reading or chanting from that week's prescribed passages from the Torah and the Prophets. Today, we celebrate with our families the occasion of *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* as a passage point which, while no longer “making one” an adult, at least is the beginning of the process by which an adolescent will soon become an adult.

12) WHAT IS A BRIS?

Bris (sometimes called a *b'rit*) means “covenant”. It is the ceremony that takes place on the eighth day after a boy's birth. It involves circumcision as a sign of the infant's initiation into the responsibilities of a “Covenanted People”.

13) WHAT IS CONFIRMATION?

Confirmation is the ceremony which takes place during the Festival of *Shavuot* (Weeks). On that day boys and girls who have completed part of their Religious School training confirm themselves in the faith of Israel. The ceremony is a symbolic reenactment of the Biblical moment when the Israelites stood at the foot of Sinai and said “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” (Exodus 19:8)

14) WHAT IS THE STAR OF DAVID?

The Star of David, in Hebrew *magen david* or shield of David) is a six-pointed star. Its origin is not known, although it appears in the ruins of the 3rd C CE. Capernaum (*K'far Nachum* or Nachum's Village) Synagogue, next to a five-pointed star. It is not until the 17th C., in Prague, that the Star of David becomes an emblem of the Jewish community, and it's only since the 19th C. that the *magen david* became widely known and universally used by Jews. Legend has it that this was King David's personal symbol, appearing on his flag and shield. In this explanation, it came to stand for his reign and his united kingdom, transcending the man himself. Since David's kingdom is seen historically as the one time when the Jews were truly united geographically, economically, socially, and religiously--the symbol of that kingdom came to represent the people's hope that it may one day come again. Though most people assume that the Star of David is the symbol of Judaism, the authentic symbol is the seven-branched candelabra called the *menorah*.

15) WHAT IS A MEZUZAH?

A *mezuzah* is a container within which is a piece of parchment. On it are written passages from the Book of Deuteronomy (6:4-9 and 11:13-20). These passages assert the unity of God and remind the Jew to love God with all one's heart, soul and might. The *mezuzah* is attached to the upper right-hand doorpost of one's house.

16) DO JEWS BELIEVE IN JESUS?

Jews accept the existence of the historical Jesus and would affirm most of his Gospel sayings as part of the fabric of 1st C Judaism. Jesus was some kind of a Jewish leader, a threat to the Romans who executed him. He did not fulfill the expectations of those Jews who were waiting for a Messianic Redemption. Jews do not accept the titles of Christ or Messiah that are given him, believing Jesus to be one of thousands of Jews executed by the Romans.

17) WHO KILLED JESUS?

This can be answered on many levels. According to Christian theology Jesus was executed as part of God's divine plan, with Pontius Pilate an unwitting instrument of God's will. Historically the facts are as follows: Jesus was in disfavor among some of the Jewish leadership of Judea, perhaps because of his religious radicalism. The Jewish court neither sentenced him to death nor urged his execution. The Jewish leaders lived in fear and dread of Pilate whose rule was vicious and cruel, and simply had no ability to urge upon the Romans toward any course of action. Jesus was executed by the Roman authorities because Pilate believed him to a political threat.

18) IS JESUS IN THE JEWISH BIBLE?

No. We understand the teachings of the prophets in their historical context. We do not believe that their words can be reinterpreted to point to events in the distant future or to support beliefs that are in conflict with the Judaism of their own time. The passages in Isaiah, for instance, which are usually construed as prophecies for the coming of Jesus are not so understood by us. For instance, the meaning of Isaiah 7:14 referring to a child born of a young woman (the Hebrew does not mean “virgin”) is a prophecy or warning that the king of Judea should not involve himself with foreign military alliances, and that the kings who so frightened him would cease to be a threat within a relatively short period of time (ie. the years of infancy of the child soon to be born.) The so called “suffering servant” poems of Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 51:12; and 52:13 specifically state that the God’s “suffering servant” is the nation of Israel itself.

19) WHAT DO JEWS BELIEVE ABOUT THE MESSIAH?

Orthodoxy looks forward to the coming of a person who will be the Messiah. It should be understood, however, that this Messiah which is the object of their prayers is not a divine “Son of God” as understood in Christianity. The expected Jewish Messiah is human, and his presence will welcome the “Day of the Lord.” Reform Judaism has no doctrine concerning the Messiah or his arrival, but looks instead to the coming of the “Day of the Lord” as a process in which we may all participate as messianic messengers of God. This longed-for messianic age will be one of universal peace and fellowship in which all of humankind will benefit.

20) DO JEWS OBSERVE CHRISTMAS?

Jews do not observe Christmas. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus. It might be helpful to remember that Jews think of Jesus in much the same way as Christians think of Muhammad, the founder of Islam.

21) IS JUDAISM A MISSIONARY MOVEMENT?

No. Judaism does not assume that salvation can be found only through Judaism. Judaism hopes that each person is true to his or her own religion, rather than be urged (or forced) to join another.

22) DO JEWS ACCEPT INTERMARRIAGE?

By intermarriage we mean the marriage of people of different religions. Judaism, along with Christianity, disapproves of intermarriage. Judaism disapproves because it can have a negative impact on Jewish survival and because it fears that the couple, failing to resolve the problem of family religious identity and the religious education of their children, may unfairly transfer that problem onto the shoulders of their children. I have always encouraged mixed-married couples to thoughtfully determine what their “family identity” ought to be, hoping that it is Jewish and that they will choose to become a part of our congregation.

23) ARE THERE MANY CONVERTS TO JUDAISM?

Although ours is not missionary movement, and we do not actively seek converts, there are several thousand new Jews-by-Choice each year.

24) HOW DOES ONE CONVERT TO JUDAISM?

Judaism, while not seeking converts, welcomes Jews-by-Choice. Conversion into Judaism follows a course of study with a rabbi, involvement in the religious life of the congregation, and a thoughtful evaluation of the values and principles of the Jewish Heritage.

25) IS THE CONVERT ACCEPTED?

A person who converts to Judaism is considered Jewish in every aspect of life, without qualification or differentiation. We point to the story of Ruth, who converted to Judaism and whose descendant was David, King of Israel.

26) WHAT IS THE JEWISH BIBLE?

Hebrew Scriptures consists of 39 books. these are divided into three major categories: **The Torah** is the first five books of Hebrew Scripture (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.) **The Prophets** (*N'vee-eem* in Hebrew) is sub-divided into the Early Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel 1 & 2, Kings 1 & 2) and the Later Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah Ezekiel and the 12 Minor Prophets). **The Writings** (*K'tuveem* in Hebrew) are the 13 separate books of literature such as Psalms, Proverbs, Job, etc.

27) WHAT IS THE TALMUD?

The Talmud is a work containing the literary efforts of scholars (recorded 200 to 500 CE.) and is a commentary of proper Jewish behavior and belief. Talmud is a vast treasure house of Jewish law and lore as well as literature, philosophy and the sciences. The English translation of the base-text alone (without the commentary that has been generated over the last 1500 years) is the size of a multi-volume encyclopedia.

28) DO ALL JEWS SPEAK HEBREW?

No. Hebrew, the cultural language of the Jewish People, is also the religious language of Judaism. As such, it is desirable for Jews to learn Hebrew, but this is not a universally fulfilled accomplishment.

29) WHY IS HEBREW WRITTEN FROM RIGHT TO LEFT?

There is no more significance to this than there is to the fact that English is written from left to right. Historically, the earliest known written languages, all coming from the Middle East, were written right to left. Hebrew, coming out of that Mesopotamian tradition, gave form and structure to the Greek language, and ultimately to our western romance languages.

30) IS YIDDISH THE SAME AS HEBREW?

No. Yiddish is the vernacular language that in the past was spoken by a majority of the Jews in Europe. It is a combination of Hebrew and German, written with Hebrew characters, but with its own grammar. (Sephardic Jews who trace their ancestry to Spain speak Ladino, a combination of Hebrew and Spanish.)

31) ARE ALL JEWS CITIZENS OF ISRAEL?

No. Only Israelis (whether Jew, Christian, Muslim or secular) are citizens of the State of Israel. One is a citizen of the country in which they live and vote and to which they owe civil allegiance. Jews living in the U. S. are Americans, even as Christians living in Israel are Israelis.

32) WHAT IS ZIONISM?

Historically, Zionism was a movement of those who believed in the importance of the establishment of the State of Israel, and who worked to fulfill that dream. Today, Zionism is a movement deeply concerned with the welfare of Israel. Thus there are Christian and secular Zionists who support the State of Israel and work for its continued well-being.

33) IS ISRAEL LIKE A JEWISH VATICAN?

No. Israel does not occupy a position of ecclesiastical authority in Judaism. Israel is the land in which Judaism was born. It is also the source of a resurgent Jewish culture. Israel of course is its own country (the only true democracy in the Middle East). Jews are bound to it because of the significance of its religious history, and by ties of kinship with its citizens. However, no authority emanates from it for Jews outside Israel.

34) HOW LARGE IS ISRAEL?

Israel has an area of almost 8,000 square miles, roughly the size of the State of New Jersey. It has a population of over 6 million.

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