

## Welcome to 10 Minute Topics

### This week's topic is: What is Judaism and Who are the Jews

#### What is Judaism?

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, known as the Patriarchs, are both the physical and spiritual ancestors of Judaism. They founded the religion now known as Judaism, and their descendants are the Jewish people.

Abraham was born under the name Abram in the city of Ur of the Chaldees to Terah, an idol merchant. From his early childhood, he questioned the faith of his father and sought the truth. He came to believe that the entire universe was the work of a single Creator, and he began to teach this belief to others.

*In the morning when he saw the sun rise in the east, he thought, "This is a great power. It must be the king who created me," That whole day he prayed to the sun. In the evening, upon seeing the sun set and the moon rise, he said, "Surely this one rules even that other power to which I prayed, for it no longer shines." All night he prayed to the moon. In the morning, upon seeing the darkness pass and the east light up, he said "Surely all these have a King and Ruler Who directs them." When G-d saw Abraham's longing for Him, He appeared to Abraham and spoke with him. (Zohar 1:86a)*

Abram attempted to convince his father of the folly of idol worship.

*Terah manufactured idols. Once he went on a trip and left Abraham to sell them in his place. When someone came to buy, Abraham would ask, "How old are you?" The customer would answer that he was fifty or sixty years old. Woe to this man!" Abraham would say. "He is sixty years old, yet he wants to bow down to a one-day old idol!" The man would go away in shame. A woman came in, carrying a bowl of flour. She said to Abraham, "Take this and offer it before the idols." He took a stick, broke all the idols, and placed the stick in the hand of the biggest one. When his father came, he asked, "Who did this to them?" "Why should I hide it from you?" replied Abraham. "A woman came in carrying a bowl of flour, and said to me, 'Offer this before the idols.' So I offered it before them. This one said, 'I will eat first!' and that one said, 'I will eat first!' The biggest one took a stick and broke the rest." "Why are you fooling me!" said Terah. "Do idols have understanding?" Abraham replied, "Let your ears hear what your mouth is saying." ... (Bereishis Rabbah 38:8)*

Eventually, the one true Creator that Abraham had worshipped called to him, and made him an offer: if Abraham would leave his home and his family, then G-d would make him a great nation and bless him. Abraham accepted this offer, and the b'rit (covenant) between G-d and the Jewish people was established.

*Abraham kept every detail of the Torah and taught it to his sons. (Bereishis Rabbah 95:3)*

Isaac was born on Passover to Abraham and Sarah. From his early childhood, he was taught Torah by his father Abraham and his Uncle Shem.

*Where was Isaac? [Abraham] had sent him to Shem to study Torah, for Abraham said, "All that I possess is only because I engaged in Torah and mitzvot. Therefore, I do not want it ever to depart from my seed." (Bereishis Rabbah 56:11)*

For Abraham's tenth test of faith, G-d told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering. This test is known in Jewish tradition as the Akeidah (the Binding, a reference to the fact that Isaac was bound on the altar). This test also demonstrated Isaac's own faith for he knew that he was to be sacrificed yet he did not resist his father. At the last moment, G-d sent an angel to stop the sacrifice. This story is used to show that G-d fiercely dislikes human sacrifice and forbids it for all peoples.

*After the Patriarch Abraham died, the Holy One, Blessed is He, appeared to Isaac and blessed him. (Bereishis Rabbah 61:6)*

Jacob was born to Isaac and Rebecca. From his early childhood, he was taught Torah by his father, his grandfather Abraham, and his uncles Shem and Eber.

*No one ever toiled in Torah like the Patriarch Jacob. He would go from Shem's house of study to Eber's, and from Eber's house of study to Abraham's. (Tanchuma, ed. Buber, Vayishlach 9)*

*Isaac taught Jacob Torah and gave him rebuke in his house of study. (Shemos Rabbah 1:1)*

Jacob and his brother Esau struggled within Rebecca's womb. Esau had little regard for the spiritual heritage of his forefathers, and sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew. After Isaac was tricked by Rebecca into giving Jacob a blessing meant for Esau, Esau became very angry, so Jacob fled to live with his uncle. While living with his uncle, Jacob was deceived into marrying Rachel's older sister, Leah, but later married Rachel, and Rachel's and Leah's maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah. Jacob fathered 12 sons (the twelve tribes of Israel) and one daughter.

After many years living with, and working for, his uncle/father-in-law, Jacob returned to his homeland and sought reconciliation with his brother Esau. He prayed to G-d and gave his brother gifts. The night before he went to meet his brother he wrestled with a man until the break of day. As the dawn broke, Jacob demanded a blessing from the man, and the man revealed himself to be an angel. He blessed Jacob and gave him the name "Israel" (Yisrael), meaning "the one who wrestled with G-d" or "the Champion of G-d." Jacob fathered 12 sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph and Benjamin. The Jewish people are generally referred to as the Children of Israel, signifying their descent from Jacob.

As centuries passed, the descendants of Israel became slaves in Mitzraim (Egypt). They suffered greatly under the hand of later Pharaohs. But G-d brought the Children of Israel out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. G-d led them on a journey through the wilderness to Mount Sinai. Here, G-d revealed Himself to the Children of Israel and offered them a great covenant: if the people would hearken to G-d and observe His covenant, then they would be the most beloved of nations, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

*Moses ascended to G-d, and Hashem called to him from the mountain, saying, "So shall you say to the House of Jacob and relate to the Children of Israel. 'You have seen what I did to Egypt, and that I have borne you on the wings of eagles and brought you to Me. An now, if you hearken well to Me and observe My covenant, you shall be to Me the most beloved treasure of all peoples, for Mine is the entire world. You shall be to Me a kingdom of ministers and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the Children of Israel." (Exodus 19:3-6)*

G-d revealed both the Written and Oral Torah (Mishnah), and the entire nation responded, "Everything that the L-rd has spoken, we will do!" According to Jewish tradition, every Jewish soul that would ever be born was present at that moment, and agreed to be bound to this covenant.

Judaism is mostly thought of as a religion, a set of ideas about the world and the way we should live our lives. Judaism is studied in Religious Studies courses and taught to Jewish children. However, many people who call themselves Jews do not believe in that religion. The most traditional Jews and the most liberal Jews and everyone in between would agree that these secular people are still Jews, regardless of their disbelief.

Jews are clearly not a race. Race is a genetic distinction, and refers to people with shared ancestry and shared genetic traits. You cannot change your race. Common ancestry is not required to be a Jew. Many Jews worldwide share common ancestry, as shown by genetic research; however, you can be a Jew without sharing this common ancestry.

Most secular American Jews think of their Jewish-ness as a matter of culture or ethnicity. There are certainly cultural traits and behaviors that are shared by many Jews which make us feel more comfortable with other Jews. Jews in many parts of the world share many of those cultural aspects. However, that culture is not shared by all Jews all over the world, and people who do not share that culture are no less Jews because of it.

There is a certain amount of truth in the claims that Judaism is a religion, a race, or an ethnic group, none of these descriptions is entirely adequate to describe what connects Jews to other Jews. Almost all Jews feel a sense of connectedness to each other that many find hard to explain, define, or even understand. The best explanation is the traditional one given in the Torah: that the Jews are a nation. Anyone who feels any sense of Jewish identity shares that sense of Jewish people-hood. Jews refer to that nation as "the Jewish people" or "the Children of Israel". As a nation or people, Jews share common ideas, ancestry, and culture, but there is also room for diversity in each of these areas. The most important part of being a nation is that sense of interconnectedness. Judaism as a religion is very communally-oriented. For example, prayers are

normally stated in the plural, and Jews are supposed to pray in communal groups. Many of the Jewish holiday observances are family or community-oriented; yet, even people who are not religious at all feel that sense of Jewish community. When Jews suffer or are persecuted, all Jews feel their pain. When a Jew does something illegal, immoral or shameful, all Jews feel the shame, and all Jews feel that it reflects on all Jews. And when a Jew accomplishes something significant, all Jews feel proud.

### Who are the Jews?

The original name for the people we now call Jews was Hebrews (Ivrit). Another name used for the people, is Children of Israel or Israelites, which refers to the fact that the people are descendants of Jacob, who was also called Israel. The word "Jew" (in Hebrew, יהודי - "Yehudi") is derived from the name Judah, which was the name of one of Jacob's twelve sons. Judah was the ancestor of one of the tribes of Israel, which was named after him. Likewise, the word Judaism literally means "Judah-ism," that is, the religion of the Yehudim.

Originally, the term Yehudi referred specifically to members of the tribe of Judah, as distinguished from the other tribes of Israel. However, after the death of King Solomon, the nation of Israel was split into two kingdoms: the kingdom of Judah and the kingdom of Israel (I Kings 12; II Chronicles 10). After that time, the word Yehudi could properly be used to describe anyone from the kingdom of Judah, which included the tribes of Judah, Levi and half of Benjamin, as well as scattered settlements from other tribes. The most obvious biblical example of this usage is in Esther 2:5-6, where Mordecai is referred to as both a Yehudi and a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

*There was a Jewish man in Shushan the capital whose name was Mordechai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjamite, who had been exiled from Jerusalem along with the exiles who had been exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has exiled. (Esther 2:5-6)*

In the 6th century BCE, the kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria and the ten tribes were exiled from the land (II Kings 17), leaving only the tribes in the kingdom of Judah remaining to carry on Abraham's heritage. These people of the kingdom of Judah were generally known to themselves and to other nations as Yehudim (Jews), and that name continues to be used today.

In common speech, the word "Jew" is used to refer to all of the physical and spiritual descendants of Jacob/Israel, as well as to the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac and their wives, and the word "Judaism" is used to refer to their beliefs. Technically, this usage is inaccurate, just as it is technically inaccurate to use the word "Indian" to refer to the original inhabitants of the Americas. However, this technically inaccurate usage is common both within the Jewish community and outside of it.

A Jew is any person whose mother was a Jew or any person who has gone through the formal process of conversion to Judaism according to Jewish law. It is important to note that being a Jew has nothing to do with what you believe or what you do. A person born to non-Jewish parents who has not undergone the formal process of conversion but who believes everything that Orthodox Jews believe and observes every law and custom of Judaism is still a non-Jew,

even in the eyes of the most liberal movements of Judaism, and a person born to a Jewish mother who is an atheist and never practices the Jewish religion is still a Jew, even in the eyes of the most Orthodox. In this sense, Judaism is more like a nationality than like other religions, and being Jewish is like a citizenship.