



## Judaism

### God

Jews believe in one Creator God who cares for all people. Jews worship God, saying blessings and thanks, and believe that they are the chosen people. Many Jewish people avoid saying and writing God's name, and so in a Jewish context, it might be printed as 'G-d'.

The Jewish prayer, the Shema, begins with words that are a fundamental expression of Jewish belief: 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Deuteronomy 6:4–5).

Parts of the Shema are written on a *mezuzah* (parchment on which religious text is written, which is generally placed inside a small decorative box) and attached to the doorposts of Jewish homes, to be remembered each time it is passed. Parts of the Shema are also placed inside *tefillin*, the prayer boxes worn on the head and left arm of many Jews, especially Orthodox and Conservative, when they pray.

### The Torah

The Torah, meaning teaching, instruction or law, is the main Jewish holy book. The term is used in a wider sense to mean the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (the same in content as the Old Testament of the Christian Bible) and the Talmud – oral law or 'Oral Torah' explaining the Torah. The Torah contains the Ten Commandments given to Moses and the 613 *mitzvot* or the Jewish laws/commandments (*halakha*) that observant Jews obey. It also focuses on the Jews' relationship with God and contains songs, prayers and wise sayings.

The whole Hebrew Bible includes:

- the TeNaKh, 'written Torah', which consists of the Torah (law; the first five books), Nevi'im (Prophets) and the Ketuvim (Writings)
- the Talmud, or oral law, which is made up of the Mishnah (the first writing down of this oral law in about 200 CE) and the Gemara (a commentary on the Mishnah)

The Torah is held in great esteem and kept in a special place in the synagogue called the 'Ark'. A weekly portion is read aloud in the Shabbat synagogue service and there is an annual cycle of readings, culminating in the festival of Simchat Torah ('rejoicing in the Torah'). Torah scrolls are taken from the Ark and carried or danced around the synagogue seven times.

Many Jews regularly study the Torah – to do so is to worship God.

### The People

The family and home are very important in Jewish life. Shabbat, or the Jewish day of rest, starts at sunset on Friday and lasts until three stars appear in the sky on Saturday. Friday nights are special, involving time at the synagogue, prayers, a meal with family and friends and the chance to rest, discuss and focus on God. Whilst Jewish practice of Shabbat may vary across the different traditions, the coming together of families every weekend, and the wider community for Shabbat services, has been at the heart of Jewish community life for centuries. The instructions in the Shema to 'teach these laws thoroughly to your children, speak of them when you sit in your house' are obeyed as part of Shabbat. Shabbat celebrates the seventh day of creation – the day of rest – and is called 'the day of delight' in some Jewish traditions. Refraining from work is seen by many as a release from the pressure of modern life rather than a restriction.

'Kashrut' is the body of Jewish law dealing with the foods that are fit to be eaten. These laws, found in the Torah, have existed for more than 3,000 years and continue to play an important part in the daily lives of many observant Jews. Food that meets the demands of kashrut is called 'kosher' (fit). 'Keeping kosher' involves eating only certain animals that have been killed in a special way, and using separate sets of kitchen utensils for milk and meat products, which must not be mixed. Food that is forbidden is *trefah* or *treyf* ('tom').