

Modul 1:

Religion and Traditions in Judaism



The Western Wall in Jerusalem, in the background the Dome of the Rock
(bviehmann)

Note:

The following provides an introduction to some of the most important Jewish traditions and religious rites. It does not aim to be comprehensive. In Judaism and especially in various Jewish traditions, there are a host of other holidays and rituals that are not dealt with here. You will find tips for further reading and internet research at the end of this text.

A note on the pronunciation of Hebrew terms: In general, this follows English pronunciation, with the exception of "ch", which is pronounced (χ).

relative or friend. The rabbi then blesses the wine and presents the groom with a glass to drink from. The same glass is then passed to the mother of the bride, and after she has had a drink, she passes it to her daughter.

The groom then places a ring on the bride's right forefinger, reciting the following words: "Behold you are consecrated to me with this ring according to the law of Moses and Israel." The two witnesses must see him place the ring, otherwise the marriage is not valid. This completes the first of the two ceremonies, called *erusin*, the betrothal. The couple is now officially promised to each other. Today it is also common for the groom to receive a ring from the bride, although this was not originally part of the religious ceremony. The *ketuba*, the marriage contract, is read aloud between the two ceremonies. This is a standard contract written in Aramaic (nowadays frequently translated) where only the names and the date are changed. In this contract, the groom commits himself to honouring and providing for his bride, and promises her a certain sum of money. Today, this sum is only symbolic. The groom then presents the *ketuba* to the bride. After that, the real marriage ceremony begins. Seven blessings are recited over the wine, the groom drinks once more and now passes the glass himself to the bride. Then the groom crushes the glass with his right foot on the floor and the guests shout "Mazal tov" (or "Mazel tov" in Yiddish). In some communities it is traditional for the groom to recite the following words after this:

"If I forget thee, o Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let my tongue cleave to my palate if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy."
(Psalm 137:5-7).

In Ashkenazi and Yemenite communities, the couple usually retire then for a certain time before the celebration or wedding feast with music and dance. This is not common in the Sephardic tradition, where the couple only get time alone on their wedding night.

Have a look at how a typical Sephardic wedding proceeds in Israel on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v451BqxsDw&feature=related>

4. Married Life – the Jewish Home

Religion is not confined to religious services, but also and primarily practised in customs and traditions at home. This is particularly true of Judaism, which was throughout its history often a minority religion in the societies where it existed. But what is typical of a Jewish home?

The Mezuzah

A mezuzah is a long, narrow case which is hung on the doorposts of each room and the front doorway. It contains a piece of parchment with the verses from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21.

Read these verses from the Bible to find out why the Mezuzot are hung on the doorposts.

Food and Dishes

In devout Jewish households there are two of many items: especially cooking utensils and dishes. This is because of the Jewish dietary laws, the *kashrut*. To eat and live *kosher*, one must follow these laws.

Many secular Jews also observe this day as a day of fasting and, at least, rest. In Israel there is an unspoken agreement that no cars should be driven on Yom Kippur. For this reason, many secular families undertake long bicycle trips, as even the busier roads are car-free. Before Yom Kippur, people wish each other "*Gmar Chatina tova!*" thus expressing the hope that the inscription into the book of life, which began on Rosh Hashanah, will have a positive outcome. Another typical greeting is "*Tzom ka!*", which means "have an easy fast".



The usually very busy Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv on Yom Kippur 2006/5777
(bviehmänn)

3. Sukkot – The Festival of Booths/Tabernacles (from 13-19 October in 2011)

Sukkot, the week-long Festival of Booths or Tabernacles, begins just five days after Yom Kippur. It recalls the period of wandering in the desert after the exodus from Egypt when Jews had to live in temporary shelters known as booths, or tabernacles. On these feast days, Jews are supposed to spend as much time as possible in the *sukka* (booth), and use this time to study the Torah. Religious Jews see it as their duty to sleep in the *sukka* for the entire week, while secular families often just use it for eating and receiving guests. On their way to the Synagogue, and where possible on any other journeys by foot, religious men carry a palm branch in one hand and a citrus fruit in the other. For some impressions of *Sukkot* in a religious suburb in Israel watch the following clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nbC9D3yrBY&feature=related>

4. Hanukkah – the Festival of Lights

Hanukkah is a relatively recent holiday. There is no reference to it in the Bible and it is not based on any passage from the Bible. It commemorates the rededication of the Temple (the word Hanukkah means dedication), the Hasmonean revolt, and the miracle of the oil in the year 164 BCE. On conquering Jerusalem, the Maccabees wanted to rededicate the Temple by lighting the menorah, a traditional lamp. However, there was only enough oil to burn for one day. But miraculously, the oil lasted for eight whole days, until the arrival of new supplies. The central Hanukkah ritual is the lighting of a nine-branched candelabrum, the *Hanukiah*. Its eight candles

symbolize the eight days for which the oil lasted (the ninth raised candle is used only to light the other eight.) During Hanukkah every evening a further candle is lit, until all nine are burning on the last day.

Hanukkah is one of many religious holidays (including Christian feast days) celebrating light at the darkest time of the year. For a long time, it was not a very important holiday, and is still not seen as particularly significant from a religious point of view. However, Zionists were quick to recognize the symbolism in Hanukkah's commemoration of assertive, militant Jewish groupings, which corresponded to the Zionist Jewish identity. For this reason, Hanukkah was promoted to a central holiday by the Zionist movement. Around the same time, the bourgeois holiday Christmas gained importance in Central Europe (especially in Germany). Hanukkah, which often coincides with or comes just before Christmas, offered Jews an alternative holiday where family members could exchange gifts.

It is traditional to eat *sufganiot* at Hanukkah, a pastry cooked in oil, which looks and tastes like a donut.



Hanukiah

(<http://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/הכּוֹנֵחַ>)

5. Purim (on 7-8 March 2012)

Purim is also not a high feast day, but a two-day holiday in commemoration of the deliverance of the Jewish people under Persian rule, as described in the Book of Esther. Less importance is attached to it as it does not derive from the Torah (the Five Books of Moses), but only from one of the so-called "scriptures". At Purim the Book of Esther is read in the Synagogue.

It is traditional to dress in fancy dress at Purim, making it a particularly popular holiday among children. Other elements of the Purim holiday include wine-drinking (in some religious communities, it is compulsory to get drunk once a year at Purim), eating so-called Haman's ears, and making noise with a Purim gragger.

Judaism(s)

“Three Jews, four opinions” – so goes a Jewish saying, which could also be said of many other religions. Judaism first arose over three hundred years ago and Jews live all over the world. It would therefore be very strange, if there were no variations in their traditions and in their interpretation of their faith.

Historically, a distinction is made between two major groups within Judaism – Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews.

“With the Christianization of the Roman Empire (in the fourth century) and the Arab conquests, the Jewish community became an ethnic minority within states under Christian and Islamic rule. This led to the development of two main forms of Jewish culture: the Sephardic (from the Hebrew word for Spain, *Sefarad*) under the influence of the Arabic-Islamic environment, and the Ashkenazi (from the Hebrew word for Germany, *Ashkenas*) in Christian Europe. In Spain, North Africa, and the Near East, Sephardic Jews shaped a distinct Jewish way of life. In medieval Europe, the cultural centres of Judaism were found in the South of France, the Rhineland, and Northern Italy, until Ashkenazi Jews were forced to take refuge in Central and Eastern Europe as a result of widespread persecution from the twelfth century onwards.”¹

This distinction is both correct and important – even today Israel has both an Ashkenazi and a Sephardic Chief Rabbi. In the Second Module, we will examine both groups in greater detail. However, in religious traditions and lifestyle nowadays, other factors play a far more important role.

Rosenthal and Homolka² broadly distinguish between three main tendencies in modern Judaism – progressive (divided into Reform and Conservative Judaism), Orthodox, and Ultra-Orthodox. This distinction is appropriate as it describes differences in the lifestyles of the three groups.

Today’s religious tendencies cannot be summed up in just a few sentences. In what follows only the most striking differences between both poles are described.³

Progressive or Reform Judaism:

In Reform Judaism, Judaism is conceived as a continually changing religion. The prophetic ideals of social justice and ethically responsible action represent the fundamental pillars of Judaism. Yet in Reform Judaism, the *Halacha*, the law based on rabbinic literature and the Bible, and the *Mitzvot*, the religious commandments, are recognized as man-made and thus subject to re-interpretation.

The Bible is understood to be an assembly of human thoughts, collected over centuries. It may thus contain statements, which appear inappropriate or even wrong in the modern context.

The *Mitzvot* too may be subject to critical reappraisals, and if necessary, abandoned. This applies to many cleansing rituals, *kashrut* rules, and the rule to rest on the Sabbath. The initiators of Reform Judaism in nineteenth century Germany suggested abolishing circumcision and transferring the Sabbath to Sundays for practical reasons. Yet today, these ideas are inconceivable.

The belief that Jews can live in any part of the world and must not strive to “return” to Israel is another feature which distinguishes Reform from Orthodox Judaism.

¹ Galley, Susanne: Das Judentum, Frankfurt/Main, 2006, p. 17.

² Rosenthal, Gilbert S. and Homolka, Walter, Das Judentum hat viele Gesichter. Die religiösen Strömungen der Gegenwart, Munich, 1999.

³ Based mainly on *ibid.*

The equality of the sexes is given high priority in Reform Judaism. Women may be ordained as Rabbis and are permitted to read from the Torah. There is no *Mitzva* valid only for men.

There is a well-known joke on the role of women, which goes as follows:

“How do you know if you’re at an Orthodox, a Conservative, or a Reformist wedding?

- At an Orthodox wedding the mother of the bride is pregnant, at a conservative wedding the bride is pregnant, and at a reformist wedding the rabbi is pregnant.”

The first ever woman to be ordained a rabbi was Regina Jonas in Berlin in 1935. The first woman rabbi to be ordained in Germany since the end of World War II was Alina Treiger in 2010. And the first woman rabbi to be ordained in France was Pauline Bèbe in 1990.

Orthodox Judaism:

Of all tendencies in Judaism, Orthodox Judaism is the least homogenous and also the least institutionalized. However, there are a number of general features:

In contrast to Reform Judaism, the Torah is seen as the direct revealed word of God. Thus the words and commandments of the Torah are binding. This applies not only to the Five Books of Moses, the written Torah, but also to the so-called Oral Torah, the interpretation of the biblical text in the Jewish tradition. The commandments enshrined in the latter are no less important than those of the written Torah. While Reform Judaism acknowledges that the laws and commandments arose in a particular context, in Orthodox Judaism it is assumed that all *mitzvot* have a higher moral purpose, even if this is not immediately apparent. The fact that the believer does not understand a commandment is no reason for it to be abandoned – on the contrary.

Men and women have separate tasks, as determined in the Torah. For Orthodox Judaism, no religious purpose is served by a man assuming women’s tasks and vice-versa. Orthodox rabbis have repeatedly pointed out that this does not constitute discrimination against women, claiming that they simply have different tasks from those fulfilled by men. However, the following three lines from the morning prayer would seem to contradict this claim: “Blessed are You who has not made me a heathen! Blessed are You who has not made me a woman! Blessed are You who has not made me an uncouth person!”

For an insight into Progressive Judaism, which arose before World War II in Germany and is today a significant branch of Judaism in the USA, we again recommend the Hollywood comedy “*Keeping the Faith*”. The Israeli film “*Kadosh*” mentioned above gives an impression of how ultra-orthodox Jews live in Israel.