Faith and Society Files: Encountering Jews

In this document, author Paul Weller provides background information about Jewish beliefs and practices to aid dialogue.

Introducing people of different religions or beliefs

As set out in the resource on the ***Religion or Belief Landscape of the UK***, (downloadable from www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/516106/Religion_or_Belief.aspx) Baptist Christians in the UK are likely to encounter people of various religion and belief traditions in a whole variety of ways and contexts. This can include at school/college/university; in work; in leisure contexts, in public settings; and when visiting places of worship.

We have produced a series of resources that aim to provide a brief introductory overview to people of other than Christian religions or beliefs. Just as Christians can understandably become uncomfortable and even distressed when words and concepts central to our understanding of Christianity are misused or misunderstood, so also can others be concerned when the words that they use are ignorantly misused or are replaced by other words that are not part of their traditions.

Even though this is rapidly changing, Christians in the UK have the relative advantage that many key Christian words and concepts have, over the centuries, entered into the English language. By contrast, many of the key words and concepts used by people of other than Christian traditions to signify things of importance to them can seem unfamiliar and perhaps, initially, off-putting. Using the terms that people use about themselves (and which, within these resources are signaled by the word or words concerned *appearing in italics*), we are respecting how our neighbours understand themselves and showing our readiness to learn how others describe themselves, their beliefs and practices.

Jewish Individuals, Communities and Organisations

Encountering Individual Jews

Generally speaking, and contrary to historically widespread images of the physical characteristics of Jews that are rooted in anti-semitic tropes, there is no visual way in which one would always know that one was encountering an individual Jewish person. An exception to this is among the *Haredim* (sometimes popularly called 'Ultra-Orthodox') where both men and women may be outwardly distinguishable by the clothing worn, as well as among some Orthodox Jews more broadly speaking, where many women may wear wigs.

Encountering Jewish Communities

Communal belonging is an important part of Jewish identity and anyone born of a Jewish mother, or anyone who has converted to Judaism, is traditionally understood to be Jewish. Nevertheless, there are diversities within the overall Jewish tradition. Religiously speaking, there are *Orthodox, Progressive, Masorti/Conservative* Jews. In the UK, the *Progressive* traditions are the *Reform* and the *Liberal*.

Orthodox Jews see the Torah and the Talmud as containing God's literal words which must be applied equally in all times and places. *Orthodoxy* includes *Hasidim*, who originated with followers of the teachings of Israel ben Eliezer and *Haredim*, sometimes referred to by others as Ultra-Orthodox.

Progressive Jews believe in the divine inspiration of the Torah but also, since it was recorded by human beings in a particular time and space, that it is necessary to reinterpret it in changing times and conditions. *Progressive* Judaism includes *Reform* Judaism, established in early nineteenth century, and *Liberal* Judaism, originally an historical offshoot of the Reform movement.

Masorti/Conservative Jews wish to remain strongly committed to the *Halakhah* whilst accepting the inevitability of its contextualised application and so explain themselves in terms of traditional Judaism for modern Jews

The Synagogue

The principal place of Jewish communal worship is the *synagogue*, which some Jews refer to by the Yiddish word *shu*l. In *Progressive* Judaism both women and men can form a *minyan* (a qualifying number of Jews to conduct worship); carry the *Torah*; and become *rabbis*. In the *Orthodox* sector women do not to take on these roles, but many *Orthodox synagogues* employ women as teachers and elect women to positions of organisational management.

A majority of Jews who are affiliated to a synagogue belong to *Orthodox synagogues* and a minority to the *Progressive* sector of *Reform and Liberal synagogues*, with a much smaller number being aligned with *synagogues* in the *Masorti* and *Sephardi* traditions.

Worship takes place in the *synagogue*, but it is also a central place of administration, cultural and social activities and education programmes. *Synagogues* are self-financing and may have a *Heder* (room) that is a part-time (usually taking place on Sundays) school for Jewish education where children can gain religious knowledge and learn Hebrew. The *synagogue* might also offer adult Jewish education.

In the larger *synagogues* services are held every morning and evening. In *Orthodox synagogues* men and women are separated for what are seen as reasons of propriety and women usually sit in a gallery above the section where the men conduct the service. Sometimes, where there is no gallery, the women are seated behind the men with a short curtain or partition separating the two. In some very small house *synagogues*, women and men worship in different rooms.

Inside the *synagogue*, a range of symbols and objects may be seen. The *Magen David* (Shield of David) is a six-pointed star of no particular religious significance. The *Menorah* is a seven-branched candlestick of a type dating back to the Temple in Jerusalem prior to its destruction by the Romans. The *Bimah* is a raised platform, usually in the centre of the *synagogue*, from which the *Torah* is read. Most *synagogues* also have a pulpit from which the sermon is preached. The *Aron Kodesh* (Holy Ark) is an alcove or cupboard with wooden or ornate door panels that contains the *Torah* scrolls. In Western countries it is usually on the East wall of the *synagogue* that is the direction of Jerusalem. It has an embroidered curtain across it, which is known as a *Parochet*. A *Ner Tamid* (everlasting light) is a lamp hung in front of the *Aron Kodesh*, reminding the congregation of the eternal presence of God.

The *Sefer Torah* is a hand-written scroll of the *Torah*. In *Orthodox synagogues*, it is read four times a week, on Monday and Thursday mornings, Saturday mornings and Saturday afternoons. It is also read on other distinctive days such as the holy days. The *Torah* scroll is kept inside a velvet cover and is usually decorated with metal breastplates and adornments. It has an honoured place in Jewish worship, especially at the festival of *Simchat Torah* (see below). The sanctity of the *Sefer Torah* is underlined by the use of a *Yad* that is a long pointer in the shape of a hand used by the reader so that the place may be kept without touching the parchment.

Visiting a Jewish Synagogue

When visiting a *synagogue*, dress should be modest, with arms and legs covered, but need not be formal. In a *synagogue* that is *Orthodox*, women should wear a skirt or dress of reasonable length and not trousers, while married women should cover their heads. Men and boys should cover their heads when visiting a *synagogue*. Non-*kosher* (see further below) food must not be brought into a *synagogue*.

If the community is standing quietly in prayer, then visitors should wait at the back until the prayer has finished. *Sabbath* services in *Orthodox synagogues* can be up to two to three hours long, so visitors are advised to take this into account when planning for their arrivals and departures. There is no expectation that visitors join in the worship unless they particularly wish to do so.

Orthodox services, and many *Masorti* services, are conducted in Hebrew and the chanted prayers are led by a *Chazzan* (or cantor). Prayer books with translations are generally available in bookcases at the back of the *synagogue*. A high proportion of *Reform* services are conducted in English, while *Liberal* services are mostly in English. No sacred food is distributed during the service. However, *kiddush* (the Hebrew for sanctification) may take place after the service and visitors will be invited to join in the blessing that is said or sung over food and drink that is distributed in order to give thanks to God. This is shared with visitors as a sign of hospitality, although there is no sense of obligation to participate. In *Orthodox synagogues*, this food and drink will consist of wine and biscuits or crisps. In other *synagogues* bread may accompany the wine. Young children are usually given fruit juice instead of wine.

Jewish Beliefs and Practices

Origins of Judaism

The historical roots of Judaism are traced by Jews to a *Brit*, or covenant, through which God is believed to have formed a permanent relationship with the community. This was first of all through Abraham, who is seen as the patriarch of the Jewish people, and then through the giving at Mount Sinai of the *Torah*, or law, to Moses. The Exodus of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt is seen as being constitutive of the Jewish people who, following this and the receipt of the *Torah*, conquered the land of Canaan which they believed was a land promised to them by God. After their establishment in the *Promised Land* and the building of a Temple as a focus of worship in Jerusalem came the 586 BCE Babylonian conquest and subsequent exile of the Jewish people. Following the restoration of a Jewish kingdom and the rebuilding of the Temple, came the destruction of the Temple by the Roman Empire in 70 CE, leading to a further diaspora in which the majority Jewish experience became one of exile until the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel, which took place in the wake of the Holocaust of European Jewry at the hands of the Nazis and those who collaborated with them.

Jewishness

Women - especially mothers - are seen as having a key role in Jewish life. This is because of their role in the family which is at the centre of the practice of Judaism and many of its festivals and celebrations. In *Orthodox, Masorti* and *Reform* Judaism a Jew is traditionally understood to be any person born of a Jewish mother or a person who has converted to the Jewish faith. In *Liberal* Judaism and *Reform* Judaism, if a child has had a Jewish upbringing, then having a Jewish father may also be considered to qualify a child for membership of the community.

In *Progressive* Judaism the gender role distinctions specified in Jewish law are no longer recognised as binding. They are, however, still upheld in *Orthodox* Judaism so, for example, if a marriage breaks down, in the *Orthodox, Reform* and *Masorti* traditions a woman may not remarry in a *synagogue* until she has been given a *get* (religious divorce) by her husband and a man normally cannot remarry until a woman has accepted a *get* from him.

Ceremonies

A number of ceremonies mark transitional points in Jewish life. As a sign of God's covenant, Abraham was required to circumcise himself and his two sons (Isaac and Ishmael). Jewish law asserts that a male Jew should normally be circumcised on the eighth day of his life. This is known as *Brit Milah* and is carried out by a trained *Mohel* (circumciser) usually in the home with family and friends present. There is no equivalent for girls, but in some communities a baby-naming ceremony for babies of both genders takes place and they may be blessed in the *synagogue*. In recent years, a covenant naming ceremony has been developed for daughters.

Before the age of thirteen, male Jews are not expected to carry responsibility for *mitzvot* (the commandments), but at thirteen years old they take up a new position within the community. The

ceremony that marks this is called *Bar Mitzvah* (son of commandment) and it involves the young man reading in Hebrew from the weekly portion of the *Torah* scroll, usually during the Saturday morning service in the *synagogue*. After the service the family of the boy who has become *Bar Mitzvah* may provide *Kiddush* for the congregation, presents are given to the boy, and some families may have a party for family and friends.

In *Progressive* Judaism there is also a *Bat Mitzvah* (daughter of commandment ceremony) for thirteen year-old females. In some *Orthodox* circles girls celebrate a *Bat Mitzvah* at the age of twelve, the traditional coming of age for females, whereas others may participate in a communal *Bat Hayil* ceremony. This ceremony often takes place on a Sunday and involves the recitation of Psalms and special readings. In *Progressive* Judaism there is also a confirmation ceremony called *Kabbalat Torah*, which takes place at the age of sixteen and marks the completion of some further religious education by the young students.

Halachically, a woman is believed to become ritually unclean through the process of menstruation. According to *Halachah*, before marriage, after menstruation, and after childbirth, women should visit a *mikveh* or ritual bath. Married women in the *Orthodox* tradition observe this tradition, but many *Progressive* Jews view the practice of visiting the *mikveh* as an option rather than as obligatory.

Shabbat

The *Shabbat* (or *Sabbath*) is central to the rhythm of Jewish individual, family and communal life. It is observed as a day of worship, rest and peace. Friday night, and Saturday, the day on which it is observed, is believed to correspond to the seventh day of the creation on which God rested from creating the earth. *Shabbat* begins about half an hour before sunset on the Friday evening and ends at nightfall on the Saturday night because the description of creation in the scriptural Book of Genesis refers to 'evening and morning', implying that a day is deemed to begin on its preceding night. The times therefore vary from week to week, starting later in summer and earlier in winter.

Kashrut (meaning 'fitness' or 'appropriateness')

Animals, birds and fish might be either *kosher* (permitted) or *treif* (forbidden). Acceptable animals include those with split hooves and which chew the cud, including such as sheep, cows and deer. Pigs, rabbits and horses are not acceptable, as also birds of prey such as hawks are not acceptable, although some birds, such as chickens, are acceptable. Eggs are considered *kosher* if they come from fowl that are *kosher*. Only fish that have both fins and scales are acceptable: therefore cod is *kosher*, but prawns are not.

Food that contains, or has been cooked in, products from non-acceptable animals is also unacceptable. Thus, for example, chips cooked in non-*kosher* animal fat are not acceptable, nor foods containing gelatin. For meat to be *kosher* it must have been humanely slaughtered by a *shochet* (a qualified slaughterer) working under the supervision of the *Beth Din* (religious court). *Shechitah* (which is slaughter according to Jewish law) involves the draining of blood from the animal by slitting its throat. Once killed, the meat from the animal must then be *kashered*. This involves the meat being soaked and salted or, in certain cases such as liver, broiled, in order to remove excess blood. The biblical prohibition against consuming blood reflects the conviction, based on a biblical statement, that blood represents life. So, for example, eggs with blood spots may also not be eaten.

Jewish law prohibits the mixing of milk foods with meat foods. This derives from biblical prohibitions against boiling a kid in its mother's milk. Separate sets of kitchen utensils are used for the two types of food. Glass (although not pyrex) can be used for both types of food. Fish may be served with milk but

then it would not be eaten at the same meal as meat. The extent to which Jewish people are observant of these food laws varies from person to person. If intending to provide food for Jewish guests it is wise to check first about any requirements.

Israel

The majority of modern Jews identify in at least some way with the state of Israel, and many Jews see it in terms of their 'spiritual home', taking regular holidays there; taking an interest in Israeli news, politics and culture; becoming involved in and/or giving money to Israeli charities; eating Israeli food, and so on. For a significant number of Jews, their identity revolves as much if not more around Israel than around the *synagogue* and other 'religious' matters. For example, it is common practice amongst Jewish teenagers to participate in an Israel experience 'tour' or 'gap year' following their final examinations in order to learn Hebrew, with such tours often being a key factor in developing a Jewish identity.

Jewish Calendar And Festivals

Jewish Calendar

According to the Jewish calendar, which counts from what is traditionally believed to have been the year of the world's creation, the Common Era year 2019 is the Jewish year 5779. This appears on Jewish legal documents such as marriage certificates, on Jewish periodicals and on gravestones. Jews use a combined lunar and solar calendar, where each month is equivalent to twenty-nine or thirty days, and a year is usually three hundred and fifty-four days. In a nineteen solar year cycle an extra month is inserted into years three, six, eight, eleven, fourteen, seventeen and nineteen, and this reconciles the Jewish calendar with the Gregorian calendar that is in common use in the UK.

Jewish Festivals

Because months are based on the moon, no fixed date for Jewish festivals can be given in the Gregorian calendar. *Progressive* Jews may celebrate the main festivals for a day less than the two days often indicated in the following details. The reason for this is that prior to mathematical calculation of the new moon, festivals were originally given an extra day in order to ensure their observance on the correct date, since a new moon could fall on one of two days. Since the new moon can now accurately be calculated, *Progressive* Jews believe that the addition of an extra day is no longer needed - and this has always been the practice in the State of Israel, except in the case of *Rosh Hashanah* (see below) that is observed for two days.

Jewish festivals always begin in the evening and are grouped into three types. These are: the *Yamim Noraim* (Days of Awe); the *Shalosh Regalim* (Hebrew literally meaning 'three foot festivals') which are the three festivals that have an agricultural and historical significance and in which it was traditional for every Jew to go to Jerusalem; and the minor festivals.

Yamim Noraim

Rosh Hashanah (September/October) is the Jewish New Year. It involves two days of judgement and penitence. The *Shofar* (ram's horn) is blown (except on *Shabbat*) in the *synagogue* to remind people of their sins and to call them to spiritual awareness. It begins the Jewish year and the ten days of repentance that culminate in *Yom Kippur*. *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* are days during which no work may be done.

Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) is a twenty-five hour fast devoted to prayer and worship, recollecting the sins of the past year and seeking forgiveness for them from one another and from God.

Shalosh Regalim

Sukkot (September/October) is the festival of Tabernacles that commemorates the wandering of the children of Israel between Egypt and Canaan and God's protection during this period. There is a practice of building *sukkot* (temporary huts) onto the sides of houses or in gardens which is intended to recall how the Israelite ancestors lived in the wilderness. Normally, the UK climate prevents Jews living in *sukkot* for the entirety of the festival, but Jewish families may have their meals in them. *Sukkot* can often be seen on the sides of *synagogue* and Jewish communal buildings. The festival has a harvest connection that is acknowledged by taking four types of plant that are carried in procession around the *synagogue*: a *lulav* (palm branch), an *etrog* (citron), two *aravot* (willow branches) and three *hadassim* (myrtle branches). In *Orthodox synagogues* in the diaspora, *Sukkot* is a nine-day period with the first two and last two days as festival days. The final day is *Simchat Torah*.

Simchat Torah (The Rejoicing of the *Torah*) is a day of great festivities to celebrate the completion and recommencement of the annual cycle of readings from the Torah in the *synagogue*.

Pesach (March/April) – which is often known in the English language as *Passover* - occurs when the first fruits of barley would have been offered as sacrifice in the Temple. It is an eight-day period of which the first two and last two days are celebrated as festivals. It commemorates the Exodus from Egypt and God's redemption of the Hebrew people. As a reminder that the Hebrews had no time to wait for bread to rise before they had to leave Egypt, no *hametz* (leavened products) are consumed at this time and it must be removed from the home. Prior to the festival the house is scrupulously cleaned in order to remove any crumbs of *hametz*. *Matzah* (meaning unleavened bread) is consumed during the festival period. A spare set of kitchen utensils, cutlery and crockery are usually used for the duration of the festival. The home ceremony centres around the *seder* meal which, in the diaspora, among the *Orthodox*, takes place on the first two nights of the festival, and among *Progressives* on the first night. The order of service surrounding this meal is found in the *Haggadah* (*Seder* service book) that utilises verses from the *Torah* and from *Midrashic* commentaries in order to tell the story of the Exodus. The *Seder* is an important family occasion, in which all present, including young children, are encouraged to participate.

Shavuot (Pentecost) (May/June) commemorates the Israelites' reception of the *Torah* at Mount Sinai and their pledging of allegiance to God. On the first night before the festival many Jews stay awake all night studying the *Torah* in preparation for the anniversary of the revelation on the next day. The Book of Ruth is read during *Shavuot*. This festival lasts for two days and is the festival of the wheat harvest of the Mediterranean and of first fruits such as olives, dates, grapes, and figs. Traditionally, dairy foods are eaten on *Shavuot*.

Minor festivals and additional fast days

There are other festivals which form a part of Jewish life but which are without restrictions on work:

Hanukah (December) commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Maccabees in 168 BCE after it had been desecrated by the Syrian and the Greek armies. Rabbinic legend recounts that only one jar of oil with the High Priest's seal on it was found which was fit for use to light the Temple *menorah* (seven-branched candlestick), but by a miracle the little jar lasted for eight whole days until fresh oil could be obtained. *Hanukah* lasts for eight days, and for each day one additional candle on the *Hanukiah* (a nine-branched candelabrum) is lit at home and in the *synagogue*. It has a lamp for each of the eight days with an additional serving light. Sometimes large *Hanukiyyot* are erected outside the *synagogue* and in city squares. Some families give gifts to children at this time.

Purim (February/March) is the day that commemorates the story found in the Book of Esther about the saving of the Jews of the Persian empire from the evil government minister Haman. On this day children dress up and the *synagogue* services include the reading of the Book of Esther, with the worshippers booing and hissing whenever Haman's name is mentioned. Presents are given to friends as well as gifts to the poor. It is a time marked by fancy dress parties and general merry-making.

Yom Hashoa (April/May) is Holocaust Remembrance Day, marked by the lighting of candles and by communal services or meetings to commemorate the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis in the middle of the twentieth century. In the wider UK society, recent years have seen the development of the observance of a Holocaust Memorial Day, in which people of all religious traditions and the general public may participate.

Yom Haatzma'ut (May) is Israeli Independence day and is celebrated in many *synagogues* by a service.

Tishah Be-Av (July/August) commemorates the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE and the Second Temple in 70 CE as well as other calamities affecting the Jewish people. It is widely observed as a fast day.

There are also a number of other fasts that are observed by Jews to varying degrees. For example, the day before *Purim* is the *Fast of Esther*.

Further Materials on Jews in the UK

For a more extensive introduction to Jews in the UK, see the chapter on 'Introducing Jews in the UK', in P Weller, ed (2007), *Religions in the UK: A Directory, 2007-10*, Derby: Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby in association with the University of Derby, pp 203-221, to which acknowledgement is made for having drawn upon some of the materials in summarised and, where appropriate, updated form.

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