

prophet Micah's saying, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:80)

While Reform Judaism was at first strongest in Germany, various branches of government there would recognize only a single kind of Judaism, and this was usually traditional Orthodoxy. However, in the United States, with its strict separation of religion and politics (or church and state), there were no such restrictions, and Reform Judaism was able to flourish. In 1885, American Reform Jews gathered in Pittsburgh to draft a statement of principles. We can summarize them this way.

1. Every religion attempts "to grasp the Infinite," and in every book of revelation there is "the consciousness of the indwelling of God in man." Judaism has developed "the highest conception of the God-idea."
2. The Bible records the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as the priests of the one God. This makes the Bible "the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction." Modern scientific discoveries are not incompatible with the teachings of the Bible, which was written at a time when people did not understand as much as we do now about how nature works.
3. The 613 Laws of Moses were designed for "the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine." Many of these laws are no longer "adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization," and do not "elevate and sanctify our lives." The only parts of the Mosaic Law that are still binding are the general moral laws.
4. All the Mosaic and rabbinical laws that "regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation."
5. The time of "Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men" is approaching. "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state."
6. Judaism is "a progressive religion," changing over time to spread the message of monotheism and morality. Christianity and Islam grew out of Judaism, and "we appreciate their providential mission, to aid in the spreading of monotheistic and moral truth." "We extend the hand of fellowship to all who cooperate with us in the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men."
7. While Judaism teaches that the soul is immortal, "We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism, the beliefs both in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden (Hell and Paradise) as abodes for everlasting punishment and reward."
8. Social justice is the central concern in Judaism. "In full accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relations between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the



basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society."

The Central Conference of American Rabbis met in 1937 in Columbus, Ohio. Under the impact of the horrific persecution of Jews in Europe, they revised parts of the Pittsburgh Platform. They re-emphasized the idea that Jews are a people, bound by a common history and religious heritage. They also stressed the importance of the synagogue and encouraged the use of Hebrew in liturgy.



Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786)

The Father of Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment



FIGURE 6.6 Moses Mendelssohn. Imagno/Getty Images.

The first Jew to become widely known across Europe was Moses Mendelssohn. He studied not only his own tradition, but also the Enlightenment thinkers of the time. His brilliance was recognized in 1763 when he entered a literary contest and won the Prize of the Prussian Academy of the Arts, defeating the philosopher Immanuel Kant. While traditional Judaism had emphasized the Talmud, Mendelssohn said that the Bible should be the basic text in Jewish education. He helped to write a translation of the Bible into literary German, and within a generation most Jewish households in central Europe had a copy of this Bible. Two of Mendelssohn's grandchildren – Felix and Fanny – had outstanding careers as composers of music.

Conservative Judaism

By 1880 Reform Judaism had become the most popular form in the United States, and if the population had simply grown without immigration, then the number of more traditional Jews would have dwindled even further by the mid-20th century. However, between 1880 and 1920 there was a huge Jewish immigration into the United States from Russia, Poland, and Eastern Europe. These people were mostly traditional Jews whose religious views had not been affected much by the Enlightenment. They did not want to drop traditional customs and laws. As they moved into American cities such as New York, however, many did see the appeal of being a part of the culture around them. And so many, while not becoming Reform Jews, became less traditional than Orthodox Jews, those who stayed committed to the traditional interpretations and practices of Jewish life. By the early 20th century, there was a new kind of Judaism for them. It was called Conservative Judaism in the U.S. and **Masorti** (traditional) Judaism elsewhere. It would keep many of the traditional elements of Judaism – Hebrew as the language of prayer, kosher dietary laws, observance of the Sabbath – but would let people adapt themselves to modern culture and to science. In 1902 in New York, Solomon Schechter founded the Jewish Theological Seminary to train rabbis in the new Conservative movement.

Reconstructionist Judaism

One of the more influential rabbis at the Jewish Theological Seminary was Mordechai Kaplan (d. 1983), who taught there for over fifty years. Born in Lithuania, he started his career as an Orthodox rabbi. Judaism, he said, “is the sum of everything about Jewish people,” not just their religious beliefs and rituals. He promoted the idea of Jewish community centers, where the whole culture of Jews would be fostered. He especially wanted to reach the many secularized Jews he saw all around him, people who had stopped observing religious rituals but who still considered themselves Jewish.

In 1922 Kaplan founded the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, and in 1934 he published *Judaism as a Civilization*. Gradually he developed a new form of Judaism that he called Reconstructionism. The major difference between this movement and Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative Judaism is its **religious naturalism**, the tendency to stress ethical values and spirituality as natural parts of human life, rather than stemming from supernatural sources. Kaplan taught that God is not a supernatural person, but a force or energy that improves human life. “God is the power that makes for salvation,” the sum of all natural processes that allow humans to live meaningful, fulfilled lives. Kaplan wrote that “to believe in God means to take for granted that it is man’s destiny to rise above the brute and to eliminate all forms of violence and exploitation from human society.” (Kaplan quoted in “Reconstructionist Judaism,” <http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/15963>). He also rejected the idea that the Jews are God’s Chosen People. This claim, he said, only alienates Jews from the rest of humankind.

For many Jews, Kaplan’s naturalism was incompatible with the Torah as revelation from a personal God, and so Reconstructionist Judaism has never attracted many members. Worldwide, there are fewer than 100 Reconstructionist synagogues. In 1945 the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada accused Kaplan of “atheism [and]



heresy," and of "disbelief in the basic tenets of Judaism." He was excommunicated and his *Sabbath Prayer Book* was burned during a ceremony at a hotel in New York City.

The Rituals of Judaism

Jewish life centers on sanctifying everyday life – that is, making it holy. The center is the family, and so many rituals are observed in the home, such as the weekly Sabbath dinner, the Passover Seder, and Hanukkah celebrations.

The *shabas*, or Sabbath, is observed each week from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday. Members of the family finish their work on Friday afternoon, bathe, and put on fresh clothes. After sundown, the family gathers in the home for a meal prepared earlier. The food is blessed and there are other prayers. On Friday evening or Saturday morning the family goes to the synagogue or temple in the morning, where they worship and hear readings from the Torah. Orthodox Jews follow the traditional laws forbidding work during the Sabbath. Since driving is considered work, Orthodox and Conservative Jews often walk to the synagogue for services. Many consider turning on electrical devices to be work, and so they use pre-set timers.

The most important object in any synagogue or temple is the Torah scroll. It is kept in the *ark*, an ornamented cabinet at the front of the hall where a lamp burns to mark its presence. An important part of the service is opening the curtains in front of the ark and removing the Torah scroll to read it to the congregation.

Like most traditions, Judaism has rituals to mark the major events in life. Eight days after a boy is born, there is the *bris*, circumcision. The transition to adulthood is marked by a **Bar Mitzvah** for boys and a **Bat Mitzvah** for girls (in non-Orthodox communities) at age 12–13. *Bar* means son, and *Bat* means daughter; *Mitzvah* means commandment. So Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah means that the young man or woman is now bound by the law. While no ceremony is required to mark this transition, and none is mentioned in the Talmud, over the last century most Jewish families have chosen to have a ceremony in a synagogue or temple, and then a reception in a party setting. At Sabbath services the young man or woman is called up to recite a blessing over the Torah reading, and perhaps to lead the congregation in prayers. They may also give a short speech that begins, "Today I am a man/woman."



FIGURE 6.7 At his Bar Mitzvah ceremony, a young man holds the Torah Scrolls. © CapturedNuance/iStockphoto.

There are also rituals for Jewish weddings, such as having the couple stand under a **chuppah** or canopy, and having the groom crush a glass with his foot at the end.

At death there is a simple ceremony and burial in a plain pine coffin. Jewish law forbids embalming and requires that the body be buried within 24 hours. Just before the funeral begins, the immediate relatives of the deceased tear their garments, or the rabbi may hand them torn black ribbons to pin on their clothes, to symbolize their loss. Traditionally, after the burial, there is a seven-day period of mourning called **sitting shivah**.

In the Jewish calendar, there are several feasts associated with the seasons. The New Year is **Rosh Hashanah** in the fall. Then nine days later is **Yom Kippur**, the Day of Atonement. Together, these Days of Awe, also called the High Holy Days in the U.S., mark the season of penitence. Also in the fall is **Sukkot**, the Feast of Tabernacles, a harvest festival for which the family builds a shelter outside, covers it with branches or fronds, and eats their meals inside it. Then in December is **Hanukkah**, which commemorates the victory of the Jews rebelling against their Syrian overlords in the second century BCE. In the spring is Passover, the celebration of the liberation of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt, as told in Exodus. At a special dinner called the **Seder**, the family eats unleavened bread to commemorate the speedy exit of the Hebrews from Egypt. The wine is blessed and there are special prayers.

Judaism Today

Today there are 13.3 million Jews worldwide. Half live in the Americas, with some 6.5 million in the U.S. About 37% live in the State of Israel and 12% in Europe and Russia. In the U.S., according to the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey, 35% of Jews identify themselves as Reform, 26% as Conservative, 10% as Orthodox, and 2% as Reconstructionist. In the United Kingdom there are about 350,000 Jews. Some 20% are Reform or Liberal, an approach to Reform Judaism that developed in the U.K.

As we have seen, Judaism has changed significantly over the centuries. Indeed, until the late 15th century, there was no such term as "Judaism." There were Jews, of course, and the laws by which they lived. They were a people – spread across the globe and thus diverse in culture, but related nonetheless by being members of "a great nation" who struggled to maintain fidelity to the one God. However, the term "Judaism" refers to an ideology (set of ideas) reinforced by practices and rituals and supported by institutions. It was coined in Europe, as a parallel to the term "Christianity" – a term coined only a few centuries earlier to refer to the *raison d'être* for "Christendom" (Christian religio-political institutions and the vast domains they governed). As we saw in Chapter 4, this kind of terminology signals what Peter Berger would call "objectification" or "reification" of a people's way of life – making the dynamic flow of a people's ways of acting and thinking "into a thing" (from the Latin *res*, "thing"). We shall see in the next section that the reification of Christianity led to a kind of rigidity: significant changes in the structure of Christianity became difficult at best. They often required revolutionary action.

However, this is not the case in Judaism. There have been many interpretations of Judaic teachings, and diverse interpretations coexist among Jews today. While most religious Jews accept the traditional language of God, covenant, Israel, Messiah, and the World to Come,



PART II USING THE TOOLS: SURVEYING WORLD RELIGIONS

they are flexible in their interpretations of these words. Reconstructionist Jews do not believe in a personal God, for example, and neither do some Reform Jews, including rabbis. Conservative Judaism requires belief in God, but leaves the description of “God” quite open. Similarly, the Messiah is understood by many Jews to be a better time in the future, rather than a liberating king. And many do not believe literally in an apocalyptic World to Come, or even in a personal life after death.

Yet the core teaching of Judaism from ancient times to the present remains that the people of Israel were chosen by God to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” God established a covenant with Abraham and renewed it with Moses at Sinai, and the “people of Israel” – Jews – are bound by it today. As God’s People, they have a special responsibility, and by carrying out this responsibility they make their lives holy and set an example for the rest of the world to follow.

Unit II Christianity

The History and Teachings of Christianity

Origins

What we now call Christianity was started by Jesus of Nazareth in the first century. From birth to death, he was a Jew and presented himself as a Jewish reformer. He did not call himself “Christ” – this is a title used later by his followers. “Christ” is the English form of *Christos*, the Greek translation of “messiah,” meaning “one who is anointed (as king).” As we saw, the idea that a messiah would come to liberate Jews from foreign oppressors became important in the centuries before Jesus’ birth. The Messiah, it was said, would be a Jewish king descended from King David.

What we know about Jesus’ life comes mostly from what was written about him, decades after his death, in the *gospels*, from the Old English word for “good news.” Biblical scholars (see Chapter 3) disagree about the exact dating of the gospels but generally agree that they were written at least forty years after the events they describe. Biblical scholars also generally agree that none of the Gospels was written by people who knew Jesus personally, even though two of the four gospels are attributed to the friends of Jesus whose names they bear: Matthew and John. Still, working with scripture and other historical documents, scholars believe they can discern some facts about Jesus’ life and teachings.

Jesus grew up in the lower class in Nazareth, a town in Galilee in the northern part of Palestine (the name the Romans had given to the parts of the land of Canaan between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, now known as the state of Israel and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza). When he was about thirty, Jesus began preaching about “the kingdom of God,” “kingdom” here being a translation of the Greek word for “reign” or “rule.” (Although Palestine was ruled by Rome at the time, the language of learning was still Greek. The gospels were therefore written in Greek.) The Kingdom or Reign of God would be a world in which people lived the way God has told them to live.