
UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM

Contents

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 History of Judaism
- 1.3 Jewish Background
- 1.4 Religious Life of Jews
- 1.5 The Sacred Books
- 1.6 Prophets, Festivals, and Prayers
- 1.7 Jewish Ethics
- 1.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.9 Key Words
- 1.10 Further Readings and References

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this paper is to bring awareness among the students and impart to them the preliminary understanding about one of the world religions, namely, Judaism. In this paper, we will discuss the History of Judaism, their family set up and religious life, the role of prophets, the role of the state and the temple, the human person and his/her belief in God (Yehova), their belief in the new Messiah and life after death, their religious practices, etc.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Judaism is a religion which believes that God is one, unique, and concerned for us and our actions. Thus it can be called 'ethical Monotheism'. Judaism traces its origin to the people of ancient Israel and Judah, and their relationship with God, who is identified throughout Jewish tradition by ineffable name YHWH (Yahweh). There were two groups among the Jews (the Pharisees and the Saducees) Pharisees accept the oral tradition while Sadducees accept the written tradition. The greatness of the Jews lies in their obedience to the Torah. Obedience to the Torah liberates the human beings and gives equality.

1.2 HISTORY OF JUDAISM

The history of Judaism can be traced back to the creation of mankind, but explicitly, Jewish historical origin begins with Abraham and the Hebrews who hailed from Haran, a town in Northern Mesopotamia. The Hebrew Bible presents Israel as a distinctive, holy people or nation in relation to Yahweh. Following the creation of the world (which took place in six days), various problems between Yahweh and the newly created human beings resulted in then expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden, near destruction of the world by a flood, and the scattering of the nation when they tried to challenge God by

building the tower of Babel. Yahweh called Abraham and promised to make him and his descendants a great nation in the land of Israel if he adhered to God as the only God, and also to his commandments. The purpose was to form His own People, to reveal the divine “instructions” or Torah, and thus to bring knowledge of God or holiness, morality, order, and peace to the chaotic world. Through Isaac (son of Abraham and his wife Sarah) and Jacob, the son of Isaac (also known as Israel), the covenant is continued. Jacob had twelve sons who became the ancestors of the twelve Tribes that formed the nation of Israel.

1.3 JEWISH BACKGROUND

The family was considered to be the smallest unit, which was patriarchal in nature and members were related by bonds of marriage or kinship, ruled by the authority of the father. The family consisted of the father, mother, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, grandparents, other relatives, servants, concubines, sojourners, etc. Solidarity was maintained around the father and retributive justice was applied in terms of corporate personality. Another notable feature is that they encouraged big families for religious and economic reasons. The family functioned as a religious community, preserving religious traditions, passing it on through instructions and worship. The father was the central figure and the mother had special responsibilities, daughters had a subordinate role and sons were of supreme importance to carry on the name of the family. There was co-operate solidarity within the family, especially responsibilities to protect the family’s name and honour. Each member had to protect his uprightness of conduct.

Social positions: Women had very little part in public life. They were not noticed and had to wear veils when they ventured out of the house. It was forbidden to look at a married woman or greet her. A wife had to help her husband in his profession, and married women engaged with their husbands in their agricultural duties. Women participated in the synagogue ceremonies and in special gatherings. Women listened and did not teach or preach, and were not allowed to pronounce a blessing.

Racial purity: It was maintained at the time of Christ. Jews kept out of all possibilities of illegal marriages. Only Israelites of legitimate ancestry formed the pure Israel, because they believed that the nation was considered God-given and its purity was God’s will. The promise of the age to come was valid only for the pure Israelites.

Divisions in the Society: The rich occupied the places in the court and dominated public life. They had big well-furnished houses, expensive servants, secretaries, etc. The rich offered expensive gifts in the temple. Large sums were given as dowries to their daughters. Representatives of the rich were Merchants, men of *Sanhedrin*, tax collectors, families of the high priests and priestly aristocracy, etc. The middle class people were retail traders, crafts- men, etc. Priests as a whole belonged to this class, except those in Jerusalem who had much wealth and education. The poor people were the slaves and labourers who were considered private property and were auctioned in the market; but they could redeem themselves. There were Jew and Gentile slaves, and the former was not bound to do menial jobs. There were people who lived on chariots. It was meritorious to show hospitality to scribes. This group consisted

of the beggars in Jerusalem, workers, unemployed people, the blind, the lame, the crippled, the deaf, and the economically poor.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Describe the origin of Judaism?

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2) Describe the social life and structure of Judaism.

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1.4 RELIGIOUS LIFE OF JEWS

God is known as Yehova (*YHWH*). He is very different from the God of other religions. God is the lord of all things. Judaism is strictly monotheistic. There is only one God and there cannot be another God. God is the one who protects the entire humanity, especially the widows, orphans, and the marginalized. God reveals himself through three ways. 1) Through the media of some techniques, which are through dreams, omens, and astrology. Priests consulted God through these instruments. 2) Through prophetic revelation: through visions by listening to the word of God. 3) Apocalyptic revelation: revelation through mysteries. God reveals himself to human beings. God reveals himself through his nature. It shows God as a compassionate God who saves humanity. In the book of Exodus, God’s saving power is made manifest. God saves humanity and he reveals his plans to human beings. The religious beliefs of Judaism are mainly expressed in their prayer book, *Siddar*, a document of public piety. These are religious beliefs shared not only by Rabbis or theologians but by everyone who turns towards God in the humility of his or her heart.

1.5 THE SACRED BOOKS

In the *Torah*, God laid out instructions for life and worship, for his chosen people. The Mishnah is the most important document of Rabbinic Judaism and is based upon traditions. It is essentially a law code and is divided into six major parts called ‘Seders’ or orders. These are 1. Agricultural law, 2. Sabbath and Festival laws, 3. Family laws, 4. Civil and criminal laws, 5. Laws concerning sacrifices in the cult and 6. Laws concerning purities. The *Talmud* is the second component of the oral Torah, the commentaries to the Mishnah, which explain the meaning and significance of the Mishnah’s laws. The great and authoritative commentary to the Mishnah is the Gemara, which is also called Talmud. Ultimately we can say that Torah means law and it consists of the five books of Pentateuch. The contents of the text are the following:

1. The content of creation
2. The covenant of Noah
3. The covenant of Abraham
4. The Exodus
5. The covenant at Sinai and the wandering in the desert.

Torah regulates the life of people at all levels. The Decalogue sums up the fundamental demands of the human consciousness. The law of Moses controls human institutions such as the family, society, economy, etc. There are also laws regarding worship, rituals, and cleanliness. The Torah covers all aspects of Jewish life and they are different from other codes of law. It is given in the name of God himself and is also called the way of God. It is closely connected with the covenant. Entering into the covenant, God makes Israel his chosen people. He makes promises to them, but also sets down certain conditions. Israel must obey his voice and keep his command. It is the basic element which prepares Israel for the salvation. Its intention is to make Israel a wise people and put them in contact with God. The Torah is an important element to understand the Jewish people. The purpose of the Torah is to liberate the people. Priests are the custodians of the Torah. Priests interpret the message of the Torah to the people.

Now let us look at some of the Jewish writings.

Talmud: The Talmud is the collection of ancient rabbinic writings consisting of two things. They are Mishna and Gemara respectively. It constitutes the basis of religious authority for traditional Judaism. It has two versions. One is the Palestinian Talmud and the second is the Babylonian Talmud. The meaning of 'Talmud' itself is 'learning' or 'instructions'.

Mishna: It is the first section of the Talmud. It consists of a collection of oral interpretations of the rabbis on the Scriptures, and it was compiled in AD. 200. It is written in the Hebrew language.

Gemara; It is the second part of the Talmud. It consists chiefly of commentary on the Mishna. The language of Gemara is Aramaic and it was compiled in AD. 450.

Midrash: It is a type of interpretation and it is a typical way of interpreting texts. It was done by a group of Jews for the Hebrew community, and commented on the Hebrew Scriptures. It was written between AD. 400-1200.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) Describe the Concept of God in Judaism?

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2) What is the Torah in Judaism?

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1.6 PROPHETS, FESTIVALS AND PRAYERS

‘Prophet’ means one who speaks for God and the media between God and human beings. They regard Moses as the authentic representative of God and as the great prophet. The other prophets are Elijah, Elia, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel respectively. They denounce offences against the Torah. Prophets accuse the people when disorder occurs. Prophets cannot tolerate injustice. Their main duty is to correct the Kings and change their attitudes. When some people make huge amounts of money as profit, the prophets correct them. In a revolutionary way, the Prophets challenge the society.

David rose as king over all Israel and he selected Jerusalem as his political and religious capital. It played a foundational role in the conceptualization and development of the ancient Israelite religion. Solomon the son of David built the temple, and established the Davidic monarchy and the Jerusalem temple as the two primary institutions of ancient Israel or Judah. The temple is the sacred centre of the Israelite state. Religious practices constituted of sacrifices and prayer at the sacred altar. Circumcision was the defining mark of the religious community.

Jewish Festivals:

Passover: It is the 14th day of the 1st month (*Nisan*). God’s deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt, where they were in bondage under the Pharaoh, is remembered.

Feast of Unleavened Bread: It is celebrated from the 15th day of *Nisan* until the 21st day. They eat unleavened bread for these seven days, and during these days they make the first of the three trips a Jew has to make to Jerusalem in a year.

Feast of First Fruits: It is celebrated on the first Sunday after *Nisan* 15th. It is accompanied by the offering of the first harvested barley to God.

Feast of Weeks (Pentecost): It is celebrated fifty days after the first Sabbath following the Passover. They make the second of three annual trips to Jerusalem.

Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah): It is celebrated on the first day of the 7th month- *Tishri*. Special trumpets blasts and special offerings are made.

Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur): It is celebrated on the 10th day of the 7th month. It is a day of fasting. Special offerings are made by the high priest to atone the sins of Israel for the full year.

Feast of the Tabernacle. (Booths): It is celebrated on the 15th - 22nd day of the 7th month, and is marked by the beginning of the new agricultural year.

The third of the three trips to Jerusalem is made on these days.

Feast of Dedication (lights of Hanukkah): It was instituted around 164 BC, after the death of Antiochus Epiphanes. The temple was cleansed after he had desecrated it.

Feast of Purim (Lots): It is celebrated on the 14th and 15th day of the 12th month, *Adar*. It commemorates the time when the Jewish people living in Persia were saved from extinction.

According to Judaism, human beings are created in the likeness and image of God. It is the cause of his uniqueness in the world. Man has to develop the divine that has been granted to him. Man is assigned with the highest powers of creation. When man sins, the iniquities make him a prisoner. Humans have the freedom to choose between life and death, good and evil. In Judaism there is no myth of sins or original sin but only a man's sin, the sin of an individual. Though man is inclined to sin, he can 'return' to freedom and purity. Because, God in Judaism, forgives iniquity and transgression and sin. (Exo.34:7). The sacrificial services are for purification.

Prayers occupy an important place in the life of a pious Jew. We can say that a pious Jew's life is always encircled by the presence of *YHWH*. This awareness is very much reflected in the life a pious Jew. The pious Jews affirm that *YHWH* is the creator of the world and the whole universe etc'. *Tefilah* is the ethical prayer. It expresses the idea of human salvation. There is an immense trust in the spiritual possibilities of human beings, profound faith in the justice and goodness of God, and the hope of a better humanity. These are the essential elements in Hebrew prayers.

1.7 JEWISH ETHICS

Judaism speaks of the nearness of God as the ultimate aim, and it teaches that man is never nearer to God than when he responds in love and sympathy to the needs of others. Judaism has always taught that God wishes man to pursue justice and mercy, to have proper regard for his fellow beings, and make his contribution towards the emergence of a better social order. Jewish ethics derives its sanction from God, the author and master of life, and sees its purpose in the hallowing of all life, individual and social. The criterion for ethics is God himself. The Rabbis teach, "just as God is gracious be thou, just as he is called 'compassionate' be thou be compassionate, just as he is called Holy, be thou holy". Man is obliged to make these traits his own to resemble his maker, so far as this is humanly possible.

Concept of Life after Death: The Jewish sacred books speak very little about what happens after death, as Judaism is much more focused on actions than beliefs. According to the Torah and the Talmud, the purpose of life is to fulfill one's duties to God and one's fellow men. Another interesting thing is that the Jews believe that a Messiah will come and rule for ever. They believe that their best king was David. They believe that the messiah is the son of God. They have strong faith in the Messiah who will establish a social order and give a formal blessing. They believe it is *YHWH* who will send somebody (Messiah) to liberate them. They firmly believe that the righteous will rise that day and it will be a time of peace and restoration of the land, and organization of Israel.

The Hebrew word *Olam Ha-Ba* (the world to Come) refers to both the Messianic Age and the Afterlife. According to the Torah, death means rejoining with the ancestors. In an imagery which refers to the finality of death, it says that “the dead are like dust returning to dust”. Another image in this connection is a shadowy place called *Sheol*. It is generally a place of darkness and silence. These indicate that the soul continues to exist in some way after death. Regarding the Day of Judgment, where the rewarding or punishing of the dead according to their earthly life will take place, all the dead will be divided into groups. The thoroughly righteous and just will go for everlasting life, in *Gan Eden* (heaven). The wicked will go Gehinnom (hell).

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is the ethical concept of the Jews?

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2) What is the Jewish idea of life after death?

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3) Briefly describe the festivals of Israel?

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1.8 LET US SUM UP

Judaism is a religion of the Jews, Hebrews and Israelites. Today, when we discuss Judaism in its strict sense, this is the official religion of Israel and it is the only country where Judaism is the state religion, and the majority of the Jews are staying in this small country. At the same time, there are Jews who live all over the world. The aim of this article is to give some preliminary notion regarding this particular religion and its significance in the present scenario. As we all know, God is the ultimate reality in all religions; the followers of Judaism consider God as the supreme reality that transcends everything. Our main concern in this paper was to provide some and basic insights into one of the world religions, Judaism. The purpose was to illustrate the social positions, religious beliefs, and their firm belief in the coming of the new messiah. The novelty that prevails in the minds of the Jews is that they are the Holy and chosen people of God. Judaism as a monotheistic religion which firmly believes that the righteous will be rewarded and the evil doers will be punished.

1.9 KEY WORDS

Ethical Monotheism	Belief in One God
<i>YHWH, Yehova, Yahweh</i>	the word used by Jews when referring God.
<i>Sanhedrin</i>	meeting place of Jews on special occasions
<i>Siddar</i>	refers to the document of public piety.
<i>Tefilah</i>	it is the ethical prayer.
<i>Gan Eden</i>	it means heaven.
<i>Gehinnom</i>	it means hell.

1.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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