

Chapter 1

The Basics

According to tradition, the beginnings of the Jewish nation stemmed from God's revelation to Abraham at the beginning of the second millennium BCE. Known as Abram, he came from Ur of the Chaldeans, a Sumerian city of Mesopotamia. The Book of Genesis recounts that God called him to go to the land of Canaan: 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation' (Genesis 12:1–2). The Hebrew Bible traces the history of this tribe from patriarchal times to the Exodus from Egypt several centuries later, and eventually the conquest of the land of Canaan by Joshua in about 1200 BCE. In later books of the Bible, the period of the judges, the rise of the monarchy, the emergence of the prophets, and the eventual destruction of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms are described in detail. With the growth of rabbinic Judaism in the Hellenistic period, the Jewish faith underwent a fundamental change that profoundly transformed Jewish life until the present. This long history of the Jewish people – stretching back over nearly forty centuries – provides the historical framework for the central beliefs and practices of the Jewish religion.

The Fundamental Beliefs

1. The Unity of God: Throughout the history of the Jewish people, the belief in one God has served as the cardinal principle of the faith. From biblical times to the present, Jews daily recite the Shema prayer: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.' According to Scripture, God alone is to be worshipped. Continuing this tradition, the sages of the early rabbinic period stressed that any form of polytheistic belief is abhorrent. For thousands of years, Jews have proclaimed their belief and trust in the one God who

created the universe and rules over creation. Such a claim is unconditional and absolute.

The Prophet Isaiah

In the sixth century BCE the prophet Isaiah proclaimed his conviction in the one true God:

I am the Lord, and there is no other,
besides me there is no God ...
I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe,
I the Lord do all these things. (Isaiah 45:5a, 7)

2. Creation: According to Genesis 1, God created Heaven and Earth. This belief is a central feature of the synagogue service. In the synagogue hymn before the reading from the Psalms, for example, God is depicted as the creator of everything:

Blessed be He who spoke, and the world existed:
Blessed be He;
Blessed be He who was the master of the world in the beginning.¹

In rabbinic literature scholars speculated about the nature of the creative process. In Genesis Rabbah (midrash on Genesis) for example, the idea of the world as a pattern in the mind of God is expressed in relation to the belief that God looked into the Torah and created the world. Here the Torah is conceived as a type of blueprint. In the Middle Ages, a number of Jewish theologians believed that God created the universe *ex nihilo*. The kabbalists, however, interpreted the doctrine of *ex nihilo* in a special sense. God, they maintained, should be understood as the Divine Nothing because, as He is in and of himself, nothing can be predicated. The Divine is beyond human understanding. Creation *ex nihilo* thus refers to the creation of the universe out of God, the Divine Nothing. This occurred, they argued, through a series of divine emanations.

3. Divine Transcendence and Immanence: For Jews, God is conceived as the transcendent creator of the Universe. Thus in Genesis 1:1–2, He is described as forming heaven and earth. Throughout Scripture this theme of divine transcendence is repeatedly affirmed. In the rabbinic period Jewish scholars formulated the doctrine of the Shekhinah to denote the

divine presence. Later in the Middle Ages the doctrine of the Shekhinah was further elaborated. According to the ninth-century scholar Saadiah Gaon, the Shekhinah is identical with the glory of God, which serves as an intermediary between God and human beings during the prophetic encounter. In kabbalistic writings the Shekhinah also played an important role. As the divine power closest to the created world, the Shekhinah is the medium through which divine light passes.

Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev

The song of the nineteenth-century Hasidic master, Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, is characteristic of Jewish belief through the ages to the present:

Where I wander – You!
Where I ponder – You!
Only you. You again, always You!
You! You! You!
When I am gladdened – You!
When I am saddened – You!
Only You. You again, always You!
You! You! You!²

4. Eternity: Throughout Scripture God is described as having neither beginning nor end. This biblical teaching was later elaborated by the rabbis. According to the Talmud there is an unbridgeable gap between God and human beings. In midrashic sources God's eternal reign is similarly affirmed. Thus when Pharaoh was told by Moses and Aaron in the name of God to let the people go, Pharaoh declared that God's name is not found in the list of gods. In reply Moses and Aaron declared: O fool! The dead can be sought among the living but how can the living be sought among the dead. Our God lives, but those you mention are dead. Our God is "the living God and the everlasting King" (Jeremiah 10:10). In response Pharaoh asked whether this God was young or old, how old he was, how many cities he had conquered, how many provinces he had subdued, and how long he had been king. In reply Moses and Aaron proclaimed: 'The Power and might of our God fill the world. He was before the world was created and He will be when all the world comes to an end, and He has created thee and gave thee the spirit of life.'

5. Omnipotence and Omniscience: From biblical times the belief in God's omnipotence has been a central feature. Thus in the Book of Genesis, when Sarah expressed astonishment at the suggestion she should have a child at the age of 90, she was criticized: "The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say 'Shall I indeed bear a child now that I am old? Is anything too hard for the Lord?'" (Genesis 18:13–14). Paralleling this belief, Jews throughout the ages have affirmed that God is all-knowing. Following the biblical view, rabbinic Judaism asserted that God's knowledge is not limited by space and time. Rather, nothing is hidden from him.

Exodus Rabbah

According to the midrash, God is capable not only of doing everything, but of doing so simultaneously:

God spoke all these things saying (Exodus 20:1). God can do everything simultaneously. He kills and makes alive at one and the same movement; He strikes and heals; the prayer of the woman in travail, of them who are upon the sea or in the desert, or who are bound in the prison; He hears them all at once; whether men are in the east or west, north or south, He hearkens to all at once.³

6. Providence: In the Bible, the notion that God controls and guides the universe is an essential belief. According to Scripture, there are two types of providence: (1) general providence – God provision for the world in general; and (2) special providence – God's care for each individual. God's general providence was manifest in his freeing the ancient Israelites from Egyptian bondage and guiding them to the Promised Land. The belief in the unfolding of his plan for salvation is a further illustration of such providential care for his creatures. Linked to this concern for all is God's providential concern for every person. In the words of Jeremiah: 'I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps (Jeremiah 10:23). Subsequently, the doctrine of divine providence was elaborated in rabbinic sources. The Mishnah declares: 'Everything is foreseen.' In the Talmud we read: 'No man suffers so much as the injury of a finger when it has been decreed in heaven.'

7. Divine Goodness: 'According to the Hebrew Bible, God is the all-good ruler of the universe. In rabbinic literature, He has chosen Israel as his

messenger to all peoples – as creator and redeemer, He is the father to all. Such affirmations about God's goodness have given rise to intense speculation about the mystery of evil. In Scripture the authors of Job and Ecclesiastes explored the question why the righteous suffer, and this quest continued into the rabbinic period. Yet it was not until the Middle Ages that Jewish thinkers began to wrestle with the philosophical perplexities connected with the existence of evil. For the kabbalists, the existence of human suffering constituted a central problem of the Jewish faith. According to one tradition, evil has no objective reality. Human beings are unable to receive all the influx from the sefirot (divine emanations), and it is this inability that is the origin of evil. Another view depicts the sefirah (divine emanation) of power as an attribute whose name is evil. On the basis of such a teaching, Isaac the Blind in the thirteenth century concluded that there must be a positive root of evil and death.

8. Revelation: According to tradition, the entire Torah (Five Books of Moses) was communicated by God to the Jewish people. In the twelfth century the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides formulated this belief as one of the cardinal principles of the faith:

The Torah was revealed from Heaven. This implies our belief that the whole of the Torah found in our hands this day is the Torah that was handed down by Moses, and that it is all of divine origin. By this I mean that the whole of the Torah came unto him from before God in a manner which is metaphorically called 'speaking'; but the real nature of that communication is unknown to everybody except to Moses to whom it came.⁴

In rabbinic literature a distinction is drawn between the revelation of the Five Books of Moses and the prophetic writings. This is expressed by saying that the Torah was given directly by God, whereas the prophetic books were given by means of prophecy. The remaining books of the Bible were conveyed by means of the Holy Spirit rather than through prophecy. Nonetheless, all these writings constitute the canon of Scripture. According to the rabbis, the expositions and elaborations of the Written Law were also revealed by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Subsequently, they were passed on from generation to generation, and through this process additional legislation was incorporated. Thus traditional Judaism affirms that God's revelation was twofold and binding for all time.

9. Torah and Commandments: According to tradition, God revealed 613 commandments (mitzvot) to Moses on Mount Sinai; they are recorded in the Five Books of Moses. These prescriptions, which are to be observed

as part of God's covenant with Israel, are classified in two major categories: (1) statutes concerned with ritual performances characterized as obligations between human beings and God; and (2) judgements consisting of ritual laws that would have been adopted by society even if they had not been decreed by God (such as laws regarding murder and theft). These 613 commandments consist of 365 negative (prohibited) and 248 positive (duties to be performed) prescriptions.

Traditional Judaism maintains that Moses received the Oral Torah in addition to the Written Law. This was passed down from generation to generation and was the subject of rabbinic debate. The first authoritative compilation of the Oral Law was the Mishnah composed by Judah Ha-Nasi in the second century CE. In subsequent centuries sages continued to discuss the content of Jewish law: their deliberations are recorded in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds. Subsequently, rabbinic authorities continued the development of Jewish law by issuing answers to specific questions. In time various scholars felt the need to produce codes of Jewish law so that all members of the community would have access to the legal tradition.

10. Sin and Repentance: In the Bible, sin is understood as a transgression of God's decree. According to rabbinic Judaism, sins can be classified according to their gravity as indicated by the punishments prescribed by biblical law. The more serious the punishment, the more serious the offence. A distinction is also drawn between sins against other human beings and offences against God alone. Sins against God can be atoned for by repentance, prayer, and giving charity. In cases of offence against others, however, such acts require restitution and placation as a condition for atonement.

Yom Kippur

On the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) the faithful are to repent of their sins and ask God for forgiveness:

Our God and God of our fathers, hear our prayer; do not ignore our plea. We are neither so brazen nor so arrogant to claim that we are righteous, without sin, for indeed we have sinned.

We abuse, we betray, we are cruel. We destroy, we embitter, we falsify. We gossip, we hate, we insult. We jeer, we kill, we lie. We mock, we neglect, we oppress. We pervert, we quarrel, we rebel. We steal, we transgress, we are unkind. We are

violent, we are wicked, we are xenophobic. We yield to evil, we are zealots for bad causes ... May it therefore be your will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, to forgive us all our sins, to pardon our iniquities, to grant us atonement for all our transgressions.⁵

11. Chosen People: The concept of Israel as God's chosen people has been a constant feature of Jewish thought from biblical times to the present. Through its election Israel has been given a historic mission to bear divine truth to humanity. Divine choice demands reciprocal response. Israel is obligated to keep God's statutes and observe his laws. In doing so, the nation will be able to persuade the nations of the world that there is only one universal God. Israel is to be a prophet to the nations, in that it will bring them to salvation. In rabbinic sources the biblical doctrine of the chosen people is a constant theme. While upholding the belief that God chose the Jews from all peoples, the rabbis argued that their election was due to an acceptance of the Torah. According to the rabbis, there is a special relationship between the children of Israel and God based on love – this is the basis of the allegorical interpretations in rabbinic sources of the Song of Songs and it is also expressed in the Talmud by such sayings as: 'How beloved is Israel before the Holy One, blessed be He; for wherever they were exiled the Shekhinah (divine presence) was with them.' Rabbinic literature also emphasizes that God's election of the Jewish people is due to the character of the nation and of the patriarchs in particular; according to the Talmud, mercy and forgiveness are characteristic of Abraham and his descendants.

Prayer Book

The Kiddush prayer for the Sabbath refers to God's choice of Israel as his people:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who has hallowed us by thy commandments and hast taken pleasure in us, and in love and favour hast given us thy holy Sabbath as an inheritance, a memorial of the creation – that day being also the first of the holy convocations, in remembrance of the departure from Egypt. For thou hast chosen us and hallowed us above all nations, and in love and favour hast given us thy holy Sabbath

as an inheritance. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who hallowest the Sabbath.⁶

12. Promised Land: Throughout their history the Jewish people have longed for a land of their own. In Genesis God called Abraham to travel to Canaan, where he promised to make him a great nation. This same declaration was made to his grandson Jacob who, after wrestling with God's messenger, was renamed Israel (meaning 'he who struggles with God'). After Jacob's son Joseph became a vizier in Egypt, the Israelite clan settled in Egypt for several hundred years. Eventually Moses led them out of Egyptian bondage, and the people settled in the Promised Land. There they established a monarchy but, due to the corruption of the nation, God punished his chosen people through the instrument of foreign powers, which devastated the Northern Kingdom in the eighth century BCE and the Southern Kingdom two centuries later.

Though the Temple lay in ruins and Jerusalem was destroyed, Jews who had been exiled to Babylonia had not lost their faith in God. Sustained by their belief that God would deliver them from exile, a number of Jews sought permission to return to their former home. In 538 BCE King Cyrus of Persia allowed them to leave, and under the leadership of Joshua and Zerubbabel restoration of the Temple began. Centuries later, however, the Temple was destroyed by the Romans and the Jews were bereft of a homeland. The glories of ancient Israel had come to an end, and the Jews were destined to live among the nations. In their despair the nation longed for a messianic figure of the House of David who would lead them back to Zion. Basing their beliefs on prophecies in Scripture, they foresaw a period of redemption in which earthly life would be transformed and all nations would bow down to the one true God. Such a vision animated rabbinic reflection about God's providential plan for his chosen people.

Psalms of Solomon

The Psalms of Solomon extol the messianic king who will rebuild the land and draw all nations to Zion:

He shall gather together a holy people whom he shall lead in righteousness. And he shall judge the tribes of the people that has been sanctified by the Lord his God ... And he shall divide

them according to their tribes upon the land. And neither sojourner nor alien shall sojourn with them any more. He shall judge peoples and nations in the wisdom of his righteousness. Selah. The people of the nations shall serve him under his yoke: He shall glorify the Lord openly in all the earth; And he shall purge Jerusalem making it holy as of old. So that nations shall come from all the ends of the earth to see his glory. (Psalms of Solomon 17:26, 28–31a)⁷

13. Prayer: According to the Jewish tradition, human beings are able to communicate with God individually or collectively; in response, God answers the prayers that are addressed to him. In Scripture He is portrayed as a personal Deity who created human beings in his image; as a consequence, they are able to attain this exalted position. The Bible itself lists more than eighty examples of both formalized and impromptu worship. Initially, no special prayers were required for regular prayer, but later, worship services became institutionalized through sacrifices and offerings. In ancient Israel three types of sacrifice were offered in the Temple: animal sacrifice made as a burnt offering for sin, meal offerings, and libations. The rituals and practices prescribed for the Temple sacrifice are set down in Leviticus chapters 2 and 23 and Numbers chapters 28 and 29.

The Mishnah states that priests serving in the Second Temple participated in a short liturgy comprising the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4), the Ten Commandments and the Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:24–6). During this period the entire congregation began to pray at fixed times, and an order of prayers has been attributed to the men of the Great Assembly. Regular services were held four times daily by the delegations of representatives from the 24 districts of the country. These services were referred to as: shaharit (morning), musaf (additional), minhah (afternoon), and neilat shearim (evening). Several orders of prayers coexisted until Gamaliel II produced a regularized standard after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Prayers then officially replaced the sacrifices that could no longer be made. This new ritual, referred to as ‘service of the heart’, was conducted in the synagogue.

Shema

The Shema is a central prayer of the Jewish liturgy. It is made up of three passages: Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Deuteronomy 11:13–21; Numbers

15:37–41. Recited every day, the first paragraph contains the phrase, ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One’:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One. Blessed be his name, whose glorious kingdom is for ever and ever. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words which I command this day, shall be upon thine heart and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the door-posts of thy house and upon thy gates.⁸

14. Love and Fear of God: Within the Jewish faith, the love of God is of central importance. Thus Deuteronomy declares: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5). In the Mishnah this verse is quoted to demonstrate that human beings must love God not only for the good that befalls them, but for the evil as well. This explanation is based on an interpretation of three expressions in this verse: ‘with all your heart’ means with both the good and evil inclinations; ‘with all your soul’ means even if God takes away your soul through martyrdom; ‘with all your might’ means with all your wealth. According to the Mishnah the injunction to love God involves being faithful even if this requires the loss of one’s wealth or one’s life.

In rabbinic sources loving God is perceived as living according to his decrees. Among medieval Jewish thinkers, however, stress was placed on mystical love. Thus in *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, the ninth-century Jewish philosopher Saadia Gaon asks how it is possible to have knowledge of God, much less love him, since we have not perceived him with our senses. In response, he asserts that certain statements are believed as true even though they cannot be proved on empirical grounds. According to Saadia, it is possible to acquire knowledge of God through rational speculation and the miracles afforded by Scripture. Hence truth about God is able to mingle with the human spirit.

In *Duties of the Heart*, the eleventh-century Jewish philosopher Bahya ibn Pakuda sees the love of God as the final goal – this is the aim of all virtues. However, the only way is through fear of him. For Bahya such

fear involves abstinence from worldly desires. When human beings contemplate God's power and greatness, they bow before his majesty until God stills this fear. Individuals who love God in this fashion have no other interest than serving him. In this regard Bahya quotes the saint who used to proclaim at night: 'My God! Thou hast made me hungry and left me naked. Thou hast caused me to dwell in night's darkness and hast shown me thy power and might. Yet even if thou wouldst burn me in fire, I would continue only to love thee and rejoice in thee.'

15. Messiah: The term 'Messiah' is an adaptation of the Hebrew *Ha-Mashiah* (the Anointed), a term frequently used in Scripture. In the Second Book of Samuel the view was expressed that the Lord had chosen David and his descendants to reign over Israel to the end of time. With the fall of the Davidic Empire after Solomon's death, there arose the view that the house of David would eventually rule over the two divided kingdoms as well as neighbouring peoples. Such an expectation paved the way for the vision of a transformation of earthly life. During this time there was intense speculation about the nature of the Messiah. In the Book of Zechariah, for example, two messianic figures are depicted. Later, among the Dead Sea sect, these two figures were joined by a third personage, the prophet of the latter days.

Despite such a proliferation of messianic figures, it was the Davidic Messiah who came to dominate Jewish thought. According to tradition, this king-Messiah will put an end to all wars on earth, make a covenant with the righteous and slay the wicked. Such a conviction served as the basis for subsequent rabbinic reflection about messianic redemption, the ingathering of the exiles, and salvation in the World-to-Come. As time passed, the rabbis elaborated the themes found in the Bible and Jewish literature of the Second Temple period. In the midrashim and the Talmud they formulated an elaborate eschatological scheme divided into various stages. In their depiction of the Messiah, scholars formulated the doctrine of another Messiah, the son of Joseph, who would precede the king-Messiah, the Messiah ben David. According to legend, this Messiah will engage in battle with Gog and Magog, the enemies of Israel, and be slain. Only after this will the Messiah ben David arrive in glory.

16. Afterlife: Though there is no explicit reference to the hereafter in the Hebrew Bible, a number of expressions are used to refer to the realm of the dead. Though such references point to a biblical conception of an afterlife, there is no indication of a clearly defined concept. It was only later in the Graeco-Roman world that such a notion began to take shape. The idea of a future world in which the righteous would be compensated for the ills they suffered in this life was prompted a failure to justify the

ways of God by any other means. According to biblical theology, individuals were promised rewards for obeying God's law and punishments were threatened for disobedience. As time passed, however, it became clear that life did not operate in accordance with such a tidy scheme. In response to this dilemma, the rabbis developed a doctrine of reward and punishment in the hereafter. Such a belief helped Jews to cope with suffering in this life, and it also explained, if not the presence of evil in the world, then at least the value of creation despite the world's ills.

According to rabbinic Judaism, the World-to-Come (Olam Ha-Ba) is divided into several stages, beginning with the time of messianic redemption. According to the Talmud, this is to take place on earth after a period of calamity. Peace will reign throughout nature; Jerusalem will be rebuilt; and at the close of this era, the dead will be resurrected and rejoined with their souls, and a final judgement will come upon all humanity. Those who are judged righteous will enter into heaven whereas the wicked will be punished everlastingly.

Basic Practices

1. Places of Worship: Scripture relates that Moses made a portable shrine, following God's instructions. This structure travelled with the Israelites in the desert and was placed in the centre of the camp in an open courtyard. The fence surrounding it consisted of wooden pillars from which a cloth curtain was suspended. Located in the eastern half of the courtyard, the sanctuary measured 30 by 10 cubits (a cubit being roughly 18 inches). At its end stood the Holy of Holies, which was separated by a veil hanging on five wooden pillars on which were woven images of the cherubim. Inside the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant, the table on which the shewbread was placed, the incense altar, and the menorah (candelabrum). In the courtyard there was also an outer altar on which sacrifices were made, as well as a brass laver for priests.

Eventually, this structure was superseded by the Temple, which was built by Solomon in Jerusalem in the tenth century BCE. Standing within a royal compound – which also consisted of the palace, a Hall of Judgement, the Hall of Cedars, and a house for Solomon's wife – the Temple was 60 cubits long, 20 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high. The main building consisted of the Holy of Holies. Within the Holy of Holies stood the Ark, which contained the Two Tablets of the Covenant on which the Ten Commandments were written. From the time of Solomon's reign, the Temple served as the site for prayer and the offering of sacrifices to God.

However, alongside the Temple, the synagogue also functioned as a place of worship. After the exile in the sixth century BCE, Jews in Babylonia established this institution for public worship, Jews coming together in synagogues to study and pray. On their return to Jerusalem in the latter part of the sixth century BCE, the Jewish populace continued to gather in synagogues as well as offering sacrifices in the Temple. Since the Temple's destruction in 70 CE, however, synagogues have served as the only places of worship up until the present day.

Synagogue

God's presence was manifest in the synagogue, where periods for daily prayer were fixed:

'My love is like a gazelle' (Song of Songs 2:9). As the gazelle leaps from place to place, and from fence to fence, and from tree to tree, so God jumps and leaps from synagogue to synagogue to bless the children of Israel.⁹

2. Worship: For the Jewish people, prayer served as the vehicle by which they expressed their joys, sorrows and hopes. It has played a major role in the religious life of the nation, especially in view of the successive crises and calamities in which the Jews have been involved throughout their history. In such situations Jews continually turned to God for assistance. In addition to personal prayer, Jews have prayed communally. In ancient times Jewish communal worship centred on the Temple in Jerusalem. With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, sacrificial offerings were replaced by the prayer service in the synagogue. To enhance uniformity, fixed periods for daily prayer were introduced, the times of which corresponded to those when sacrifices had been offered in the Temple. By the time of completion of the Talmud in the sixth century, the essential features of the synagogue service were established, but it was only in the eighth century that the first prayer book was composed by Rav Amram, Gaon of Sura.

In the order of service the first central feature is the Shema. In accordance with the commandment 'You shall talk of them when you lie down and when you arise' (Deuteronomy 6:7), Jews are commanded to recite this prayer during the morning and evening service. The second major feature of the synagogue service is the Amidah (Eighteen Benedictions). These

prayers were composed over a long period of time and received their full form in the second century. They consist of 18 separate prayers plus an additional benediction dealing with heretics. From earliest times the Torah was read in public gatherings; subsequently, regular readings of the Torah on Sabbaths and festivals were instituted. Other features of the synagogue service are the kaddish prayer, which takes several forms, and the Hallel, consisting of Psalms 113–18. Since the thirteenth century, the three daily services have concluded with the recitation of the Alenu prayer, which proclaims God as king.

3. Sabbath: Genesis 2:1–3 declares: ‘The heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all his work which He had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which He had done in creation.’ This passage serves as the basis for the decree that no work should be done on the Sabbath day. During their sojourn in the wilderness of Zin, the Israelites were first commanded to observe the Sabbath. They were told to work on five days of the week when they should collect a single portion of manna; on the sixth day they were instructed to collect a double portion for the following day, which was to be a ‘day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath of the Lord’ (Exodus 16:23).

By the time the Sanhedrin began to function, the observance of the Sabbath was regulated by Jewish law. Following the injunction of Exodus 20:10, the primary aim was to refrain from work. In the Torah only a few provisions are delineated: kindling a fire, ploughing and harvesting, carrying from one place to another. Such regulations were expanded by the rabbis, who listed 39 categories of work (which were involved in the building of the Tabernacle). In the Talmud these categories were discussed and expanded to include within each category a range of activities. In order to ensure that individuals did not transgress these prescriptions, the rabbis enacted further legislation, which serves as a fence around the law.

The Sabbath itself commences on Friday at sunset. A little while before sunset Sabbath candles are traditionally lit by the woman of the house, who recites the relevant blessing. In the synagogue, the service preceding Friday maariv takes place at twilight. Traditionally, when the father returns home from the synagogue, he blesses the children. At the Sabbath table, the father recites the kiddush prayer over a cup of wine. This is followed by the washing of the hands and the blessing of bread. The meal is followed by the singing of hymns (*zemirot*) and concludes with the Grace after Meals. On Sabbath morning, there is a special liturgy consisting of a morning service, the reading of the Torah and the Haftarah

(reading from the prophets), and the additional service. At the end of the Sabbath, the evening service takes place and is followed by the Havdalah service.

Lekhah Dodi

The Lekhah Dodi (Come my beloved) prayer is recited in anticipation of the coming of the Sabbath:

Come, my beloved, with chorus of praise, Welcome Bride Sabbath, the Queen of days.

‘Keep and Remember’! – in one divine word, He that is one, made his will heard; One is the name of him, one is the Lord! His are the fame and the glory and praise!

Sabbath, to welcome thee, joyful we haste, Fountain of blessing from ever thou wast – First in God’s planning thou fashioned the last, Crown of his handiwork, chiefest of days ...¹⁰

4. Pilgrim Festivals: According to the Book of Deuteronomy, Jews are to celebrate three pilgrim festivals each year: ‘Three times each year shall all your males appear before the Lord your God at the place which He will choose, at the feast of unleavened bread, at the feast of weeks, and at the feast of booths’ (Deuteronomy 16:16). The first of these festivals is Passover (Pesach) which is celebrated for eight days from the 15th to the 22nd of Nisan.

- a. Pesach (Passover): Passover commemorates the Exodus from Egypt. In preparation for this festival, Jewish law stipulates that all leaven must be removed from the house. On the night before the 14th of Nisan a formal search is made for any remains of leaven. This is then put aside and burned on the following morning. The first night of Passover is celebrated in the home ceremony referred to as the seder. This is done to fulfil the biblical commandment to relate the story of the Exodus to one’s son. The symbols placed on the seder table serve to remind those present of Egyptian bondage, God’s redemption, and the celebration in Temple times. They include matzah (unleavened bread), four cups of wine, the cup of Elijah, bitter herbs, parsley, haroset (mixture of apples, nuts, cinnamon and wine), a roasted shank-bone, a roasted egg, and salt water.

- b. Shavuot (Festival of Weeks): This festival is celebrated for two days on the 6th and 7th of Sivan and commemorates the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. Synagogues are traditionally decorated with flowers or plants, and dairy food is consumed during the festival.
- c. Sukkot (Booths): The third pilgrim festival commemorates God's protection of the Israelites during their sojourn in the desert. Leviticus commands that Jews are to construct booths during this period as a reminder that the people of Israel dwelt in booths when they fled from Egypt (Leviticus 23:42–3). During this festival a sukkah (booth) is constructed and its roof is covered with branches of trees and plants. For the duration of Sukkot, meals are to be eaten inside the sukkah. On each day of the seven days of the festival, beginning on the 15th of Tishri, the lulav (palm branch) is waved in every direction, symbolizing God's presence throughout the world. Holding the four species (palm, myrtle, willow and citron), Jews make one circuit around the Torah which is carried onto the bimah (platform) on the first six days. During this circuit hoshanah prayers are recited. In conformity with Leviticus 23:36 ('On the eighth day you shall hold a holy convocation ... it is a solemn assembly'), Shemini Atzeret and Simhat Torah are celebrated following the festival.

5. New Year and Day of Atonement: In ancient times the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) took place on one day; it is presently observed for two days on the 1st and 2nd of Tishri, marking the beginning of the Ten Days of Penitence, which end on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur).

- a. New Year: According to the Mishnah, all human beings will pass before God on the New Year; the Talmud expands this idea by stressing the need for self-examination. In rabbinic literature each person stands before the Throne of God, and judgement on every person is entered on the New Year and sealed on the Day of Atonement. On Rosh Hashanah the Ark curtain, reading desk and Torah Scroll mantles are decked in white, and the rabbi, cantor and person who blows the shofar (ram's horn) all wear a white robe (kittle). During the service the shofar is repeatedly sounded, calling sinners to repent. Traditionally, it was a custom to go to the seaside or the banks of a river on the afternoon of the first day to perform the ceremony of Tashlikh, which symbolizes the casting of one's sins into a body of water.
- b. Day of Atonement: The Ten Days of Penitence begin with the New Year and last until the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). This is

considered the most solemn time of the year when all are judged and their fate determined for the coming year. On Yom Kippur it is the tradition to fast from sunset until nightfall the following day. In the synagogue special prayers for forgiveness are recited. At the end of the service the shofar is sounded.

Moral Failure

In the Yom Kippur service, moral failure is confessed:

We have sinned against you through bribery. And we have sinned against you through slander. We have sinned against you through gluttony. And we have sinned against you through wanton glances. We have sinned against you by rashly judging others. And we have sinned against you through selfishness. We have sinned against you through stubbornness. And we have sinned against you through gossip. We have sinned against you through baseless hatred. And we have sinned against you by succumbing to dismay.

For all these sins, forgiving God, forgive us, pardon us and grant us atonement.¹¹

6. Days of Joy: In the Jewish calendar there are a number of joyous festivals on which Jews are permitted to follow their daily tasks:

- a. Hanukkah: This festival is celebrated for eight days beginning on 25 Kislev – it commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over the Seleucids in the second century CE. The central observance of this festival is the kindling of the festive lamp (menorah) on each of the eight days.
- b. Purim: This festival is celebrated on the 14th of Adar to commemorate the deliverance of Persian Jewry from the plans of Haman, the chief minister of King Ahasuerus. In most congregations Purim resembles a carnival – children frequently attend the reading from the scroll of Esther in fancy dress, and whenever Haman's name is mentioned, worshippers stamp their feet and whirl noisemakers (greggers).
- c. Rosh Hodesh: This festival of joy occurs with the New Moon each month. There is a special liturgy that celebrates this festive occasion.

- d. Tu Bi-Shevat: This joyous festival is the New Year for Trees which takes place on the 15th of Shevat. Among the fruits eaten on Tu Bi-Shevat were those of the Holy Land. In Israel new trees are planted during this festival.
- e. Israel Independence Day: This is Israel's national day, which commemorates the proclamation of its independence on the 5th of Iyyar, 1948. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel declared it a religious holiday and established a special order of service for evening and morning worship.

Hanukkah

On each of the eight nights of Hanukkah candles are lit, one the first night, two the second, adding one candle each subsequent night:

Praised are you, Lord our God, king of the universe whose mitzvot (commandments) add holiness to our life and who gave us the mitzvah to light the lights of Hanukkah.

Praised are you, Lord our God, king of the universe who accomplished miracles for our ancestors in ancient days and in our time ...

Rock of Ages, let our song praise your saving power. You amid the raging throng were our sheltering tower. Furious they assailed us, but your help availed us. And your word broke their sword when our own strength failed us.¹²

7. Life-cycle Events: In Scripture the first commandment is to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28). In biblical times childbirth took place in a kneeling position or sitting on a special birthstool. Scriptural law imposes various laws on ritual purity and impurity on the mother. In ancient times the birth of a child was accompanied by numerous superstitious practices, including the use of amulets to ward off the evil eye. The naming of a newborn child takes place on one of two occasions: a baby boy is named at the circumcision ceremony; a baby girl is named in the synagogue. The custom of redeeming first-born male children is based on the biblical prescription that first-born sons should be consecrated to the Temple.

According to Jewish law, all male children are to undergo circumcision as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham's offspring. Jewish ritual circumcision involves the removal of the entire foreskin. It is to be

performed on the eighth day after the birth of the child by a person who is properly qualified (mohel). At 13 a boy attains the age of Jewish adulthood. From this point, he is accounted as part of the quorum for prayer (minyan). The bar mitzvah ceremony involves prayer with tefillin (phylacteries) for the first time, and reading from the Torah. Unlike bar mitzvah there is no legal requirement for a girl to take part in a religious ceremony to mark her religious majority (at the age of 12). However, in modern times the practice of bat mitzvah for girls has become commonplace.

Bar Mitzvah

The following prayer is for a bar mitzvah:

May He who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless this youth who was called up today in honour of God and in honour of the Torah, and to give thanks for all the good that God has done for him. As a reward for this, may the Holy One, praised be He, keep him and grant him life. May He incline his heart to be perfect with him, to study his law, to walk in his ways, to observe his commandments, statutes and judgements. May he be successful and prosperous in all his ways, and may he find grace and mercy in the eyes of God and man. May his parents deserve to raise him up to the study of the Law, to the nuptial canopy and to good deeds.¹³

8. Marriage: According to tradition, marriage is God's plan for humanity, as illustrated in the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis. In the Jewish faith it is viewed as a sacred bond as well as a means to personal fulfilment. It is more than a legal contract; rather an institution with cosmic significance, legitimized through divine authority. The purpose of marriage is to build a home, create a family and thereby perpetuate society. In modern times the traditional wedding ceremony normally follows a uniform pattern. The ceremony itself can be held anywhere, but typically it takes place in the synagogue or the synagogue courtyard.

In a traditional ceremony the groom signs the ketubah (marriage contract). He is led to the bride and covers her face with a veil. The couple are then led to the marriage canopy (huppah), accompanied by their parents. According to custom those leading the couple carry lighted

candles. When the participants are under the canopy the rabbi recites the blessing over wine and other blessings. Then the bride and groom drink from the cup. The groom then recites the traditional formula: 'Behold you are consecrated unto me with this ring according to the law of Moses and of Israel.' He then puts the ring on the bride's right index finger. To demonstrate that the act of marriage consists of two ceremonies, the ketubah is read. The seven blessings are then recited over a second cup of wine. The ceremony concludes with the groom stepping on a glass and breaking it.

Wedding Ceremony

After the rabbi takes his place under the canopy, the bridegroom is led by his father and mother to the huppah. The rabbi then says:

May he who cometh be blessed.

He who is supremely mighty; He who is supremely praised; He who is supremely great; May He bless this bridegroom and bride.

After the bride is led by her parents to the huppah, the rabbi says:

May she who cometh be blessed.

Mighty is our God. Auspicious signs, and good fortune. Praiseworthy is the bridegroom. Praiseworthy and handsome is the bride.

The rabbi then fills a goblet of wine and recites two benedictions:

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who has created the fruit of the vine.

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who has sanctified us with thy commandments, and hast commanded us concerning forbidden connections, and hast forbidden us those who are merely betrothed, but hast allowed to us those lawfully married to us through huppah and betrothal. Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, who sanctifiest Thy people Israel through huppah and betrothal.¹⁴

9. Mikveh (Ritual Bath); Leviticus 11:36 specifies that a purification ritual should take place after ritual impurity for individuals and utensils:

‘Only a spring, cistern, or collection (mikveh) shall be cleansing.’ In Temple times this was applied to a variety of causes of ritual impurity. Later, it was applied primarily to women after menstruation. It is emphasized that the purpose of immersion is not physical but spiritual cleanliness. According to tradition, husbands and wives may not have sexual relations during the days of the wife’s monthly period, nor for seven clear days afterwards. This means that among the Orthodox the wedding date is calculated to fit in with the bride’s menstrual flow so that she is married during her ‘clean period’. During the time that she is forbidden to her husband, the couple sleep in separate beds and avoid touching each other in any way. Then, after the flow has ended and seven full days have elapsed, the wife visits the ritual bath. For immersion to be valid, every inch of the surface of a woman’s body must come into contact with the ritual water so that all trace of dirt be removed. Finger and toe nails are trimmed and the hair is thoroughly combed out. Among the Strictly Orthodox, it is the practice for married women to cut off their hair and wear a wig. This has the double benefit of fulfilling the commandment that married women must cover their hair and it makes the monthly visit to the ritual bath easier to manage. When the supervisor is satisfied that the woman is completely clean and her hair free from tangles, she is directed to the ritual bath itself. There she immerses completely so that the waters cover her head, and she recites the traditional blessings. Then she can resume marital relations with her husband.

Mikveh Monologues

One woman gave an account of her own recent and unexpected experience of mikveh following a major life-changing operation, and of the almost mystical synchronicity of events which brought it about. This had led her to consider the new wider usage of mikveh as a powerful and positive experience on an individual level, beyond fertility and reproduction into all kinds of life-cycle events, with its associated concept of rebirth and renewal through water ...

Several women expressed a desire to see a new mikveh ritual instituted for other key events in their lives. One said, ‘I have a vision of a cross-communal mikveh’, and another told us of women’s centres in Israel where a particular point is made of asking the mikveh attendants to look out for signs of domestic violence injuries on women who use the mikveh. Another suggestion was that since mikveh is getting very positive responses from feminists who were

once very critical about the practice, it would be an appropriate area for the Jewish Women's Network to take a lead.¹⁵

10. Home: In Judaism, religious observance in the home is of fundamental importance. Like in the synagogue, such observance continues various traditions of the ancient Temple. The Sabbath candles, for example, recall the Temple menorah, and the dining table symbolizes the altar. Most significantly, within the home, family life is sanctified. As head of the family, the father is to exercise authority over his wife and children. He is obligated to circumcise his son, redeem him if he is the first-born, teach him Torah, marry him off and teach him a craft. Further, he is required to serve as a role model for the transmission of Jewish ideals to his offspring. Regarding women, the prevailing sentiment is that the role of the wife is to bear children and exercise responsibility for family life. Children are expected to carry out the commandment to honour and respect their parents.

Symbols of the Jewish religion characterize the Jewish home, beginning with the mezuzah on each doorpost. In Scripture it is written that 'these words' shall be written on the doorposts (mezuzot) of the house. This prescription is understood literally: two passages from Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:13–21) are copied by hand on a piece of parchment, put into a case, and affixed to the doorpost of every room in the house. At the beginning of the Sabbath the kiddush prayer is recited over wine prior to the evening meal. Before meals on the Sabbath as well as on ordinary days, a blessing over food is recited. After the meal, a Grace after Meals is said.

The cycle of the year provides various opportunities for home observances. During Passover, normal dishes are replaced. The seder itself is observed in the home; during the service the Haggadah prayer book is read, and a special seder dish is prepared which includes various symbolic foods commemorating the Exodus from Egypt. During Sukkot it is customary, as mentioned, to eat and dwell in a temporary structure (sukkah) built for the festival. During Hanukkah a festival lamp (menorah) is kindled at home on each day of the festival. Life-cycle events also provide an occasion for special observances in the home, including circumcision. At the time of mourning, friends and visitors come to the home during the seven days of mourning (shivah), where a quorum (minyan) recites prayers.

11. Dietary Laws: According to the Jewish tradition, food must be ritually fit (kosher) if it is to be eaten. The Bible declares that the laws of kashrut (dietary laws) were given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Thus

Jews are obligated to follow this legislation because of its divine origin. The laws concerning which animals, birds and fish may be eaten are contained in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:3–21. Scripture specifies that only those animals that both chew the cud and have split hooves may be eaten. No similar formula is given concerning which birds may be consumed; rather a list is given of forbidden birds such as the eagle, the owl and the raven. Regarding fish, the law states that only fish that have both fins and scales are allowed. A further category of kashrut deals with the method of killing animals for food (*shehitah*). The act of slaughter must be done with a sharpened knife without a single notch, since that might tear the animal's food- or wind-pipe. Another restriction concerning ritual food is the prohibition against eating milk and meat together.

12. Death and Mourning: Concerning death the Bible declares that human beings will return to the dust of the earth (Genesis 3:19). The rabbis of the Talmud declared that death occurs when respiration has stopped. Jewish law stipulates that no effort should be spared to save a dying patient. Yet despite such an attitude, traditional Judaism fosters an acceptance of death when it is inevitable. Once death has been determined, the eyes and mouth are closed. The body is then put on the floor, covered with a sheet, and a lighted candle is placed close to the head. Mirrors are covered in the home of the deceased, and any standing water is poured out. A dead body is not to be left unattended. The burial of the body should take place as soon as possible. After the members of the burial society have taken care of the body, they prepare it for burial. It is washed and dressed in a white linen shroud. The corpse is then placed in a coffin or on a bier before the funeral service. Traditional Jews only permit the use of a plain wooden coffin. The deceased is then borne to the grave. A marker should be placed on a newly filled grave, and a tombstone should be erected and unveiled as soon as permissible.

Judaism provides a special framework for mourning. The mourning period, known as *shivah* (seven), lasts for seven days beginning with the day of burial. During this time mourners sit on the floor or on low cushions or benches and are forbidden to shave, bathe, go to work, study the Torah, engage in sexual relations, wear leather shoes, greet others, cut their hair, or wear laundered clothing. Through these seven days, it is customary to visit mourners. *Shivah* concludes on the morning of the seventh day and is followed by mourning of a lesser intensity for thirty days known as *sheloshim* (thirty).