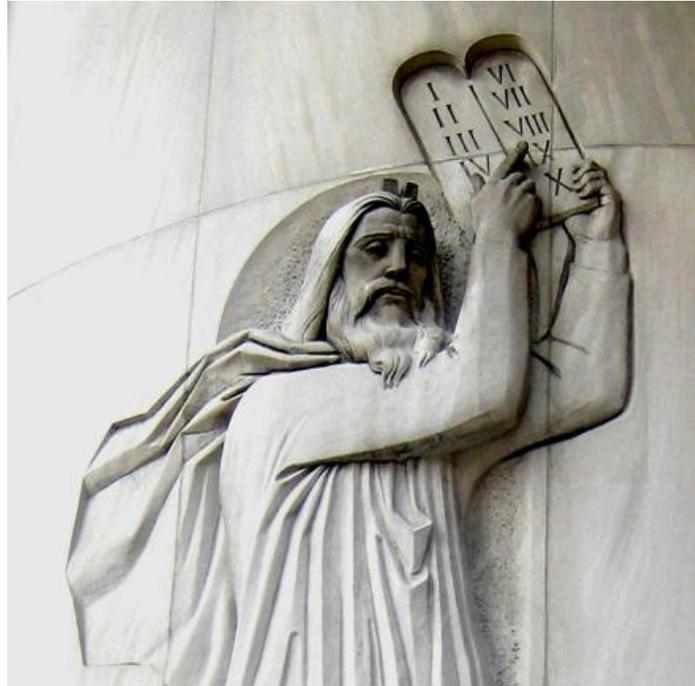


The Essentials of Judaism

Beginnings:

The Jewish faith begins with the entity that created all that is, and the assignment of the name of **God (YHWH)** to that entity by its people. According to a 2nd century BCE calculation, the creation event happened in 3761 BCE (Year One of the Jewish calendar). But when do the people of Israel come into being? Is it with **Abraham and Sarah**, who leave their families and tribe and strike out on their own into Canaan, because Abraham and God have made a covenant (perhaps 1800



BCE)? Is it when Abraham's grandson **Jacob** wrestles with God, receives the name Israel, and has twelve sons whose descendants become the twelve tribes of Israel? It might be easiest to say that it is when those descendants, still living in Egypt centuries later because of famine, are enslaved by the Egyptians - and then **Moses** rises up as a leader to take them through the Red Sea (1350 BCE?) and into the desert, where a new **covenant** is made between God and the people that centers on the Ten Commandments and the entry into the Promised Land. From any of these perspectives, Judaism begins with the recognition of a covenantal relationship between God and the people.

Central teachings and practices:

- There is only **one God**, who is the creator of all, and who desires to be in a relationship of care and concern with all of that creation. The form that relationship takes with the people of Israel is one of covenant: a binding exchange of promises. Judaism may be the oldest version of monotheism.
 - The regular expression of this belief in worship and prayer at both morning and evening is known as the Shema ["hear"]: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God; the LORD is one."
- A Jew is to live in a relationship with God. This includes:
 - Adherence to, or at least a life guided by, **torah** [law]: the Ten Commandments, the other 603 commandments, but also the entirety of the teaching of the first five books of the Bible, collectively known as the Torah

- Seeking the visions of God's justice and ethical living as outlined in the writings of the **prophets**.
- Attending to the history and expression of the covenantal relationship as it is described and celebrated in all of the writings of the **Hebrew Bible**.
- Praying to God and worshiping God both at home and in community, as a constant reminder and reactivation of that relationship. There is particular focus on **Shabbat** (a weekly day of rest and worship), **Passover** (celebrating the escape from Egypt), and the **High Holy Days** that begin the Jewish year.
- There is no centralized leadership in charge of doctrine or practice except within particular traditions; **rabbis**, learned teachers, are the expression of local authority.
- The **Bible** is the collection of sacred writings of ancient Israel; commentaries written in the centuries following come under the names Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash, which are all understood to have similar authority.
- The mystical aspects of Judaism are designated by the umbrella term **kabbalah**; practices of personal devotion and a search for union with the divine can be found in all historical branches and periods.

The main branches of Judaism:

- Over 80% of all Jews live equally divided between Israel and the United States.
- In the US, there are three major branches:
 - **Orthodox**, including Hasidim, are the most traditional groups, insisting on the divine origin of the Torah and strict adherence to its laws (for example, the kosher food laws) as continually understood by their rabbis - they comprise only 9% of the Jewish population.
 - **Conservative** - 17%. This branch occupies a middle ground of regarding the Torah as based on divine revelation but historically situated and in need of constant reinterpretation; the laws are thus binding but as reinterpreted for the contemporary situation.
 - **Reform** - 37%. In this branch, revelation is continuous and entwined with human reason, the ethical heritage of the Jewish people is of greater importance than ceremony, and the laws are not binding but are guidance - this is the most liberal branch of the religion.
 - 27% of US Jews identify as such ethnically but do not identify with any religious form at all.

Image: Moses presents the Ten Commandments (detail), Hermon A. MacNeil, 1957 - on the New York State Supreme Court building, Adams Street, Brooklyn