

polytheism the belief that there are many gods

monotheism the belief that there is only one God

Talmud the collection of early Jewish traditions, or commentaries, that explain the laws and teachings of Judaism and the Hebrew Bible, or *Tanakh*

1. The Central Teachings of Judaism

The religious and moral ideas of Judaism have had a lasting effect on Western civilization. Let's learn about four central teachings of Judaism that remain very influential today.

Monotheism Most people in ancient times believed in many gods, a belief named **polytheism**. The Israelites, later called Jews, were different because they believed that there is only one God, a belief referred to as **monotheism**. Judaism is the world's oldest monotheistic religion.

Judaism teaches that God is the **source** of morality (standards of right and wrong). These ideas of right and wrong had not always been valued by other ancient civilizations. Jews learn about and follow their religion by studying their sacred texts. Through study and prayer, many Jews feel that God is close to them in their daily lives.

Following Jewish Teachings Following the teachings in the Hebrew Bible and the **Talmud** (TAHL-muhd), a set of Jewish writings that explain the teachings of Judaism, is central to Jewish life. The Torah and the Talmud **instruct** Jews about how to lead moral lives. For example, Jews are taught to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Among Judaism's oldest and best-known laws and teachings are the Ten Commandments, which explain how to lead an upright and honorable life, as well as how to have a relationship with God. One of the commandments sets aside a holy day, the Sabbath, every week. The Sabbath, a day of rest and prayer, is still practiced by Jews and followers of other world religions, including Christianity.

The commandments also lay down standards of right and wrong, such as “You shall not steal” and “You shall not murder.”

Over time, Jewish religious leaders developed a larger set of laws and teachings, some of which refined the Bible's dietary restrictions on what foods to eat. These dietary rules are often followed during religious holidays, such as the festival of Passover. These holy days celebrate the Exodus—the freeing of the enslaved Israelites from Egypt. Jews observe these rules and practices in different ways.

This is a bronze cover to a Jewish prayer book (left), or siddur (sid-er). There are hinges on the right side of this bronze cover so that the siddur can open to the right, opposite from English books. Prayer books contain daily prayers and blessings and Jewish teachings (right).

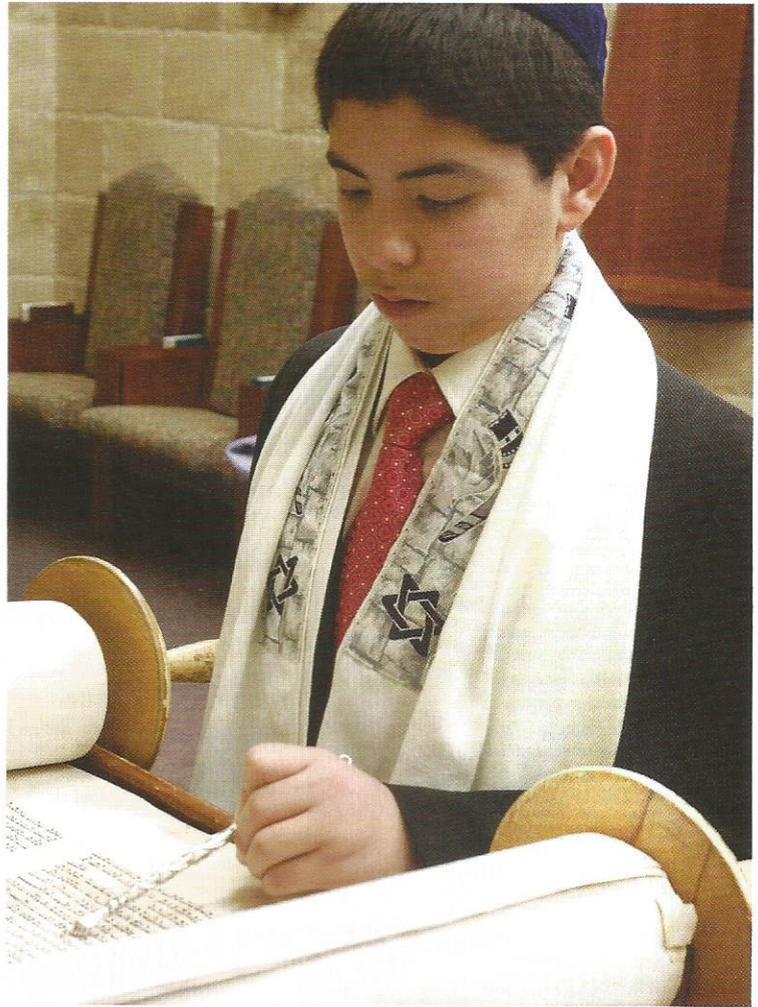


Equality and Social Justice

Beginning with the Ten Commandments, Judaism has always been concerned with a code of **ethics**, or moral values of right and wrong. Two important values that have influenced many societies are equality and social justice.

Unlike some other ancient civilizations, the Israelites did not view their leaders as gods. Instead, they believed in only one God, and even kings had to obey God's laws and teachings. Judaism teaches that God considers all people equal.

Belief in equality goes hand in hand with a concern for social justice. Many stories and sayings in the Hebrew Bible, or *Tanakh*, teach about treating everyone fairly. For example, one passage says, "You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor." Caring for the less fortunate people in society is a basic value in Judaism.



The Importance of Study Studying the Hebrew Bible, and especially the Torah, is very important in Judaism. Jews also study interpretations of the Hebrew Bible made by scholars and rabbis, or religious teachers.

In ancient times, rabbis and scholars who interpreted the Torah's teachings made decisions that were passed down orally. In the 200s C.E., Jewish scholars began to create the Talmud, which recorded how different people believed that the rules found in these oral traditions and the Torah should be applied. The Talmud became a basic source of Jewish law. Later on, rabbis wrote their own studies of both the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, continuing the tradition of interpreting the teachings of Judaism.

Throughout history, Jews have kept their reverence for study and learning. Many Jews learn about Jewish history, law, and traditions through reading and discussion. They also pass on their knowledge to other members of the faith and to others.

Jews today continue to read, study, and discuss the Torah as one way of understanding and practicing their religion. This boy reads from the Torah during his bar mitzvah, a coming-of-age ceremony for Jewish boys. Young Jewish girls have a similar ceremony called a bat mitzvah.

ethics a set of moral principles or values

exile to banish or expel from one's own country or home

Jewish Diaspora the scattering of the Jewish people outside their homeland, beginning about 586 B.C.E.

2. Foreign Rule and the Jewish Diaspora

The invasion of Judah in 597 B.C.E. and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 B.C.E. threatened the survival of Judaism. Thousands of Israelites, or Jews, were **exiled** in Babylon. Earlier Israelites of the tribe of Judah called themselves "Judeans," and their homeland, Judah. After the Kingdom of Israel was destroyed, those in the surviving Kingdom of Judah were all called Judeans. The name was later shortened to "Jews" and came to be applied to all Jews.

The **Jewish Diaspora** had begun. From this time on, the followers of Judaism were **dispersed**, or scattered, across many lands. Those who did return home found their land dominated by foreign rulers. It would not be easy to keep Judaism alive.

Rule by the Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks

The Jewish captives lived in Babylon for about half a century. From then on, Jews outside their homeland prayed to return. During this exile in Babylon, men the Jews believed to be great prophets rose up to encourage the people to remain faithful to Judaism.

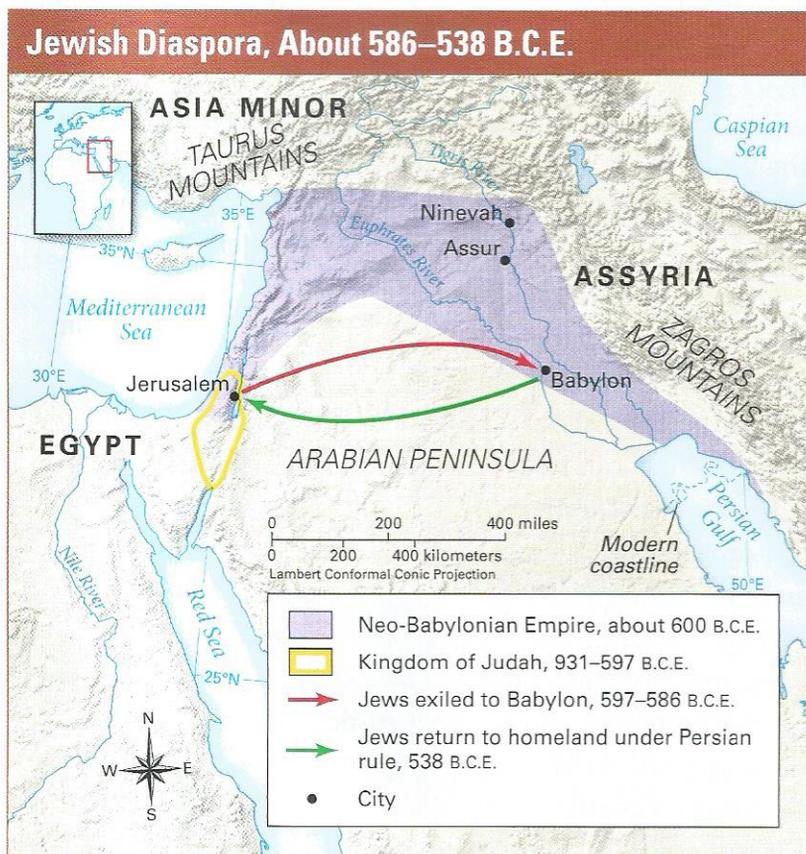
In 539 B.C.E., the Persians conquered the Babylonians. The

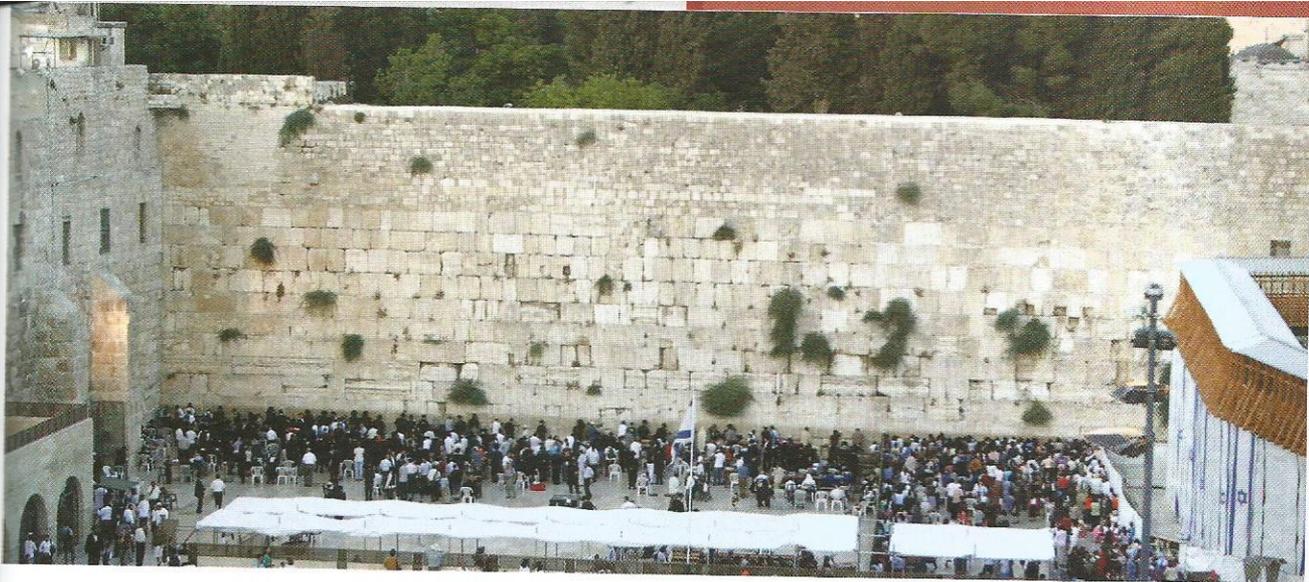
Persian king, Cyrus, ended the Jews' exile. He let the Jews practice their religion, return to Judah, and rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem. The rebuilt Temple became known as the Second Temple.

For nearly 400 years, foreigners ruled Judah. After the Persian reign ended, the Greeks took control. Unfortunately for the Jews, the foreign rulers were often harsh.

One Greek ruler, Antiochus IV (an-TIE-uh-kuhs), tried to force the Jews to worship idols of Greek gods in the Second Temple. In 168 B.C.E., the Jews rebelled and initiated a war. By 164 B.C.E., they drove the Greeks from Jerusalem, reclaiming the Temple. Jews celebrate Hanukkah (HAH-nuh-kuh) to honor this victory and a miracle that the rabbis say occurred in the Temple at that time.

Many Jews were exiled from their homeland to Babylon in 586 B.C.E. However, some Jews were eventually able to return to Judah.





Rule by the Romans For about 100 years after the war with the Greeks, the Jews lived as an independent kingdom in Judah, now called Judea. Then, in 63 B.C.E., they fell under Roman rule.

The Romans were building a great empire and were quick to act against any sign of rebellion. Thousands of Jews were brutally executed under Roman rule. However, the Romans did allow the Jews to practice their own religion and to govern some of their own affairs. In 22 B.C.E., the Romans appointed King Herod to rule the Jews. Herod announced a major project to expand the Second Temple of Jerusalem, on an even grander scale than Solomon's Temple. The work took 46 years to complete.

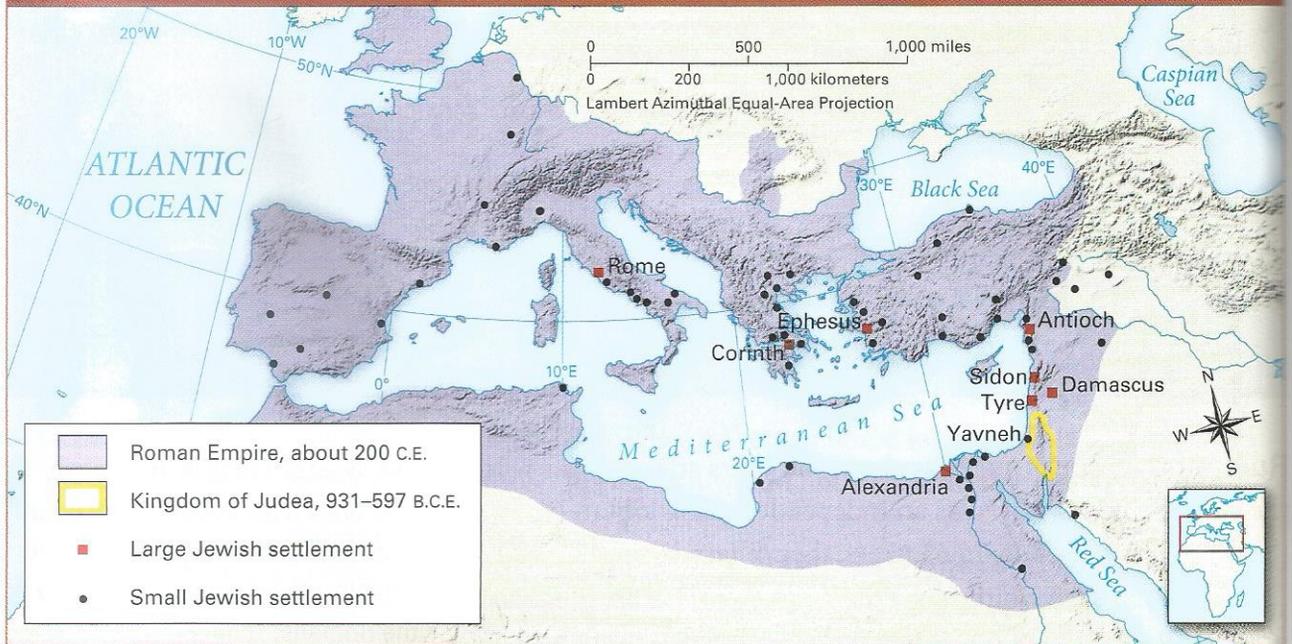
In 66 C.E., the Jews rose up against the Romans. For about three years, they managed to keep the Romans out of Jerusalem. Then, in 70 C.E., a Roman military leader named Titus led an army of 60,000 soldiers against the Jews. Although they fought back fiercely, the Jews were hopelessly outnumbered and watched in horror as the Romans destroyed the great Temple of Jerusalem. All that remained of the Second Temple was its western wall. To this day, Jews consider the Western Wall their most sacred place.

In 135 C.E., the Romans suppressed another Jewish revolt. This Roman victory began the final exile of the Jews from their homeland. The Romans seized Jewish land and forbade the Jews from entering Jerusalem. Although some Jews always remained in the land of Israel, thousands were sent to other parts of the Roman Empire.

The Jews had lost control of their homeland and their holy city, but Judaism not only survived, it flourished. Next, you will learn how the Jews preserved their faith and way of life.

The Western Wall in Jerusalem was once a part of the network of walls that surrounded the Second Temple, which was destroyed by the Romans. Today, Jews come from all over the world to pray at the Western Wall.

Jewish Diaspora in the Roman Empire, About 200 C.E.



After the Romans put down the Jewish revolts, they forced most Jews into exile in many parts of the Roman Empire. Notice how few large Jewish settlements there were.

3. Preserving the Teachings of Judaism

After losing control of their homeland, their holy city, and the great Temple that was the heart of their religious practices, the Jews faced a great struggle to preserve their religion. They were exiled throughout many gentile, or non-Jewish, lands. With creativity and dedication, they found ways to keep Judaism alive.

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai One rabbi who helped preserve Judaism was Yohanan ben Zakkai. When the revolt against Rome began in 66 C.E., ben Zakkai feared for the future of Judaism. He worried that if the rabbis died in the fighting and the Temple were destroyed, Judaism might not survive.

Ben Zakkai begged the Jews to surrender to save Judaism. When they refused, he decided to approach the Romans for help.

Ben Zakkai had himself smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin. He met with a Roman general named Vespasian (vuh-SPAY-zhee-ehn) and gained permission to open a Jewish school, with the help of other rabbis, in the town of **Yavneh** (YAHV-neh).

When Jerusalem fell, Yavneh became the center of Jewish learning. At their school, ben Zakkai and the other rabbis educated new rabbis. Teachers came from many places to study at Yavneh. Then they returned to their communities to share what they had learned. In this way, the rabbis at Yavneh ensured that Jews still had leaders to guide them.

Yavneh an ancient city in Israel that became a center for Jewish learning

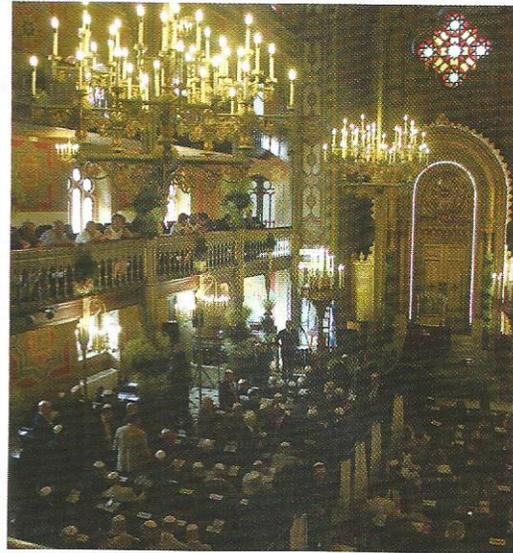
New Teachers and Practices The rabbis at Yavneh also introduced new practices to pass on the teachings of Judaism. For example, the rabbis made the synagogue important. A synagogue is a house of worship, as well as a place to study, to meet, and to gather socially. It strengthened Jewish communities.

The rabbis also created a religious service for synagogues. Prayer and study of sacred texts became a new way to worship God without the Temple rituals. Today, Jews, Christians, and Muslims follow this model for services.

Moreover, the rights of women have changed. Judaism was once a patriarchy, in which men held power. Under Jewish law, women had some rights. They could buy and sell land, bring cases to court, agree to marry, and—at times—own property. Women gained more rights over time. For many groups today, women and men are seen as equal.

Over the centuries, rabbis studied and commented on sacred texts, and developed other new practices. These new practices helped Jews preserve their religion in communities worldwide.

In 1948, a new Jewish nation, the State of Israel, was created in part of the lands once ruled by King David and King Solomon. Many Jews settled there. For these and other Jews around the world, Jewish traditions have enabled the religion to thrive.



In the tradition of Rabbi ben Zakkai's first school, synagogues remain a key institution in Judaism. They are designed to bring members of the Jewish community together.

Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you learned about how Judaism was preserved in the Jewish Diaspora.

The Central Teachings of Judaism Earlier religions believed in polytheism. Judaism is the oldest monotheistic religion. The Hebrew Bible and the Talmud present a code of ethics with teachings that focus on social justice. Jews pass on learning to others.

Foreign Rule and the Jewish Diaspora After the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E., most Jews were exiled to Babylon. When the Persians defeated the Babylonians in 539 B.C.E., many Jews returned to Judah under Persia's rule. Later, the Greeks and then the Romans ruled Judah, now Judea. The Jews fought the Romans in 66 C.E. and in 135 C.E. The Romans put down these revolts and exiled most of the Jews.

Preserving the Teachings of Judaism During the Jewish Diaspora, Jews wanted to preserve their religion. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai set up a center of Jewish learning in Yavneh. His rabbis taught other rabbis, who shared their knowledge at home. Ben Zakkai made synagogues the center of Jewish life and created a new religious service. These new practices preserved Judaism.