

# Jewish Religion and Practice

Jewish religious practice is rooted in the Torah, also known as the Five Books of Moses, and its extensive commentaries. The five books of the *Torah* are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They consist of the core narrative of the Jewish people: their call into being by God, their trials and tribulations, and their covenant with God, which involves adhering to a way of life embodied in a set of religious obligations and civil laws.

The Old Testament or Hebrew scriptures are known collectively as the *Tanakh*. The word *Tanakh* is derived from the three Hebrew letters of the three components: the *Torah*, the *Nevi'im* (prophets) and the *Ketuvim* (writings, which include histories, prophecies, poems, hymns and sayings). This collection of sacred writings was primarily written over a period of almost a thousand years, from 1000 to 100 BC.

The Torah is handwritten on parchment scrolls by specially trained scribes. The scrolls are rolled up and preserved in an ornate cover. It is kept in the Holy Ark, the *Aron Kodesh*, in the synagogue. Public readings of the Torah take place every Sabbath (Saturday), Monday and Thursday in the presence of a *minyan*, the required quorum of ten adult Jewish males. One section is read each week, until all five books have been completed, and the process begins again.

**Nevi'im** (Prophets): These are the Books of Joshua, Judges, I Samuel, II Samuel, I Kings, II Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

**Ketuvim** (Writings): This consists of the Books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah, I Chronicles, and II Chronicles.

**The Talmud** is a compilation of commentaries incorporating the works of Jewish scholars and records of their discussions about legal matters and how to interpret the holy writings. These discussions were at first passed down from the time of Moses as an oral tradition. In the early centuries of the Common Era (dated from the beginnings of Christianity), these teachings were committed to writing. The Talmud consists mainly of the *Mishnah*, which summarizes the laws of Judaism, and the *Gemara*, which is a commentary on the *Mishnah*.

**Minyan:** A Minyan is a quorum of at least ten adult Jewish males, required to constitute a prayer meeting. A Jewish male can participate in a minyan once he has reached Bar Mitzvah age (13 years).

**Kashrut:** *Kashrut* is the observance of Jewish dietary law, set out in Torah and explained and amplified by the Talmud. Food that may be consumed according to Jewish law is termed *kosher*. The laws of *kashrut* define which meat, fish and poultry are permitted as food. Animals must have a cloven hoof and chew the cud, and fish must have fins and scales. Prohibited foods include pork and shellfish. Mixing milk and meat is also forbidden. Food that contains neither milk nor meat, such as bread, fruit, vegetables and fish are termed *parev*. Orthodox Jews use separate utensils for milk and meat. Different sets of dishes are required for the festival of Passover.

**Bar Mitzvah:** When a Jewish boy reaches the age of 13, he is deemed old enough to understand his religion and its teachings and to be responsible enough to adhere to them. On the first Sabbath of his thirteenth year, a Jewish boy is called up to read from the weekly portion of the Torah. This coming of age ceremony is called a Bar Mitzvah, meaning 'Son of the Commandment'. It is customary to hold a celebratory meal for the barmitzvah boy afterwards.

**Bat Mitzvah:** A Bat mitzvah is an equivalent coming of age ceremony for Jewish girls who have reached the age of 12. Girls may recite verses from the Book of Esther or the Book of Psalms or prayers from the *siddur* (prayer-book), while the rabbi gives his blessing, and delivers an address. The event is also celebrated by joyous festivity.

**Marriage:** The Jewish wedding ceremony takes place under a *chuppah*, or canopy, often ornately decorated. Four pole holders, usually close male relatives and friends, hold the canopy aloft. The *Ketubah* (marriage contract) is read in the original Aramaic, and the groom accepts his responsibility to provide food, shelter and clothing for his wife, and to be attentive to her emotional needs. The marriage may not be solemnized until the contract has been completed and handed to the bride. The Seven Blessings (*Sheva Brachos*) are recited after the reading of the *Ketuba*. A glass is placed on the floor, which the groom breaks by stamping on it. This act recalls the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and connects the couple with the spiritual and national destiny of the Jewish people. For the next seven days, the newly-marrieds are honoured at special celebratory meals, after each of which *Sheva Brachos* are again recited.



Sabbath bread loaves ('Challah')