Key Teachings of Judaism

Jewish teachings provide Jews with guidance on how to practice their religion and lead good lives. These teachings come from multiple sources including sacred Jewish texts - the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud - and later writings by Jewish rabbis and philosophers.

Among the most famous Jewish teachings are the Ten Commandments. These commandments are contained within the Hebrew Bible. Many Jews and Christians identify them with the two stone tablets which, according to the Hebrew Bible, God gave to Moses along with other religious instructions. Religious Jews see the Ten Commandments as a notable summary of how God wants Jews to live. But it is important to note that the Jewish tradition explicitly teaches that other religious instructions are as obligatory and as sacred as the Ten Commandments.

Jewish sages have provided guidance as to the most important Jewish teachings. According to the Talmud, a man challenged Hillel, one of Judaism's most revered sages and the highest ranking jurist from 31 BCE through 9 CE, to teach him the whole Torah in the time he could stand on one foot. The term Torah is best known to non-Jews as the Jewish name for the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. But the word literally means "instruction," and it can refer to the entire body of Jewish teachings as it does here. Hillel responded, "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole Torah; the rest is just commentary. Go and study it." Likewise, Rabbi Akiba, the foremost Jewish scholar in the late 1st through the mid 2nd centuries, taught that the Hebrew Bible's commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself" is "the greatest principle of the Torah."

Therefore, it is essential that any discussion of Judaism include its teachings about treating others well. However, the discussion should also include other essential teachings that give a more complete understanding of the religion. The six items indentified below are among the most important and influential ideas in Judaism. It is important to bear in mind that this list was created as a useful reference for those who want a better understanding of the religion; there is no official list of Judaism’s most important teachings.

1. There is only one God and God provides standards of right and wrong that people should follow. Judaism introduced this belief, called ethical monotheism, to the world. This belief differs from other ancient religions, which believed in many gods. Jewish ethics flow in large measure from this idea; Judaism teaches that there is such a thing as "right" and "wrong" and that people have an obligation to do what is right.

2. Treat others well. The Hebrew Bible contains broad principles such as “Be kind to strangers” and “Love your neighbor” as well as specific instructions to ensure others are treated fairly. The Talmud states, "Charity is equal in importance to all other commandments combined." Since the Hebrew Bible states that all people are created in the image of God, Jews believe that every individual is important and deserves to be treated with respect.

3. Honor the Sabbath. Judaism teaches that Jews should spend one day a week, the Sabbath, focusing on things other than work and material concerns. This is the origin of the idea of a weekly day of rest that is part of many religions and is widely followed in many parts of the world.

4. Pray. Judaism teaches that people can communicate with God through prayer. Traditionally observant Jews have daily prayers in the morning, afternoon, and evening, and also pray...
before and after meals, before beginning a journey, when they see a natural wonder, and at other times when they need help or want to express thanks.

5. **Study.** Judaism teaches that studying the Hebrew Bible and other Jewish texts leads to wisdom and good deeds, so Jewish culture emphasizes the importance of learning. Throughout the centuries, Jews greatly respected scholars and depended on them to determine how to apply Jewish teachings to new situations. Today, most Jews build on this tradition to respect all forms of scholarship and to see knowledge as valuable and worth pursuing.

6. **The Land of Israel is Judaism’s most important spiritual center.** Most of the events in sacred Jewish scripture occurred there. Judaism’s most sacred sites are there, including Jerusalem, which is its holiest city and the site where the Jewish Temple once stood. Jews face towards Jerusalem, the ancient and modern Jewish capital, during their daily prayers. The daily prayers address the importance of the Land of Israel to the Jewish past and future.
A question asked by students: Are Jews a Religious Group or an Ethnic Group?

One of the most common questions that students ask during lessons that address Jews or Judaism is whether Jews are a religious group or an ethnic group. Jews themselves have a wide range of opinions and beliefs about what it means to be a Jew and what defines being Jewish. Nevertheless, there are areas of general consensus.

The essential point to convey to students is that Jews do not fit neatly into predefined categories, but they do form a distinct and unique community that is connected by rich traditions and thousands of years of history.

The following facts provide additional information:

- Categories are human constructs that help us talk about and make sense of the world. However, some things, such as the Jewish people, do not fit neatly into our preexisting categories (such as religious group or ethnic group). It is like being asked whether a round peg goes into a square hole or into a triangular hole; it does not quite fit either one.

- Jews, even the most traditionally religious Jews, consider someone with Jewish parents who does not practice any element of Judaism to be Jewish. Conversely, Jews also consider a convert with no Jewish ancestry whatsoever to be as Jewish as any other Jew. This dichotomy illustrates how Jews don’t fit into our usual categories and have elements of both religious and ethnic groups.

- Jewish life encompasses more than religion. For example, expressions of peoplehood, remembrances of historical experiences, connections to the Land of Israel, and cultural elements such as music, art, language, and food are also parts of Jewish life.

- There are Jews of almost every background including Jews of African descent, Indian descent, European descent, Middle Eastern descent, Southeast Asian descent, and Hispanic descent.

- Most Jews object to describing Jews as a racial group not only because of the diverse backgrounds of the Jewish community, but also because the language of race conjures memories of the Holocaust when the Nazis used racial terminology to justify their attempt to annihilate the Jewish people.

- In traditional Judaism, a Jew is a child of a Jewish mother or is someone who converted to Judaism; anyone with a Jewish mother, regardless of whether they practice Judaism, is a Jew and anyone who converts to Judaism, regardless of their ancestry, is a Jew. Today, some branches of Judaism teach that a person can also be a Jew if he or she has a Jewish father and identifies as a Jew.

- Most Jews feel connected through Jewish history, traditions, family ties, and the religion of their ancestors - even if they are not religiously observant themselves.

Please download the latest version of this resource from [www.icsresources.org/curricula](http://www.icsresources.org/curricula). ICS frequently updates, revises, and strengthens its materials. The ICS website includes a variety of lesson plans, teacher’s guides, maps, and primary source materials. Most
maps and images are in color if accessed through the website. All materials may be downloaded and shared.

Sign up at www.icsresources.org/register to be notified of major updates, new materials, and events in your area. Please send questions, suggestions, and requests about ICS educational materials to bchaika@icsresources.org.
Understanding Terms for Lessons on Ancient Israelites and the Hebrew Bible

A number of educators have asked ICS staff about different terms that refer to the Jewish people and their ancestors, their homeland, and their sacred scripture. This document is designed to be a brief reference document that describes the most common of these terms.

SACRED SCRIPTURE

Bible: Both Jews and Christians call their holy scriptures the Bible. Teachers need to distinguish which scriptures are being referenced because the Christian Bible includes texts that are not sacred texts in Judaism. This is done most simply by using the terms Hebrew Bible and Christian Bible. Some textbooks use these terms.

Hebrew Bible: Refers to those texts that are sacred in both Judaism and Christianity. The name refers to the fact that the texts were originally written in the Hebrew language. This is a neutral, academic term that is used by scholars and is 100% appropriate to refer to sacred Jewish texts. Some textbooks use the term Hebrew Bible when referencing Jewish Scripture.

Tanakh: The traditional Jewish name for the Hebrew Bible. It is equivalent to saying the Jewish Bible or Jewish Scripture. The name is an acronym. Jews traditionally divide the Hebrew Bible into three sections Torah (The Five Books of Moses, the Pentateuch), Nevi’im (The Books of the Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings, books such as Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs). The first Hebrew letter of each of these three sections sounds out Tanakh. It is appropriate to introduce this term to students but not necessary; use of the term Hebrew Bible is acceptable. If you choose to use this term, you should be aware that it refers strictly to the sacred text of the Jews. Also, if you use this term, you should be careful to ensure that students fully recognize the fact that Jewish sacred texts are also sacred in Christianity as “Tanakh” is likely an unfamiliar term and students might not realize that it refers to texts that are also included in the Christian Bible.

Old Testament: One of two sections of the Christian Bible (the other section is the New Testament). It includes all the books of the Hebrew Bible. The term reflects Christian religious belief about the history of God’s relationship with the world and humanity. These beliefs differ from ancient Israelite and modern Jewish belief about these subjects. Therefore, the term should not be used as the name of the sacred text of Israelites or Jews. It is appropriate to use the name Old Testament in discussions of the Christian sacred text and religious belief. It is also appropriate and important to teach students that Judaism’s sacred texts are included in Christianity’s sacred texts because Christianity developed within Judaism before becoming a separate religion.

PLACE NAMES

Land of Israel: The standard name in the Hebrew Bible for the geographic region where the Israelites lived. It has been used continuously by Jews throughout history to refer to their historic homeland.
Holy Land: A term used by Jews and especially by Christians for the region. This term emphasizes that both Judaism and Christianity developed in this place. It is a religious term and thus not usually used in textbooks or state standards.

Kingdom of Israel: The name of the Israelite kingdom ruled by Saul, David and Solomon. The kingdom split following Solomon’s death. The northern kingdom kept the name of the Kingdom of Israel. It was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BCE.

Kingdom of Judah: The southern kingdom that was created after the Kingdom of Israel split in two following Solomon’s death. The name comes from the Israelite tribe of Judah, which was the largest tribe in the area and the tribe of David and Solomon. Unlike the northern kingdom, their descendants continued to rule this kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital. It was conquered by the Babylonians in the sixth century BCE. The provinces and the restored Jewish kingdom that existed in this area in later periods continued to be labeled with variants of the name Judah, most famously the Roman province of Judea, until 135 CE.

Palestine: The name that Romans gave the province of Judea in 135 CE. The Roman emperor renamed the province Palestine as part of the punishment for the Jewish attempt to regain independence.

THE PEOPLE

Israelites: The preferred name for the ancestors of the Jews. The name comes from the Hebrew Bible where the descendants of Abraham’s grandson Jacob are called “the children of Israel,” or simply “Israelites.” The name is a reference to the account in the Hebrew Bible that Jacob’s name was changed to Israel. You may begin using the term “Jews” instead of “Israelites” in the period following the Assyrian conquest (722 BCE). You should definitely use the term “Jews” instead of “Israelites” in the Second Temple period (following the Babylonian Exile in 586 BCE).

Hebrews: An alternate name for the ancestors of the Jews. If your state standards and/or textbook use the term “Hebrews,” it is acceptable to use this term. But if you have a choice, “Israelites” is the preferred term. It is the standard term used in the Hebrew Bible, which is the main source for information about this people. “Israelites” is also the standard term used by modern scholars. It is important to note that the term “Hebrew” is correct and appropriate in reference to the language.

Jews: The appropriate and correct name for members of the Jewish people. The term comes from the Kingdom of Judah. When King Solomon died, the Israelite kingdom split. The northern kingdom was called Israel. It was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire in 722 BCE. The southern kingdom was called Judah. The words “Jew,” “Judaism,” and “Jewish” come from this place name. Referring to “Jews” or “the Jewish people” is acceptable after 722 and should be used (rather than Israelites) to refer to the people after the Babylonian Exile. The terms “Jews” and “the Jewish people” are equally acceptable. It is very offensive to use the word “Jew” as an adjective (e.g., the Jew lawyer…) or a verb.
Overview
There are two parts to this document. This first part outlines key points that should be covered in lessons on ancient Jewish history. The second part fills out these points in a narrative summary of Jewish history from Biblical origins through the Roman period.

Note
Please download the latest version of this lesson from www.icsresources.org/curricula. ICS frequently updates, revises, and strengthens its materials. The ICS website includes a variety of lesson plans, teacher’s guides, maps, and primary source materials. Most maps and images are in color if accessed through the website. All materials may be downloaded and shared.

Sign up at www.icsresources.org/register to be notified of major updates, new materials, and events in your area. Please send questions, suggestions, and requests about ICS educational materials to bchaika@icsresources.org.

Key Points
1) Abraham and Moses are key figures in Judaism.
2) Jewish tradition teaches that the Exodus is the formative event in Jewish history.
3) Kings David and Solomon had great accomplishments, historical impact, and religious significance.
4) The Temple in Jerusalem was the center of Jewish religious life and its location is the holiest place in Judaism.
5) The Babylonian Exile was a transformative event.
6) Judah, later called Judea, was ruled by various foreign powers and repeatedly attempted to regain independence.
7) Rome destroyed the Second Temple, exiled the majority of the Jewish population of Judea, and changed the province’s name to try to minimize the Jewish connection to the area.
8) After the destruction of the Second Temple, Rabbinic Judaism emerged as Jews developed new religious practices and interpretations that remained grounded in ancient traditions.

Summary of Ancient Jewish History: Biblical Origins through the Roman Period
According to Jewish and Christian traditions, Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob are the fathers of the Jewish people. The Hebrew Bible, which Christianity adopted as the Old Testament, states that approximately 4,000 years ago Abraham became the first person to
reject idolatry and to practice monotheism, the belief in only one God. This source also describes how Jacob led his family to Egypt to escape a famine and how his descendants were eventually enslaved. These descendents, the ancestors of the Jews, are called Israelites, or the Children of Israel, because Jacob’s name was changed to Israel.

The Hebrew Bible states that after many years of slavery in Egypt, God sent Moses to lead the Israelites to freedom. After forty years of travel through the wilderness, they eventually returned to their ancestral homeland, the Land of Israel. On their journey, the Hebrew Bible states, God spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai and gave the Israelites a code to live by – including the Ten Commandments. According to Jewish tradition, this is the origin of the Torah.

The escape from slavery in Egypt, called the Exodus, is the seminal event of Jewish history. It is one of the prime examples of God’s power in Jewish literature and is the most commonly referred to event in Jewish prayers. The Hebrew Bible’s calls to pursue a just society references the Exodus by explaining that “you were strangers in Egypt” and thus know what it means to be treated unfairly. The Exodus is also a source of inspiration for other cultures’ liberation struggles (The Institute for Curriculum Services’ Using Popular Music to Close Lessons on Jews and Judaism addresses this topic).

The Israelites originally lived in a tribal society. In times of crisis, the Hebrew Bible states that God provided great men and women, called judges, to lead all the tribes. These include Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. Eventually, the Israelites decided that they needed a permanent king like other nations. As a result, the religious leader Samuel appointed the first king, Saul.

The second king, David, expanded the United Kingdom of Israel, established a dynasty, and made Jerusalem the capital around the year 1000 BCE. He is remembered as an exemplar of religiosity and as a model for later kings. Many of the psalms in the Hebrew Bible’s Book of Psalms are attributed to him.

David’s son, Solomon, built the First Temple in Jerusalem, the most sacred place in Judaism and the center of Jewish religious life throughout its existence. He also increased the United Kingdom of Israel's power. He is remembered as an exceptionally wise individual, which is the origin of the expression “wise as Solomon.” Several Biblical books are attributed to him: the Book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.

After Solomon’s death, the United Kingdom of Israel split into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. In 722, the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel and deported its population. As a result, subsequent Jewish history focused on Judah; the words Jew and Judaism come from this word. The Jewish homeland, as distinct from a political entity, continued to be referred to as “The Land of Israel” throughout this period and this terminology continues to be used by Jews today.

Descendents of David ruled Judah from the capital of Jerusalem until it was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. This was a transformative event in Jewish history. In addition to ending the political independence of the Jewish kingdom, the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple and exiled the population to Babylon. This began Diaspora Judaism – the existence of sizable Jewish communities that lived outside of the Jewish homeland. The existence of large Jewish communities outside of the Land of Israel became a permanent feature of Jewish life. This helped prepare the Jewish people to adapt to changes experienced centuries later under
Roman rule by providing models for Jewish life that were not tied to Temple practices and the specific geography of the Land of Israel.

After defeating the Babylonians, the Persian King Cyrus allowed the exiles to return and rebuild their temple. The rebuilt temple is called the Second Temple. Many Jews remained in the Diaspora where they had built new lives and vibrant communities. Judah remained under foreign domination until the second century BCE when the Jews regained their independence. However, as Rome gained power, it exerted its influence over the Jewish state beginning in 63 BCE. In 6 CE, it was incorporated into the Roman Empire as the province of Judea.

Jews rebelled repeatedly in an attempt to regain their independence, but without success. In the year 70 CE, the Romans destroyed the Second Temple, the holiest place in Judaism and the center of Jewish religious life. When the Romans began building a temple to one of their gods on the Temple ruins in 131 CE, Jews rebelled again. This time the majority of Jews in the province were killed, exiled, or sold into slavery. In an attempt to wipe out the Jewish connection to the land, the Romans changed its name from Judea to Palestine in 135.

Jews responded to the loss of their homeland and the destruction of the Second Temple by remaining grounded in and adapting their ancient traditions. During the siege of Jerusalem, a sage named Yochanan ben Zakkai sneaked out of the city in a coffin to negotiate with the Roman military commander, Vespasian. He managed to convince Vespasian to protect the city of Yavneh and the Jewish sages there. These scholars laid the groundwork for what became Rabbinic Judaism.

Rabbinic Judaism built upon Jewish tradition while adjusting to new realities. Temple ritual was replaced with prayer service in synagogues. This built upon common practices of Jews in the Diaspora dating back to the Babylonian exile. Although worship in the Temple was impossible after its destruction, Judaism continues to revere its location as the holiest place on earth and Jews turn towards it during their prayer services.

Jews expressed the pain of losing their homeland by quoting traditional texts such as the Hebrew Bible’s Psalm 137: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour.” Through sacred texts, prayers, songs, folktales, and artwork, Jews continued to express their connection to their ancestral homeland while creating new homes in Southwest Asia, North Africa, Europe, and beyond. At the same time, they affirmed that Judaism’s religious teachings and values were relevant wherever they lived. These teachings and values include an emphasis on social justice, loving one’s neighbor, and taking care of those in need. They are drawn from Jewish tradition and sacred scripture, which Jews continued to study, discuss, and interpret to find lessons on how to live their lives.