Chapter Overview

The religion of Judaism resembles a family perhaps more than any other tradition. There is no single founder of the faith and no designated head of the tradition. As the chapter notes, this family can be defined as a national group or as a religious group. It is one of the oldest Western religious traditions, and was the religion of Jesus of Nazareth, who is known as the founder of the Christian religion. In religious terms, Jews are those believers who understand their faith as an ongoing dialogue with God, both in the past and in the present and into the future, and as those who have accepted Gods invitation for covenant. This call from God is still open today to all people; therefore, Israel refers to all those who answer the invitation and strive to live out Torah. The chapter itself offers an implicit expression of what Judaism means. One such way is this: according to Modecai Kaplan, Judaism is as an evolving religious civilization. This characterization of Judaism is the focus of the chapter.

Judaism offers a treasure of stories, many of which are found in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Jewish Scriptures, written according to conservative scholars by Moses. These stories are compelling and fascinating in their demonstration of human nature, and their honesty about the struggles humans have endured. They form the foundations for much of the body of Western literature, and many great authors, including William Faulkner, have attested to the importance of having been raised on the early books of the Jewish Bible.

In addition to its literary contributions, Judaism is also important because it was the parent religion of the sacred way known as Christianity--much like Hinduism was the parent religion of Buddhism. Judaism has endured a long history of struggle for survival, and as an undercurrent the theme of strength runs through its sacred scriptures, rituals, and ethos. Contemporary expressions of the religion have taken many forms; specifically the, Orthodox, Hasidic, Conservative, Reform, and Re-constructionist branches. Members of the Jewish faith can be found in nearly every culture.

Judaism offers opportunities to the teacher to use current events and local representatives of the Judaic community such as rabbis to provide firsthand accounts of what it means to be Jewish. A follower of a particular religion can have a tremendous impact on students and can communicate in a memorable way that often leaves its imprint on their minds better than a strictly textual approach. Another possibility during a spring semester might be to have students attend a Seder or Passover meal in a Jewish home. The experience of hearing the scriptures read and learning about the symbolic foods served in the course of this meal will convey the religious imagination of the Jewish faith in a poignant way. Students could be asked in a subsequent class session to write an essay on their firsthand experience of this ceremonial meal.

The goals of the chapter are these:
1. To present an overview of the history of Judaism
2. To explain the religious concepts and practices that generally characterizes contemporary Judaism.

A history of the Jewish People

To help students follow the involved history of Judaism, it may be useful to lay out a rough road map of important persons and events in chronological sequence for them ahead of time. The point would be to give your students significant names and events to look for as they work through the pages of this chapter. A comment or a question to answer for each name and event listed would also give students something specific with which to connect each item. Most dates for each item can be found on the time line on page 233.
Abraham: Who was he? Why is he important?

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob: Who is this group? Why are they significant?

Moses: Who was he? What did he do that is so memorable?

Exodus: What was this event and what did it mean for the Jewish faith?

King David: Who was he? What is he renowned for?

The building of the first Temple by Solomon: Where was this built? What religious beliefs were associated with the Temple?

The fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians and the destruction of the Temple: Why was this so traumatic for the Jewish people and their faith?

The second Temple is built: Why was this event so important?

The second Temple is destroyed by Rome: Why did this occur? How did this change Judaism?

The rabbinical tradition: What is it? Why is this so significant for Judaism?

Maimonides: Who was he? When did he live? What were his accomplishments?

The Baal Shem Tov: Who was he? With what movement within Judaism is he associated?

The Holocaust: What was it? What special problems did this atrocity present to the Jewish faith?

Zionism: What is it? When did it develop? Why did it develop?

Some ideas about the biblical stories section

Pages 232-248 present pivotal stories about the development of the Jewish faith. The source for these stories is primarily the Jewish Scriptures (often called the Old Testament by those outside of the Jewish faith), especially the Pentateuch—the first five books. It would be good to point out to students that these stories express what is known as sacred history, which is not the kind of history with which most of us are familiar. Sacred history expressed the religious and theological significance of events—it is a combination of some facts plus theological interpretations of those facts. The chapter itself states that the accuracy of these stories is a matter of debate; however, when attempting to understand a religion's sacred history the most important question is not, Did it all really happen that way?; rather, the key question is, What did specific persons and events mean for this people and their relationship to the Holy? This kind of critical thinking will help students to get a sense of the effects the teachings might have had on the hearers so long ago.

History and the religious interpretation of that history are therefore central features of Judaism. The story of the creation and the subsequent stories about the tribes of Israel may be familiar to some students, but quite likely not to all. Again, this is a point at which an introduction by a rabbi or a storyteller may work well to share the beauty and the frailty of the human condition expressed in these narratives.
Abraham: The only man in the Bible called the Friend of God

It is essential when teaching on Judaism to explain the significance of the man called Abraham. He is looked to as the patriarch for the three great monotheistic religions of the world; Islam, Christianity, and Judaism all trace their roots to Abraham and his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac.

Genesis 12 speaks of God’s call to Abraham to leave his homeland and his family and go to the new land God would give to him. In Genesis 15: 1-18 we read that, the Lord made a covenant with Abram. It would be helpful for the instructor to give a brief overview of the ancient covenant ceremony that would have been common to Abram and his people. The ceremony generally was between two men, and it was called the cutting of a covenant. The following steps were required:

- Count the cost: cutting covenant meant you were responsible to protect your covenant partner and their family even unto death.
- Set a time and place to meet.
- Invite witnesses to attend
- Kill the covenant animal by cutting it down the backbone and standing between the two walls of flesh.
- Exchange a listing of all your worldly possessions
- Exchange your belts, which had your dagger, money pouch and sword.
- Exchange coats, which had the family crest.
- Exchange names; you take the name of the covenant partner into your name.
- Cut the palm of your hands and clasp the hand of your partner so the blood will mingle.
- Rub ashes into the wound to make a covenant scar.
- Hold up your hands to the heavens and before the witnesses declare, O God, may you do to me what has been done to this animal if I should ever break this covenant.
- From now on the only person on earth you refer to as Friend is your covenant partner.
- God cut covenant with Abraham, thus he is called the Friend of God.

Clarify now with the class the significance of the fact that God cut covenant with Abraham and his descendants. In what way has this covenant impacted the history of the Jewish people? Is the covenant still considered valid today by Jewish people?

Sacred practices and holy days

Judaism is a sacred path rich in rituals and religious celebrations. The instructor could put some or all of the following terms up on a board or projector screen and ask students what the different terms mean. This could provide a point of comparison for the actual meanings explained in the text, as well as give students something specific to seek after during their reading:

**SACRED PRACTICES: HOLY DAYS**

| circumcision | Rosh Hashanah | Shavuot |
| mikva | Yom Kippur | Tisha Be-Av |
| kosher | Sukkot |
| t fillin | Simhat Torah |
| Sabbath | Hanukkah |
| challah | Tu B shvat |
| havdala | Purim |
| Bar Mitzvah | Pesach (Passover) |
| Bat Mitzvah | Yom Hashoah |
| Seder | Yom Haatzma-ut |

Some distinguishing characteristics of Judaism

It might be helpful to students if the instructor pointed out several very important beliefs, which distinguish Judaism from other major religions:
1. Judaism is strictly monotheistic. God is one, indivisible.

2. God has no form. This helps account for the prohibition against depicting God in any artful way in Judaism.

3. Within Judaism belief, the Holy is the Holy and humans are humans, which means that no human can ever be divine.

4. Humans will never be perfect.

5. Judaism believes that everyone has direct access to God, and no intermediary is necessary.

6. One’s soul is morally neutral. We are free to choose good or evil throughout our lives.

7. Judaism insists on obedience to the God-given commandments in the Torah, and on one’s personal responsibility to be a co-worker with God on earth.

8. The Jewish faith professes that all the righteous peoples of the world can have a share in the world to come.

9. The dividing line between Judaism and Christianity is belief in Messiah. Christianity declares the Christ has come and he was a first century Jew named Jesus from Nazareth. Orthodox Judaism still awaits the coming of the promised Messiah today.

**Sufferings of the Jewish people: persecutions**

Tragically, persecution has played a significant role throughout the course of Judaism’s history. Although there have been periods of tolerance as with Zoroastrian Persians, many encounters with other faiths have resulted in the political domination and oppression of Jews, for example:

* Palestine became Christianized by the Roman Empire
* By the fifth century C.E., Christianity was established as the state religion
* In the seventh century, Palestine and Syria fell to the Muslims
* During the eighth-century fall of Spain, Jews were persecuted.
Anti-Semitism has emerged under different historical regimes. During the Enlightenment, persecution lessened with progressive thinking and modernizing influences. However, in the twentieth century, a dark resurgence of anti-Semitism made its way through Hitler’s Nazi regime and nearly obliterated the entire European Jewish population. It is horrifying but also important to note that Hitler did not invent anti-Jewish beliefs and prejudices—he capitalized on them. A further enlightening insight into Hitler’s awful arithmetic is this valid conviction: As long as one Jew was left to remember the Jewish faith and history, this religion and its people would survive.

Students may or may not have been exposed to extremist propaganda that declare the Holocaust never took place. It might be good to raise the issue for discussion. It would be equally good to specify the inhuman treatment of the Jewish people at the hands of other human beings:

* Being forced to live in a ghetto
* Being forced to wear a yellow or white star
* Being forced to do only menial labor
* Action Groups or death squads assigned to murder Jews
* The construction of death camps to accomplish the Final Solution
* Being starved, tortured, experimented on, worked to death, or dying in one of the carefully constructed gas chambers in the camps
* Six million Jews murdered: children, women, men
* An outside world that largely looked on and took little action

**September 11th and the friend of my enemy theory**

Throughout history many religious faiths have had a number of extremists who have acted in such a way as to bring reproach upon their faith. The Crusades are, in retrospect, a blot on the history of Christianity. Extremists in India and Pakistan have resorted to violence to make their points, even coming to the brink of a nuclear exchange that has unthinkable consequences. Some who oppose abortion in America, based on religious beliefs, have resorted to blowing up clinics and killing doctors who perform the procedure.

Recent reports relative to the September 11th attack on American targets have revealed some chilling insights. Apparently one of the motivating factors in the attack by Moslem extremists was that America continues to be the most loyal ally of the nation of Israel. Since its rebirth as a nation on May 15, 1948 Israel has fought several wars and constant terrorist attacks to maintain their nationhood. The United States gives more financial aid to Israel on a yearly basis than to any other nation in the world. Israel has the best-armed and equipped military force in the Middle East, largely due to their relationship with America. All of these factors contributed to the attack on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, costing the lives of several thousand innocent people. The logic of the attackers simply being, the friend of my enemy is my enemy. Religious fanaticism is perhaps the cruelest kind of all.

An interesting activity would be to have students research and then discuss other past and recent forms of mass murder or genocide, such as: the virtual eradication of the First Peoples of the Americas by Europeans and their descendants, the plight of the Armenians during World War I, the activities of the *Kmer Rouge* in Cambodia, the tribal clashes in Africa in the countries of Rwanda and Burundi where over a million people died in just over 100 days. Also the ethnic cleansing during the war in Bosnia, and the situation of the Kurds in Iraq could be studied. Some investigating would quickly reveal atrocities committed today and yesterday by humans on others because of their religious and ethnic heritage. Comparing and contrasting present or very recent horrors with the Holocaust should bring students to the grim realization that it can happen again -- and has.
Contemporary Judaism

Judaism today continues five age-old teachings. First, that there is one true God. Second, the most important commandment for humans is to love their God with all their heart and with all their soul and all their might. Third, humans are created in the image and likeness of the one true God. Consequently, human life is sacred and all people ought to be treated equally. Fourth, the Torah shows the way to treat one another justly. Torah is a gift from God, which shows the way to God. Fifth, Judaism teaches that human beings are called to maintain faith in the face of suffering.

Probably, the best known Jewish practice is the keeping of the Sabbath. It runs from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday. A Friday night service welcomes the Sabbath and the Saturday morning service is a time of public and private prayer, singing, and reading of the Torah. It is important to point out that worship services and rituals, as well as overall lifestyles, differ greatly among the major branches of Judaism, namely, the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist groups. Moreover, Jewish feminism is exerting influence in areas such as God language, spirituality, and the position of women in the state of Israel.