Judaism

WHO IS GOD?

Judaism is a monotheistic religion, meaning the Jewish people believe in one omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and omnipresent (always present) God. The ancient Israelites believed that God's name was YHWH. This name was considered very sacred, and was pronounced only once each year-by the high priest on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. Two words which are often used to refer to God are Elohim (Hebrew for "God") and Adonai (Hebrew for "my Lord").

WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

Jewish people believe that the universe was created by God. An account of God's creation of the world in seven days is given in the Torah, one of the Jewish sacred texts. There is an order and hierarchy to creation, with humankind at the top, having responsibility for and authority over the rest of creation. Adam and Eve are considered to be the first man and first woman, and all humanity descends from them. Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden until they disobeyed God by eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. For their protection, God then removed them from the Garden of Eden so they would not eat of the tree of eternal life. {Religion Who}

WHY ARE WE HERE?

Because Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden of Eden, humankind struggles with a dual nature, one that includes both the desire to disobey God's teachings in favor of human impulses, and the desire to obey God's teachings, because they lead to peace and well-being. Jewish people believe that God has always been present to people, guiding the course of history, in order to bring all people back to God's divine teachings. Jewish people believe that they are God's chosen people, chosen to play a role in establishing God's divine reign for all people. Through the faithful observance of God's teaching by the Jewish people, all people will be brought into relationship with God.

HOW DO WE KNOW?

The most important of the Jewish sacred texts is the Torah (Hebrew for teaching). Because it contains five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), The Torah is sometimes referred to as the Pentateuch, or the Five Books of Moses. The Torah is the teaching given by God to the Israelites ,,through Moses. Traditionally, it is taught that Moses wrote the Torah in the 13th century BCE, as it was dictated to him by God. The Torah contains historical accounts (from the creation of the world through to Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt) of God's involvement with the Israelites, as well as laws, codes, and rites for the Hebrew people to follow and to practice. Included in the Torah are the Ten Commandments, also called the Decalogue, ten of God's teachings seen as the essence of God's law, covering most aspects of human existence.

The Talmud, a type of oral Torah, is also an important part of Jewish sacred literature. Like the Torah, the Talmud was given to Moses by God, but unlike the Torah it was handed down orally for centuries, until the 2nd century CE. The Talmud can be seen as commentary on the Torah, for it explains ways of understanding and interpreting the laws God gives in the Torah.

WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO?

Jewish people believe that they, as a community, have a special relationship with God. The purity and holiness required for communion (or contact) with God comes through action, the action of observing God's teachings. In ancient Israel, following God's teachings included performing sacrifice and purification rites. Today, there are three primary ways of practicing Judaism.

1. Orthodox Judaism seeks to observe God's teachings exactly as they were when given by God to the Israelites. Orthodox worship services and rites are performed in the Hebrew language.
2. Reform Judaism seeks to observe God's teachings in the context of today's modern, Western culture. Worship services and rites are performed mostly in the vernacular,·that is, the language that local people use.
3. Conservative Judaism, placing itself somewhere between Orthodox and Reform Judaism, seeks to balance a strict preservation of tradition with an acceptance of certain historical, social, and cultural changes.

Generally speaking, keeping in mind that the different streams of Judaism require specific actions, Jewish people today observe the law by doing things like keeping kosher (that is, following a special diet), and worshipping at Temple (also called a Synagogue) on Shabbat (or sabbath in English), where prayers are sung and the Torah is read. Shabbat means day of rest, and for Jewish people, the Sabbath is Saturday. Throughout the year, Jewish people also observe several special Holy Days.

WHAT'S GOING ON TODAY?

There are an estimated 15 million Jewish people in the world today (source: 1999 World Almanac). Although it was founded in the Middle East, and is still practiced there today, Judaism·s presence extends throughout the world, especially in North America.

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE IT?

Judaism is often represented by the Star of David (magen David, or shield of David in Hebrew), or the star created by two overlapping triangles. In ancient times, this symbol was used in several different religions as a sign of protection from evil. From the 17th century CE on, however, the Star of David has been used as the general symbol of Judaism.

The 411 on the founding of Judaism

Who: Abraham is considered the founder of the Hebrew (Jewish) people. Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob are known collectively as the patriarchs of Judaism. Moses is also a very important figure in the foundation of Judaism. God revealed to Moses the teachings which are central to the Jewish faith.

What: Judaism is the term for the religion of the Jews. The word Judaism comes from the name Judah, who was one of Jacob's twelve sons, and whose tribe became one of the most influential Israelite tribes. Judah is also the name of one of the ancient Israelite kingdoms. Ancient Jewish people are also referred to as the Hebrews, and the Israelites. The term Israelites comes from the fact that the Patriarch Jacob is also known as Israel.

When: 4000 years ago, that is, 1900 BCE (Formerly, BC, Before Christ, BCE stands for ˙Before the Common Era.˙It refers to any date before the year 1, and CE, which stands for ˙Common era (formerly AD, Anno Domini, year of our Lord), denotes dates from the year one on.

Where: Abraham, entering into a covenant (a relationship based on a promise) with God, left his home in Harran, which was in ancient Mesopotamia, (what is now the Middle East), and went to Canaan, the land God promised to Abraham's ancestors. The ancient land of Canaan is roughly where Israel and Lebanon are today. As the result of the conversion of other ancient peoples, and as the result of religious persecution, Judaism has spread to many parts of the world, such as Greece, Spain, central and eastern Europe, and North America.

WHAT IF I WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For basic information on Judaism:

A Sourcebook of World Religions, edited by Joel Beversluis.

For an easy-to-use, audio-visual, online encyclopedia on Judaism, grouped by basic, intermediate, and advanced information:

Judaism 101

For scholarly information about Judaism, check out:

Britannica Online -- Judaism section

The Virtual Religion Index Jewish Studies section

Academic Info: Jewish Studies

For a site with an enormous amount of links to sites about any aspect of Judaism, head to:

Andrew Tannenbaum's Judaism and Jewish Resources (which includes information on the Hebrew

language)

For discussions, chats and articles about current issues in Judaism, information about upcoming Holy Days, and to contact active Jewish organizations around the world, go to:

Guide to Judaism, Mining Co.

Sources:

Britannica Online -- Judaism section (http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=108149&tocid=0)

Judaism 101 at www.jewfaq.org