

The Semitic Religions

When we speak about the Semitic religions, we are referring to **Judaism, Christianity & Islam**. The word Semitic describes the people who *came from* the Middle East & their languages. Arabs & Jews are both Semitic. Christianity is a Semitic religion because it *originated* in the Middle East.

Another feature Semitic religions share is **monotheism**. The prefix "**mono**" means *one* (1), while "**theism**" means *belief in God or gods*. So, although these religions differ greatly, they each believe in *only one God*. Later, you will be reading about **polytheism**, the belief in more than one god.

Look at the map of the **Middle East** →. The writings of the Hebrew Bible *originated* in the land between the Jordan River & the Mediterranean Sea. As you will see, *both* Judaism & Christianity are rooted in these writings. This area is now the modern state of **Israel**. Its capital, historic **Jerusalem**, is sacred to all 3 Semitic religions.

Find the cities of **Mecca & Medina** in the **Arabian Peninsula**. The prophet **Muhammad** was born in Mecca, now the *world center of Islam*. Every year, millions of Muslims, members of Islam, make **pilgrimages** to this sacred city. Medina is where Muhammad set up the first Muslim state. These cities are now part of **Saudi Arabia**.

Basic Beliefs & Observances of Judaism

Monotheism

The most basic belief of Judaism is that of monotheism. A **midrash**, a Jewish legend, teaches that **Abraham's** father was an idol-maker. One day when **Abraham** was young, his father left him in charge of the store. Abraham took a wooden club & smashed every idol in the store except for the largest one... & placed the club in its hand!

I. 3 Semitic religions

- A. _____
B. _____
C. _____

II. have **origins** (came from) in the _____

III. share concept of **monotheism**: worship of _____ (#) god

IV. *as opposed to* other religions who believe in **polytheism**: worship of _____ gods



Making inferences: What do you believe an "idol-maker" was? _____

When his father returned & asked Abraham what happened, Abraham told him that the idols got in a fight, & the largest one smashed all of the smaller ones! His father said, "Do you expect me to believe that an idol can do that? They are just wood & stone! Tell me what really happened!" Abraham responded, "If you really believe that idols are only stone & wood, why do you worship them?"

The Chosen People

Another belief of Judaism is that the Jews are the "**chosen people**." This does NOT mean that Jews believe they are better than other people or that people need to convert to Judaism in order to be loved by God. Rather, it means that *God chose the Jewish people for the special responsibility of receiving the Torah* (their sacred scripture) & observing all of its mitzvot & passing the special messages of the Torah to the rest of the world.

Messiah

Both Judaism & Christianity believe in a Messiah. Messiah is Hebrew *meaning* "anointed." In Biblical times, the coronation of a new king involved pouring a small amount of oil on his head, called anointing. Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah (the name Christ comes from a Greek word meaning messiah) & that he will return. Christians also believe that the Messiah is the son of God. Jews believe that the Messiah will be a human being, a descendant of King David, who will bring the world to a time of complete peace in which every person will recognize & worship one God. Some Jews also believe that the Messiah will gather all Jews to the land of Israel, the Temple will be rebuilt & there will be a resurrection of the dead.

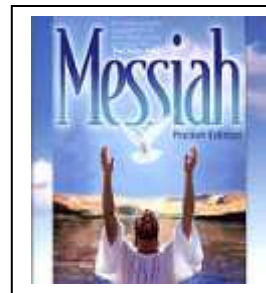
Mitzvot

Jewish observance is structured doing mitzvot (commandments). Mitzvot cover all areas of the life of a Jew, including religious obligations & other kinds of ethical behavior. Examples follow.



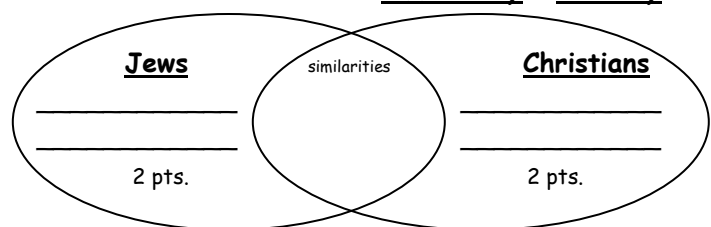
Why do Jews believe they are the "chosen people"?

- Because Judaism was the 1st of the world religions.
- Because they consider themselves better than others.
- Because they believe God chose them to receive the Torah.
- None of the above.



_____ is a Hebrew word meaning "_____."

Using the Venn diagram, show how Jews & Christians view the Messiah differently & similarly.



Prayer

Jews are *obligated* to pray certain prayers 3 times a day ~ morning, afternoon & evening. These prayers include the **Shema**, the most important statement of Jewish belief & the **Amidah**, a silent prayer in which they might ask God for certain things like health, wisdom, protection from enemies, & the coming of the Messiah. Some kinds of prayers are included only when praying with a **minyan** (10 people over the age of Bar & Bat Mitzvah; 10 men in Orthodox Judaism,) so Jews are encouraged to pray with a community.

Tzedakah (charity)

Jews are obligated to give a certain percentage ~ generally at least 10-15% ~ of their income.

Kashrut (dietary laws)

According to the laws of **kashrut**, only split-hooved animals that chew their cud, certain types of fowl (e.g. chicken, turkey, & duck,) & fish with fins & scales are **kosher**, meaning proper to eat. Jews are also *forbidden* to mix dairy & meat products together at the same meal. In addition, animals (not fish) must be killed in a special way called **shechitah** (kosher slaughter) so they die with as little pain as possible. One of the purposes of the Kashrut laws in to *sensitize* Jews to proper treatment of animals.

Shabbat (The Sabbath)

On **Shabbat**, from sundown on Friday night until dark on Saturday night, Jews set aside time to rest. It is symbolic of God's 7th day of rest, after taking 6 days to create the world. On Friday nights & Saturday afternoons, Jews have special Shabbat meals, including blessings over wine & special braided egg breads called **challah**. In a traditional observance of Shabbat, Jews refrain from creative acts which change the state of the world, including cooking, shopping, lighting fires (including electricity,) sewing or knitting, writing or coloring.

T or F (circle one): Jews are allowed to pray only 3 times per day.



Dietary laws of Kashrut stipulate which **foods** are **considered** _____ (proper to eat):

- 1) **animals** with _____
- 2) **fowl** including _____
- 3) **fish** with _____ & _____
(...meaning lobster, crab & oysters are *forbidden or taboo*)

Rules also state it's **forbidden to mix** _____ & _____ at the same meal/on same plate
Animals must be _____ with as little _____ as possible.

Shabbat is **from** _____ on _____ night **until** _____ on _____ night. This is done **in remembrance of God's creation of** the _____.



Branches of Judaism

Reform Judaism

In the 19th century, the Reform movement changed significant part of Judaism to make it more compatible with a changing world. For example, in the United States, the language of prayer became English instead of Hebrew. In addition, Reform Jews believe that the mitzvot in the Torah are only meaningful if they add to one's relationship with God. Most of the traditional restrictions of Shabbat & Kashrut are not observed by Reform Jews.

Orthodox Judaism

In response to the changes that Reform Judaism was introducing, the Orthodox movement emerged. Orthodox Judaism asserted that every letter of the Torah was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, along with a detailed commentary. Therefore, all traditional practices of Judaism reflect the will of God & can not be changed in any way.

Conservative Judaism

Conservative Judaism responded to Orthodoxy by saying that there has always been a way to change Jewish law & tradition, but the *basic* system of mitzvot can not be changed. Most of the observances of Shabbat & Kashrut, for example, remain unchanged, although most Conservative Jews tend to treat them more liberally than do Orthodox Jews. Examples of changes include giving women an equal role in synagogue ritual (in most, but not all, Conservative synagogues) & more flexibility to change traditional prayers to reflect modern concerns.

Reconstructionist Judaism

Reconstructionism, founded in the mid-20th century, is the most recent of the Jewish major movements. It operates under the principle of "The tradition has a vote, *not* a veto." In other words, unlike Reform, the entire basic system of mitzvot is still an important part; but unlike Conservative, an individual mitzvah can be modified or rejected if the community no longer finds it meaningful.



Label: _____
(Hint: # of Mitzvah)

List the branches in order from *MOST* traditional & strict to *LEAST*:

- Strictest:** 1) _____
2) _____
3) _____
Least: 4) _____

WORD BANK:

Conservative
Orthodox
Reconstructionist
Reform



Jewish Rites of Passage

Bar & Bat Mitzvah

When a boy reaches the age of 13 years plus one day or when a girl reaches the age of 12 plus one day, according to their birthdays on the Jewish calendar, these individuals become **Bar Mitzvah** (for a boy) or **Bat Mitzvah** (for a girl). Literally, this means "son or daughter of the commandments." From that day on, they become responsible for observing all of the **mitzvot** (commandments) of Judaism. Prior to becoming bar or bat mitzvah, their parents were responsible for their religious behavior.

Preparing to celebrate a Bar or Bat Mitzvah in the synagogue requires years of study. The content of the synagogue celebration varies, but it commonly includes one or more of the following: reading from the **Torah** scroll, reading a selection from the prophets, leading a portion of the service & delivering a speech, called a d'var Torah ("word of Torah") about the scriptural readings. In Orthodox synagogues, only boys celebrate Bar Mitzvah by taking part in the synagogue service. Following the conclusion of the service, family, friends & the congregation join together for a festive meal.

Marriage

Marriage in the Jewish tradition is called **kiddushin**, which *means* sanctification. A wedding is a *public ceremony* (because the community is expected to help the couple live a life of loyalty & devotion to God & Jewish tradition) in which the bride & groom commit themselves exclusively to each other.

Before the wedding ceremony, the bride & groom formally accept the provisions of the **ketubah**, the Jewish *marriage contract* which stipulates, among other things, that they agree to cherish, honor, & maintain each other (physically, emotionally, & spiritually) according to the customs of Jewish marriage. The ketubah is then signed by 2 witnesses.



Matching Jewish Rites of Passage:

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| _____ Bat Mitzvah | a. for girls at age 12+ |
| _____ Bar Mitzvah | b. for boys at age 13+ |



Girls & boys at their respective **Bat & Bar Mitzvahs**. ↑ → ↓



Following the signing of the ketubah, the groom places a veil over his bride's face. The origins of the veil go back to the matriarch Rebekah, who, when she saw Isaac for the first time, "took her veil & covered her face." (Genesis 24:65). The veil is symbolic of Jewish traditions of modesty.

The marriage takes place under a **cupah**, a wedding canopy representing the home that the bride & groom will create together. The rabbi recites blessings, the couple drinks wine & exchanges rings (in an Orthodox ceremony, the groom does not receive a ring,) & the rabbi recites 7 special blessings comparing the couple to Adam & Eve, the 2 original human being of creation. At the end of the ceremony, the groom breaks a glass, recalling the destruction of the Temple & reminding the couple that it is their responsibility to help fix the imperfect world in which they live.

Death

The Torah, at the beginning of Genesis, teaches us that human beings were created when God took a clod of earth, formed it into a human figure, & breathed life into it. When the breath of life leaves a body for the last time, Jewish tradition teaches that the body should be returned to the earth as quickly & naturally as possible.

For this reason, Jewish funerals do NOT permit cremation or embalming (except in the Reform movement,) & they use coffins that are made entirely of wood. Most funerals take place within a day or 2 of death. The body is carefully washed & dressed in plain linen garments by a special group called the *Hevra Kadisha*, meaning "the holy society" because of the special nature of their responsibility.

Following the funeral, the family returns home for shiva (meaning "7" & refers to the first 1st 7 days following the funeral.) During this time, mourners are prohibited from excessive grooming & pampering of the body, such as taking long baths, shaving, or trimming nails.



The Jewish **cupah** **represents** _____.
 a. the bride & groom
 b. their marriage
 c. the couple's family
 d. their home together

What term means the **OPPOSITE** of an "**imperfect world**"?

- a. flawed
- b. utopia
- c. damaged
- d. defective
- e. all the above
- f. none of the above



Drawing conclusions: Explain **why** Jews believe that the **body** should be **buried "as quickly & naturally as possible" upon death.** _____



Making predictions: During **shiva**, ****why** would mourners be **forbidden to overly groom & pamper** themselves?

(Don't know? Look on the next page!)

In addition, it is customary to cover the mirrors in a shiva house. The reason for these customs is to allow the mourners to focus of their grief, instead of having to spend time worrying about their physical appearance. Mourners also do *not* go out of their homes during shiva; rather, the community comes *in* to comfort them by bringing them meals & leading services so the mourners can recite the *Kaddish*.

The mourner's *Kaddish* is one of the most famous Jewish prayers. It is recited by mourners at the funeral, during shiva, & then for up to a year following the death. It is also recited on a **Yahrtzeit**, the anniversary of a death, again according to the Hebrew calendar. Interestingly, it does not mention death. Rather, it is a prayer affirming one's belief in God *even after* experiencing the tragedy of the death of a loved one.

← ** Here's your answer from page 9! ☺



Putting it all together: **Why** is honoring Yahrtzeit important to Jews? _____
