

## Judaism

### Visiting a Synagogue

The Talmud – an encyclopaedic analysis by the Jewish sages of Jewish law – observes that just as no two human beings have the same physical features, they are also not alike in their mental capacities and their views of the world. There may only be one God, but today there are about thirteen million Jews<sup>1</sup>. Every one of them has an opinion. That is why we should not be surprised that there are different kinds of Judaism with different emphases and interpretations.

Orthodox Judaism maintains all of the teachings and traditions of the past as immutable and unchanging for every age. Nevertheless it embraces under its wing a fairly wide diversity of views and observance.

In contrast to Orthodox Judaism's view that the Torah and past traditions are immutable, Reform Judaism, which arose in early nineteenth-century Germany, aims to reinterpret Judaism in the light of Western thought, values, and culture where such a reinterpretation does not come into conflict with Judaism's basic principles. Reform Jews regard the Torah as their ancestors' record of their encounter with God, a document containing both timeless and timebound teachings.

There are also other Jewish denominations that you may come across, namely Masorti, Liberal and Progressive. These different denominations affect synagogue practices. In Orthodox synagogues men and women are assigned different roles and are separated in worship. Women play no role in leading public worship. In some other denominations women may take any role, including that of Rabbi.

The building in which Jewish public worship generally takes place is called a synagogue. Established communities normally erect a purpose-built building which serves to host Jewish community activities, social as well as religious. Educational activities, religious services and special community or family occasions such as weddings and bar/bat mitzvahs (the celebration of children becoming adult Jews) take place there. Most Jews in Great Britain choose to affiliate to a synagogue, though their attendance at activities will vary from regular to occasional, depending upon their individual interests and tastes.

The furnishings and symbols in a synagogue are generally the same across the different Jewish groups. All synagogues will have an Ark, which houses the Torah Scrolls. In front of the Ark one will see a *ner tamid*, a perpetual light, symbolic of the lamp that was lit in the Temple in Jerusalem. Rabbis, Cantors or synagogue members may lead services. In non-orthodox synagogues the Rabbi or officiant may be a woman. There is usually a raised platform (the *bimah*), either in the centre of the synagogue, or near the ark, on which is placed a reading-desk from where the service is led and the *Torah* is chanted or read to the congregation.

The major weekly Jewish day of worship is the Sabbath (*Shabbat*). It begins on Friday evening and lasts 25 hours until Saturday evening. The time of *shabbat* may dictate the times of services, or services may be held at fixed times. *Shabbat* symbolises God's rest from the work of creation on the seventh day, as told in the

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<sup>1</sup> Most people who are Jewish are born to Jewish parents. They are therefore members of the Jewish people by birth. However, being Jewish means also belonging to a religious community and it is possible for a non-Jewish person to join the religious community and become accepted as Jewish. This process is normally referred to as 'conversion'. It is however a sensitive topic for some Jewish communities who find the concept of conversion difficult.

Biblical book of Genesis (Hebrew: *Bereshit*). Jews are commanded to imitate God in this respect by ceasing from certain activities. As one of these involves a prohibition on carrying in certain circumstances, it is recommended that visitors to an Orthodox synagogue on *shabbat* respect the community's practice and generally refrain from carrying objects such as bags or umbrellas. Though these rules do not apply to non-Jews, it would be sensible to seek guidance before visiting.

### **Dress for visitors**

To dress well honours the Sabbath. A visitor should dress smartly, though most communities would accept the modern idea of 'smart but casual'. However, beware of children's notions of 'smart'. Men and boys should cover their heads – a small head covering called a *Yarmulka* or *Kippah* may be made available at the synagogue for guests. In orthodox synagogues Jewish women and girls may also be required to wear a head covering, such as a hat or headscarf, so check regarding their views about visitors and headgear. Jewish men in all denominations usually wear a *tallit*, a prayer 'shawl'. Non-Jewish visitors are not required to wear a *tallit*. In non-orthodox synagogues, women may be seen wearing a tallit.

In Jewish tradition, communal prayer is regarded more highly than private prayer. To constitute a valid community for public prayer, tradition requires a *minyan*, (a quorum of at least ten men over the age of thirteen). Non-orthodox synagogues count women in the minyan. Prayers are mandated three times daily: in the early morning; at midday; and at sunset.

The fullest Jewish public prayer service takes place on the Sabbath. All established synagogues of all denominations would hold services on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. The Friday evening service may last thirty to ninety minutes and the Saturday morning service may last from ninety minutes to over three hours, depending on the congregation: in general, the more orthodox, the longer the services. Orthodox synagogue services are almost entirely in Hebrew. In other denominations, the local language (e.g. English) may be used for up to half the service. Prayer books normally include translations or interpretations of the Hebrew texts.

The major 'building blocks' of all Jewish services are (i) preliminary prayers, often of an individual tone (ii) the *Shema* – the key phrase of which is "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." Some say that the recitation of this biblical passage is the closest Judaism comes to a 'creed'. (iii) The next major element of the service after the *Shema* is the *Amidah* (also known as the *Shemoneh Esreh*), a series of up to nineteen sections of praises, thanks and petitions to God. If appropriate to the service, the public reading of a portion of the Torah may follow the *Amidah*. The *Torah* reading, from the first five books of the Bible is accompanied by the *Haftarah*, a reading selected from elsewhere in the Bible. Concluding prayers, including the Aleynu and the Kaddish, follows the Torah service.

The congregation in a synagogue will sit for much of the service. Seating styles and arrangements vary. Visitors should arrive in good time for services, introduce themselves, and ask to be shown to seating. Synagogues normally delegate persons to act as officers to oversee the conduct of such matters. In orthodox synagogues, women can expect to have a separate seating area from men.

Visitors will generally get more from visits to services if they arrange an introduction to synagogue activities and/or a tour of the synagogue beforehand.

Please note that synagogues do not collect money during services. Handling money is not an activity appropriate to *shabbat* or holy days. If you wish to give a donation, e.g. as thanks for having a school group shown around, write to the synagogue to ask how you can donate. Synagogues are generally registered charities.

Visits to services must be arranged in advance. You cannot just turn up at a service unless someone in the congregation knows you.

### **Books Used in Services**

The daily and sabbath prayer book is known as a *siddur* ('order', i.e. of prayers) which varies among the different Jewish denominations. In services, people often follow *Torah* and *Haftarah* readings from a volume which contains the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), and the traditional section from Prophets which is associated with each weekly Torah portion.