**What Do Jews Believe?**

**Jewish Beliefs**

When learning about a religion one of the first questions people ask is: What do members of that religion believe? Although it is difficult to capture the beliefs of every single member of a faith, usually there are overarching tenets that most members of the group adhere to in some fashion. The same can be said of Judaism. However, it is important to note that Judaism does not have an official credo that all Jews must accept in order to be Jewish. Judaism is not a religion of absolutes.

While individual Jews have different views about things like [kashrut](http://judaism.about.com/od/dietarylaws/Dietary_Laws_of_Kashrut.htm) and halahkah, in general most Jews believe in some form of the following:

**God**

Judaism is a monotheistic faith, meaning that Jews believe there is only One God. Often this God is beyond our ability to comprehend, but God is nevertheless present in our everyday lives. How individual Jews choose to understand this manifestation of the divine varies. Some connect with God through prayer, others see the divine in the majesty of the natural world, others may not think about God on a daily basis. Each individual's relationship with God is unique and personal.

**Humankind Was Created In the Divine Image**

Judaism teaches that every person (Jewish and non-Jewish) was created "b'tzelem Elohim," which is Hebrew for "in the image of God." For this reason every person is equally important and has an infinite potential to do good in the world. People have the freewill to make choices in their lives and each of us is responsible for the consequences of those choices.

**Community**

Judaism believes that Jews are uniquely connected with each other. Regardless of where we live in the world, all Jews are part of a global Jewish community.

**Torah**

The Torah is Judaism's [most important text](http://judaism.about.com/od/judaismbasics/a/What-Is-The-Torah-Chumash.htm). It contains stories and commandments that teach us about life and death. It contains the 10 Commandments as well as the [613 commandments](http://judaism.about.com/od/judaismbasics/fl/What-are-the-613-commandments.htm) (mitzvot). All Jews consider the 10 Commandments to be the most important commandments in the Torah, though not all Jews adhere to the 613 mitzvot (one of the main differences between the different branches of Judaism).

The Ten Commandments:

1. I am the Lord your God
2. You shall not recognize the gods of others in My presence
3. You shall not take the Name of the Lord your God in vain
4. Remember the day of shabbat to keep it holy
5. Honor your father and your mother
6. You shall not murder
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. Do not give false testimony against your neighbor
10. You shall not covet your fellow's possessions

**The Land of Israel**

The Torah tells us that the Land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael) was part of the covenant made between God and the Jewish People at Mount Sinai. However, there is no one view of Israel among modern day Jews. Some strongly support Israel, while others feel conflicted by the politics of the region. The only thing that can be said across the board is that Israel is part of every Jew's worldview, in one way or another.

**Messiah**

Judaism teaches that one day a Messiah (a person from God) will unite the world and bring peace to humanity. The concept of the Messiah is not a central part of every Jew's belief system, but tradition does teach that the Messiah will be descended from the family of King David.

**Judaism On One Foot - Summing Up Judaism**

There is a story in the Talmud that is often told when someone is asked to summarize the essence of Judaism. During the first century B.C.E. a great rabbi named Hillel was asked to sum up Judaism while standing on one foot. He replied: "Certainly! What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the Torah. The rest is commentary, now go and study." (Talmud Shabbat 31A.) Hence, at its core Judaism is concerned with the well-being of humanity. The particulars of every Jew's individual belief system is the commentary.

**What Does It Mean For Jews to Be the Chosen People?**

According to Jewish belief, Jews are the Chosen People because they were chosen to make the idea of one God known to the world. It all began with Abraham, whose relationship with God has traditionally been interpreted in two ways: either God chose Abraham to spread the concept of monotheism, or Abraham chose God from all the deities that were worshiped in his time. Either way, the idea of “chosenness” meant that Abraham and his descendants were responsible for sharing the word of God with others.

**What is the Western Wall?**

Although many think that the Kotel was an actual wall of the Second Temple, believe it or not it was actually a retaining wall to the outer courtyard near the Temple built many years after the Temple.

**Meaning**

There are many different names for the towering structure found in Jerusalem’s Old City, although it is primarily known as the Kotel or the Western Wall (Kotel ha’Maarav). There are early sources for “western wall of the Temple” in Shir haShirim Rabbah 2-8, and the earliest modern references come from the 11th century where it is related that Rabbi Samuel ben Paltiel (980-1010) gave money for oil at the sanctuary at the “Western Wall.”

Other names for the site, many of which derive from the observance of Jews weeping for the destruction of the Temple at the site for the wall, include

* Al-Buraq: Used by Arabs, this term arose in the 19th century and comes form the tradition that it was inside the wall that Muhammad tethered his winged steed Buraq. The tradition has roots in the 14th century.
* Wailing Wall: This terminology appears in English sources from throughout the 19th century.
* Klagemauer: This is the German terminology and comes as from a translation of the Arabic *el-Mabka*, meaning “place of weeping.”
* Mur des Lamentations: This is the French terminology that also comes from the Arabic translation.

**What is it?**

Obviously the Kotel and its environs have been, since the beginning of time, a hotbed of significant activity for Judaism and other world religions and peoples. These are just some of the significant events and occurrences from the site.

* Known at one time as Mount Moriah, the Temple Mount is traditionally known as the place where the creation of the world began with the placing of the “[Foundation Stone](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-the-foundation-stone.htm#didyouknowout).”
* Mount Moriah was the place where Adam, the first man, was created.
* In the Akeidah narrative, Mount Moriah is “the place that God chooses” for Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.
* Jacob’s dream of the angels and ladders took place at Mount Moriah.
* When the First Temple and Second Temple were built, the Holy of Holies was built around the Foundation Stone.

**How To**

Jewish law dictates that Jews should pray facing the Kotel, no matter where they are in the world, and this is why Jews face east ([Kitzur Shulchan Aruch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shlomo_Ganzfried%22%20%5Cl%20%22Kitzur_Shulchan_Aruch%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) 18:10). It is considered a powerful place to pray for your mate or any other needs, as it is the closest location to the Holy of Holies where God’s presence (shechinah) was during the time of the Temple.

Today, many Jews will become bar or bat mitzvah at the Kotel on either a Tuesday or Thursday, and [Israel Defense Forces](http://www.idfblog.com/) soldiers are sworn in at the Western Wall Plaza. The Kotel is also a popular place for mass prayer during times of national crisis.

Every year, large crowds gather for Tisha b’Av to commemorate the destruction of the Temple, and during the three pilgrimage festivals (the shalosh regalim), Jews from around the world travel to the Kotel to take part in prayers.

People from all over the world from all faith and religious traditions visit the Kotel en masse to see the towering structure that has defined Judaism for thousands of years.

One of the most popular activities at the wall is to [write a note](http://judaism.about.com/od/prayersworshiprituals/f/kotelnotes.htm) and to place it into the crevices of the ancient wall. The earliest mention of this practice comes from 18th-century Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar (Sefer Tamei Ha-minhagim U’mekorei Ha-dinim). These letters are collected every twice a year and buried on [Mount of Olives](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2007-09-05/where-do-all-the-prayer-notes-go/660366). More than 1 million notes are placed into the wall every year, including by visited dignitaries, [presidents](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2008/07/israel-snooping.html), and [celebrities](http://www.kveller.com/mayim-bialik/mayim-bialik-update-from-israel-the-west-bank-the-kotel-the-family/).

You can also [send a letter to the Kotel](http://english.thekotel.org/SendNote.asp?icon=1), which will be printed and placed in the wall on your behalf.

Visit the [Kotel Cam](http://english.thekotel.org/cameras.asp) and you can also see the Western Wall Plaza, its visitors, and experience a bit of the Kotel for yourself.