

EXPLORING BELIEF

JUDAISM

— WHERE PAST

History, community and spirituality are all part of the complex amalgam that is the modern expression of Judaism, as *Kate Johnston* discovers.

Judaism today is a community-based faith inextricably entwined with the history of the Jewish people.

Followers understand and live out their personal relationship with God within the context of a deeply felt connection to the past. Like Christianity and Islam, it is a monotheistic religion – one that believes there is only one God, through whom all things come into existence – but of the three, Judaism is the oldest.

“The earliest expressions of monotheism came through the stories of the Bible – Abraham, Moses and the experiences of the Jewish people in Egypt and coming out of Egypt,” says Rabbi Morgan from the Temple Beth Israel in Melbourne. “The tendency of humanity is to multiply gods – everybody wants their own God who will fight on their behalf! But the one God is *everybody’s* God.”

Judaism believes all worshippers can approach God without an intermediary – a rabbi is a teacher, not a priest. At the heart of Jewish life, however, is the synagogue, a local community and religious centre where festivals and ceremonies, such as Bar Mitzvahs (coming of age ceremonies) are celebrated. “We don’t have parishes or automatic affiliation to synagogues,” says Rabbi Morgan. “When people are members of synagogues, it’s because they’ve come to join as individuals and families.”

Of great importance is the study of the *Torah* (the first five books of the Bible as revealed to Moses), the *Mishna* and *Talmud*, and other traditional interpretations of the Hebrew scriptures. Jewish festivals and traditions often stem from these works. For instance, Shabbat (Sabbath), a day of rest from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday, originates from the creation narrative in Genesis and is codified in the fourth of the Ten Commandments in Exodus.

The many movements within Judaism interpret the scriptures differently; the focus, then, tends to be on actions rather than beliefs (though Hasidic Jews are also interested in mystical questions about the nature of divinity; see box). Thus, there is no strict, formal set of beliefs for all. In general, however, followers adhere to the commandments in the Torah, laws put into place by rabbis, local customs and a cycle of holidays that follow the Jewish lunar calendar.

The Jewish community in Australia

Rabbi Morgan was born and raised in America before he went to England for post-graduate study. From his experience, the Australian Jewish community differs from those of the US, UK and Israel in that there is a very large Holocaust survivor community.

“After the war, many people applied for immigration to Australia because it is as far away from Europe as they could get, short of the moon!” he says. “That makes for a tight-knit community which tends to be inward looking, although they *love* Australia, because Australia was their saviour land. But they don’t get involved in social issues in Australia as



Three (of many) movements within Judaism

Orthodox

Orthodox Jews follow a strict Kosher diet, prepared in accordance with religious law. They believe that the Torah and Talmud are God’s actual words given to the Jewish people.

Hasidic

Hasidism is a more mystical form of Orthodox Judaism, which emphasises ecstatic communion with God. All Jewish men wear hats, usually a yarmulke (skullcap), as a sign of respect to God and a reminder that there is a higher power. Ultra-religious Jews, including some Hasidic men, can often be recognised by their distinctive dress: full beards, hats, dark clothes and side curls, called payos. The payos are worn in obedience to a commandment in Leviticus.

Progressive (Liberal or Reform)

The Progressive movement emerged in 19th Century Europe to adapt Judaism to contemporary living. It accepts female rabbis. Rabbi Morgan says social activism, human rights and egalitarianism are important principles in Progressive Judaism.

AND PRESENT MELD



Rabbi Morgan

PHOTO: COURTESY RABBI MORGAN

much as Jews in America or the UK do. There, they immigrated over a longer period of time, many before the First and Second World Wars.’

According to Rabbi Morgan, a large proportion of the Australian Jewish community are Zionistic – active supporters of Israel. “This is also connected to the Holocaust,” he says. “War-time experiences have made people aware of the fragility of Jews living outside of Israel, in the Diaspora¹. Israel is the place where Jewish people can feel secure and in charge of their own destiny. We lost our sovereign land to the Romans two thousand years ago; this created the Diaspora. Since then, our prayers have been steeped in longing for the land. Now that we have it again, the idea of losing it fills most of us with absolute dread.”

Israel is also a sacred home – the land God promised to Abraham. “I’ve done quite a bit of travelling and when I walk around Jerusalem, it feels like a place unlike any other on earth. You feel that sense of God most strongly – it’s the

land upon which the Jewish people can live out the Torah, our sacred destiny.”

Rabbi Morgan sees that destiny as furthering views and behaviour that will bring the world a little bit closer to redemption – every individual must take whatever action they can. “There is a famous passage in the Mishna which says ‘It’s not ours to complete the work, but we’re not allowed to desist from it either!’”

For many Jews, redemption or peace on earth will be affirmed with the coming of the Messiah (*Moshiach*), who will not be a divine figure but more like a leader who acts as a signal that the work has been done. “There are lots of views within Jewish tradition about the Messiah,” says Rabbi Morgan. “But whatever the Messiah is, it’s well argued that the Messiah won’t do the work for us – we have to do it.

“There’s an ancient rabbinic story about this: if you’re planting a tree and someone announces ‘The Messiah has come’, finish planting the tree and then go to greet the Messiah. The Messiah isn’t going to plant the trees, we plant

the trees. Very ecological! But the idea is that we have to do it. We have to make the world a better place.” YL

1. The term ‘Diaspora’ first appears in Deuteronomy, referring to the dispersion of Jews among the Gentile nations. It is now used to describe not only Jews but any body of people living outside their traditional homeland. Source: *Oxford English Dictionary*, 5th edn, 2002.

→ MORE

Temple Beth Israel is the largest of four Progressive Jewish congregations in Australia, with 2700 members. Its website has a ‘Guide to Judaism’ under worship and spirituality.
Web www.tbi.org.au

Judaism 101 is a comprehensive online resource on Judaism.
Web www.jewfaq.org

The UK’s **BBC** has an easy-to-navigate website which clearly explains Jewish traditions, festivals and holidays.
Web www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism