Chapter 4: Jewish Traditions

Chapter Overview

In this chapter on the Jewish traditions, Michele Murray explores the history, practices, and ideas of the Jewish people. Murray examines the diverse and complex history of Judaism by investigating aspects of Jewish identity in relation to the biblical story, the place and use of the Torah, the concept of covenant, the Exile to Babylonia, responses to the Enlightenment, the development of modern branches of Judaism, the Shoah, and recent developments in gender and equality issues.

Murray illustrates the connections between the history, practices, and ideas of the Jewish people throughout their various traditions. Murray explains that the pilgrimage festivals of Passover (Pesach), Sukkot (the Festival of Booths) and Shavuot (the Festival of Weeks) are developed from the biblical accounts of the Exodus and the establishment of Israel in the Torah, while also illustrating their continuing vitality in the Jewish tradition. Murray explains the festivals of Purim and Hanukkah by connecting them to the Book of Esther and the Diaspora (Purim), the Books of the Maccabees, the Maccabean Revolt, and the Hasmonean Family (Hanukkah). The ideas of monotheism and covenant found in the Torah are explicated by Murray as she relates their significance to the practices of circumcision, bar and bat mitzvot, the ethical imperatives of the Decalogue, the various movements of Kabbalah and medieval philosophy, and the observing of mitzvot (commandments) in general.

Murray focuses on diversity within Jewish traditions by analyzing the varieties of groups throughout their history. In doing so, she summarizes key Jewish groups of the Second Temple Period, the rise of Rabbinic Judaism, the Karaites, the differences related to the geographical Palestinian and Babylonian traditions, as well as the differences between Ashkenazim, Sephardim, and Mizrahim. Moreover, Murray discusses the relationship between the Enlightenment and its responses in the forms of the modern branches of Judaism including Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and Humanist Judaism. Murray also analyzes the background of anti-Semitism, the Shoah, and the creation of the State of Israel.

Murray discusses the development of Written and Oral Torah, prayer, prayer items, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as well the life-cycle events of birth, death, marriage, divorce, and the recent developments concerning the Jewish bloodline, Jewish feminism, and marriage equality. In this chapter, Murray calls us to reflect upon how Jewishness is rooted in many different aspects of life, including religious, cultural, and ethnic elements, while also being a response to changing situations and markers of identity.

Learning Objectives are met when the student:

1. Summarizes and comprehends the key movements, issues, and persons across Jewish history from biblical times to the present day including the Hebrew Bible (i.e., Tanakh), the Mishnah, Gemarah and Talmud.
2. Analyzes the responses of Jews to struggle and adversity, from the Babylonian Exile, to Persian Rule, Hellenization, and Roman occupation, and explains how these conflicts shaped Judaism.
3. Summarizes Jewish rituals and practices (such as the centrality of the Shema) by tracing their significance back to events within Jewish history up to the present day.
4. Compares and contrasts the developments within the Jewish traditions from the time of the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) to Islamic rule (7th CE to 12th CE) and within the Christian world (7th CE to 15th CE).
5. Interpret the diversity in the Jewish traditions by outlining the effects of the displacement and migration wherein religious and cultural traditions were both preserved and reinvented, therein producing a great deal of intellectual dynamism and heterogeneity allowing for the development of new, different, and sometimes antagonistic, expressions of Judaism, including the place and role of women, and variant understandings of Jewish identity.

Study Questions

1. What are the three parts of the Tanakh? What is the general content and examples of books from each of these three parts of the Tanakh?
2. What event is commemorated during the Passover, which is the first of the three major festivals collectively known as the “Three Pilgrimages” (*Shalosh Regalim*)? What are some of the key food components and meaning behind them within this ritualistic practice? Identify and explain the meaning of two food items.
3. What does the ritualist practice of Sukkot commemorate within the Jewish tradition? What are some of the key components and what is their assigned meaning?
4. Which of the five modern branches of Judaism was first to developed by Israel Jacobson? What are some of the early changes and present-day core tenets in this modern branch of Judaism?
5. Prayer is often considered to be the centre of Jewish religious life. What are some of the key components, practices, times and locations associated with prayer in the Jewish traditions? Identify two or three items related to prayer within or across the branches and historical periods of the Jewish traditions.

Study Questions: Answers

1. The three parts of the Tanakh are as follows: (1) Teaching or Law (Hebrew term is Torah), which consists of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy); (2) the Prophets (Hebrew term is *Nevi’im*), which includes a number of prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel; (3) and the sacred Writings (Hebrew term is *Ketuvim*) (e.g., Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes), which includes books of songs, prayer and wisdom literature. (p. 130)
2. Passover (*Pesach* in Hebrew) commemorates the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Its focal point is the ritual meal called the Seder (“order”), during which a text called the Haggadah is read aloud. Relating the story of the Exodus from Egypt, it celebrates the fact that death passed over the Israelites when God sent a plague to destroy the Egyptian firstborn. The food items of Passover Jews include unleavened bread to remind the Jews that the Israelites fled Egypt so quickly that they could not wait for their bread to rise. A vegetable such as parsley or celery represents spring or hope, before it is eaten it is dipped in salt water, which symbolizes the tears of the Israelites. Horseradish recalls the bitterness of slavery and a mixture of fruit, nuts, wine, and spices, recalls the mortar from which the Israelite slaves made bricks for the pharaoh. A shank bone from a lamb echoes the lamb’s blood of which Israelites marked their doorways so that God would “pass over” without taking their firstborn. A hard-boiled egg symbolizes either fertility or mourning for the loss of the two Temples in Jerusalem. Lastly, a bitter vegetable, usually romaine lettuce, is an optional second symbol of the harsh life of a slave. It is the custom to reserve some wine in a special cup for the prophet Elijah, whose return to Earth will herald the coming of the Messianic Age, a time of peace and prosperity for all (p. 132).
3. Sukkot commemorates the years of Israelites’ wanderings in the wilderness. It is an eight-day holiday during when (as long as weather permits) Jews eat and sleep in the open air in a temporary structure called a *sukkah*, which translates as “booth” or “tabernacle.” The *sukkah* (pl. *sukkot*) have a roof made of organic material like leaves and branches; also, the sky must be visible through gaps in the roof to symbolize the Israelites’ willingness to put themselves directly under divine protection. Usually in September or October, Sukkot is said to have taken its name from temporary shelters that farmers used in autumn to guard their ripening crops. It is the third and last of the “Three Pilgrimages” (*Shalosh Regalim*). (p.136)
4. Israel Jacobson was the father of Reform Judaism in eighteenth-century Germany. The pioneers of Reform Judaism wanted to show that the Enlightenment ideas were compatible with Judaism. The Hamburg Temple used the common German of their day rather than Hebrew and eliminated any reference to the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. They also demonstrated the similarities between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Today, understanding Judaism to be flexible and evolving, Reform Jews generally do not follow dietary laws. Reform Judaism was the first to ordain women. (p. 156)
5. Jewish prayers take two forms. First, are the preset forms from the ancient period; second are the spontaneous prayers by the individual Jew at any moment. Prayer services are centered around the formal type of prayer. Three times daily in the evening, morning and afternoon, the Jewish community prays in worship services that correspond to the daily sacrifices performed at the Temple in Jerusalem. Every Sabbath morning includes readings from the Torah and the Prophets. Tradition teaches that it is better to pray in a group, thus, the Orthodox practice is to have at least 10 adult males (Hebrew *minyan*, which means “number”) to make a quorum for public prayer. Conservative synagogues may allow women to be part of the minyan whereas Reform Judaism does not require a minyan. In most Conservative and Orthodox synagogues, males wear the skullcap (Hebrew is *kippah*; Yiddish is *yarmulke*). The *tallit* is a fringed prayer shawl usually worn by men in morning prayers; it is only worn in the evening on Yom Kippur. For weekday morning prayer men put on tefillin (or phylacteries): small black leather boxes containing words of scripture from Exodus and Deuteronomy, which are tied to the forehead and upper arm to fulfill the instructions of the Shema to “Bind them [these words] as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead.” Traditionally, only men have worn the tallit and tefillin, but in modern times some Conservative and Reform women have begun wearing them as well (pp. 160–161)

Research Questions

1. Whether one follows the dietary laws is often seen as a key marker of one’s “Jewishness.” Why might this be the case? What are some of the variant approaches and teachings related to the connection of dietary practices and Jewishness?
2. Conservative Judaism emerged as a response to Reform and Orthodox Judaism, and is often described as the middle ground between these branches. What are the tenets and practices of Conservative Judaism and how do they compare and related to both Reform Judaism and Orthodox Judaism respectively?
3. One of the important concepts of Lurianic mysticism, founded by the Kabbalah scholar Isaac Luria (1534–1572) is the teaching and practice of *tikkun olam* or the “restoring of the world.” Define and explain why this teaching was appealing in the 16th century and how it continues to be relevant for contemporary issues related to social justice?
4. Why have we distinguished between anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism when looking at the history of the persecution of the Jewish people? Provide one or more examples of each to illustrate the differences between these two ideologies.
5. What historical events preceded and ultimately engendered Rabbinic Judaism? What are the some of the key practices, persons and literature connected to the first few centuries of Rabbinic Judaism?
6. Mordechai Kaplan, who was the founder of the Reconstructionist movement in the United States, argued that Judaism was first and foremost a cultural and social movement; therefore, there was no need for supernatural religion to play a role within Judaism. Evaluate Kaplan’s teachings within the context of the United States of the 1920’s, therein, addressing questions such as: what influenced his approach; who was his intended audience; what and who was he responding to; and what needs were met by the Reconstructionist movement?
7. Prayer is at the heart of Judaism, and is thus called “service of the heart.” Yet, there are significant variations in the forms of prayer among the modern branches of Judaism. Compare practices of prayer in at least two different branches.
8. Judaism has several rituals and practices that mark the important moments in life, from birth to death, from coming of age to marriage. Compare two of these practices and examine how these practices are connected to Jewish identity.
9. What has been the role and place of women within and throughout the Jewish traditions? Compare and contrast two traditions therein explaining the historical, cultural and religious rationale behind their different approaches to the role and place of women within their communities.
10. How did the Holocaust and then the subsequent birth of the State of Israel shape and change prevailing notions of cultural and religious identity amongst Jewish people?

Reflection Questions

1. Jewishness can be rooted in many different aspects of life, including religious, cultural, and ethnic elements. How do the traditional definitions of Judaism allow for such flexibility in interpreting Jewish identity?
2. How does the understanding of the biblical narrative as sacred history affect how Jewish people interpret the Torah?
3. Why do some Jewish women want traditional images, rites, regulations, and rituals to change? Why have some branches of Judaism embraced these changes, while other branches have been resistant to changes?
4. What is the underlying meaning and significance of the Jewish High Holy Days, also known as the Days of Awe? What practices and beliefs are associated with Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and the Days of Penitence, which occur in between these two High Holy Days?
5. For the majority of Jewish people, the Hebrew word “Shoah” more aptly describes the events that occurred in Europe between the years 1933–1945 than does the Greek word “Holocaust.” Why do you think this is so?

Additional Resources

1. *The Story of the Jews*. PBS SoCal. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/story-jews/>

In this five-part television series (each episode is approximately one hour), Simon Schama travels the globe recounting the story of the Jewish people and their history. Additional videos and other materials made ready for course instruction are also available on this site.

1. Jewish Virtual Library. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/about-aice>

With nearly 25,000 entries, the Jewish Virtual Library is one of the most (if not the most) comprehensive online encyclopedia for Jewish history, politics and culture. The site has catalogued these entries within thirteen “wings” including Biography, Myths & Facts, Travel, Vital Stats, Women and more.

1. *Judaism 101*, by Tracey R. Rich. <http://www.jewfaq.org/index.htm>

This online encyclopedia of Judaism provides an accessible overview of Jewish beliefs, people, places, language, scripture, holidays, practices, and customs. The website notes that the material is written “predominantly from the Orthodox viewpoint” as the writer believes it is a good starting point for any inquiry into Judaism.

1. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Online Exhibit “Some Were Neighbours.” <http://somewereneighbors.ushmm.org/#/exhibitions>

This online exhibit is comprised of documents, photos, and videos, including the testimonies of collaborators and survivors of the Holocaust. Reflecting on the complexities of human motivation and action, the website explains that “the Nazis found countless willing helpers who collaborated or were complicit in their crimes. What motives and pressures led so many individuals to abandon their fellow human beings? Why did others make the choice to help?”

1. T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights: <http://www.truah.org/index.php>

T’ruah brings a rabbinic voice and the power of the Jewish community to protecting and advancing human rights in North America, Israel, and the occupied Palestinian territories. We do this by training and mobilizing our network of 2,000 rabbis and cantors, together with their communities, to bring our Jewish values to life through strategic and meaningful action.

1. *Tikkun*. <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/>

This bimonthly magazine, edited by Rabbi Michael Lerner, deals with contemporary issues from a Jewish perspective, and comprises critiques of politics, culture, and society.

1. Dan Cohn-Sherbok. 2003. *Judaism: History, Belief and Practice*. New York: Routledge.
2. Nicholas De Lange and Miri Freud-Kandel. 2005. *Modern Judaism: An Oxford Guide*. New York: Oxford University Press.
3. Naomi Graetz. 2005. *Unlocking the Garden: A Feminist Jewish Look at the Bible, Midrash and God*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 2005.
4. Michael L. Satlow. 2006. *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Field Work Guidelines

If you are interested in doing fieldwork, you need to plan and organize your fieldwork experience as thoroughly as you can. Generally, you can divide your fieldwork experience into three stages: Planning, during, and after your fieldwork.

Planning Your Fieldwork

*Research:* Begin by researching the individual, group, or place you would like to do work on or with. Visit websites if available, and read any available scholarship.

*Make Contact:* Contact the person, group, or administrators of the place you would like to research. Give as much information as possible about your project so that your contact can guide. Often your contact will be able to help you understand the rules for conduct that will be needed during your fieldwork. Remember to be polite and courteous.

*Questions:* Based on your research and interests, create a set of questions you would like to answer during the course of your fieldwork.

*Ethics Approval:* Some projects need to have ethics approval, especially if your research involves people. The guidelines for applications for ethics approval may differ depending on the organization or university you work with; thus, please contact your organization or university to find out more about this process.

During Your Fieldwork

Often, there are specific rules for conduct when you visit sacred spaces and/or interview people, and usually, these rules can be seen before you enter a site, or spoken about before you interview people. It is best to find out about these rules before you begin your fieldwork. There are some general rules that should be followed at all times: Always be polite and courteous, dress modestly, and participate where appropriate.

*Be polite and courteous:*

1. Introduce yourself. If you are visiting a sacred site or a worship centre, you will be able to find people who are either there to meet you specifically, or would like to help you during your visit.
2. Leave your camera, phone, notebook, or laptop in a bag or even at home unless you have received prior permission to use these items.
3. Be aware of signs. Signs have important information about the place you are in, thus, look for the signs and the information they give.
4. Be respectful of the people and your surroundings. Do not disturb the rites or the privacy of the people. While there are times when you may be invited to participate, please remember that if you are not invited, you should keep a respectful silence and distance from the rite. Also, people may be curious about why you are visiting or conducting your research. Try to answer their questions as best you can. They may be able to provide you with additional information and further help.

*Dress modestly:*

1. Rules for appropriate dress are often important when visiting a place or a group. Please follow these rules if you have been given them.
2. For synagogues or Jewish sacred sites, these rules usually mean that knees and shoulders should be covered for both men and women. Men may also need to cover their heads. Often, if you are not dressed appropriately, you may be given appropriate attire, or you may not be allowed into a site.

*Participate Where Appropriate:*

1. If you have been invited to participate, please do so!
2. Generally, follow the guidelines that have been given to you, or the people around you. The best tip: Stand when people stand, and sit when people sit.
3. Ask questions. If you are not sure what to do, ask the people around you. Most people will be happy to help you out.
4. If you are interviewing a particular person or people, make notes on the questions that you ask, and answer any questions that you are asked as well.

After Your Fieldwork

1. Make a comprehensive set of notes on your experience as soon as you are able. The better your notes are, the more you will be able to draw on later.
2. Thank anyone who has helped you with your experience, and acknowledge their help in the written version of your work.
3. Follow up with the people or the place that you have visited. If you have used information from any interviews, offer to send a copy your work to the place or the people you have met.