

Introduction to Judaism (24 lectures, 30 minutes/lecture)

Taught by Shai Cherry, Vanderbilt University, Ph.D., Brandeis University



What could be simpler than a single people worshipping a single God for 3,000 years? But Judaism is far from simple, and as a religion, culture, and civilization, it has evolved in surprising ways during its long and remarkable history. Consider the following:

- Although Judaism is defined by its worship of one God, it was not always a pure monotheism. In I Kings 8, King Solomon addresses the Lord by saying, "there is no God like You," suggesting that the Israelites recognized the existence of other gods.
- The practice of Judaism was focused on animal sacrifice until the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in the first century, which forced a radically new approach to worship.
- The political emancipation of the Jews in 18th-century Europe transformed a thousand-year-old style of Jewish life. "You can't find an expression of Judaism today that is just like Jews lived 300 years ago," says Professor Shai Cherry.

Yet for all it has changed, Judaism has maintained unbroken ties to a foundation text, an ethnicity, a set of rituals and holidays, and a land.

A Journey of Religious Discovery

In these 24 lectures, Professor Cherry explores the rich religious heritage of Judaism from biblical times to today.

He introduces you to the written Torah, and you learn about the oral Torah, called the Mishnah (which was also later written down), and its commentary, the Gemara. And you discover how the Mishnah and Gemara comprise the Talmud, and how they differ from another form of commentary called Midrash.

He teaches you about the three pillars of the world defined over 2,000 years ago by Shimon the Righteous: Torah, worship, and deeds of loving kindness.

He takes you through the calendar of Jewish holidays, from the most important, the Sabbath, to the key holidays of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover, and Pentecost (Shavuot); and to historically minor celebrations such as Channukah, which is now a more visible holiday.

You also learn about the origins and attributes of the different Jewish movements that formed in the wake of Emancipation in the late 1700s and the resulting full emergence of Judaism into Western society. These include the Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox, and Reconstructionist movements. "Although Jewish history is not one long tale of travails," says Professor Cherry, "there have been several catastrophes that powerfully shaped the Jewish consciousness." He includes discussions of the impact on Jewish thought of the Babylonian exile and the destruction of the Second Temple in antiquity, and the Holocaust in the 20th century.

"We will see that for every topic that we cover we have a multiplicity of responses and a multiplicity of answers," says Professor Cherry, noting that this course could just as easily be called "An Introduction to *Judaisms*."

What's in a Name?

Judaism's sacred text is the Bible, also called the TaNaKH, the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, and, by Christians, the Old Testament. As Professor Cherry points out, these terms have different implications:

- *TaNaKH*: This is the Hebrew acronym for the three sections of the Bible—the Torah (the first five books, known as the Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).
- *Torah*: The word *torah* means "a teaching," and it can refer to the Pentateuch, the entire TaNaKH, or even the whole corpus of Jewish thought.
- *Hebrew Bible*: This is a religiously neutral term used by scholars for the TaNaKH. Professor Cherry notes that his expertise is in the TaNaKH, not the Hebrew Bible, since he approaches the text from the Jewish interpretive tradition.
- *Old Testament*: Christians refer to the TaNaKH as the Old Testament, since in their eyes it has been superseded by the New Testament. For Catholics, the Old Testament has a number of books that are not included in the TaNaKH.

Interpreting the Scripture

Jews and Christians not only have different names for the Bible, they understand it very differently. For example, Christianity takes an episode that is relatively minor in Jewish tradition—the temptation of Adam and Eve—and extracts from it the doctrine of original sin.

Similarly, early rabbis took the repeated phrase, "And there was evening and there was morning," in the enumeration of the six days of creation and concluded that the day begins in the evening, which is why Jews start the celebration of their holidays at sundown.

As a case study in interpretation, Professor Cherry delves deeply into the prohibition against seething a kid in its mother's milk, mentioned in *Exodus* and *Deuteronomy*, which led to the kosher practice of strict separation of meat and milk products. Recently, a scholar pointed out that the original Hebrew could be interpreted to mean *fat* instead of *milk*.

A prohibition against seething a kid in its mother's fat makes more sense, because it is another way of saying that the mother and offspring should not be slaughtered on the same day, in accord with the biblical injunction against killing two generations of the same species on the same day.

But the rabbis had very good reasons to read the passage as they did, says Professor Cherry, who shows the theological logic that has resulted in the dietary separation of meat and milk, a practice observed by traditional Jews today.

Unlocking Mysteries of Jewish Thought and Ritual

"Let's unpack this," Professor Cherry says often during these lectures, as he takes a concept, a biblical passage, or an episode from history and explores its meaning in Jewish thought and ritual.

In doing so, he is following the footsteps of the acknowledged master of this form of analysis, the medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides, who figures prominently throughout the course and is treated in depth in Lecture 14.

There, Professor Cherry focuses on Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and its discussion of creation, prayer, and the reasons for the commandments. Maimonides is filled with insights into how Judaism evolved as it did, noting, for example, that the practice of ritual animal sacrifice in early Judaism was God's way of taking a pagan rite that the Israelites had learned from the Egyptians and redirecting it.

In a subsequent lecture, Professor Cherry shows how Maimonides's success at putting Judaism on a logical footing set the stage for a reaction that produced the Jewish mystical system called the Kabbalah.

Professor Cherry unlocks other mysteries, such as why the first day of the seventh month (Tishrei)

is the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah). It seems likely, he says, that "this was the time of the Babylonian New Year. So when the Jews were exiled to Babylonia, they saw that the Babylonians celebrated their New Year on that day, and said, 'We've got some sacred occasion where we blow the trumpets, so let's make that our New Year, too.'"

He also explores different concepts of the Messiah, profiling two controversial candidates. The first is Shabbatai Tzvi, who was proclaimed Messiah by followers in 1665, and whose travels across Eastern Europe eventually landed him in Turkey, where he converted to Islam to avoid execution by the authorities.

The other candidate is Rebbe Menachem Mendel Scheersohn, a charismatic leader of the Lubavitch Chassidim in Brooklyn, who died in 1994. Rebbe Scheersohn's widely touted messianic credentials created intense debate and division in the Ultra-Orthodox community.

From the Decalogue to *Fiddler on the Roof*

From the first lecture on the Torah to the last on the Jews as the Chosen People, this course is packed with fascinating information, including:

- Jews say "Decalogue," not "The Ten Commandments," because there are actually more than ten commandments in the Decalogue. For instance, "On six days you shall work and the seventh day shall be a Sabbath to you." Usually that counts as one: that you should have a Sabbath on the seventh day. But there is also, "On six days you shall work."
- The prophets in the biblical period served the same function as today's free press. They tell the king what he doesn't want to hear.
- When people die in the TaNaKH, everyone goes to the same place, *Sheol*—a shadowy underworld that is neither heaven nor hell.
- After crushing the Bar Kochvah revolt of the Jews in the second century, the Romans changed the name of the land of Israel and Judaea to echo the Israelites' ancient enemies, the Philistines. This is how the region came to be called Palestine.
- Today, the designation "Temple" on a Jewish house of worship is usually a sign that it is a Reform congregation, since Reform Jews no longer look toward the dream of rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple.
- Orthodox Judaism is just as much a product of modernity as is Reform, since several varieties of Orthodoxy emerged in the 19th century as a response to Emancipation, the Enlightenment, and the founding of the Reform movement.

In addition, Professor Cherry devotes several lectures to complex issues such as the problem of evil and suffering, the Zionist movement, the role and status of women in the Jewish world, and how Judaism understands Christianity.

Throughout, Professor Cherry is articulate, engaging, and passionate, with a gift for making a point by means of a memorable cultural reference. He calls attention to an echo of Jewish mystic Rav Kook in a Joni Mitchell song; to the Kabbalistic nature of "The Force" and "The Dark Side" in George Lucas's *Star Wars*; and to the Sabbath lesson given by Gene Wilder as an Old-West rabbi in *The Frisco Kid*, when he dutifully dismounts his horse at sundown, risking capture by bandits.

Professor Cherry notes that when he teaches introductory Judaism at Vanderbilt University, he asks his students to see two films: *Fiddler on the Roof*, for its picture of the breakdown of tradition as Jews confront modernity; and Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, for its treatment of secular Jews grappling with contemporary issues of faith and ethics. Both films repay viewing in light of the lessons you'll learn in this course.

In his final lecture, Professor Cherry sums up: "The Judaisms we've examined in this course reflect

the ongoing struggles of the Jewish people from their ancient life as a sovereign nation, to the travails of exile, to the opportunities of acculturation in modernity, and finally to the re-establishment of the state of Israel. Hearing God's words anew—receiving Torah every day—has meant reinterpreting the tradition, creatively re-reading the words of the past, whether they relate to core ideas like the notion of evil and the notion of the Chosen People, or *mitzvot* such as the prohibition of idolatry, or the laws of marriage and divorce. Even the basis for re-interpreting the tradition, the claim that God's words do not cease, is itself a re-reading of Torah."

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