

Jewish Identities

Followers of the teachings of the Torah are called Jews. Jewish staff and students form part of the La Trobe community. Acknowledging and respecting Jewish identities at La Trobe therefore requires, in part, a basic understanding of what Judaism and being a Jew is about.

Jews in Australia

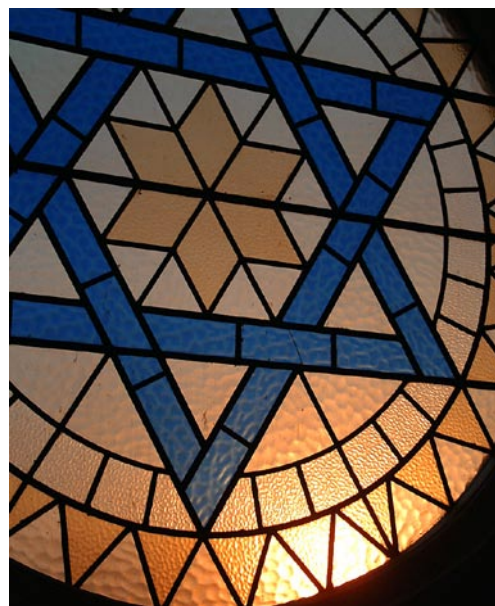
- The Jewish presence in Australia began with the arrival of Jewish convicts on the First Fleet in 1788.
- The first Jewish free settlers arrived in Australia in 1809; by the 1840s there were small but growing Jewish communities in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, totalling approximately 0.5% of the Australian population.
- The first synagogue in Australia was formally established in 1837 in Sydney. In 1841 the first organized Jewish congregation was established in Melbourne.
- The first Australian born Governor General, Sir Isaac Isaacs (1885–1945) was Jewish.
- Until the 1930s, the majority of Jews in Australia originated from the United Kingdom.
- After World War Two, the Jewish population grew and diversified with the influx of Jewish migrants and refugees from central and eastern Europe, many of whom had fled Nazi persecution.
- According to the 2001 Census, approximately 83,000 people identified as Jewish, making up about 0.4% of the Australian population. In 2006, this figure was almost 89,000.
- Compared to any other city in Australia, Melbourne contains the highest proportion of Jewish inhabitants.

In Victoria, the Jewish population is diverse with origins in Russia, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Egypt and Europe. More recent arrivals have also come from countries of the former Soviet Union and Israel.

About Judaism

Judaism is both a religion and a culture. As a religion, Judaism is monotheist. Its roots are in the ancient Middle East with Hebrew as its sacred language. Its core is belief in one God as stated in the Jewish creed (called the Shema) "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One!" (Deut. 6:4–9, 11:13–21, Numbers 15:37–41). But often Jews are connected more by bonds of peoplehood than by faith. There are even Jews who consider themselves atheists or agnostics yet are still proud members of the Jewish community.

As a culture, Judaism includes not only its own religious teachings and Hebrew as a common tongue but also numerous other languages, literature, philosophies, poetry, music, art and cuisine.



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Place of worship

There are three Hebrew terms for the synagogue, the centre of Jewish life: a house of prayer, a house of study, and a house for gathering. This institution plays all three roles for Jewish people at different times. The spiritual leader of a synagogue is the rabbi, whose primary role is to teach and lead worship. However, educated lay people may perform the same roles if they are sanctioned to do so by their congregations. Some synagogues employ a cantor to assist with worship and educators and teachers to help teach children and adults about the Jewish tradition.

Religious texts

The Torah includes the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. It tells the story of how the family of Abraham came to be the Jewish people through their shared experience of slavery and of receiving the law at Mount Sinai. A selection from the Torah is read at weekly Sabbath services. The Torah is written on animal parchment by a trained scribe and is treated with great reverence.

Jews consider a number of other books to be of great importance. The Talmud is a large work recording early debates between the rabbis as to appropriate religious and civil practises. From the Talmud, a number of commentaries and law codes emerged. The Shulchan Arukh is seen as the ultimate authority on most points of Jewish law for Orthodox Jews.

Jews use a fixed liturgy which is set down on their prayerbook. The prayerbook includes a number of biblical texts, particularly psalms. However, most of the prayers were composed much later. Progressive Jewish prayerbooks often include readings by contemporary writers and poets.

Jews for whom a religious life is important are divided into two distinct and very different groups: Orthodox Jews and Progressive Jews.

Orthodox Judaism

Orthodox Jews are united by a belief that all Jewish teachings were divinely revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai approximately three thousand years ago. They believe in truth of the Written Law—meaning the Hebrew Bible. However, they also believe that all teachings that follow, collectively known as the Oral Law, were also revealed by God. For example, the Torah (comprising the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) prohibits work on the Sabbath but does not define precisely what is meant by “work.”

The Mishnah, an early collection of Jewish law, provides 39 categories of labour that is forbidden on the Sabbath, including lighting or extinguishing a flame. With the invention of electricity and the automobile, Orthodox rabbis in the late 19th century concluded that turning on a lightswitch and starting up a car both constituted lighting flames and were so prohibited on the Sabbath.



It was their belief that God had revealed to Moses that some day such modern conveniences would be invented and that the rabbis of that time would make the proper decisions.

Because Orthodox Jews believe that all Jewish teachings and practises are revealed by God, they do not believe they have the option to opt out of any of these traditions. An Orthodox life is characterised by strict adherence to Jewish practises, including the dietary laws (kashrut), work restrictions on the Sabbath and holidays, and thrice-daily prayer. Men and women have different roles within Jewish life: men lead worship and have public religious roles, while women are seen as the keeper of the hearth. Both are expected to engage in serious study and to work together to observe Jewish laws.

Dietary requirements and restrictions

Orthodox Jews will usually avoid eating animals prohibited in the Torah, including pigs and shellfish, but may not keep a strict separation of milk and meat foods. Meat foods must be kosher – this is meat or poultry which has been slaughtered by a certified ritual slaughterer skilled in the art of a quick kill.

Dress code

Orthodox Jews generally adhere to modest dress. Men keep their heads covered, and women are expected to dress modestly. Some married Orthodox women cover their heads with a scarf, hat, or wig.



Significant Holidays

The Sabbath

Shabbat begins on Friday evening and ends at dark on Saturday night. Orthodox Jews observe significant work restrictions on this day, as do many progressive Jews. Shabbat is celebrated both in the synagogue, with special extended prayer services, and at home with delicious meals and home prayers. Jews are expected to view the Sabbath as a day out of time, in which the regular routines of the rest of the week are not followed.

The High Holy Days

The Jewish holy season begins with the festival of Rosh Hashanah (the new year), usually in mid- to late-September. The ten day days of awe culminates with Yom Kippur – the day of atonement, which is a solemn day of fasting and self-searching. Both Orthodox and progressive Jews refrain from working on these days and often join with family and friends to mark the start of the new year.

The agricultural festivals

The holidays of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot all mark important seasons in the Israeli growing year and are ordained from the Torah. Each also has a historical aspect connected to it: Passover recalls the exodus from slavery in Egypt following the ten plagues. Shavuot marks the anniversary of God's gift of the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. Sukkot, the festival of booths, recalls how God housed the Jewish people in impermanent structures in the Sinai Wilderness. All three festivals have special foods and celebrations associated with them.

There are a number of additional celebrations that occur throughout the Jewish year, including Purim, Chanukah, Tu B'Shvat, and also contemporary observances connected with the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel.

Progressive Judaism

Progressive Jews view all Jewish teachings as divinely inspired but man-made. They are more likely to view Jewish teachings as traditions that are passed on through the generations but not personally commanded by God or revealed to Moses. They are much more likely to view Jewish practises as offering greater meaning to their lives. Some progressive Jews may choose not to drive or use electricity on the Sabbath because they believe their Sabbath observance is more fulfilling if they do so. Others may find their Sabbath observance enhanced by the use of electricity and the ability to travel easily from one place to another.

Dietary requirements and restrictions

Many progressive Jews keep the Jewish dietary laws, but generally not as strictly as Orthodox Jews. They will usually avoid eating animals prohibited in the Torah, including pigs and shellfish, but may not keep a strict separation of milk and meat foods, as Orthodox families do. They may also not buy kosher meat or poultry.

Dress code

While modesty is valued among progressive Jews, they do not generally see a Jewish requirement to dress in a modest fashion. Some progressive Jewish men do keep their heads covered, but most do not.

Further Reading

ABC: The Sacred Site
<http://www.abc.net.au/compass/explore/>

American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise:
Jewish Virtual Library
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaism.html>

Australian Bureau of Statistics Year Book
Australia, 2006: Religious Affiliation
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/46d1bc47ac9d0c7bca256c470025ff87/BFDDA1CA506D6CFACA2570DE0014496E?opendocument>

Judaism 101: Kashrut: Jewish Dietary Laws
<http://www.jewfaq.org/kashrut.htm>

Religion Facts: Judaism
<http://www.religionfacts.com/judaism/>

