

JEWISH BIRMINGHAM

Jews are recorded as coming to the city in 1728. Currently there are less than 2500, which is less than one per-cent of the population of Birmingham. In its heyday the community numbered 8,000.

There are 5 synagogues in Birmingham, four of which are orthodox: Birmingham Hebrew Congregation at Singers Hill, which also organises regular worship at King David School in Moseley; Birmingham Central Synagogue in Edgbaston; and the strictly Orthodox Lubavitch Centre in Balsall Heath. In addition there is the Birmingham Progressive Synagogue at Five Ways. The beautiful Singers Hill building dates from 1856 and is one of three 'cathedral synagogues' in England. The only other still used in the West Midlands area is Solihull and District Hebrew Congregation, although there is also a small Reform community in Coventry.

In Birmingham there is one shop selling kosher meat and provisions, a voluntary aided Jewish primary school and welfare facilities administered by Jewish Community Care, including sheltered housing, a home for the elderly and a day centre. Birmingham's Universities attract a large number of Jewish students and a Jewish student hostel is a community resource available for them.

Jews are represented on various civic bodies as well as SACRE, educational, health service and prison chaplaincies and on other cross faith organisations. Enquiries about the community and its activities can be made to the Representative Council for Birmingham and West Midlands Jewry, 0121 643 2688

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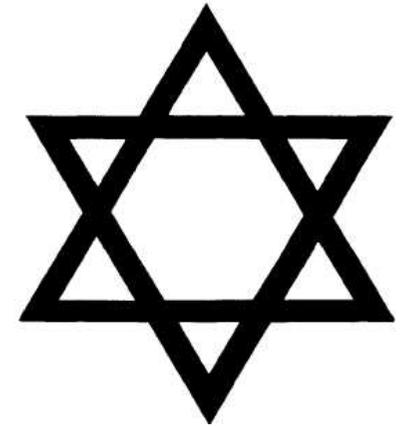
Originally founded in 1974, Birmingham Council of Faiths' objective is to promote knowledge and mutual understanding of the beliefs and practices of the city's many religious faiths.

Its belief is that through greater understanding of each other, a more harmonious and cohesive society can be created.

An additional strategy is to act as an interfaith hub, networking between the diverse faith organisations in the city and to serve as a focal point for information about their activities.

This brochure is one of ten covering the Council's affiliated faiths, which currently include Baha'is, Buddhists, Christians, Confucians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and Zoroastrians

Jewish



one of
Birmingham's
faith
communities

JEWISH BASICS

Judaism is the religion of the world's approximately 15 million Jews and is one of the oldest monotheistic faiths. Both Christianity and Islam emanate from Judaism, accepting the belief in one God and the moral teachings of the Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrew Bible is the most important holy book of Judaism. It is divided into three parts - the *Torah* (meaning 'teaching'), the Prophets, and the Writings. The basic laws and teachings of Judaism are found in the *Torah*, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The most important teachings of Judaism are that there is one just and compassionate God who was revealed to Abraham, the first Jew; and the commandment in the Torah to 'Love your neighbour as yourself'.

Orthodox Jews believe that Moses brought the Torah down from Mount Sinai, but to interpret this there is Oral Law (commentaries such as the Talmud, written in about the 5th century CE). Liberal Jews believe that the *Torah* was inspired by God but written by human beings. They therefore believe Judaism can change and develop and that, though all of the ethical laws in the *Torah* must still be followed, many ritual laws do not need to be observed today.

There is no single leader of Judaism who can decide how to follow the commandments or what to believe. Even though Jews believe different things and disagree about the rules, they are still one religion and one people. Orthodox Jews believe that God will send a Messiah at a time when Jews need and deserve it, who will bring peace and make the world a perfect place.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Judaism is a way of life with the *Torah* as the guide. The rites of passage for a Jew begin from birth when they are named and males are circumcised: part of the covenant between God and Abraham. Prayer services take place three times daily in a synagogue, which has an important role in the life of a Jewish community. The spiritual leader is called Rabbi (teacher). Life-long formal and informal education and study is an integral part of Judaism.

The home is an important focus of Jewish life and Jews bring their observance of Judaism into daily life through ethical living, especially in their relationships with others; in the giving of charity and in the keeping of practices such as the Jewish dietary laws. These forbid the eating of pork, shellfish and meat that is not 'kosher' (i.e. not slaughtered according to Jewish law), as well as the mixing of milk and meat.

The Sabbath, which falls from Friday night to Saturday night, is central to Jewish life. Whilst the details of observance vary between Orthodox and Progressive Jews, for all it is a day of rest and spiritual renewal.

Jews observe a number of holy days and festivals. Amongst the most important are Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), Pesach (Passover, which celebrates the Exodus from Egypt), Shavuot (which celebrates the giving of the Ten Commandments) and Succot (when temporary huts are built to recall when the Israelites dwelt in the desert).

SOCIAL PRACTICE

Judaism teaches that a person serves God by studying the holy writings and implementing them in daily life through observing God's commandments.

Judaism teaches that all people are created in the image of God and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. The Jews are sometimes called the "Chosen People" - meaning that they have special duties and responsibilities to fulfil in their lives, as commanded by God to whom they are and will be accountable. Judaism does not try to convince others to accept its beliefs and practices, but it will accept people who choose to convert to Judaism.

Caring for the elderly and infirm, the socially disadvantaged and those who are unable to care for themselves is a priority in Judaism. The community has an infrastructure which caters for those members who need assistance. Visiting the sick and bereaved and supporting the poor are important religious duties.

Jews also believe they have a duty to participate in '*tikkun olam*', the repair of the world. Today this is often interpreted as being involved in social action, caring for the environment and working for a just world. There are a number of Jewish organisations which work towards this end, for example see the environmental web-site www.biggreenjewish.org and Tzedek, Jewish Action for a Just World (www.tzedek.org.uk). Jews contribute to most aspects of the secular life of where they live, engaging in a number of ways to bring about communal cohesion.