



UNDERSTANDING

*Our*

JEWISH  
NEIGHBORS

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# 1

## Beginnings of the Jewish Tradition

By Rabbi Mark S. Diamond

The origins of the Jewish faith tradition begin with the stories and laws of the Torah, or Five Books of Moses. God’s mysterious call to Abram<sup>2</sup> set the patriarch on a journey from Haran to the land of Canaan, then to Egypt, and back to Canaan. According to Jewish tradition, Abram was the first person on earth to uphold monotheism, belief in one God. The Genesis narratives tell us that Abram sealed a *berit*<sup>3</sup> with God and received a new name, Abraham, “father of a multitude of nations.” His wife, Sarai, underwent a similar name change and became Sarah, “princess.”

The Torah relates that Abraham and Sarah were blessed with Isaac, a son in their old age. The patriarch sent his faithful servant Eliezer to find a suitable wife for Isaac. His mission was fulfilled when Isaac married Rebekah. Thus, the lineage of patriarchs and matriarchs that began with Abraham and Sarah passed on to Isaac and Rebekah, and then on to Jacob and his two wives, Leah and Rachel. The names and images of these seven biblical forebears—three patriarchs and four matriarchs—are reverently recited in Jewish liturgical<sup>4</sup> texts to this very day.

One of them achieved a unique status in later Jewish tradition. Like his grandfather Abraham, Jacob received a new name that signified a profound change in his life. After his wrestling match with an angelic adversary,<sup>5</sup> Jacob shed the negative imagery of his given name. *Ya’akov* (Jacob), the baby boy who emerged from his mother’s womb clutching the *aykev*<sup>6</sup> of his brother Esau, thus became Israel, the one who persevered with God. The people of Israel (the Jewish people), the Land of Israel, and the modern nation State of Israel all hark back to this ancient story.

The patriarchal and matriarchal stories in the Book of Genesis paint colorful and multifaceted portraits of these biblical characters. They performed acts of deep faith and righteous conduct—opening their own tent to strangers, arguing with God to save the just inhabitants of sinful cities, worshiping one God, and bringing others to their new faith. Nonetheless, they were human beings with moral flaws and faults—passing off their wives as sisters in order to save their own lives, cheating a brother out of his birthright, fooling a father to receive his choicest blessing. Perhaps the timeless beauty and majesty of the Torah lies in the sheer honesty and enduring realism of these stories.

The book of Genesis is first and foremost the history of clans that form the nucleus of a new community of faith. The stories about Joseph introduce the names of sons and grandsons whose descendants would later become the tribes of ancient Israel. In addition, the story of Joseph brings us from Israel to Egypt, where an ex-slave was cast into prison by a jealous master and became the viceroy of a mighty nation and savior of his long-lost brothers and father.

While Genesis is the record of patriarchs, matriarchs, and their families, Exodus is the epic of the birth of a people and a nation. Joseph's descendants were enslaved in Egypt and endured four centuries of forced labor at the hands of Egyptian taskmasters. Pharaoh ordered all Hebrew male children to be killed shortly after birth. One baby, Moses, escaped the royal decree and grew up in the royal household. He fled to the wilderness after witnessing the cruel mistreatment of a Hebrew slave, only to return to Egypt at God's command to lead his people to freedom. Each spring, Jews throughout the world retell these Exodus narratives of persecution, liberation, and redemption in their Passover *seder* <sup>7</sup> celebrations.

As the Exodus story unfolds, Moses and the people of Israel face challenge after challenge on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. After releasing his slaves from Egyptian servitude, Pharaoh had a change of heart and pursued them to the shore of the Sea of Reeds. Unsure of what to do, Moses prayed to God for deliverance, only to be told to lift up his staff and witness the divine miracle of the parting of the waters. The people passed through unharmed, while the mighty army of Pharaoh drowned in the raging waters after their former slaves' hasty crossing.

The Israelites journeyed to the foot of Mt. Sinai and awaited Moses's meeting with God on the holy mountain. The prophet descended and proclaimed the word of the Lord, only to be shocked and angered by the image of his followers dancing around a golden calf at the foot of the mountain. Moses shattered the stone tablets and was forced to ascend Mt. Sinai again to receive a new set of tablets after he pleaded with God not to destroy this sinful people.

Jewish commentators throughout the ages have discussed and debated the nature of this awesome revelation at Mt. Sinai. Was it the famed Ten Commandments? Perhaps it was the entire Torah—the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Or the entire Hebrew Bible, known as the Old Testament in Christian tradition. Or, as many traditional Jews posit, Moses received not only the entire Written Law (Torah) but the Oral Law (including later rabbinic works such as the *Mishnah*<sup>8</sup> and *Talmud* <sup>9</sup>) as well. Perhaps Moses was not an ancient scribe who faithfully recorded each and every divine word but a prophet and teacher who communicated with God. In this account of the revelation, the story of the conversations between a gifted human (or humans) and the Holy One became sacred Jewish scripture. Each of these views has its fair share of proponents among Jewish believers and practitioners. What they hold in common is an affirmation that the stories of the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai became the two central motifs of subsequent Jewish thought and practice.

Moses was denied entrance into the Promised Land, and so it was left to his successor, Joshua, to lead the people into the Land of Israel. He, in turn, was succeeded by judges who gathered the Israelite tribes into loose alliances to counter external threats. The judges gave way to prophets, among them Samuel, who agreed to the people's urgent plea to anoint a king to lead them like other nations. Three monarchs—Saul, David, and

Solomon—reigned over a united Kingdom of Israel. David captured Jerusalem and made the city the capital of his empire; his son Solomon extended the borders of Israel and built the First Temple in Jerusalem.

The united empire lasted only one hundred years and split apart upon Solomon's death in the tenth century BCE.<sup>10</sup> A revolt led by Jeroboam broke out and led to the formation of two separate kingdoms—Israel in the north comprising ten Israelite tribes headed by Jeroboam, and Judah in the south comprising the tribes of Judah and Benjamin led by Solomon's son Rehoboam. The Hebrew word for Judah (*Yehudah*) becomes the root of the word *yehudim* (Jews) who trace their ancestry to this ancient tribe and most prominent population of the southern kingdom.

Monarchs rose and fell in the north and south, with righteous kings and wicked kings ruling over diminished and weakened nations. They proved to be no match for the rising empires of the ancient Near East. Assyria conquered Israel in 722 BCE and exiled its inhabitants, giving rise to considerable speculation about the ten lost tribes and their ultimate fate. Babylonia conquered Judah in 586 BCE, laid waste to Jerusalem, and destroyed the First Temple. The Babylonian empire gave way to the Persian empire, whose ruler, Cyrus, permitted the exiled Judeans to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple. The Second Temple was dedicated in 515 BCE, later rebuilt and expanded by the Roman procurator Herod and destroyed by the army of the Roman Empire in 70 CE.<sup>11</sup> A section of the outer retaining wall of the Herodian Temple is all that remains today, the holy site revered by Jews as the *Kotel*, the Western Wall (Wailing Wall).

Most ancient peoples abandoned their faith and religious rituals when enemy forces destroyed their central sanctuaries.<sup>12</sup> If their gods failed to protect their sacred shrines, it was clear that their deities were weaker than those of their enemy and it was time to worship their gods. Not so with the Judeans (Jews) of the ancient Near East. New and unprecedented forms of worship and religious hierarchy emerged out of the ashes of the Second Temple (the central Jewish sanctuary in Jerusalem, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE). *Melakhim*<sup>13</sup> and *kohanim*<sup>14</sup> were stripped of their respective political and religious functions passed down from father to son. *Rabbanim*<sup>15</sup> assumed leadership roles in Jewish religious life based on scholarship and wisdom rather than lineage. No longer was there a central temple where the people worshiped God through animal sacrifices. Daily prayers and intensive study of scriptural texts became the norms of Jewish religious life. Synagogues, which began to develop after the destruction of the First Temple, became the locus of Jewish communal life, serving as centers of prayer, learning, and assembly. The Jewish people settled into centuries of life in Diaspora<sup>16</sup> communities, though they yearned for a return to their homeland, the Land of Israel.

The rabbinic sages who assumed authority beginning in the first century CE produced the earliest works of postbiblical Jewish law and lore. The *Mishnah* (circa 200 CE) and Babylonian *Talmud* (circa 600 CE) are the literary foundations of Jewish religious life and all subsequent works of *halakhah*.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that while Jews today trace their origins to Israelite religion and the Hebrew Bible, they are the heirs of rabbinic Judaism that was nurtured and developed in a postbiblical world. Jewish culture, communal life, and thought in the modern world bear little resemblance to their backgrounds in ancient Israel.

A famous text in *Pirkei Avot*<sup>18</sup> recounts the faithful transmission of Torah learning revealed by God to Moses at Sinai, who passed it on to Joshua, then to the elders, next to

the prophets, and eventually to rabbinic sages and sets of rabbinic debate partners. The unbroken chain of *shalshelet ha-kabbalah*<sup>19</sup> began with Moses (traditionally referred to as Moshe Rabbenu, “Moses our Rabbi/Teacher”) and continued through the Middle Ages with celebrated sages such as the French rabbi and textual commentator Solomon son of Isaac (known by the acronym Rashi) and the Spanish-born rabbi and philosopher Moses Maimonides (known by the acronym Rambam). It continues to this very day when rabbis and other instructors teach sacred texts—Torah, *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, and many others—to their students. This timeless devotion to Jewish learning, known as *talmud Torah*, is the centerpiece of a wide variety of Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish educational settings, including *yeshivot*,<sup>20</sup> seminaries for the training of rabbis, *cantors*,<sup>21</sup> teachers, community day schools that provide Jewish and secular instruction, Jewish supplemental schools (often known as religious schools, Hebrew schools, and Sunday schools), seminars, retreats, camps, and others.

Jewish tradition encourages intensive examination and discussion as hallmarks of Jewish learning. Paired learning, known as the *hevrutah* method, is a time-honored educational approach in which two study partners read, analyze, and debate the multiple levels of meaning in a given Jewish text. The rabbinic sage *Hananiah ben Tradyon* taught, “When two persons meet and exchange words of Torah, the *Shekhinah*<sup>22</sup> hovers over them.”<sup>23</sup>

Being fully Jewish requires a devotion to lifelong learning. And that learning includes asking questions. Judaism is a faith tradition that welcomes, encourages, and commands its followers to ask questions. Isador Rabi, a Jewish recipient of the Nobel Prize in physics, was once asked why he became a scientist. He explained that his friends and classmates in school returned home each day and were asked, “What did you learn today?” Rabi’s mother used to say, “Izzy, did you ask a good question today?” Jewish teachers and Jewish learners ask good questions. This love of learning and questioning is the cornerstone of Jewish religious life and education throughout the ages.

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<sup>2.</sup> Genesis 12.

<sup>3.</sup> Covenant. All italicized words are transliterations of Hebrew terms into characters that English-speaking readers can understand. Note that there is no one universally accepted way of rendering Hebrew characters into English ones.

<sup>4.</sup> Prayer.

<sup>5.</sup> Genesis 32.

<sup>6.</sup> Heel.

<sup>7.</sup> Literally “order,” a ritual service and dinner for the first night or two nights of Passover.

<sup>8.</sup> The first code of Jewish law after the Torah.

<sup>9.</sup> A compilation of the Mishnah and Gemara, rabbinic discussions of the Mishnah.

<sup>10.</sup> Before the Common Era; Jewish terminology for BC.

<sup>11.</sup> Common Era, Jewish terminology for AD.

<sup>12.</sup> Holy places.

<sup>13.</sup> Kings.

<sup>14.</sup> Priests.

<sup>15.</sup> Rabbis.

<sup>16.</sup> Jewish life outside the Land of Israel.

<sup>17.</sup> Jewish law.

<sup>18.</sup> Teachings of the Sages, a book in the Mishnah.

<sup>19.</sup> Jewish tradition.

<sup>20.</sup> Traditional rabbinical schools and day schools.

21. Trained members of the clergy who lead music and prayers in synagogues.
22. The Divine Presence.
23. *Pirkei Avot* 3:3.

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