

Questions: Jewish People

Editor Stephen Pett



QUESTIONS: JEWISH PEOPLE

Each faith has its unique contribution to make to the human enterprise. If I were to summarise Judaism's I would say that it lies not in climbing to heaven, but in bringing heaven down to earth. Judaism is the epiphany of everyday life.

Chief Rabbi, Lord Jonathan Sacks

There is a *midrash* in the Jerusalem Talmud that claims that the first question God will ask when a person reaches the next world will be 'why did you not enjoy all that was permitted to you?'

These two comments reflect the Jewish focus on *living*, on *being* Jewish, rather than on beliefs. This book explores this way of Jewish living. Even the activity on the Rambam's 'Principles of Faith' (p.9) places it within the process of discussion, interpretation and debate that characterises Jewish responses to sacred texts. It also sets it alongside the idea of practising charity – a challenging way in for students to explore intentions and actions, including their own.

It is important that RE includes authentic contemporary voices of people of faith. Lisa Kassapian's thoughtful contribution (pp.2–3) and the words of Jewish teenagers (pp.13–15) reveal the diversity there is in ways of living within the Jewish tradition.

As always, books in this series seek to provide strong stimulus materials but also practical classroom strategies. The 'buttress' activity (p.16) helps to build students' skills in answering evaluative

questions – excellent for examination responses; the talk strategies (p.26) support students' skills in interpretation and expression; and the unit on the Holocaust (pp.18–24) sets out a model for enquiry that can be used to structure a day conference or a series of RE lessons.

Our focus on Judaism as a living tradition does not preclude considering the Holocaust. Asking students to reflect on what they can learn from the way Jewish people live now and their hopes for the future, in the light of the Holocaust, emphasises the continuation of the tradition. It also demands personal engagement from students.

Questions: Jewish People seeks to deepen understanding, challenge assumptions and provoke questions, as well as to enrich the classroom experience of Judaism for students and teachers.

Stephen Pett
Editor

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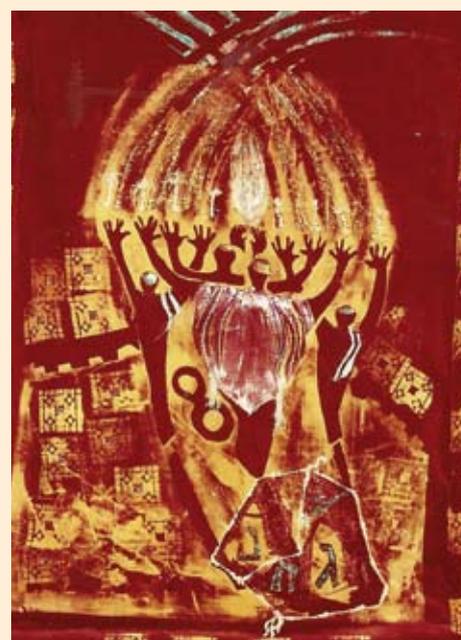
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Triumph of Light over Darkness

An eight-branched menorah, with a ninth candle or *shamash* (servant) with which to light the others, and a *dreidel* both feature in this evocative image for Chanukah.

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What are the questions that Jewish people worry about? What are the issues that concern the Jewish community?

Jewish people are essentially worried about the same questions and issues as the non-Jewish community. Here are four examples.

- 1 In striving towards a cohesive community, Jews seek to provide care for one another and for the wider community and to be open to inter-faith dialogue in an increasingly pluralistic society. What concerns the Jewish community is the question 'How do we find a balance between the desire to be open and tolerant and deal with the threat that exists?'
- 2 Jews are divided by religious, social and political views. The division between different branches of Judaism is the cause of much tension within the religion. This may be a contributing factor in the rapid decline in synagogue membership and in the assimilation into the Diaspora (Jews living outside Israel). The question 'Who is a Jew?' has been ever present in Jewish communities, and Jewish self-identity continues to matter greatly to the Jewish people. There is no single answer to this question.
- 3 Jewish communities worry about the fluctuation in the numbers of Jewish people attending synagogue and ask how they can thrive by attracting and retaining Jewish adolescents, young adults and the children of mixed marriages. Many Jews are concerned with the lack of religious adherence to the faith in practical form. They ask the question 'How can I be a good Jew?'
- 4 Social justice is a central value in British Judaism. Known as *tikkun olam* (meaning repairing the world), work for justice is of great importance as it provides hope for the future. A key idea from Jewish liturgy is charitable giving; the Hebrew word for this is *Tzedakah* the root of which is in the word *Tzadei-Dalet-Qof*, meaning justice. The question is, 'How can we change the world to bring a more just society in the future?'

What are your favourite stories from Jewish writings and teachings? Why are these special to you?

I have always found the story of the Wisdom of Solomon (Kings 3:16-28; 4:21-34) to be a memorable one. The story tells of two women who come to Solomon's court with a baby. They explain to King Solomon that they shared a house, they both became pregnant and both gave birth at similar times to sons. When one baby died in the night, one woman accused the other of swapping the dead baby for the living one.

King Solomon commanded, 'Bring a sword. Divide the living baby in half so each can have part of this baby.' One of the women nodded in approval and said it seemed fair, while the other one cried out, 'No! Give her the baby. I want my child to live.' Solomon established that the baby belonged to the woman who shouted for its life; he concluded that she was the real mother.

This story acts as a reminder that truth and justice should prevail. It is also a simple pointer to the natural strength of maternal love.

What issues do you want RE teachers to remember when they plan to teach about Judaism?

- 1 *More than dates and festivals:* Teaching about Judaism should not reduce this religion to lists of dates, festivals, practices and lifestyles, but rather focus on providing active and engaging approaches which facilitate learning from Jewish views on ethical and moral values and what constitutes Jewish identity.
- 2 *Balance:* Teachers should beware of representing Jews purely in religious terms, but show Judaism as an ethnicity. Teaching about religious ritual should be balanced with teaching about the values of Jews and the Jewish desire to make a better world.
- 3 *The name of God:* Some Jewish texts do not print the full English word 'God', substituting instead 'G-d' or 'Gd'. There is no prohibition in Jewish law from writing 'God'.
- 4 *Acknowledge diversity:* When teaching about Judaism, as with any other faith, teachers should remember that there is great diversity within the Jewish religion globally, nationally and locally. It is important that teaching does not reduce Judaism to a single homogenous group. Essentially Jews come under the strands of Ashkenazi (Eastern European or 'German') and Sephardi (Middle Eastern and 'Spanish') referring to their origin.

The main divisions, however, are based on beliefs and practices. There are two divisions within Judaism that significantly differ: Orthodoxy and Reform Judaism. From the latter has stemmed Liberal and Conservative (also known as 'Masorti') Judaism. These are the most substantial divisions and most widely followed in Britain. The movements are divided along many theological lines. Teachers should ensure a balance of views when using printed text, visits or visitors.

- 5 *Dialogue is central:* It is often joked that where there are two Jews there are three opinions. This multiplicity of ideas is fundamental to an understanding of the Jewish people. In the core sacred text of the Talmud, Jewish law is developed through discussion; the rabbis provide interpretations of the Psalms and Proverbs and give Bible commentaries. Judaism is always about open dialogue.

These pages are written for teachers, but why not get your older students to use this interview?

- They might identify what is most important to Lisa.
- They could reflect on any comments that surprised or puzzled them.
- They could devise some more questions they would like to ask.
- They might ask these same questions of another Jewish person and see what different answers they give.

CHALLENGE

An activity to suit higher-achieving students can be found on p.33.

A more detailed version of the interview with Lisa is available for RE Today subscribers on the website: www.retoday.org.uk



HOW DO JEWISH STORIES EXPRESS JEWISH SPIRITUALITY?

Summary of learning

Jewish spirituality is eminently practical. Judaism is not defined by specific or mandatory beliefs, but is organised around sacred deeds (*mitzvot*): actions are more important than beliefs.

Studying the Torah is important in Judaism, not so much as a means of identifying specific beliefs, but as a way of knowing God, and understanding what God wants the individual to do.

The stories found in the Tenakh, along with other texts such as the commentaries on the Tenakh found in the Midrash, and indeed a wider tradition of Jewish writings, provide a vast resource to be considered by the individual and community seeking to feed and grow their spiritual lives.

These pages include:

- Two structures through the prism of which Jewish stories (and stories from any religion or belief) can be investigated: *pardes* and *spiral text*.
- Three activities to engage students in using the structures and developing their understanding of Jewish spirituality, and in reflecting on their own responses to some religious and spiritual questions.

This unit is aimed at 11–13 year olds.

Information: key terms

Gemara: Commentary on the Mishnah; included in the Talmud.

Halakhah: The code of conduct encompassing all aspects of Jewish life.

Kabbala: Jewish mysticism.

Midrash: Collections of various Rabbinic commentaries on the Tenakh.

Mishnah: First writing down of the Oral Tradition. An authoritative document forming part of the Talmud, codified about 200CE.

Mitzvah: Divine commandment, or sacred deed. The Torah contains 613 Mitzvot.

Rabbi: An ordained Jewish teacher. Often the religious leader of a Jewish community.

Rambam: Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (1135–1204CE). A twelfth-century Jewish sage; the first person to write a systematic code of all Jewish law.

Rashi: Rabbi Shlomo Yitchaki (1040–1105CE). An eleventh-century Jewish scholar; author of a unique commentary on the Bible.

Talmud: The Mishnah and the Gemara, collected together.

Tenakh: The 24 collected books of the Jewish Bible, comprising three sections: Torah; *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim* (Te; Na; Kh).

Torah: Law; teaching.

Outcomes

Students can demonstrate achievement at levels 3–5 in these activities if they can say 'yes' to some of these 'I can ...' statements:

Description of achievement:

I can ...

Level 3

- describe the importance to Jewish people of story as a way of helping them become more spiritual
- make links between Jewish ideas of spirituality and my own ideas.

Level 4

- use the concept of charity to show understanding of how the teachings of a rabbi can help a Jewish person become more spiritual
- apply the idea of spirituality to my own life.

Level 5

- explain similarities and differences between Jewish spirituality and other people's ideas
- express and explain my own views about what makes a person 'spiritual'.

Connections

Spiritual development: The activities provide students with opportunities to:

- **consider** some of life's fundamental questions and how religious teaching can relate to them
- **reflect** on and express their own beliefs, values and principles in the light of what they are studying in RE.

Pardes activity

What is being said?

P'shat

Hint: what does the story remind you of?

Remez

Title of story or issue

**Interpreting:
how would you tell someone else what you have found out?**

D'rash

Hidden: what isn't said?

S'ad

For the teacher

A **spiral text activity** uses group work and individual thinking to get students to attend closely to a piece of sacred text; it can also be used with other pieces of text, whether religious or not. At the centre is the stimulus. Arranged round the stimulus are eight prompts. A template is provided on p.10.

The approach works well when students work in fours (or twos) and when several different texts on the same theme are used. It is useful as a basis for further research or reflection, or for an immediate response in the light of prior learning.

The activities on this page use some teachings of Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, otherwise known as Moses Maimonides or 'The Rambam'. This provides a mechanism for exploring with students:

- the effect of Judaism not having a specific set of beliefs which are expressed in a sacred text
- the role of rabbis such as The Rambam in providing commentary on the Torah to support understanding
- that Jewish spirituality is about the individual being proactive in working out what s/he believes God wants her or him to understand and to do – action is more important than beliefs.

Activity 2 Spiral text

Explain to students that:

'The Rambam' is one of Judaism's most well-known and highly regarded rabbis. This activity asks them to work with his 'Thirteen Principles of Faith', a list of general principles which have been debated by Jews over the centuries, and into our own time.

Give each group of students:

- a copy of the Thirteen Principles of Faith (p.9)
- four A3 copies of the spiral text template (p.10)

Ask students in groups of four to:

- Read** the 'Thirteen Principles of Faith'
 - Identify** four of the statements they would like to work with and **write** each of the four statements in the centre of one of the spiral text sheets
- Pass** the sheets round their group quite quickly (every two minutes works well), completing the boxes with their ideas and questions
- Place** their sheets on their table, or on the wall, and then walk round the room looking at the work of other students. If they want to **add a thought** of their own to another group's work, they may do so and should sign their comment.
- Talk about** (back in their own group):
 - What is there to notice about the sentence starters in the boxes? What does this suggest about the role of discussion and debate in Judaism?
 - What might be the advantages and disadvantages for a religion of not having a specific set of beliefs?
 - During the discussion, what happened to the stimulus text in the centre?
- Feed back** ideas to the class, noting differences of interpretation between groups choosing the same statements. How has their understanding of the meaning of the chosen text been changed?

Then move on to Activity 3.

Activity 3

The Rambam and Rashi

Give each group of students:

- a set of the 'Eight Degrees of Charity' (p.9) cut up and 'ready to go'
- access to the internet or paper based resources on The Rambam and Rashi.

Ask students in groups of four to:

- Sort** the 'Eight Degrees of Charity' into the correct order. They should be able to explain their reasoning, and suggest why they think this 900-year-old commentary is still found to be helpful. Which statements are to do with: intention; motivation; action; effect?
- Complete** a spiral text activity using the three statements from the Talmud given below (one statement per A3 sheet, from p.10). How are these similar or different to The Rambam's Eight Degrees of Charity, or to the students' own thoughts about charity?
- Find out about** 'The Rambam' and 'Rashi', two highly respected rabbis. They should use the links below and look for clues to explain why they think the writings of these two rabbis are still very popular almost 1000 years after their deaths.
 - www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Maimonides.html
 - www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/rashi.html

What the Talmud has to say about charity

- Giving is not the essential thing, but to give with delicacy of feeling.
- Even a poor man who survives on charity should give charity.
- If a person closes his eyes to avoid giving charity, it is as though he committed adultery.

ACCESS

An activity on the Eight Degrees of Charity suited to lower-achieving students can be found on p.32.

A template for the spiral text activity can be found on the RE Today subscribers' area of the website:
www.retoday.org.uk

