

TRADITIONS

Many beautiful and unusual objects are used in Jewish rituals, and objects have the great advantage that they can be brought to new places to help in the creation of a Jewish universe there. Traditions are a common history and culture, connecting Jews across centuries and national borders.

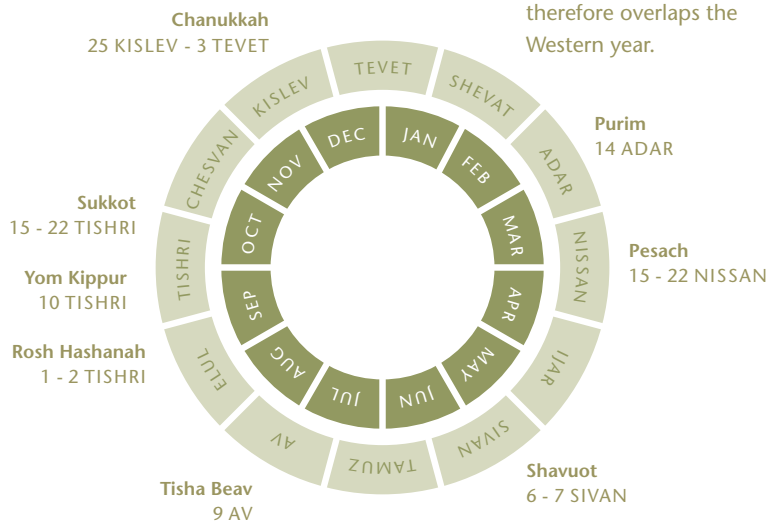
The religious spectrum

Less than 10% of the Jewish community in Denmark's members are orthodox Jews striving to comply with all the commandments of Judaism. For orthodox families in Denmark, procuring kosher food, arranging their work according to the feast days and taking care of their children's education can be a lot of work, and some of them choose to move to large European cities or Israel. Far greater shares of the members appreciate traditions without wishing to call themselves religious, and define themselves as "cultural Jews" or "traditionalists".

But there is also a growing group of Jews in Denmark who seek to return to the religious and spiritual values of Judaism, entirely separate from the law aspect. Jewish mysticism exerts great attraction, even among Jews without much contact with the community.

COHESION AND MEMORY

The religious centre of Judaism is tradition – both the tradition that people live with and pass on, and the tradition they study and discuss. The Jewish culture is book-heavy, but still partial to sensuous ritual: candles are lit, spices are scented, symbolic foods are eaten, words are read aloud, and objects are touched. Rituals address all the senses and create an atmosphere that everyone from small children to old men share. In this way ritual binds the community and is an important link between Danish Jews and other Jews in space and time. When retelling the story of Moses leading the twelve tribes out of Egypt at the feast of Pesach, the speaker and participants become themselves a continuous part of a millennia-old tradition.



The Jewish Year

The Year begins with Rosh Hashanah in September/October, and therefore overlaps the Western year.

A long count

The Jewish calendar counts the years back to "the creation of the world", and has now reached the year 5764. The Western year 2004 is 5764-65 in the Jewish calendar. In the Jewish calendar the year 0 is "the creation of the world". In the Western calendar the year 0 is the birth of Christ.

Jewish traditions bring Jews together and often point back to common memories. Judaism does not claim to hold a special truth which all mankind should follow. Ethical principles such as striving for justice and truth are duties applicable to all mankind, while Jewish traditions are specifically for Jews. Jews therefore do not mission, and only accept converts who come of their own volition with a strong wish to belong to the extended Jewish family.

Dualities

The Jewish sphere is in some ways a parallel world to Danish everyday life. Active observers of Judaism have a Hebrew name apart from their Danish name; they live with two separate calendars, observe their own holidays and use special Jewish expressions.



A New Year greeting card.

Observing rituals, doing good deeds and studying tradition are the fundamentals of Judaism



The good bread

The Sabbath begins on Friday night at sunset, and it is customary to eat a festive meal at this time. Braided bread with poppy seeds is holiday food among Ashkenazi Jews.

The traditional name is hallah or berkes, which means blessing. The word berkes has entered Danish as “birkes” (poppy seeds).

Private homes did not have ovens in the old days, and Sabbath bread was bought at Jewish bakeries. The people of Copenhagen took a liking to bread with “birkes”, and poppy-seed bread is today eaten all over the country.



Kittel

The word *kittel* will make many Danes think of an item of clothing worn by cleaning ladies. “Kittel” is one of the few Jewish words that have been assimilated into the Danish language. In Danish, the word means working coat. Among religious Jews, the kittel is a white ritual robe that the bride gives to the groom at the wedding. He wears his kittel once a year in the synagogue at Yom Kippur. It used to be customary for men to be buried in their kittel.

JUDAISM IS SOMETHING YOU DO

Judaism focuses more on practice than on faith. Observing rituals, doing good deeds and studying tradition are the fundamentals of Judaism. The emphasis on practice is also seen in the many rules known collectively as *halakhah*, which cover both the social and ritual aspects of life. The rabbis have been fine-tuning Jewish law down to the smallest detail for the last 2,000 years. Although the Hebrew Bible contains many rules about such things as feast days and food, the law as it is observed is first and foremost found in rabbinical works such as the Talmud and later works about the law. Rabbis can settle questions about rituals, family law, hereditary law and other judicial matters based on these texts, and they actually did until modern times. Today the Jews are subject to the secular laws of the state, and rabbis only rule on religious matters. In modern society, few Jews are orthodox, adhering to halakhah to its full extent.

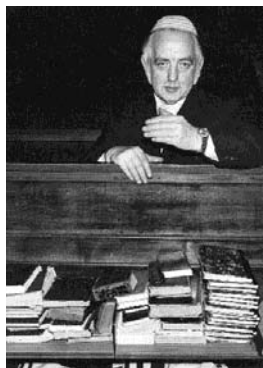
The areas of Judaism which the largest numbers of Jews still observe are the commandments to eat kosher food, celebrate the Sabbath, Pesach, Chanukkah and Yom Kippur, and to circumcise boys and get buried the Jewish way. Not everyone keeps all the rules, and each person often creates his or her own set of rules. Although there are precise and detailed rules about what food is kosher – that is “fit to eat” according to Jewish law – people often interpret the rules their own way.

The traditional rules forbid shellfish, pork, horse meat and certain species of fish, and demand that the animals are slaughtered according to certain regulations. It is not allowed to mix milk products with meat. Strictly orthodox Jews only eat food prepared in a kosher kitchen under supervision. Others eat anywhere, and will eat shellfish, although they avoid pork and eating milk products with meat, for example by picking feta cheese out of salad served with lamb chop. In the modern world, every individual Jew weighs tradition against the limitations he or she can afford to live with, for example with respect to social life.

The Jewish culture is book-heavy, but still partial to sensuous ritual

THE FREEDOM TO UNDERSTAND FOR ONESELF

The scrupulous structure of Jewish life has its antithesis in the joy of arguing and discussing. The traditional way of studying law texts and other religious books are by discussing with them: finding contradictions and problems in their wording and then trying to solve the problems with one's own interpretations. This freedom in the face of tradition contributes to keeping it from petrifying, and the culture of discussion is alive and well outside intellectual circles. Distinguished intellectuals have always been important in Judaism, and historical sources show that great efforts were made to teach children Hebrew language and traditional texts. The huge library of Jewish texts from the last 2,000 years reflects how Jews have embraced Scripture by commenting, explaining or re-interpreting it again and again.



Jerry Bergman

Covering the head

In Judaism, covering one's head is a sign of respect for the divine. There are many possibilities, and the choice of hat or kippa often reveals a person's religious standpoint.

The people of the book

The Jewish library occupies many metres of shelving. Books and studies are essential for passing on Jewish tradition, and through the centuries, Jews have held on to Hebrew as a common literary language across national borders. The large fundamental texts are the Books of Moses and the rest of the Hebrew Bible, but they are always understood in the light of the last 2,000 years of rabbinical commentary.

Rabbinical discussions of laws and ideas are especially found in the Talmud, while the Midrash genre presents the Bible creatively, supplementing it with new stories. Commentary is the most common form of Jewish literature: Jews have written commentaries on the Bible, the Talmud, law texts, poetry, liturgy, mystical texts and philosophy etc. – and even commentary on commentary. Writing commentaries is to add a new layer to tradition. Apart from religious literature, there are Jewish fairy tales, poems, legends, chronicles and many other genres.



The Book of Ester is read at Purim. The most beautifully decorated books are often used for special rituals.

Jacob's Jewish education

And now, said the Father, we would start seriously on the Gemoro, so that they, when you come to Copenhagen, will be convinced that we from the countryside are not completely witless ...

Then began the study of the old rabbis' clever, subtle, hair-splitting law commentaries, interwoven with interesting stories, legends and anecdotes, which eased the daily toil and made it attractive ...

Thus Jacob learned about his people's mysterious teachings. The world in which his spirit moved appeared to him as a row of quiet cells within the Temple of Solomon, where holy men sat praying; he often felt he was standing in the long, low temple with the small windows, but with rich, golden ornaments twisting in strange entanglements, and fantastic, mysterious figures; from the temple's forecourt he heard the crowd of believers mumble prayers around the priest, and the God of Zion speaking to them softly.

From Meir Aaron Goldschmidt: *A Jew*, 1845

On the way to the synagogue on Yom Kippur

There we went, I on my mother's arm. One does not drive on such a day, through the streets of Copenhagen, while the Belgians panted by and the wagons rumbled and everyone was busy. We felt like little kings and queens, owning a world all to ourselves into which other people were not initiated. Everywhere in the city you would meet this little procession of meticulous pedestrians dressed in black: on Købmagergade, Nørrevold, from Landemærket, Borgergade, Adelgade, Hummergade, and Nikolajgade. A world which has now disappeared. People would shake hands: Gut Yomtov. It is the Day of Atonement: Let all strife be forgotten, all outbursts of anger. All evil is lulled to sleep over the pages of the prayer books. We become happy, blasé, well-behaved children.

From Sam Besekow: *The Tailor's Son*, 1964



Farberoff

THE INNER UNIVERSE

Although Judaism is oriented towards practice, it is also a personal, mental universe. There is a great wealth of Jewish stories, symbols, myths and legends which are not least expressed through ritual. If the practical aspect of Judaism were not connected with the inner experience of the individual, then Jewish tradition would seem meaningless to most people. The rituals of the Sabbath are connected with the ideas of celebrating the creation of the world by resting, by dedicating oneself to domestic life or perhaps one's own inner life. Legends about angels visiting the family at the Sabbath table, or of the prophet Elijah, who is said to invisibly witness circumcisions, often imprint themselves strongly on the minds of children and become part of their inner universe. Even in a modern world with healthy scientific scepticism, myths and symbols are important elements of the religious sphere.

Myths and symbols are important elements of the religious sphere

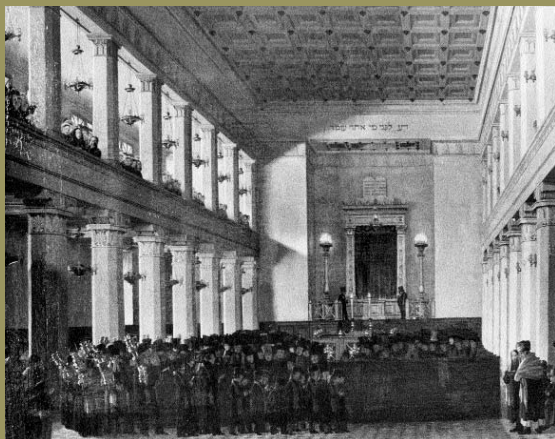


Torah streamer

In the old days it was customary to have a Torah streamer made for one's son's birth and give it to the synagogue. It is used for wrapping around the Torah scrolls before the outer wrapping is put on. Such Torah streamers list the boy's name and birth date and express the wish that he may grow up "to study the Torah, get married and do good deeds".

THE HOME AND THE SYNAGOGUE

The home is an important base for Jewish religion and culture. The many rituals and the objects used, especially belong at home. Thus, the synagogue has a less essential role than the church has in Christianity. The Jewish service is not centred on preaching, but is a collective event created by the congregation. On the Sabbath, reading from Torah scrolls is the central element, and many members of the congregation are involved in taking out the scrolls, reading them aloud, carrying the scrolls in procession and putting them away again – all accompanied by special texts and blessings. The rabbis' Danish sermons in the synagogue in Krystalgade are a modern addition to the traditional service, which could actually be carried out without the presence of a rabbi. The synagogue is first and foremost a meeting place, so participating in a service in the synagogue does not have to be an indication of faith; many people go there for social reasons, and people normally talk quite a lot during the service. The experience you get from the religious service is absolutely individual, at the same time as the service brings people together.



Simchat Torah.

Jerry Bergman

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