

What does Judaism teach about God?

Lauren: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm Lauren Layfield. I'm a TV and radio presenter, and I'm your host for this series all about Judaism.

We'll be exploring the beliefs and practices you may come across as part of your GCSE, and in this episode, we're looking at how God is understood within Judaism. But I cannot do it alone, so joining me is my brilliant co-host. Rabbi Anna Wolfson's with us. Hi Anna!

Anna: Hi Lauren, really happy to be here!

Lauren: Good. Can you tell us a little bit more about yourself Anna?

Anna: Sure. I am a Rabbi which means I lead Jewish services, do community development, and teach others about Judaism. I work at a synagogue in London, and I speak about Judaism every single day. It's something I'm really passionate about.

Lauren: We are so excited to learn a little bit more today but before we dig in, it's a really good idea to grab a pen, some paper, or maybe your notes app, because throughout the episode we'll highlight key information that you might want to jot down.

Anna: And stay listening to the end, because there'll be a quick quiz.

Lauren: OK just to start off then Anna, can you give us a bit of background on Judaism?

Anna: Of course! Judaism is one of the oldest major religions, and it was started by the ancient Hebrew people - the Israelites. It is estimated that there are around 15 to 16 million Jewish people worldwide today.

Lauren: And do all those that follow the religion do so in the same way?

Anna: No, there are various denominations in Judaism which practise their religion differently. During this series we'll mostly be looking at how Orthodox, Reform, and Liberal Jews practise their faith, however there are other denominations too.

In the UK and Ireland, Liberal and Reform Judaism now tend to come under the same movement known as Progressive Judaism. However, we will be referring to them separately throughout this series. The different denominations tend to believe the same things about God, but the difference is how they apply these beliefs to their lives.

Lauren: Anna, there are some beliefs about God which are central to Jewish life, isn't that right?

Anna: Yes, that's correct. One really key belief to understand is 'monotheism'. This is the belief that there is only one God, and that God is the only being who should be worshiped and praised.

Lauren: Mono means one, so monotheism means one God. Is that right?

Anna: Exactly. That's a great way to remember it, Lauren. Monotheism is really central to Jewish worship.

Anna: There's a prayer that shows us the idea of one God. It's called the Shema and many Jews say it in the morning and evening. You can find it in the Torah, a central, sacred text in Judaism, in Deuteronomy, Chapter 6, Verse 4. It goes like this.

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

On many Jewish homes, you might even find a mezuzah on the doorpost. This is a small case or container that holds a scroll with passages from the Shema inside, serving as a reminder of the oneness of God and God's presence.

Lauren: So, monotheism is important for Jewish people not just in prayer, but within the home as well?

Anna: Precisely, and monotheism is a key word for this topic.

Lauren: There's loads more information on the Bitesize website. All you need to do is search for Bitesize GCSE Judaism. Anna, you mentioned earlier that not all Jewish people practise their beliefs about God in the same way?

Anna: That's right Lauren. The main differences are due to how each denomination interprets the scriptures and follows Jewish laws.

Lauren: OK, so tell us some more about some of the main denominations and how they approach practising Judaism.

Anna: The ones we will discuss are Orthodox, Reform and Liberal. Orthodox Jews follow the laws within Torah, which is the sacred book, very literally as they believe they were given directly from God to Moses at Mount Sinai. They follow traditional Jewish law, known as 'halakhah', strictly, including both the biblical commandments and rabbinic interpretation. Orthodox Judaism maintains traditional practices in prayer, study, dietary laws, Shabbat observance, and daily life.

Lauren: It sounds so interesting. What can you tell us then about Reform Judaism?

Anna: Reform Jews also value the Torah but often interpret it differently. They believe that even though the laws were written thousands of years ago, they can now be adapted for modern life.

Lauren: OK and then how do Liberal Jews approach religion?

Anna: For Liberal Jews, just like for Reform Jews, there's a focus on living out Jewish values as opposed to exactly following all of the traditional laws.

Lauren: And so what does that mean for you?

Anna: As a rabbi, part of my job is enabling people to understand how the ancient text is relevant to our lives today so they can make informed choices on their Jewish practice.

Lauren: So if I'm following correctly, each denomination shares the belief in one God but it's the practice that differs?

Anna: Exactly.

Lauren: Anna please could you tell us about some of the key characteristics of God for Jewish people?

Anna: Of course! Let's take a look at some of God's 'divine attributes'. There are four 'omnis' that Judaism teaches about God. Omni means 'in all ways'. Each of these four divine attributes start with 'omni'. They are;

- God is Omnipotent, which means all-powerful
- God is Omniscient, which means all-knowing
- God is Omnipresent, meaning God is everywhere at all times
- and God is Omnibenevolent, which means all-loving.

Lauren: So within Judaism, is God understood to have all of these qualities?

Anna: Exactly Lauren! And as we've said, there is only one God, so monotheism is key.

Lauren: Anna, can you share an example about how these beliefs about God are embedded into everyday Jewish life?

Anna: Sure. Let's talk about food! Kashrut are laws around what food Jewish people can and can't eat, also known as kosher food laws. We'll talk about these in more

detail in our episode on Jewish traditions, but observing these laws strengthens our relationship with God.

Because God is omnipresent, meaning God is everywhere at all times, following kashrut laws teaches us that even in the most common rituals of daily life, like eating food, we are with God. The separation of meat and milk is a cornerstone of kashrut. It's based on a commandment in the Torah, which tradition has developed into complete separation of meat and dairy products.

Lauren: So, do all denominations practise kashrut in the same way?

Anna: Not quite. Orthodox Jews observe kashrut according to traditional Jewish law - Halakhah. Reform Jews see kashrut as a personal choice so will 'keep kosher' in more of a symbolic way, while still holding and expressing Jewish values.

For me as a member of the Liberal movement, I see different ways that kashrut is followed, from keeping it fully, to those who don't follow it at all and also, many who choose another diet, like veganism or vegetarianism, to show their understanding of a modern-day kashrut.

Lauren: And we'll be talking a lot more about those practices in other episodes of the series. Just head to BBC Sounds and search for 'Bitesize GCSE Judaism' to listen to those.

Anna: Now Lauren, I wonder if you know the meaning of the word covenant?

Lauren: I know it means an agreement but tell me how it relates to Judaism.

Anna: You're quite right in that a covenant is a solemn agreement between two or more people. In Judaism, many Jews view their relationship with God as a covenant and believe that if they do as God asks, they'll be rewarded. The first covenant was between God and the founder of the Jewish people.

Lauren: OK tell us who was the founder of the Jewish people?

Anna: It was Abraham. He made an agreement with God that he and his descendants would obey and worship God, and God alone, and would lead by example. Abraham was actually the first person to introduce the idea of one God, or monotheism. Before Abraham, people followed many Gods. His covenant with God was really where Judaism began and God promised land for Abraham and his descendants to live on.

Lauren: Were there any other covenants?

Anna: Another really key covenant was with Moses, who is a central figure and prophet in Judaism. This is where the Ten Commandments come in.

Lauren: Ah yes, I've heard of these.

Anna: Yes, many people will have heard of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments were given to Moses by God for all Jewish people to follow and help guide them on how to relate to God and each other. They form part of the covenant made on Mount Sinai between Moses and God.

Lauren: Could you give us some examples of these commandments?

Anna: Yes sure. They cover a wide range of things such as only worshipping one God and keeping the Sabbath, or Shabbat, holy. Shabbat is the weekly Jewish day of rest. Within the Ten Commandments, there are also some moral rules such as 'do not steal' and 'do not murder'. God promised to punish those who disobeyed them. You can find the Ten Commandments in the book of Exodus.

Lauren: So, following these laws and commandments, that's how Jews keep the covenant today?

Anna: Exactly. For many Jews, particularly those who are more Orthodox, following the 'mitzvot', as the laws and commandments are known, is how they show their commitment to that agreement with God.

Lauren: And does that affect how Jewish people treat others?

Anna: Well, it does. Because of the covenant, Jews believe they have a moral responsibility to act justly, to care for others, and to do the right thing.

Lauren: So, it's not just about individual faith?

Anna: No, these principles don't just guide individuals. They actually help to shape communities, where people are bonded by shared values and traditions. If you were to visit a synagogue for instance, which is a place of worship for Jewish people, you would very likely see the Ten Commandments displayed on the wall. OK

Lauren it's time to test your knowledge. Are you ready for a quick quiz?

Lauren: I am ready for a quick quiz. I love quizzes.

Anna: Ok. Feel free to grab a pen and paper or even use your notes app to jot these questions and answers down!

Lauren: And remember you can always pause the episode if you need a bit of time to think.

Anna: First question. What does 'monotheism' mean?

Lauren: OK monotheism is the belief in only one God.

Anna: You got it, well done. Next question. What does 'omnipotent' mean?

Lauren: I think that means 'all powerful'.

Anna: That's it! It's one of God's divine attributes. And finally, what does a 'covenant' mean in Judaism?

Lauren: OK so a covenant is a solemn agreement between two or more parties. And in Judaism, it refers to the special relationship between God and the Jewish people.

Anna: Fantastic Lauren, well done.

Lauren: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast.

Anna: In the next episode we'll dive into how Jewish faith is lived day to day.

Lauren: Really excited for that one. And remember there are loads of podcasts covering other GCSE subjects, just like English, Science, and History. Just search 'Bitesize GCSE' on BBC Sounds.

Anna: See you next time!