

Why is the Synagogue important in Jewish life?

Lauren: Hello! My name is Lauren Layfield and you're listening to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm a TV and radio presenter and in this series, we're exploring some of the key beliefs and practices you may come across when you're studying Judaism.

In this episode, we're looking at the role of the synagogue in Jewish life, and I'm very happy to be joined once again by Rabbi Anna Wolfson. Welcome back Anna!

Anna: Hi Lauren, it's a pleasure to be here! As a rabbi, I spend a lot of time in the synagogue. For many Jews the synagogue is a house of prayer and all-round community centre. It serves many functions so let's get stuck in and see what they're all about.

Lauren: Yeah, we've got a lot to cover so you may want to take some notes using a pen and paper or maybe your notes app. And make sure you stick about until the end because Anna's got a quiz for us.

Anna: Absolutely. I'm looking forward to it. Let's get stuck in.

Lauren: So Anna, let's go right to the basics. What is a synagogue?

Anna: Good question. Well, the word 'synagogue' comes from a Greek word meaning 'to bring together'. It's a place for worship, community, and study.

Lauren: And when did Jewish people first use synagogues for worship?

Anna: Historically, Jews would have worshipped in a portable temple, essentially the precursor to the synagogue, called the Tabernacle.

Lauren: So, by portable, do you mean they transported it around with them?

Anna: Exactly that! The book of Exodus explains that God instructed Moses, the prophet, to build a Tabernacle. It was so that the Israelites could have a place of worship whilst they were journeying through the wilderness after leaving Egypt. It was believed that God was present wherever The Tabernacle was.

Lauren: So, is that where communal worship took place?

Anna: Yes. Today though communal worship is practiced in synagogues. Synagogues are the heart of Jewish life. Praying together is really important to many Jews. For some prayers to be said, it's believed a minimum of ten Jewish adults should be present. This is what is known as a 'minyan'.

Lauren: And is that the same across the major denominations?

Anna: Yes, however for Orthodox Jews a minyan is just men, whereas for Reform Jews and Liberal Jews, such as myself, it can be a mixed group.

Lauren: OK so synagogues are a place for Jewish people to pray. How else do they bring communities together?

Anna: Synagogues are also used for services on specific days such as the Sabbath - the weekly day of rest - and festivals like Passover, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. On those days the community comes together at the synagogue to pray and read from the Torah.

Lauren: We talked about those holy days and celebrations in our episode on Jewish festivals. You can listen to that one, and all the episodes in this series, over on BBC Sounds. Just search 'Bitesize GCSE Judaism'.

Lauren: So, Anna, if we were to step inside a synagogue right now, what would it look like?

Anna: Well, you'll often see an ark or cupboard, known as the 'aron hakodesh', which is the holiest part of the synagogue. It's a cabinet that holds the Torah scrolls and it faces in the direction of Jerusalem.

It's often decorated really elaborately and designed to remind us of the biblical Ark of the Covenant, which held the original Ten Commandments thousands of years ago. There's also usually a 'ner tamid', meaning 'eternal light', which is a light that's always kept burning to show God's presence.

Lauren: So, could you say the 'ner tamid' shows God's omni presence, one of his divine attributes?

Anna: You absolutely could. It shows that God is always present.

Lauren: And the Torah scrolls you mentioned, could you describe them?

Anna: The Torah scrolls are often wrapped with a decorated cloth and are usually read by a rabbi. A pointing device called a 'yad' is often used to follow the text, so the scroll is not being touched or damaged.

Lauren: And Anna, you read the Torah scrolls as a part of your role?

Anna: That's right. As a rabbi that's part of my job. But it does not always have to be the rabbi who reads from the Torah as there are other people who have been trained to read it too. The Hebrew in Torah does not have any vowels in it so it can take a lot of practice to get it right.

Lauren: So, the 'aron hakodesh' holds the Torah scrolls, but where's the Torah actually read from?

Anna: So that happens on the 'bimah' which is a raised platform.

Lauren: OK and can you tell us more about daily services?

Anna: Yes, many Orthodox synagogues hold three daily prayer services in Hebrew; Shacharit in the morning, Minchah in the afternoon, and Arvit in the evening.

Lauren: And who leads these services?

Anna: Well, they're often led by a rabbi - a trained, Jewish religious leader and teacher. In Orthodox Judaism, rabbis are men. In Reform and Liberal Judaism women can train to be rabbis as well.

Lauren: Are there any other differences between Orthodox, Reform and Liberal worship in synagogues?

Anna: There are. In Orthodox synagogues, men and women usually sit separately, while in Reform synagogues they often will sit together. These differences reflect each tradition's interpretation of Jewish law and practice.

Lauren: And do people wear anything special at the synagogue?

Anna: Some do. Many Jewish men wear a skullcap called a 'kippah', and during prayer some wear a 'tallit', which is a prayer shawl. In Reform and Liberal synagogues both men and women can wear kippah and tallit. Orthodox men may also wear 'tefillin' during weekday morning prayers.

These are small leather boxes containing passages from the Torah. Many married Orthodox women cover their hair at all times in public as a sign of modesty, and all married women cover their heads when attending Orthodox synagogues.

Lauren: OK so we're building up a picture here. Can you give us more detail about what happens during a service?

Anna: Yes, well services use a prayer book called the 'Siddur', containing set prayers. Worshippers will often stand and sit at various points in the service to show respect and even bow during certain words in some prayers.

One of the most important prayers is the Amidah, known as 'the standing prayer', which is recited silently while standing and facing Jerusalem. It contains 19 blessings praising and thanking God. In some Orthodox services people will gently sway to help with concentration.

Services may also include Torah readings, followed by closing prayers such as the 'Aleinu', which praises God. It starts like this: "Aleinu l'shabeich l'don hkol", meaning it is our duty to praise the Ruler of all.

Lauren: So, Anna, synagogues really are a hub for Jewish people to gather aren't they?

Anna: Indeed. But not just for worship. On top of that, they are places to study the faith and often bring people together much like a community centre.

Lauren: OK tell us a bit more about that then.

Anna: Well they're places where people, young and old, come together to socialise. They may have meetings, do activities and take part in events for the community and for charity.

Lauren: And charity is really important in Judaism isn't it?

Anna: Definitely. It's central to Jewish life and it's believed we can be forgiven for our sins by taking part in charity, much like with prayer and repentance. But synagogues are also places of religious education and some will teach people Hebrew.

Lauren: Is that so Jewish people can read the religious texts?

Anna: Yes and it's a way for Jewish people to connect to their history and identity. Hebrew is an ancient and sacred language for Jews. The Torah is in Hebrew, as are many prayers, so some believe it's a way to connect more deeply to our faith and ancestors.

Lauren: So is learning Hebrew important then?

Anna: Yes, synagogues will often help with reading and speaking Hebrew. Also young people will train for about a year before doing their first Torah reading as part of their Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah ceremonies.

Lauren: So it sounds like synagogues are a place where Jewish people can find connection with one another and develop understandings of their faith.

Anna: That's right. And as we've discussed, communal gathering has been a tradition since the beginning of Judaism. In fact, in Psalms 122, Verse 1 it says:

"I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'."

Lauren: I like the use of the word rejoiced there because it shows that gathering for communal worship is joyful and a major part of Jewish life.

Anna: Absolutely. And that shared focus on God, the Torah, and the synagogue helps unite Jewish communities and reinforces a shared identity. Right, I think it's quiz time Lauren. I'm going to ask you three quick questions, and you can try and answer them. Is that ok?

Lauren: Yes! I'm feeling very confident today! Grab a pen and paper with me, or you can use your notes app, and write down your answers. And if you need to, just pause this episode whilst you think about your answer.

Anna: OK, first question. Can you tell me how many people are required for a minyan?

Lauren: I'm pretty certain that a minyan requires a group of at least ten people.

Anna: You've got it, well done! Next question. What is the 'aron hakodesh'?

Lauren: That's the ark or the cupboard in a synagogue which contains the Torah scrolls. And it is said to be the holiest part of the synagogue.

Anna: You're absolutely right! OK final question. Can you name three activities that synagogues can be used for?

Lauren: Yes one would be prayer and worship. Another would be religious study. And the third could be socialising or community events.

Anna: Brilliant! That's right. Synagogues are so much more than a place to practise the religion. They're often the centre point of the community.

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

Anna: Yes I hope it's been helpful. In the next one, we'll be looking at exam skills so we can put this knowledge into practice.

Lauren: Yes and if you want to recap on any other areas of Judaism before listening to that one, make sure to head to BBC Sounds or the Bitesize website. Just search for 'GCSE Judaism'.

Anna: You can also find podcasts to help with other GCSE subjects, like English, History and Science.

Lauren: That is right and we'll see you next time!