

Why are certain practices significant in Judaism?

Lauren: Hey and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast on Judaism. I'm Lauren Layfield - I'm a TV and radio presenter, and in this series, we're exploring the beliefs and practices you may come across at GCSE.

This episode, we're looking at how Jewish faith is lived out in different denominations. And helping me is the extremely knowledgeable Rabbi Anna Wolfson. Hi Anna!

Anna: Hi Lauren, it's a pleasure to be here!

Lauren: Anna, tell us a little bit about being a rabbi.

Anna: Yes, well, it means I'm an ordained spiritual leader and teacher. As a rabbi, I follow a lot of these practices myself and talk about them to members of my community too.

Lauren: Well, we can't wait to hear a little bit more but before we get started, grab a pen, some paper, or your notes app, because we'll be highlighting key ideas throughout this episode.

Anna: That's right, and don't forget to stick around until the end. I'll be testing you with a quick quiz.

Lauren: Anna, can you tell me about a key Jewish practice?

Anna: Of course. Let's start with the mitzvot. The mitzvot are 613 laws believed to have been said from God to Moses. They guide Jewish people on how to live a good life. They're found in the Torah, which is a sacred text containing the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

Lauren: OK so tell us some more about them.

Anna: Well, the laws contain instructions on how Jewish people should live their lives. There are different ways of thinking about the mitzvot, or dividing them up, but a common way is to split them into 248 positive mitzvot, known as 'mitzvot aseh' and 365 negative mitzvot known as 'mitzvot lo taaseh'.

Lauren: Okay so what is the difference between the positive and the negative ones?

Anna: The positive mitzvot describe actions Jews are commanded to do. These include things such as honouring our parents or worshipping God. The negative mitzvot set out what Jewish people are commanded not to do, such as not bearing grudges and not having any other Gods.

Lauren: That's really fascinating, and in our episode on God and Judaism, we talked about Moses's covenant with God and how it is upheld today. So would it be correct to say that the mitzvot are how people actually act on their covenant with God? Almost like they're putting their connection into practice each day?

Anna: Exactly. The mitzvot guide behaviour, ethics, and worship. So, it's really about living the faith as well as believing. In fact, there's a line from Psalm 119, verse 105 that sums this up really well. "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." For many Jews, the mitzvot act like that guiding light, helping them make choices in everyday life.

Lauren: Yeah, I like that. It's like the laws give direction and meaning to Jewish people.

Anna: That's a good way to see it.

Lauren: Do different Jewish denominations follow the laws differently?

Anna: They do, yes. All Jewish traditions value the mitzvot but different denominations interpret them in different ways. And just to recap, in this

series we'll be discussing Orthodox, Reform and Liberal denominations, but there are others too.

Lauren: OK shall we start with Orthodox then?

Anna: Sure. So Orthodox Jews tend to observe all 613 commandments very strictly because they believe that the Torah was given directly by God to Moses. In practice, this means following traditional Jewish law (halakhah), which interprets and applies the commandments comprehensively.

For example, during Shabbat, the weekly Jewish day of rest, Orthodox Jews don't just avoid work. Many won't turn on lights or drive, because the traditional Jewish law interprets these activities as forms of work prohibited on Shabbat.

Lauren: OK and what about Reform Jews?

Anna: Many Reform Jews believe that the Torah was divinely inspired, but written by humans, rather than being word-for-word dictation from God to Moses. For example, during Shabbat, instead of not turning on light switches they might choose to act in the spirit of the law.

That might mean focusing on rest and family time, perhaps avoiding work-related technology and social media while staying connected with family.

Lauren: And why do Reform Jews see that differently to Orthodox Jews?

Anna: Well Reform Jews tend to look at the mitzvot through the lens of the world in which they were written i.e., thousands of years ago. They then decide how, or even if, those laws should be followed today.

Most Jews believe that God gave humans free will - the ability to make their own choices. So, while all Jews value the mitzvot, different denominations choose how to follow them in ways that reflect their beliefs and understanding.

Lauren: So, we've talked about the Jewish laws, or 'mitzvot'. What about Jewish worship?

Anna: Worship and prayer are really important in Judaism. Worship happens at home, and synagogues are buildings designed for communal prayer, bringing Jewish communities together. Praying among other people in synagogue is a different experience from praying alone at home. I find there's something about the coming together of voices and the human connection that can give another spiritual layer to prayer.

Lauren: And we'll look more at this in our episode on the role of synagogues, so make sure you head to the BBC Sounds app and search 'Bitesize GCSE Judaism' to listen to that one. Anna, tell us a little bit more about prayer for Jewish people.

Anna: Sure. Many Jewish people believe prayer connects them to God. There are formal prayers from a prayer book which is called a Siddur, and there are informal prayers which are usually made up spontaneously by the individual. They're more personal. Both types of prayer can happen at home or in the synagogue.

Lauren: Are there any prayers that are particularly important to remember?

Anna: Yes. There's the Shema, which affirms belief in one God, or 'monotheism'. It goes like this:

"Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad."

Lauren: That's amazing, and can I just say you've got a lovely, lovely voice.

Anna: Thank you.

Lauren: Can you tell us a little bit more about the Shema?

Anna: Sure, well traditionally Jews recite the Shema twice daily. Once in the morning and during evening prayers, as commanded in the Torah - "when you lie down and when you rise up". Another central prayer is the Amidah, which is usually said silently

while standing and facing the direction of Jerusalem. The Amidah contains 19 blessings praising and thanking God.

Lauren: So, Anna, we know that both of those prayers can happen at the synagogue, but could you tell us a little bit more about how you pray at home?

Anna: For sure! Some Jews pray at home instead of, or as well as, attending daily services. Many pray when they wake up, before meals, and before going to sleep. Homes may also display reminders of faith, like a mezuzah on the doorpost. That's a little box or capsule containing words from the Shema.

Lauren: Anna, are there any other forms of worship that help you feel connected to your Jewish community?

Anna: For sure, let me tell you about the Sabbath, or 'Shabbat' in Hebrew. We discussed earlier that the way people actually practise it really comes down to how their denomination interprets the mitzvot. For me, it's one of my favourite parts of every week.

Lauren: OK, tell me a little bit more about it.

Anna: So, Shabbat is a day of rest in Judaism. It takes place on the seventh day of the week, starts at sunset on Friday and ends at nightfall on Saturday.

Lauren: And why is it so important?

Anna: Well, it comes from one of the Ten Commandments, which tells Jews to keep the Sabbath day holy. It's also based on the Hebrew Bible passage, where God created the world and then rested on the seventh day of the Jewish week. For many Jews, Shabbat is part of the covenant with God, a chance to step back from work and focus on faith, family and reflection.

Lauren: And just a reminder that if you'd like a recap on any of the terms used in this series, be sure to head to the BBC Bitesize website. Just search for the GCSE Religious Studies pages. So, Anna what happens during Shabbat?

Anna: Many Jews mark Shabbat with special meals at home, prayers, and spending time with family. Some attend synagogue services on Friday night and/or on Saturday. Shabbat ends on Saturday evening with final prayers and the Havdalah ceremony, which uses wine, spices, and a candle to mark the return to everyday life. Many Jews, from all denominations, will also avoid working on Shabbat.

Lauren: And you mentioned special meals. Can you tell me more about the food eaten during Shabbat?

Anna: The food is amazing and it has a really important role! Cooking has to be done in advance and during Shabbat Jews usually eat a special plaited bread known as challah. Challah is special as it symbolises the food God gave the Israelites when they were walking in the desert.

Depending on where a Jewish family originates from in the world, there will be a traditional shabbat meal. For my family and many other Jews whose ancestors are from Eastern Europe and Russia, it is traditional to have chicken soup, roast chicken and potatoes, with all the trimmings.

Lauren: Oh my goodness it sounds absolutely delicious. And are there any other customs?

Anna: Yes. Before Shabbat begins, families tidy, prepare food, and place two candles on the table, lighting them and saying a blessing to welcome Shabbat. There will also be blessings over wine and two loaves of challah. Songs and stories are shared together. Saturday is usually for synagogue, another family meal, and rest or studying the Torah.

While we're on the topic of food, we also have food laws in Judaism. These are known as kosher laws, or 'kashrut'. These laws are part of the mitzvot and guide what foods Jews can traditionally eat and how they should be prepared.

Lauren: OK so what makes food kosher?

Anna: Well, there are rules about particular animals. For example, land animals must have split hooves and chew the cud, which would include cows, sheep, goats and deer. Birds that are kosher include chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys and pigeons.

Lauren: And are there any other rules that you can tell us about Anna?

Anna: Well fish we eat must have fins and scales, and pork and shellfish are forbidden. Meat and dairy must not be eaten together, and some Jews will wait hours between eating them. For meat to be kosher, animals must be slaughtered through shechitah, the Jewish ritual method, by a trained expert called a shochet. This involves a swift cut with a sharp knife, which Jewish tradition holds to be humane and to minimise the animal's suffering.

Lauren: Would I be right in thinking that Orthodox Jews might follow these laws differently to Reform Jews?

Anna: Generally, yes. Orthodox Jews often keep separate utensils for meat and dairy. Some Reform Jews may follow rules. For those who do, kosher laws turn eating into a religious act, a constant reminder of faith, identity, and belonging.

Lauren: OK I think it's time for you to quiz me Anna.

Anna: Right, let's do it! I'm going to ask three quick questions based on this episode's learning.

Lauren: Grab a pen, or your notes app, and jot down your answers. And remember you can always pause the episode if you need a bit more time. Right, I am ready for the first question!

Anna: OK here we go. What are the mitzvot and how many are there?

Lauren: They are the laws in the Torah that many Jewish people follow, and there are 613.

Anna: You've got it, well done! OK, next question. Can you name two important prayers in Judaism?

Lauren: Yes, it's the Shema and the Amidah.

Anna: That's it, well done! Together, they're central to Jewish prayer. And finally, what does 'kashrut' refer to?

Lauren: Kashrut are the Jewish food laws, also known as Kosher laws. And they guide what Jews can and can't eat.

Anna: You got it, great work Lauren!

Lauren: Thank you very much for listening to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast on Judaism.

Anna: In the next episode we're looking at Jewish festivals and why they matter.

Lauren: Yeah, keep exploring the series to learn more about Jewish beliefs and traditions, and to help prepare for your exam. Just search for 'GCSE Judaism' on BBC Sounds.

Anna: See you next time!