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2nd Edition

# Judaism

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into everyday Jewish life

Grasp the spiritual depth  
of the faith and practice

**Rabbi Ted Falcon, PhD**

Writer, teacher, spiritual counselor

**David Blatner**

Co-founder, InnerFaith Foundation





# Judaism

2nd Edition

**by Rabbi Ted Falcon, Ph.D.  
and David Blatner**

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**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
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## Judaism For Dummies®, 2nd Edition

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# Introduction

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We're amazed by how many people have become interested in Judaism in recent years. Some people interested in Judaism are in search of meaningful connections to the past. Some have a hunger for deeper understanding and ritual, a longing for something precious to pass on to their children, something nourishing and loving to live by. For many Jews (and non-Jews, too) this has meant exploring the rich tapestry of Judaism — some discovering the religion for the first time, others re-examining the lost or forgotten traditions from their youth.

For non-Jews, perhaps this interest follows an increasing awareness of the significance of Judaism as the source and inspiration for both Jesus and the “Old Testament.” People seem to have a greater openness these days to appreciating the depth of Judaism without seeing it as a threat to other faiths.

For Jews, perhaps this resurgence of interest stems from a community recovering from Holocaust horrors and rediscovering that the faith and practice still exist. Certainly, much of the interest seems to come from the increasing realization that Judaism has much to offer in the mystical, meditative, and spiritual realms.

## About This Book

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The problem facing many people interested in Judaism is that the vast majority of Jewish books on the market today either tackle one particular subject in great depth (such as 300 pages just on the holiday of Sukkot), or they approach Judaism from an orthodox perspective (“These are the 613 things you *should* do if you know what’s good for you”). We don’t find anything wrong with either of these approaches, but we want to offer something different. We believe that even a subject as deep and important as Judaism can be fun to read about. And the more you find out about the subject, the more fun it is.

With that in mind, we offer you *Judaism For Dummies*. Wherever you’re coming from — whether you’re interested in the religion or the spirituality, the culture or the ethnic traditions — this book offers you a glimpse into Judaism that you’ve never seen before, one that helps you appreciate what all the excitement is about.

Even better, we've packaged all this great information in easy-to-read chapters that are organized in easy-to-access chunks.

## Conventions Used in This Book

We use practices throughout this book that might take some getting used to. First, when we discuss dates, we don't use BC and AD, because they're based on Christian theology. Instead, we use BCE ("Before the Common Era") and CE ("in the Common Era").

We also do our best not to assign a gender to God. As we describe in Chapter 2, Judaism makes it very clear that God is neither male nor female. However, when we feel that something is being lost by not using masculine or feminine pronouns, we leave them in.

Additionally, to help you navigate this book as you begin to navigate the world of Judaism, we use the following conventions:

- » *Italic* text highlights new words and defined terms. We italicize Hebrew words when we first define them and then use regular font for subsequent appearances of the term.
- » **Boldfaced** text indicates keywords in bulleted lists and the action part of numbered steps.
- » Monofont text highlights a web address.

## Pronouncing Jewish Words

You can't read about Judaism without bumping into the Hebrew language, and we include a lot of Hebrew throughout this book. However, there are a few things you need to know about reading Hebrew. For example, the Hebrew language is read right-to-left.

### Cha, Kha, Ha!

Hebrew doesn't have a "ch" sound, like the English words "chew" or "lunch." The sound just doesn't exist!

On the other hand, English doesn't have that guttural, throat-clearing sound like the Scottish make when they say "Loch Ness" (like saying "ha" down in your throat instead of in your mouth), and Hebrew does. In most cases we *transliterate*

(“spell out the way it sounds”) this “kh” sound. However, for a few words that are better known, such as “Chanukkah” and “challah,” we use “ch” because that’s how they are usually spelled. Even though we spell them using “ch,” you should use the guttural sound when you see words such as “Chanukkah” or “challah.”

Yiddish — that Eastern European mixture of Hebrew, German, and Slavic languages — *does* have the English “ch” sound, and every now and again, we include words that use this sound (like “boychik” and “kvetch”). In these few instances, we let you know which pronunciation to use.

## You say Tomato, I say Tomaso

There is one letter in the Hebrew alphabet that Ashkenazi Jews have traditionally pronounced “sav” and Sephardi Jews have pronounced “tav.” The result is that many words can be pronounced correctly in two ways. For example, *Shabbat* and *Shabbos* are both correct. Modern Israeli Hebrew follows the Sephardic tradition (with the hard “t”), but many descendants of Eastern European Jews prefer the softer “s” sound.

In this book, we almost always use the Modern Israeli pronunciation. If you’re more comfortable with “bris” (rather than “brit”), “Shavuot” (rather than “Shavuot”), or “B’reishees” (rather than “B’reisheet”), don’t call our publisher and complain — just swap them in your head.

Also note that Israelis tend to place the emphasis of a word on the last syllable, where Westerners tend to place it on an earlier syllable. So, you hear “Shah-vu-oh” instead of “Sha-vu-ohs,” or “mah-zahl tov” instead of “mah-zel tov.”

## Pronouncing vowels

Hebrew vowels are pronounced almost like Spanish or Japanese vowels: the *a* is said “ah,” *o* is “oh,” *e* is “eh,” *i* is “ee,” and *u* is “oo.” For example, *Magen David* (the star of David) is pronounced “mah-geh-n dah-veed,” and *Tikkun Olam* (“the repair of the world”) is pronounced “tee-koon oh-lahm.” Whenever possible, we include pronunciation keys throughout the book.

## About the translations

Translating one language into another always requires interpretation and compromise. The translations of Hebrew that you see in this book — which are either our own or came from traditional Jewish sources — may be significantly different than those in other books. If you find two different translations for the same text, there’s a good chance that both are true, depending on your perspective, and that there are lessons to appreciate from both versions.

# Foolish Assumptions

When writing this book, we assumed that our readers didn't know anything about Jews and Judaism. Toward that end, we explain all the rituals, ideas, and terms that you need to know in a way that you can understand, even if you're reading about these things for the first time.

In fact, when it comes to Judaism, being a “dummy” isn't just tolerated — it's actively encouraged, and has been for over 2,000 years. Each spring, during the holiday called Passover (see Chapter 25), Jews around the world reread a book called the *Haggadah*. The book tells the story of how the Hebrews escaped Egyptian slavery about 3,300 years ago, and it supplements the tale with a bunch of other poems, songs, and fables, including one about the following four children:

- » The “Wise” child searches for depth and meaning in the Passover story, trying to find hidden connections and spiritual truths in the holiday.
- » The “Wicked” child, whose rebellious nature requires detailed explanations for everything, demands that the holiday's rituals be relevant in his or her own life.
- » The “Simple” child just smiles, saying, “Tell me what to do and I'll do it.” This child wants to know how but not why, and finds deep comfort in the rituals themselves.
- » The “dummy” that the title of this book refers to is the fourth child. This child hungers for knowledge but doesn't know where to begin. The *Haggadah* describes the fourth child only as the “One who doesn't know enough to ask a question.”

Centuries of rabbis have taught that *all* these children live within each of us, and that you must celebrate them all — and especially the dummy inside.

This book is designed for all four of your inner children. Sometimes you may say, “Listen, I just want to know how this ritual is done.” So we describe rituals and give you step-by-step instructions. Other times you may want to stomp your feet and say, “What is this tradition? How is it relevant to me?” That's good! Sometimes everyone needs to express some rebelliousness, so we discuss those things in the book, too.

If you're a wise and worldly searcher with a longing for connection, you'll also find jewels in each chapter of this book. Ultimately, we hope you read the book from the open and honestly curious perspective of the dummy's “beginner's mind,” which makes you available for deeper learning.

# How This Book Is Organized

In order for you to get the most out of the book quickly and efficiently, we've broken it down into parts, each with its own theme.

## Part 1: What Jews Generally Believe

We begin by exploring the different groups within the Jewish community, like Ashkenazi and Sephardic, and denominations, like Orthodox, Reform, and so on. Then we target two of the most important issues in Judaism — God and Torah — before discussing the basic practices and ethical foundations of Judaism, like the kosher laws, what happens in worship services, and what Judaism says about war and the environment. Part I ends with a look at the ancient (and really cool) practices of Jewish mysticism (usually called *Kabbalah*).

## Part 2: From Womb to Tomb: The Life Cycle

In Part 2 we discuss how Judaism honors and celebrates the major stages of life with rituals, including the *bris* (circumcision and naming for boys), *brit bat* (welcoming and naming for girls), Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, weddings, and funeral rites.

## Part 3: An Overview of Jewish History

You can't understand Judaism (or even Western civilization) without knowing something about Jewish history. But that doesn't mean that the history has to be boring! In Part 3 we delve into the highlights and the low points — from the Biblical stories to modern day — focusing on what you need to know and why you need to know it.

## Part 4: Celebrations and Holy Days

Okay, so it's Chanukkah again (or Passover or Sukkot, or whatever) — how do you “do it right”? In Part 4 we explore every major Jewish holiday, from the weekly Shabbat to the weeklong Sukkot. If you want to know what, where, when, why, how, or who, this is the place to look.

## Part 5: The Part of Tens

If you've only got time for a quickie, make sure to put a bookmark at the beginning of Part 5. We include a list of people you should know about, plus answers to common questions about Judaism.

## Part 6: Appendixes

If you're in a heated debate with a Jewish person, you'd better know the differences between "shlemiel" and "shlemazl," and between "tukhis" and "tsuris." Don't worry, we cover all this in the Appendixes, along with a quick easy-in/easy-out guide to prayers and blessings and a list of resources to consult for additional information.

## Icons Used in This Book

In order to highlight some important bits of information, we use the following icons throughout the text.



TIP

The information next to this icon tells you things that can lead to a deeper understanding of or a more fulfilling experience with Judaism.



REMEMBER

This icon highlights ideas you should keep in mind as you explore or practice Judaism.



CONTROVERSY

Wherever you see this icon you find some disagreement in the Jewish world.



ANECDOTE

This icon warns you of a more personal story hidden in the text. Read at your own risk.



CAUTION

The text next to this icon will help you steer clear of any road blocks you may run across as you read about or experience the faith.



WORDS OF WISDOM

This icon highlights some of the many important Jewish teachings from the last few millennia.



# Where to Go from Here

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This book is a reference, meaning that you don't need to read it from cover to cover. (Though you're certainly welcome to do just that.) We wrote the chapters as self-contained packets of information. So for example, if you're heading to a Jewish wedding, you can jump right to Chapter 9; if you were invited to a Passover seder, dive right into Chapter 25.

Of course, many of the core ideas in Judaism — the themes that we come back to time and time again throughout the book — are all covered in Part I, so you may want to peruse that part first.

As an added bonus, we invite you to check out our online resources about Judaism. Check out our detailed calendar of Jewish holidays as well as our list of ten important Jews you should know at [www.dummies.com/extra/judaism](http://www.dummies.com/extra/judaism); and feel free to visit our website at [www.joyofjewish.com](http://www.joyofjewish.com). And because we believe that Judaism is like a conversation that continues forever, send an e-mail to [authors@joyofjewish.com](mailto:authors@joyofjewish.com).



# 1 What Jews Generally Believe

## IN THIS PART . . .

You'll find out why you can never be sure someone is Jewish (or not) just by how they look. Plus, you'll get the skinny on all the details about *being* Jewish, like is it a race or a tribe? Is it a religion or a practice? Do you have to believe in God? And what's all this about meditation and the kabbalah? That stuff isn't Jewish, is it?

#### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding the difference between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews
- » Exploring the wide spectrum from Orthodox to Reform (and beyond)
- » Playing the “Who’s a Jew” game

## Chapter **1**

# That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Jewish: Who’s a Jew and Why

**W**e used to think we could tell if someone was Jewish just by looking at them. We each grew up in very different times and very different places in America, but we both developed the same notion of what being Jewish meant: Small stature (but often slightly overweight), large nose, dark wavy or curly hair, dark eyes . . . you can’t really explain it in print — it’s more like a feeling. “Hey, is that guy Jewish?” “Oh yeah, no doubt about it.” You just know!

Then we went to Israel. It took about five seconds for each of us to realize that what we thought was “Jewish” was just one small segment of a much bigger picture — like finding out that kissing isn’t all there is to love. We saw blond Jews, Middle-Eastern Jews, Asian Jews, Black Jews, Latino Jews, Jews who looked like Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Jews who looked like Britney Spears. Boy, we had a lot to learn!

# The Jewish Tribe

Judaism isn't a race or even a particular culture or ethnic group. A little over 15 million Jews are spread around the world, including about 6 million in the United States and about 5 million in Israel — so Judaism obviously isn't "a nation." And, if you're anything like us, you know more Jews who don't believe in God or practice Jewish observances than those who do, so being Jewish doesn't even necessarily have to do with religion.



REMEMBER

So what *does* it mean to be Jewish? Here are the basics:

- » **Being Jewish (being "a Jew") means you're a Member of the Tribe (an M-O-T).** The tribe started with a couple named Abraham and Sarah more than 4,000 years ago, it grew over time, and it's still here today. You can become an authentic part of the Jewish tribe in two ways: by being born to a Jewish mother or joining through a series of rituals (called *converting*). Some folks think there are other ways of becoming a Jew, too; we cover that issue later in this chapter.
- » **Judaism is a set of beliefs, practices, and ethics based on the Torah (see Chapter 3).** You can practice Judaism and not be Jewish, and you can be a Jew and not practice Judaism.

## What's in a name?

The word "Jewish" doesn't appear in the Bible at all. For example, the folks who came out of slavery in Egypt in the Book of Exodus (see Chapter 11) were called "Hebrews" or "Children of Israel," and they each belonged to one of the 12 tribes of Israel. Ten of the 12 tribes were dispersed by the Assyrians in the eighth century BCE (see Chapter 11), but the tribe of Judah and the smaller tribe of Benjamin remained as the Southern Kingdom known as Judea until early in the sixth century BCE.



TIP

When Judea fell to the Babylonians, and the people were taken into exile, they became known as the Judah-ites (*Yehudim*), since they were the people of Judah (*Yehudah*). In Hebrew, the name *Yehudim* persists today and simply means "Jews." The religion they practiced was later called "Judah-ism" — which became "Judaism." We prefer to pronounce this word "Judah-ism" rather than "Jude-ism" or "Judy-ism" — which makes it sound like you're talking about Judy Garland.