

The History of Judaism

Origins of Judaism

Judaism traces its origins back 3800 years to Abraham and Sarah, the patriarch and matriarch of a people called the Hebrews (or Israelites). The story of Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants is told in the Jewish scriptures. It is a story of a **covenant** or promise made between God and Abraham.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing."

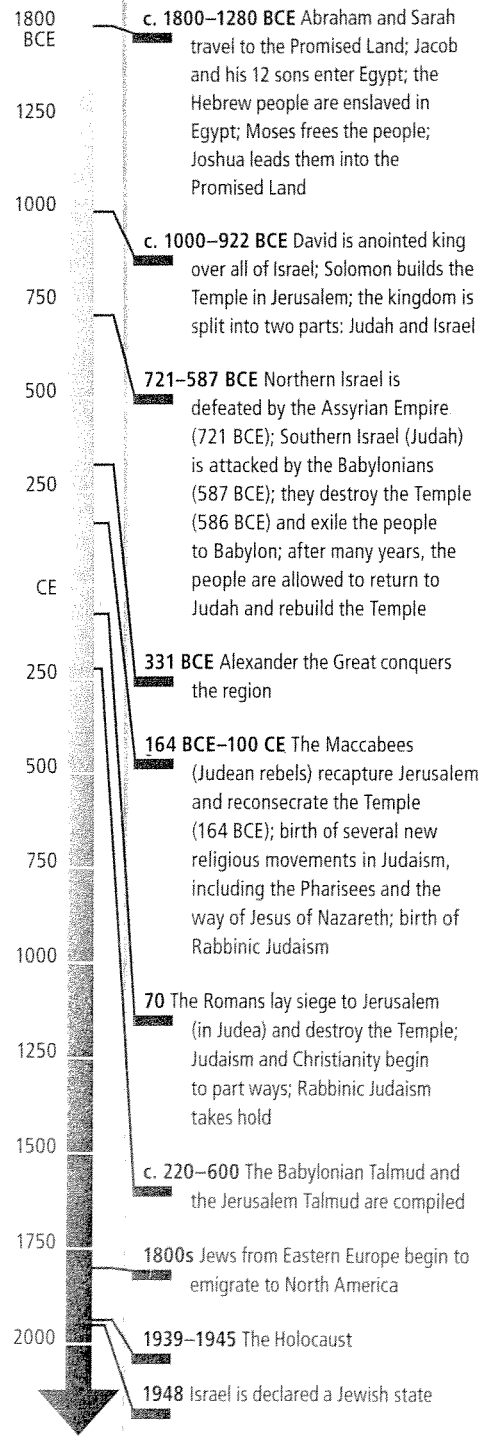
(Genesis 12:1-2)

Links to the Past

The area that we now know as Israel was once divided into two kingdoms: the kingdom of Israel (the northern kingdom) and the kingdom of Judah (the southern kingdom). The religion that began with Abraham among the Hebrew people is called Judaism because the Jewish people of today trace their heritage to the Hebrew people who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah.

Throughout its sacred texts, which you will learn more about later in this chapter, Judaism has maintained continuity with its distant past. But, even though Judaism's roots date back to ancient times, over the centuries it has evolved and changed from the practices of the early Hebrews.

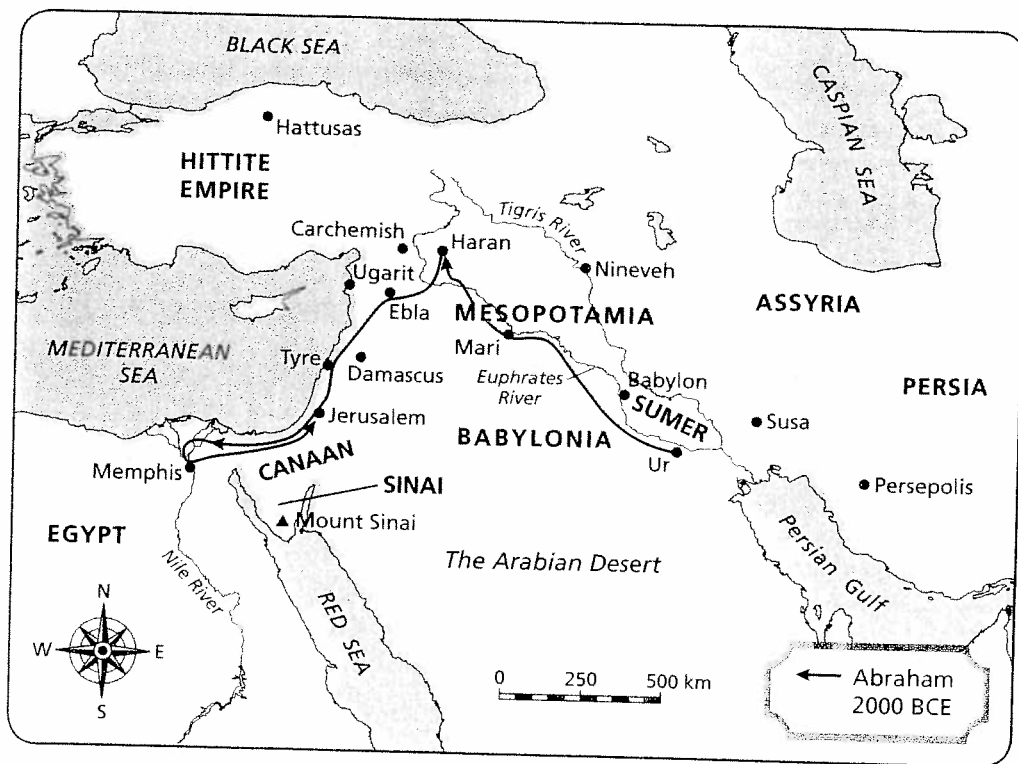
Timeline of Jewish History



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Mesopotamia and Canaan, 1800 BCE



Mesopotamia and Canaan. In Chapter 12 of Genesis, God directed Abraham to leave Ur in Mesopotamia and go into the land of the Canaanites. This map shows Mesopotamia and Canaan around 1800 BCE. Compare this map with a modern-day map of the same area. What differences and similarities do you see? Which peoples live in these areas today?

Check Your Understanding

1. Explain the meaning of "covenant."

Think About It

2. Examine the timeline and draw out three or four important themes or ideas (for example, land) from the events described there. In your own words, explain the significance of each idea to an understanding of Judaism.

Making It Personal

3. Which of the themes in question 2 are important to you personally? Why?

The Birth of Modern Judaism

The Judaism practised in the time of King David and King Solomon was very different from Judaism as we know it today. Its current form and practices have changed greatly over the centuries. As well, a catastrophic event in the first century of the Common Era—the destruction of the Temple—had an enormous impact on Judaism as we now know it. The Temple was the centre of all Jewish worship and sacrifice.

In 66 CE, Judea was under the control of the Roman Empire. A group of Jewish revolutionaries known as the Zealots rose up against the rulers of the land. In response, the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem, destroying the city and

the Temple. Three thousand people who had taken refuge in the Temple perished when the Temple fell in 70 CE.

Two religious movements, Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, survived the terrible events of the year 70 CE, but they were also changed by it.

Christianity

The destruction of the Temple changed forever a Jewish movement that had begun with Jesus of Nazareth about 40 years earlier. This movement included both Jews and non-Jews who had accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the long-awaited Jewish **Messiah**, or Christ. Jesus had been crucified by the Romans in 30 CE. His followers came to be known as Christians.

Messiah

A word meaning “the anointed one”; the word “Christ” comes from the Greek word meaning the same thing



The Western Wall. The only part of the Temple of Jerusalem that remained standing after it was destroyed by the Romans was the Western Wall. For Jews today, this wall is Jerusalem’s most sacred place. The wall is a reminder of the ancient Temple and of Jews’ spiritual connection to the ancient land of Israel. Some believers pray and study at the wall and push prayers written on pieces of paper into the gaps of the historic Temple stones.

Christians presented Jesus as the fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel. As a result, a conflict developed



The Resurrection of Christ. This painting is by Italian artist Raphael (1483–1520).

between Christian Jews and Rabbinic Jews (known at the time as Pharisees). Toward the end of the first century and the start of the second century, the two groups parted ways.

Rabbinic Judaism

The second movement, called Rabbinic (or Halakhic) Judaism, was begun by a group known as the Pharisees. With the Temple destroyed, the Pharisees found a new focus for Judaism in their sacred writings. They encouraged people to gather in synagogues or study houses to study the Torah—the “teaching” or guidance of God—found in their scriptures.

The Pharisees used the scripture translated into Aramaic, the language most people spoke in Israel. Studying and interpreting Torah became an important way of helping Jewish people follow the laws of the covenant wherever they lived. The interpreters of the Torah were known as scribes or rabbis. That is why this movement came to be called Rabbinic Judaism.

† Catholic Connection

Jews believe that God will send a Messiah to save Israel. They believe that the Messiah has not yet come. Christians believe that Jesus is the Messiah promised by God.

! Fast Fact

In the New Testament, the Pharisees are sometimes presented negatively. Even today, some people use the term to mean people who follow guidelines and teachings too strictly, or are hypocritical. This is not really fair. The Pharisees were sincere seekers of the will of God.

Check Your Understanding

1. In your own words, explain how Christianity started out as a Jewish movement.
2. Explain why Judaism today places such an emphasis on studying scripture to find guidance in life.

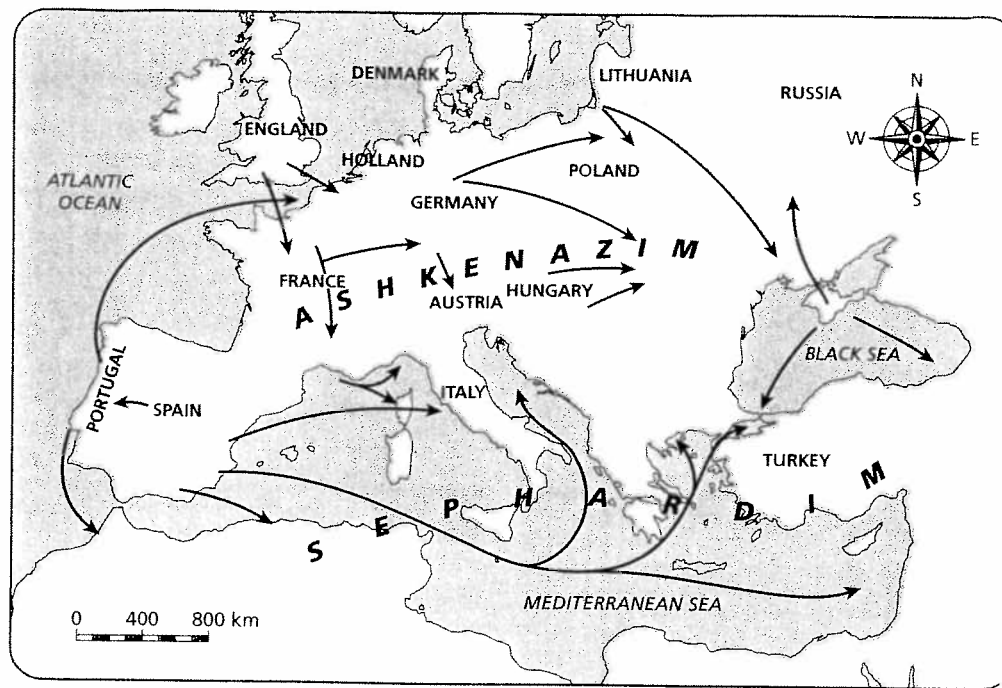
Think About It

3. Create a graphic (for example, a flow chart or mind map) to illustrate how the following groups were connected during the early history of Judaism: the Hebrew people; Israel; Judah; non-Jews; Christianity; Rabbinic Judaism.

Making It Personal

4. Where do you look for guidance in life?

Jews in Europe, 1400s and 1500s



Jews without a Homeland.
The map shows how, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Jews were constantly on the move in Europe.

Diaspora

The scattering of Jews outside of Israel in both ancient and modern times

Ashkenazim

Central and Eastern European Jews and their descendants

Sephardim

Primarily Spanish, Portuguese, and North African Jews and their descendants

Jews in the Diaspora

In 135 CE, the Romans expelled the Jews from Judea, forcing them to take refuge in other countries. Most Jews ended up living in foreign countries, in what became known as the **Diaspora** (meaning “dispersion” or “scattering”). This scattering among nations and the constant desire to return to the land of Israel and to Jerusalem is a key aspect of the history of the Jews and their faith.

Jews in Christian Europe

In the Diaspora, Jews became divided into two major groups: the **Ashkenazim**, in Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe, and the **Sephardim**, around the Mediterranean basin. Both groups had an immeasurable influence on the intellectual, economic, cultural, and spiritual life of every country in which they lived. And yet, in many cases, Jews remained set apart—they were “the other.” In the largely Christian countries of Europe, Jews

were often unjustly accused of being the killers of Jesus the Messiah and were treated as unbelievers.

The Kabbalah and Hasidism

Several Jewish mystical movements became popular in the Middle Ages. Mystics are people in search of God through a life of prayer, meditation, and reflection. The main Jewish mystical teachings are *Kabbalah* (twelfth century) and *Hasidism* (eighteenth century).

The Kabbalah

The teaching of the Kabbalah is found in many texts. One text, called *Zohar*, is best described as a journey into the self of each individual. The true nature of God, according to Kabbalah, is indescribable, except by saying what God is not. This true essence of God is known as *Ein Sof*, which means “without end.” God has no boundaries in either time or space.

Hasidism

The founder of Hasidism was Israel ben Eliezer (1698–1759), also known as Ba'al Shem Tov. He taught that communion with God happened through prayer, good deeds, humility, and, especially, joy. He is best known

for his humorous stories in which people encounter God as they do the simplest chores. Hasidic communities are led by charismatic leaders ("rebbe"), to whom followers come for guidance and sustenance.



Hasidic Jews. Most Hasidic communities in Canada are in Montréal (shown here) and Toronto. Hasidic Jews are easily identified by their dress. Most of the men wear dark suits and black hats, and many have long, uncut sideburns. Women dress modestly and cover their hair. Hasidic communities generally keep to themselves and maintain a strict observance of Jewish laws.

Check Your Understanding

1. What are some ways in which Jews have contributed to European culture?

Think About It

2. With a partner, look up the word "anti-Semitism" in a dictionary. Record the definition and give some examples from history. Why might it be especially important for Catholics to speak out against anti-Semitism whenever they encounter it?
3. Why do you think some religious communities, such as Hasidic communities, dress and eat in ways that set them apart?

Making It Personal

4. Jews and Christians have often been persecuted for their faith. How would you defend your faith if you were persecuted for it?

† Catholic Connection

There is a tradition of mysticism within Catholicism as well. St. Catherine of Siena, a mystic who lived in the fourteenth century, said, "My me is God."

† A Closer Look

The characters in Ba'al Shem Tov's stories are typically simple rural people without much education. They appealed to an audience who lived in small, mostly rural villages, and who were not able to follow the ascetic practices of other Jewish leaders of the time.

The Enlightenment, the Holocaust (Shoah), and Modern-Day Israel

Three events in particular have shaped Judaism in the past three centuries: the Enlightenment, the Holocaust (*Shoah*), and the founding of the State of Israel. They still mark Judaism today.

The Enlightenment

During the seventeenth century, a new way of knowing began to dominate Western Europe: the way of reason. Until that time, mysticism and religion had been the ways of knowing and understanding life. This new movement came to be called the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment emphasized intellectual freedom. Only what could be known by reason was considered acceptable. All else was superstition. People became very skeptical about traditional political, social, and religious beliefs.

The Enlightenment had an enormous impact on Judaism and Christianity. For one thing, as less emphasis was placed on religion, Jews in some parts of Europe became more accepted. At the same time, the Enlightenment caused divisions within Judaism, as Ashkenazi Jews split into three different traditions: Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox.

Reform Judaism

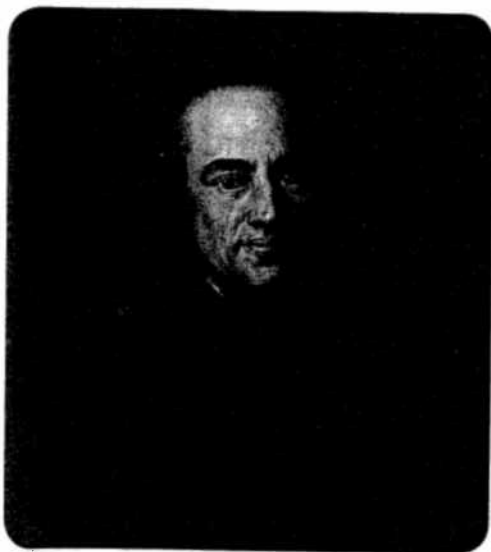
Reform Judaism attracted those Jews who had mixed more frequently with the rest of the population. They wanted to enjoy the same freedom as everyone else, to participate in intellectual life and work with non-Jews. Reform Jews began to interpret the scripture with modern methods. They also became less concerned with traditional purity laws and kosher food, and with the desire to return to Israel, the homeland.

Today, Reform Jews use a combination of Hebrew and English for religious services. Men and women sit together in the synagogue, and women are ordained as rabbis. Many, but not all, Reform Jews believe that as long as one parent is Jewish, the children are Jewish.

Individualism is encouraged in Reform Judaism, which stresses that each person must decide what beliefs and practices are key to his or her spiritual life. Reform Jews often accept secular moral values (the values of society in general), although they live by traditional values as well. Reform Jews also stress *tikkun olam*—repairing the world through social action.



Jewish Day School. Canadian cities with Jewish populations such as Toronto and Montréal, have many day and elementary schools. In addition to the secular curriculum, students learn Jewish law and tradition. They celebrate Jewish holidays and observe Jewish customs. This school, Jewish Day School in Ontario, is the only Jewish day school in Canada.



Moses Mendelssohn. Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) laid the foundation for the Reform Judaism approach. He argued that reason and religion can live side by side.

Conservative Judaism

As Reform Jews began to take part fully in every aspect of secular life, some Jews began to fear that they would lose their separate identity. In reaction, a Conservative movement arose.

Conservative Judaism follows many, but not all, of the 613 commandments of the Torah, as well as many of the earliest traditions, such as the order of prayers, the use of Hebrew, and some dietary laws. Although Conservative Judaism is open to using modern historical methods of study, it considers Reform Judaism too loose in its interpretation of the traditional authority of the scripture.

For Conservative Jews, the needs of the community and its Jewish identity always come before individual wants and needs. Active participation in the synagogue is very important. Like Reform Jews, Conservatives stress *tikkun olam*.

Men and women may sit together in the synagogue, and women



Female Rabbis. Conservative Judaism has opened the position of rabbi to women. Why do you think some Conservative Jews are reluctant for women to become rabbis?

are also ordained as rabbis in the Conservative tradition, although not every congregation agrees with this. Conservative Judaism is the largest branch of Judaism in Canada.

Orthodox Judaism

Orthodox Judaism continues to observe all the ancient rules and practices. Members of this tradition want to avoid “watering down” the Jewish faith. They believe that God gave the whole Torah—oral and written—to Moses at Mount Sinai.

While some Orthodox Jews accept some secular moral values, being Orthodox (“orthodox” means “correct teaching”) means following the

Fast Fact

About 70 percent of Jews in Canada belong to one of the three main Jewish religious traditions. Four out of ten of these are Conservative, three out of ten are Reform, and another three out of ten are Orthodox. (The other 30 percent of Jews in Canada are secular Jews or belong to smaller Jewish sects.)

Secular Jew

An ethnic Jew who is not religious



Shabbat. Orthodox Jews leaving synagogue on Shabbat (Sabbath). By observing Shabbat, Jews enter into God's rest and God's appreciation of creation.

commandments of the Torah, strictly observing the Sabbath and other Jewish holy days, using Hebrew in the synagogue, dressing modestly, and following the dietary laws, among other things.

Men and women do not sit together in the synagogue. Orthodox Jews believe that being Jewish can only pass down through the mother. If the father is Jewish but the mother is not, the children are not considered Jews.

Check Your Understanding

1. Suggest ways in which the Enlightenment challenged religion. Compare your conclusions to those of others in the class.

Think About It

2. With a partner or in a small group, do some research on the distinctions between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism. Then, create a three-column chart to show what you learned. Possible research topics include the role of the oral tradition, the Bible, women rabbis, traditional morality, and God's role in the Torah.

Making It Personal

3. Which form of Judaism appeals most to you? Explain your answer.

The Holocaust (Shoah)

How would it feel to know your own government wanted to eliminate you for no other reason than your ethnic origin or your religious beliefs? That is what happened to the Jewish people in Germany during World War II. Between 16 and 20 million people were killed in concentration and labour camps by German Nazis and their allies. About 6 million of these victims were Jews. The Nazis' attempt to exterminate the Jews became known as the Holocaust (*Shoah*).

Adolf Hitler was elected chancellor of Germany in 1933. Even though German Jews were among the most integrated

into European society, Hitler considered them to be from an "inferior race" and declared them enemies of the state. He even blamed Jews for Germany's loss in World War I (1914–1918) and for Germany's economic problems during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Many Jews, alarmed by Hitler's actions against them, tried to leave Germany. However, this was the period of the Great Depression, and many countries were severely limiting the number of immigrants they would allow in. Anti-Semitism was widespread at this time—not just in Germany but in other countries, including Canada—and this certainly contributed to the unwillingness to grant Jews asylum.

Shoah

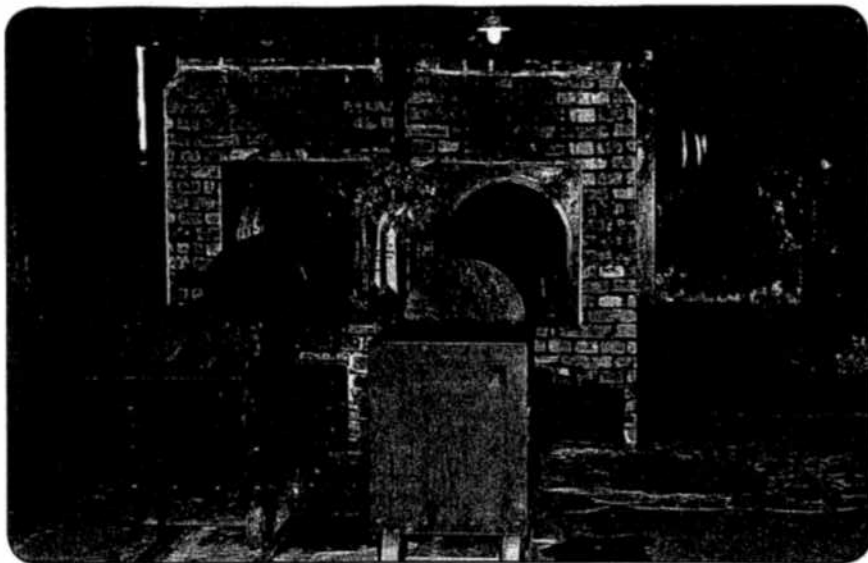
From the Hebrew word for "catastrophe," "calamity," or, as it is usually translated, "holocaust"; it refers to Nazi Germany's deliberate attempt to exterminate the Jewish race between 1933 and 1945

Fast Fact

Other groups were also targeted by the Nazis. About 500 000 Roma (Gypsies), about 150 000 people with disabilities, 10 000 homosexuals, and 2000 Catholic priests and Protestant ministers were also killed.



↑ **MS St. Louis.** In 1939, the MS *St. Louis* set out from Hamburg, Germany, carrying 907 Jewish refugees. One after another, six countries refused to allow the ship to dock at their ports. Canada was the ship's last hope of refuge. But, despite a desperate campaign by Canadian Jewish organizations, the government refused to allow the refugees into the country. The ship was forced to return to Germany, where many of its passengers later died in concentration camps. **With a partner, think of a fitting way to commemorate this event in Canada, as a reminder of our collective responsibility to care for those in need.**



Once in power, Hitler deliberately set out to eliminate all Jews in Europe. On his orders, Jews were imprisoned, starved, forced to do heavy manual labour, medically experimented on, tortured, and killed. The Jewish population of Europe was reduced from 9.5 million to 1.6 million in just 12 years.

Auschwitz Crematorium. In the crematorium at Auschwitz, a particularly brutal concentration camp in Poland, the bodies of Jews were burned after they died.

The Liberation of Auschwitz.

In January 1945, the Polish concentration camp Auschwitz was liberated by Allied soldiers. Here, 15-year-old Ivan Dudnik, suffering from exhaustion and malnutrition, is carried out of the barracks.



Fast Fact

Of the 6 million Jews who perished in the death camps of Nazi Germany, 1.5 million were children or teenagers. Nobel Prize-winning novelist Elie Wiesel was a teenager when the Nazis deported his family and other Jews to Auschwitz from his town in Romania.

Profile: Irena Sendler

Irena Sendler was a Catholic social worker. At great risk to her own life, she helped smuggle 2500 children out of the Warsaw Ghetto, saving them from certain



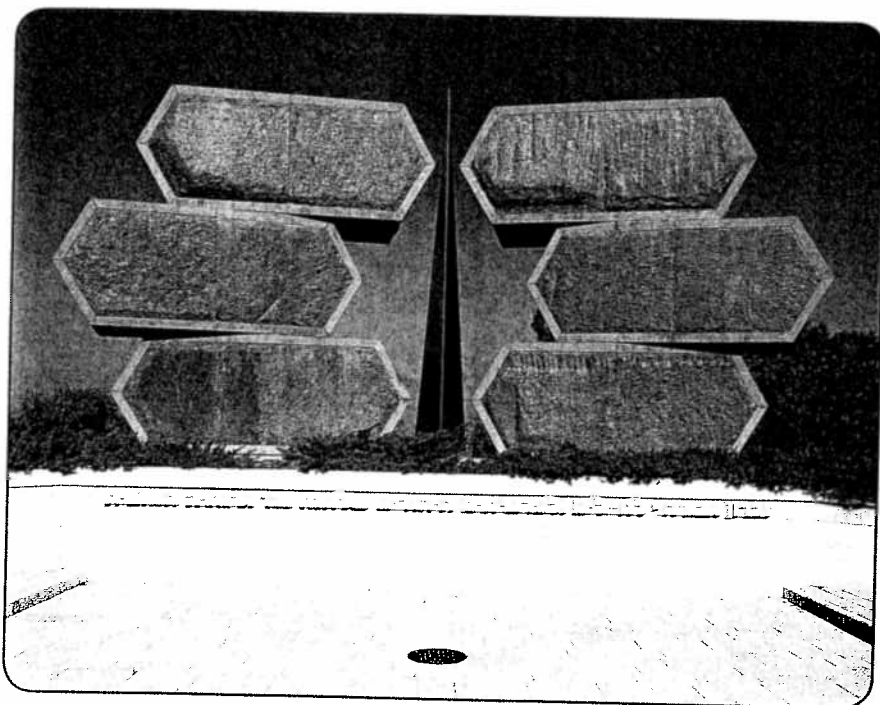
Irena Sendler. In the 1940s, Irena Sendler was involved in the rescue of Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto. By 1942, the German army had crowded some 500 000 Polish Jews into a ghetto in Warsaw, the capital of Poland—an area of about one square kilometre. There, they awaited transportation to the extermination camps.

death in Nazi concentration camps. The children were carried out in boxes, suitcases, or trolleys, given new identities, and placed with convents and sympathetic Christian families.

On the night of October 20, 1943, Sendler was taken prisoner by the Nazis. Although they broke her legs and feet, and left her body permanently scarred, she refused to betray her network of helpers or the children she had helped save. She was sentenced to

death but escaped when a guard was bribed to let her go. She immediately returned to her work using a new identity.

In her later years, Sendler was cared for in a Warsaw nursing home by a woman she had helped smuggle out of the Warsaw Ghetto; the woman had been six months old at the time of her rescue. Sendler died in 2008 at the age of 98. After her funeral, Poland's Orthodox chief rabbi offered prayers at her graveside.



Holocaust Memorial at Yad Vashem. This sculpture stands outside The Hall of Remembrance at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, a memorial to the 6 million Jews who died in the Holocaust. The names of the death camps are marked on the floor of the hall. In 1965, Irena Sendler became one of the first Righteous Gentiles to be honoured by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem.



Emil Fackenheim.
A Canadian Jewish philosopher and theologian and a survivor of the Holocaust, Emil Fackenheim (1916–2003) considered the Holocaust such a challenge to Jewish faith that he sought to add a 614th law to Jewish scripture. This new law would state: “The authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another, posthumous victory.” To avoid giving Hitler another victory, Jews must carry on Jewish traditions and not give in to despair. **How can humans overcome tragedies such as the Holocaust?**

Effects of the Holocaust on the Jewish Community

After the horrors of the war, the faith of many Jews who survived was terribly shaken. How were they to make sense of this inhumanity? They wondered if God was punishing them for their lack of faithfulness and their indifference to the Torah. And yet, how could they stay faithful to the God of the covenant after all they had been through? This is the question still faced by many modern Jews. That Judaism lives on is a testimony, a witness to God, born out of this struggle to understand.

For others, however, the traditional Jewish belief that God is with us in good times and bad remains strong. They believe that goodness and love will prevail, and God’s reign will triumph at the end of history. The central message of the Torah, in the

words of Rabbi Hillel, is “What is hateful to you, do not do to others.” This is the rallying cry for many Jews—Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative—in response to the Holocaust.

A greater emphasis on *tikkun olam* has become the response of religious Jews to the cruelty unleashed during World War II. As the group Rabbis for Human Rights stated in its Principles of Faith, “The Mishnah [oral Torah] teaches: ‘Therefore was Adam created single, to teach you that the destruction of any person’s life is tantamount to destroying a whole world and the preservation of a single life is tantamount to preserving a whole world’” (*Tractate Sanhedrin 4:5*). For Jewish people, life is sacred because it is from God. Preserving life is, for many Jews, a key response to the Holocaust.

Check Your Understanding

1. Explain the effects the Holocaust has on the Jewish people today. How do Jews retain their faith in the God of the covenant in the face of such evil?

Think About It

2. Elie Wiesel—author, political activist, winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, and Holocaust survivor—said of the Holocaust: “While not all victims were Jews, all Jews were victims.” What do you think Wiesel means by this statement?

Making It Personal

3. Create a short profile of someone you have read or heard about who survived the Holocaust. Explain how it affected or changed them.
4. The UN has designated January 21 as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. In the Jewish calendar, 27 *Nisan* is set aside for the same purpose. What do you think would be appropriate ways to mark these events? Discuss with a partner or small group.

Zionism and the State of Israel

Zionism

The persecution Jews experienced in Europe fuelled a desire to return to the land God had promised them. By the late 1800s, many Jews supported **Zionism**, a movement to establish a national Jewish state in Palestine. In the following decades, some of these Zionists began to emigrate to Palestine. Arabs who lived in the region objected to Jews coming to what they saw as *their* homeland, and fighting broke out several times.

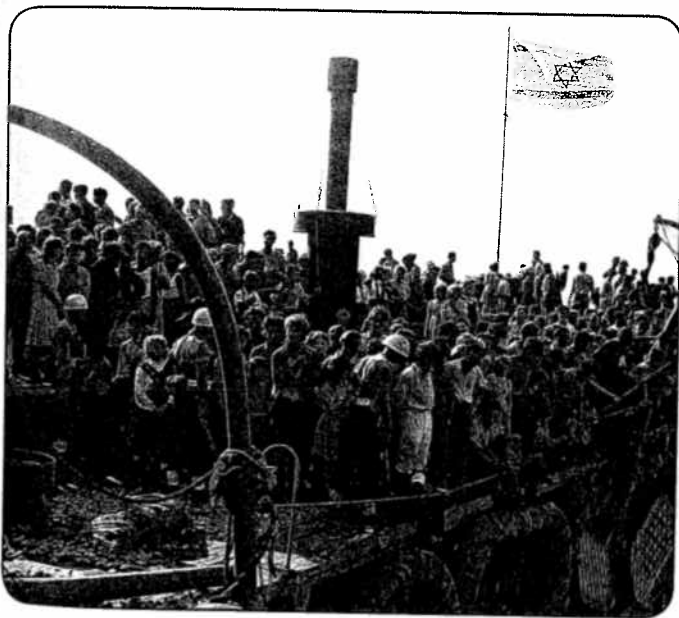
After World War II, many Western countries began to support Jewish struggles for a homeland in Palestine. Finally, Britain, which held control of

the region, submitted the issue to the United Nations. In 1947, the UN—pressured by Western nations—voted to divide Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state, with Jerusalem under international control.

Arabs living in Palestine were shocked. They felt betrayed by the Western countries, whom they had supported during World War II. Palestinian Arabs felt particularly betrayed by the British, who in 1915 had promised them independence in Palestine. On May 14, 1948, Jews proclaimed the independent State of Israel. The very next day, neighbouring Arab nations invaded Israel in an attempt to destroy the new Jewish state.

Zionism

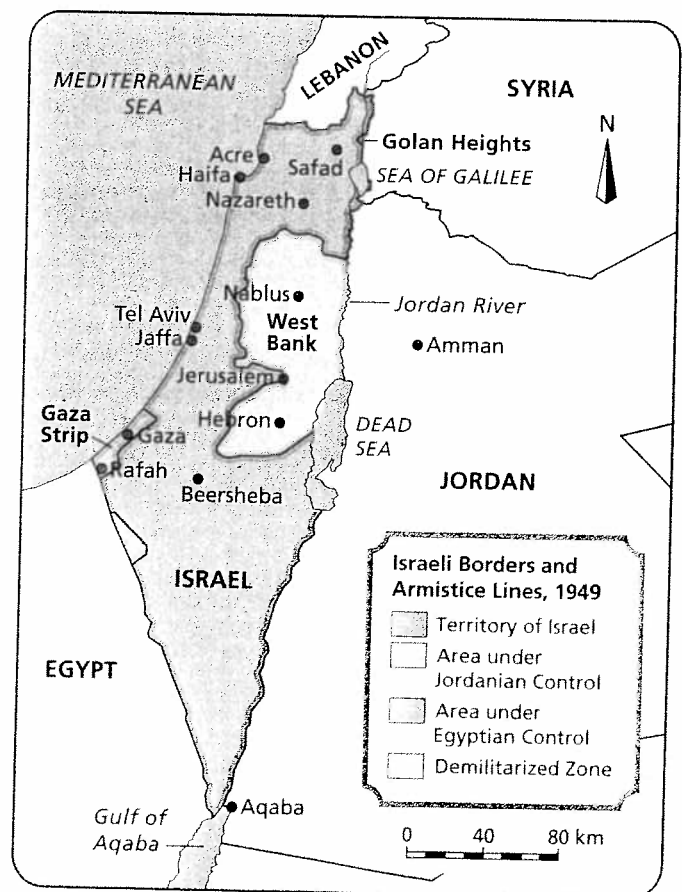
A movement that began in the nineteenth century for the purpose of creating a Jewish state in what is now modern Israel; today, "Zionism" refers to strong support for the State of Israel



➔ **Exodus.** In 1947, the ship *Exodus* carried a large number of Jewish emigrants, mostly Holocaust survivors, to Palestine to settle there. However, they had no legal immigration certificates. The British navy seized the ship, and all the passengers were taken back to Europe.

➔ **The State of Israel.** Israel was immediately surrounded by nations opposed to its very existence. **With which nations has Israel come to peaceful terms?**

The State of Israel, 1948





When the war ended about eight months later, Israel controlled not only its part, but also about half of the land that the UN had planned for the new Arab state. The rest was annexed by the Arab neighbours. Nearly a million of Palestine's Arab inhabitants left the country or were expelled by the Israelis. Most of them became refugees with no home and no country of their own, living in the Arab-controlled part of Palestine.

Displaced Refugees. Arab refugees are displaced by the establishment of the Jewish state. Since 1948, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people has become a major obstacle to Jewish-Muslim relations. Western support for Israel has also contributed to poor relations between Islam and the West. **What has happened to the Palestinian refugees since 1948?**



Israel, Tel Aviv. Israel now has a number of thriving urban centres. As well, Israelis have cultivated land that was once desert and transformed it into rich agricultural land.

Check Your Understanding

1. Explain how the focus of Zionism changed over time.

Think About It

2. Why did Western nations support the idea of a Jewish homeland after World War II?

Making It Personal

3. What can you do every day to include and welcome others, especially those whose beliefs are different from yours?