*Use a highlighter and marginal notes to identify import concepts as you read, and****then****complete the graphic organizer once you have completed the reading.*

What do Jews believe?

Specific theological beliefs vary widely within Judaism. As a whole, Judaism emphasizes religious practices (orthopraxy) in community more than personally stated commitments to creeds (orthodoxy). Practice, therefore, is critical: a relationship with God through obedience to the divine law, however differently this is understood among various Jewish denominations. However, there are certain beliefs that unite all religious Jews. The central core of Jewish belief is stated in the *Shema Yisrael* – a verse from the Jewish Bible that is a religious commandment (*mitzvah*) for all Jews to recite: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.”

1

Judaism begins with a strict monotheism – a single God, unitary in nature and utterly distinct from humanity, who created and holds power over all things. Like the monotheism of Islam, Jewish monotheism rejects the Christian concept of the Trinity – one God in three persons – as unimaginable out of belief in God’s indivisible unity. God, whose revealed proper name is YHWH (יהוה in Hebrew), is the omnipotent creator of the universe and the determiner of human morality. Jews believe that God can and has intervened in the world of mankind, and it is through this revealed aspect of God that people are able gain some understanding of Him; a complete human understanding of God is impossible, as He is beyond comprehension.

2

According to Jewish scripture, God’s intervention in the world has largely taken place through His interaction with the Jewish people. Judaism thus asserts a special covenant between God and the Jewish people. The most important event in ancient Judaism was the establishment of this covenant between God and the Hebrew patriarch Abraham – forever distinguishing Israel as God’s chosen people. God promised to make Abraham the father of a great people and said that Abraham and his descendants must obey God and act as a “light to the nations.” These stories portray Abraham as an example of obedience to God’s commands….In exchange for God’s blessings, Abraham promised to stay true to God’s laws and have his people live righteous lives. God also pledged the land of Canaan (approximately modern-day Israel) and beyond to the descendants of Abraham. This area thus came to be known as the Promised Land.

3

Moses is considered the chief of all the Prophets, and his Torah – the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures – is believed to be God’s revelation, dictated by God to Moses. Traditional Jewish belief holds that Moses is the only living human being to have ever stood in the direct presence of God. Jews uphold Moses as a central figure in the history of their tradition and their people, as he delivered the Jews out of slavery in Egypt and gave them the Torah.

4

 Jews believe in free will and divine reward and punishment, but the afterlife (known as "the world to come”) is a much less prominent theme in Judaism than it is in Christianity and Islam. Overall, Judaism emphasizes doing good in this life for the sake of bettering the world – a spiritual goal called *tikkun olam* – rather than for securing one’s place in a blessed afterlife.

5

Denominational Differences

Judaism is presently divided into three distinct but internally diverse denominations: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism. While all share the fundamental Jewish beliefs in moral monotheism, the status of the Jews as God’s chosen people, and the traditional primacy of the prophet Moses, each denomination differs in its views on the Messiah, the importance of rebuilding the Great Temple in Jerusalem (destroyed by the Roman Empire in 70 CE), the resurrection of the dead, and the status of and ability to interpret Jewish law (Halakhah). These differences developed largely in the 19th century out of each denomination’s particular view of the proper relationship between modernity and Jewish tradition.

6

Orthodox Judaism lies on the most conservative end of the Jewish spectrum, promoting the idea that modern philosophical, social, and political developments have no bearing on ancient Jewish tradition and how Jews should live their lives. To a significant extent, Orthodox Jews try to keep modern influences out of their religious lives, seeing Jewish teachings and *Halakhah* established by the Torah and elucidated by traditional rabbinical sages as eternally valid and generally not in need of reinterpretation. Based on their strict adherence to traditional Judaism, Orthodox Jews believe in a coming Messiah, who will come from the biblical House of David and rule as King over the Jewish people in accordance with Jewish law. The Orthodox also adhere to the belief that the Temple in Jerusalem must be rebuilt, likely around the time of the Messiah’s coming, at which point Jews will reinstitute the practice of making sacrificial animal offerings to God. Orthodox Jews also hold to the belief that the dead will undergo bodily resurrection. Orthodoxy contains two primary streams of thought: Haredi (ultraOrthodox), who reject all modern influence and regard true Judaism as unalterable; and Modern Orthodox, who very occasionally and limitedly permit halakhic ordinances to be reexamined in light of modern realities in case they should be applied in a different manner than they have been in the past.

7

Conservative (also known as Masorti) Judaism occupies a middle ground between Orthodox and Reform Judaism. It espouses the view that Jewish tradition must be conserved and not discarded in favor of modern developments, while also holding to the belief that reexamining *Halakhah* and applying it in different ways as Jews face changing realities has always been a part of Jewish practice, thus characterizing reinterpretation not as non-Jewish innovation but as a part of Jewish tradition. Conservative Jews believe in a coming Messiah, in the resurrection of the dead, and in the rebuilding of the Temple, but do not believe in reinstituting sacrificial offerings once the Temple is rebuilt. Conservative Judaism allows for a wide range of interpretations on these and other matters, from literal to metaphorical.

8

Reform Judaism is the most liberal branch of the tradition. Influenced by Enlightenment ideals of freedom, Reform Jews stress personal autonomy in deciding how one lives out his or her faith and even in deciding what one ought to believe. *Halakhah* is not binding for Reform Jews, as most of its stipulations and rituals are considered obsolete and irrelevant to modern life. Reform Judaism teaches basic morality, as found in the Ten Commandments, and largely adheres to traditional Jewish monotheism, though some Reform rabbis tend toward theism in their theologies. Reform Jews reject as false or unimportant the ideas of a Messiah, bodily resurrection, and a rebuilt Temple.

9

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