

A close-up photograph of a silver fountain pen lying diagonally across an open book. The pages of the book are filled with dense, handwritten Hebrew text in a traditional script. The lighting is soft, highlighting the metallic sheen of the pen and the texture of the paper.

JUDAISM

GCSE

RELIGIOUS

STUDIES

THE DEFINITIVE RESOURCE

BY CLIVE LAWTON

THE BOARD
OF DEPUTIES OF BRITISH JEWS
PROUD TO REPRESENT THE COMMUNITY



CLIVE LAWTON BA, MEd, PGCE



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The Board of Deputies of British Jews

The Board of Deputies of British Jews is the voice of the British Jewish community advocating on a range of issues from religious freedoms to counter-extremism, Holocaust restitution to interfaith dialogue, and ties with Israel. The Board of Deputies engages with Government and Parliament, the media, the diplomatic community and other groups in society to ensure the Jewish community's concerns are heard. On education the Board of Deputies works to ensure that Jewish schools and the education of Jewish students are protected and that non-Jewish institutions have access to accurate information on Judaism and the Jewish people.

Charitable activities with which The Board of Deputies of British Jews is identified are funded by The Board of Deputies Charitable Foundation (Registered Charity No. 1058107), a company limited by guarantee and registered in England (No. 3239086).

Edited by Jackie Emery

Photography by Gary Perlmutter Photography

Printed in the United Kingdom by FBprinters LLP

Acknowledgements:

Sandra Teacher for guidance and support

Sara Perlmutter for project management

Diane Gies and Bernice Black for proof reading

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ISBN (Print) 978-0-9955252-0-7 ISBN (ebook/PDF) 978-0-9955252-1-4

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HANUKIAH

INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest challenges facing Religious Education teachers today is ensuring that the information they source is both authentic and comprehensive. Many websites that carry apparently excellent material come to the subject from only one angle, denomination or approach to the religion in question. Teachers face a veritable minefield as they try to sift through which sources they can trust and which they should avoid. Many publications are written by those who have only a partial knowledge of the religion, and contain glaring errors. The problem is further compounded when these inaccuracies are repeated from book to book, with each writer replicating the misinformation from the last.

The material presented here avoids those pitfalls. It was commissioned by the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the representative body of British Jewry, and written by Clive Lawton, a leading light in the field of Religious Education. The reader can therefore be confident that this resource is an accurate representation of the way Jews practice and believe. As a rule, the traditional teachings and practices are described first, followed by the variety of contemporary approaches to be found amongst the different denominations in the UK. It provides an unbiased indication of the diversity within the Jewish community, and highlights the issues that are of most importance.

The Department for Education guidelines, on which each of the Examination Boards has designed its own syllabus, form the framework for this publication and its contents. Rather than try to adjust the material to suit each syllabus, we have provided thorough information on the guideline topics which can then be applied to any of the syllabuses, in whatever way the Examination Boards have chosen to configure their own particular preference and style.

This resource is easy to use and provides information for both students and teachers. Each topic is headed by a list of key facts, which is followed by fuller explanatory material. Vocabulary for the key facts has been carefully regulated to ensure it is easily accessible to the midrange GCSE pupil. The explanatory material is more detailed, reflecting the complexity of some of the topics, but genuine efforts have been made to ensure that all the material is comprehensible and requires limited teacher adjustment, although some pupils might need help with some sections. Teachers can use this resource to support their own teaching, in the confidence that it will help their students to meet their need to cover the range of topics expressed in the new requirements.

For those choosing the comparative themes path, we have presented short essays on each of the ten topics, comprehensively covering the fields. However, these themes are more complex and might require more teacher mediation.

In addition, there is a comprehensive glossary of terms and an easy summary of Jewish denominations.

The following material is simple enough for a student who only wishes to grasp the basic information, but also provides for the student aiming for high grades, who will find in here everything needed to become proficient in their studies of Judaism. We are confident that not only is this information accurate and wide ranging, but also written in a manner that will be directly comprehensible to and useful for hard-pressed RE teachers as they get to grips with the new GCSE requirements.

We are pleased to be able to commend to you this fine contribution that the Board of Deputies of British Jews has been able to make towards ensuring that the study of Judaism is well informed, accurately represented and, we hope, enjoyable.

JEWISH RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS AT A GLANCE

**BELOW IS A LIST OF THE JEWISH
RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS TO BE
FOUND IN THE UK. THESE
DENOMINATIONS ONLY APPLY TO
ASHKENAZI JEWS. SEPHARDI,
YEMENITE, ITALIAN, ETHIOPIAN AND
INDIAN COMMUNITIES ARE ALL
ORTHODOX OR TRADITIONAL IN
PRINCIPLE.**



HAREDI (including Hasidim)

Sometimes, mis-called 'Ultra Orthodox' or 'Strictly Orthodox' (they are simply 'differently Orthodox') this group is most distinguished by its costume, with men wearing black coats and black hats. Haredim reject most modern ideas on evolution, changes in gender roles, fashion and permissiveness and consider the traditional codes of halachah as totally binding. There are many different sub-sets of Haredim, including various Hasidic sects, the best known of which is Chabad Lubavitch.



LIBERAL

A sector of Progressive Judaism, sometimes called 'Liberal and Progressive'. This is the most radical wing of UK religious Jewry. It is most sceptical of the authority of both the Written and Oral Torah, and is most likely to take on board contemporary outlooks in its Judaism. Until recently, Liberal Jews were the only group to accept that someone might be counted as a Jew if only their father was Jewish. Confusingly, this sector is similar to the American 'Reform'.



MASORTI

The newest and smallest denomination in the UK, allied to the American Conservative movement. Masorti means 'traditional' and this group sees itself as taking a halachic position, so it would not be right to include it amongst the Progressive denominations. However, Masorti's divergent views on halachah make it separate from the Orthodox.



ORTHODOX / MODERN ORTHODOX

The Orthodox are by far the largest grouping in the UK, but to distinguish the position of most Orthodox Jews from the Haredim (who are also Orthodox Jews) the term 'Modern Orthodox' is often used. This indicates that while these Jews also feel bound by halachah and see the Written and Oral Torahs as authoritative, they are also prepared to try to find ways to incorporate or at least learn about modern culture and ideas.



REFORM

The oldest denomination of Progressive Judaism in the UK. Reform is more tolerant of tradition than its more radical partner, the Liberals, and is therefore more likely to accommodate traditions that might seem to most Progressive Jews to have little purpose, but also which do not offend their principles. As a result, Reform is more reluctant to institute change. For example, they have only recently loosened their approach to counting people with only Jewish fathers as Jewish, but they have not yet taken up the Liberals' more permissive position.

A.1 BELIEFS AND TEACHINGS ABOUT THE NATURE OF GOD INCLUDING GOD AS ONE, CREATOR, LAW-GIVER AND JUDGE

KEY POINTS

- **God as One – indivisible and unique.**
- **God created the world; all things owe their existence to God.**
- **God gave the Torah to the Jewish People.**
- **God is fair and just and requires justice and fairness.**

EXPLANATORY BACKGROUND

God is given different names that refer to different qualities. For example, Ha'Rachaman – the Merciful One, Ayn Sof – Without End, El Shaddai – God Almighty, and so on. He is addressed as 'Our Lord', 'Father', 'King', etc, but there is never any doubt that there is only one God. Even in the Torah, God has different names, the two most common being Elohim, which is usually translated as 'God', and YHVH, which is usually translated as 'Lord'. The Hebrew alphabet does not have vowels, only consonants, and so it is anyone's guess as to how the four letters YHVH are pronounced. As it is considered to be God's holiest name, Jews do not attempt to pronounce these letters, reading them instead as Adonai which means 'My Lord'. Others, however, have tried to guess the possible vowels, giving rise to suggestions like JeHoVaH or YaHVeH, but Jews do not use these. Many Jews, in following the commandment to respect God's name and not to use it carelessly, will refer to God as Ha'Shem which simply means 'The Name'. In English written texts they will substitute 'G-d' for 'God'.

The Hebrew names of God are in the plural masculine form, but Jews do not think that God is essentially male or plural. The plural form might indicate majesty, as in Queen Victoria's famous comment: "We are not amused". To use the singular would not be sufficient to encapsulate God. It might also be used to differentiate references to God from other lords or potentates.

The Jewish God has a personality and will, and is never just a 'life force' or inexorable power.

The idea that God is indivisible and unique is encapsulated in the most famous and widely used prayer, the Shema (Hebrew for 'Listen'). Taken from the Torah verse Deuteronomy 6:4 "Listen, Israel: The Lord is Our God, the Lord is One", it is more of a declaration than a prayer.

That God created the world is a clear doctrine as summed up in the Genesis narrative (Genesis 1:1-2:3), but there are different approaches to its literalness. The main concept is that God created the world deliberately and that it was good. Haredi Jews take the Genesis narrative literally, and have similar difficulties to those of some Christians when reconciling the account with current scientific theories. Most other Jews across the religious spectrum, from Modern Orthodox to Liberals, regard the narrative as a general description, not as a scientific account, but this does not mean that they take it any less seriously. It is in the Torah and there is much that can be learned from it.

The Torah comprises the first five books of the Bible. It is also known as the Pentateuch or the Five Books of Moses. It contains accounts of the creation, the origins of the Jewish People, poetic prayer and praise, and the way in which God wants Jews to relate to Him. It also contains laws and rules – the Commandments (Hebrew: 'Mitzvot'). Fulfilling the mitzvot is regarded as following God's will for the Jewish People, underpinned by the concept that the Jews should be "...holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy." (Leviticus 20:26)

A fundamental principle is that God is just and fair. This is highlighted in the story of Sodom and Gemorrah when Abraham challenges God to be fair, since He is "...the Judge of all the world" (Genesis 18:17-32). However, as shown in the biblical Book of Job, Jews recognise that the world does not always seem fair. Over the centuries Jewish thinkers have developed ideas about life after death to square up the conviction that God operates the world on the basis of fairness and justice, even if this is not always apparent.

DIVERSITY AMONGST JEWS

There are Jews who do and do not believe in God, and there is a wide variety of attitudes towards Him. Because so much of being Jewish involves actions towards one's community and society, it may be that many 'religious' Jews do not think too much about God, and most of the time the idea is loosely in the background. "What should I do?" is more important than "What should I believe?" One small Jewish religious denomination, Reconstructionists, who are mostly found in America, have more or less avoided the idea of God and focus instead on Judaism as a religious culture.

PROBLEMS WITH THE SPECIFICATIONS

The nominated selection of God's qualities is not necessarily those that Jews would have chosen for themselves. Several key ideas are missing: first amongst these is 'Merciful', another is 'Forgiving'. Jews accentuate that God does not judge us according to His unattainable standards. He recognises that we are limited and is always prepared to listen to our repentance and take seriously our good intentions. God is also thought of as loving, protective and caring. Rabbis have commented that when Jews suffer, God weeps at their pain. A common prayer is to ask God to "...shelter us under Your wings" or to "...spread the shelter of peace over all the dwellers on earth." God is often addressed in Jewish prayer as "Our Father Who is in Heaven", summing up in a phrase both the ideas of God's intimacy and His grandeur.

A.2 BELIEFS AND TEACHINGS ABOUT THE DIVINE PRESENCE (SHECHINAH)

KEY POINTS

From the earliest accounts in the Hebrew Bible, such as God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8), or God dwelling within the portable Sanctuary (Exodus 25:8), Jews have recognised that God's presence, while indivisible, nevertheless can be especially focussed in certain places and circumstances. During Roman times, this intense Presence became known as the Shechinah, which is derived from the Hebrew word 'shochen', meaning 'to dwell' or 'to settle'.

EXPLANATORY BACKGROUND

The word Shechinah does not appear at all in the Hebrew Bible, but the concept does. The building of the Temple in Jerusalem was based on the idea that God would be prepared to somehow focus His Presence in one location, though this does not in any way imply that God is limited to or is physically trapped there. Jews have never suggested that God has a physical form that could be contained in a specific place.

In later years, Jewish mystics – the Kabbalists – took special note of the fact that the Hebrew word Shechinah is feminine, and accentuated the idea of this being the feminine aspect of God: more loving, caring and loyal, perhaps, than some of the more conventional characterisations of God as a king or a warrior. This also gave rise to ideas of some kind of union between God and the Jewish People. The sense of the intensity of God's Presence amplified this feeling of passionate engagement with Him.

Over the centuries, many have taught that God's Presence, the Shechinah, would be brought into a place by doing good things there: studying, praying, fulfilling various mitzvot, and so on. This became especially significant after the Temple was destroyed, and in a way Jews might feel that God was 'homeless'. It then fell to Jews to try and create a home for God in their own lives and places.

DIVERSITY AMONGST JEWS

As mentioned in the section on God, most Jews do not spend too much time thinking about or talking about God. Even those who do would be unlikely to talk about the Shechinah, except as a way of accentuating that good actions would receive God's approval. So a teacher might say: "Studying Torah is a mitzvah; when you study, the Shechinah will be looking over your shoulder."

In recent years, Feminist Jews have been attracted to the concept of a female dimension to God. They find it a helpful rebalancing of ideas about God, which they would argue that until now have been excessively male.

In Kabbalistic circles, popular amongst Hasidim and some others, the idea and word Shechinah might be used more commonly.

PROBLEMS WITH THE SPECIFICATIONS

Picking out the Shechinah as a special topic, and the one particular aspect of God for study here, is an idiosyncratic choice that does not reflect the way most Jews would articulate their religion or understanding of God. However, an academic analysis of Jewish sources might be justified in identifying the idea of the Shechinah as an important, but unconscious development in Jewish theological problem solving: "How can God be universal, and yet be present in a manner that allows for relationship?"

B PRACTICES

THE PUBLIC ACTS OF WORSHIP: SYNAGOGUE SERVICES

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE USE OF TENACH (THE WRITTEN LAW) AND TALMUD (THE ORAL LAW) IN DAILY LIFE

THE PLACE OF WORSHIP IN THE HOME AND OF PRIVATE PRAYER

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRAYER IN JEWISH WORSHIP INCLUDING AMIDAH – THE STANDING PRAYER

THE ROLE OF RITUALS: BIRTH CEREMONIES; BAR AND BAT MITZVAH; MARRIAGE; MOURNING RITUALS

THE IMPORTANCE OF SHABBAT IN THE HOME AND SYNAGOGUE

THE ORIGINS AND MEANINGS OF JEWISH FESTIVALS SUCH AS ROSH HASHANAH, YOM KIPPUR, PESACH, SHAVUOT AND SUKKOT

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SYNAGOGUE; RELIGIOUS FEATURES OF SYNAGOGUES INCLUDING DESIGN, ARTEFACTS AND ASSOCIATED PRACTICES

THE ROLE OF DIETARY LAWS: KOSHER AND TREFAH, SEPARATION OF MILK AND MEAT

B1. PUBLIC ACTS OF WORSHIP: SYNAGOGUE SERVICES

KEY POINTS

- **A Jew can pray anywhere, but it is preferable to pray with a community.**
- **There are three formal times of services on weekdays and an additional service on Shabbat.**
- **The Shabbat morning service is the most attended. It consists of psalms from the Hebrew Bible, various prayers composed during different periods of Jewish history and a weekly reading from the Torah. The Torah scroll is ceremoniously taken out of the cupboard (the Ark) and paraded around the synagogue before being placed on the reading desk.**
- **Despite there being a certain amount of ceremony during the services and readings, the atmosphere in most synagogues is relaxed and informal. Orthodox synagogues tend to have children coming and going, congregants arriving at different times during the service and people chatting to each other. Progressive services are usually shorter but more formal, and more of the service is read out loud together.**
- **In Orthodox synagogues, people will recite many of the prayers to themselves, with a service leader keeping everyone more or less together.**
- **In Orthodox synagogues, almost all the service is said in Hebrew, apart from the sermon and the prayer for the welfare of the country and its rulers. In Progressive services, a fair amount is said in English, although Hebrew is becoming more used.**
- **Orthodox synagogues do not use musical instruments on Shabbat and songs are sung without accompaniment. Synagogue music ranges from fine set pieces performed by the service leader to lively songs sung with great gusto by all the congregation.**
- **Orthodox Shabbat services use the same words every week, and regular worshippers become familiar with the prayers. Progressive services tend to use a few alternative versions, and sometimes leave opportunities for people to make up their own prayers. That is rare in an Orthodox service, but there are set prayers for almost any occasion.**

EXPLANATORY BACKGROUND

The formal daily services are morning, afternoon and evening and the prayers can be said more or less at any time during those periods. On Shabbat and festivals, an additional service is added after the morning service.

In ancient times, when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, daily sacrifices used to take place. In many ways, these prayer services now substitute for those sacrifices. The additional service on Shabbat and festivals is because there used to be an additional sacrifice on those days in the Temple.

According to halachah, the full service can only be said if there is a quorum or minyan present. According to the Orthodox tradition, this must be ten males over the age of barmitzvah. According to Progressive Jews, this can be any ten Jews, male or female, over the age of majority. However, some Progressive Jews are prepared to be more relaxed about this limitation, if they have got eight or nine people present.

In an Orthodox community, if a minyan is not present, the Torah cannot be read out from the scroll, parts of prayers cannot be said, mourners cannot recite their daily mourners' prayer, and so on. Because of this restriction, strenuous efforts are made to 'make up a minyan', and even those Jewish men who are not particularly observant will understand if called upon to help 'make a minyan'.

Shabbat services are often followed by a buffet reception called a 'kiddush', at which everyone present is welcome. Kiddush is the name of a prayer to celebrate the specialness of the day, and is recited over a glass of wine or grape juice. It may also be recited, with a different blessing, over whisky or another strong drink. The buffets can be modest with cake and biscuits, or more lavish affairs with smoked salmon, pickled herrings, dips, cheese platters, etc. If someone is celebrating a special occasion, such as a barmitzvah, a birthday or a wedding anniversary, they will often sponsor the kiddush. Most importantly, the kiddush gives congregants the opportunity to socialise and chat after the service.

DIVERSITY AMONGST JEWS

Most Progressive Jews have dropped the Additional Service. They see it as backward-looking towards the Temple service, which they feel is now an out-of-date concept, with its sacrifices and priests.

Progressive services tend to be shorter than Orthodox services. At Progressive synagogues, everyone arrives at the beginning and much of the service is said together more formally than in an Orthodox service.

For other differences, see above.

PROBLEMS WITH THE SPECIFICATIONS

None

B.6 SHABBAT IN THE HOME AND SYNAGOGUE

KEY POINTS

- **Shabbat starts at sunset on Friday evening and lasts until nightfall on Saturday night.**
- **This means that its start and end times vary throughout the year. In the winter, observant Jews may need to leave work or school early in order to get home in time for the beginning of Shabbat.**
- **On Shabbat, in keeping with the mitzvah in the Torah, Jews are not meant to do any work, but instead keep the day 'holy'.**
- **In the book of Isaiah in the TeNaCh, Shabbat is called a 'pleasure' and the day should be enjoyable (Isaiah 58:13).**
- **Shabbat is a day for being with family and friends and there is much social activity: three festive meals, going to synagogue and joining the rest of the community on that day in talking, playing and relaxing.**

EXPLANATORY BACKGROUND

Shabbat is instituted in the Torah, partially as a way to remember the account of the creation that tells how God made the world and rested on the seventh day, and partially to remind the Jews that God brought them out of Egypt so that they would no longer be slaves. Both these ideas are mentioned in the mitzvah to keep Shabbat, which is the fourth of the Ten Commandments.

But saying that the Jews should not work on Shabbat and that they should keep it holy brings the question: 'What is work?' and also: 'What is holy?'

The Oral Tradition answers these questions. 'Work' does not mean effort or something that makes you tired. After all, that is not the kind of work God rested from. 'Work' in this context means creation and destruction; actions which in some way change the physical world, even if they do not involve much effort. 'Holy' in this context means making the day different and special, set aside as a time for not doing ordinary workaday things. It is a time for yourself, your family and your God.

Orthodox Jews will spend the day in sociable activity, in prayer with their community, playing games with their children, eating and drinking (but not cooking or washing up), walking not driving, talking not watching TV, meeting with family and friends, not spending time on the phone or the computer. God rested, and therefore Jews are commanded to rest – and 'rest' in this context means leaving the world alone and not trying to manipulate it. This does not mean that a Jew has to spend Shabbat in the cold and dark and not enjoy good food. It just means that everything needs to be organised by sunset on Friday. If you prepare your food to slow cook in the oven before Shabbat begins, and set your heating and lights on a time switch, you can have a pleasant day without thinking about doing anything to make things work for you on Shabbat. Similarly, if you do not drive or go shopping on Shabbat, you will need to live within walking distance of your synagogue and do all your shopping beforehand, so that you can be relaxed and worry-free on Shabbat.

Shabbat is begun by the woman of the household lighting at least two candles to symbolise the extra light and joy of the day. The Friday evening meal starts with a blessing over a glass of wine, which all share to accentuate that it is a day of celebration and pleasure. This is followed by a blessing over specially made fine bread called 'hallah', which is also shared by all present. However, it is important to note that the wine and the bread themselves are not blessed. All Jewish blessings praise God for the item or action that is the focus of the blessing. The subject of a blessing is not rendered sacred or special. In this case, the wine and bread remain just wine and bread.

On Shabbat morning, an observant family walks to synagogue where they join their community for the service and enjoy time with their friends afterwards at the Kiddush. They might also attend a learning session led by the rabbi, during or after the service. The Shabbat morning service has more ceremony than regular weekday services, especially with the centrepiece reading from the Torah.

After synagogue, people might pop into friends' homes and join them for a drink or a snack before making their way to their own home for another festive meal. They may have invited newcomers or visitors to the synagogue, and many consider it good fortune to find a guest to join them for a Shabbat meal.

Shabbat afternoon is a chance to relax; perhaps to have a snooze, play a game, go for a walk, read a book or to learn. Children will visit friends or play games with their families. Some Jews return to synagogue for the afternoon service and while there they may share a third Shabbat meal together, which will have been organised by members of the community. At that meal, which is probably more like a light snack, someone will teach something – maybe an idea drawn from that week's section of the Torah – and those present will sing Shabbat songs round the table.

Shabbat finishes at nightfall. In the UK, in summer this is quite late and there is virtually nothing left of Saturday evening. In the winter, this is very early and the whole of Saturday evening lies ahead. 'Havdalah', meaning 'Distinction', is the brief closing ceremony that ends Shabbat. It can be performed either at home or at synagogue. Another cup of wine is used – this time overflowing – to symbolise that the pleasure of Shabbat should overflow into the rest of the week. Sweet smelling spices symbolise the sweet savour of Shabbat lingering as it goes, and a plaited candle reminds those present that the end of Shabbat means the beginning of another week of work with the first thing the Bible tells us God created – light (Genesis 1:3).

DIVERSITY AMONGST JEWS

The Shabbat described above is an Orthodox Shabbat. Progressive Jews will be less concerned about the details of the rules and will more likely make the day one of pleasure and value, without worrying whether or not they drive or use the phone. Once again, the detailed system of halachah and traditional rulings will not be as influential in Progressive communities, because each Jew decides for themselves what might create the right atmosphere for them. Nevertheless, the general outline of the day will be similar and many of the practices mentioned will be identical. For example, although Shabbat might be started by the woman of the home lighting at least two candles as described, a Progressive Jewish family might start Shabbat at the same time all the year round, or wait until everyone gets home from work to begin the day.

PROBLEMS WITH THE SPECIFICATIONS

None

B.9 THE ROLE OF DIETARY LAWS: KOSHER AND TREFAH, SEPARATION OF MILK AND MEAT

KEY POINTS

- **'Kosher'** means 'acceptable according to Jewish law'. It does not only apply to food; for example, a badly written scroll of Torah would be 'not kosher'.
- Although 'kosher' is often mis-translated as 'clean', the concept has nothing to do with cleanliness or hygiene.
- The noun from 'kosher' is 'kashrut'; one talks of the laws of kashrut.
- 'Trefah' refers to non-kosher food. It literally means 'torn'. According to the laws of kashrut, meat must always have been carefully killed. Meat taken from an animal – including permitted animals – which has been 'torn', for example, through hunting, is not kosher. However, the word 'trefah' now means any non-kosher food.
- The main laws of kashrut can be found in the Written Torah (Leviticus 11:1-23)
- Only mammals which both chew the cud and have split hooves are kosher.
- Only fish that have both fins and scales are kosher. Therefore, nearly everything commonly called 'seafood' is not kosher.
- Various birds are identified as not kosher – mainly, but not exclusively, birds of prey. Most domestic (farm) birds are kosher.
- Almost all insects and 'swarming creatures' are not kosher. The only exception is certain types of locust.
- According to the Oral Torah, all mammals and fowl must be slaughtered in a swift and painless way, which rapidly drains the blood from the brain, rendering the animal instantly unconscious. This system of slaughtering, which can only be performed by a specially trained and qualified slaughterer, is called 'shechitah'. If animals are killed by any other method, they are trefah – not kosher.
- Fish can be killed by any method.
- All fruit and vegetables are kosher.
- Only the milk and eggs of permitted animals and birds are kosher.
- According to the Oral Torah, milk and meat products should be consumed separately.

EXPLANATORY BACKGROUND

For many Jewish people, the laws of kashrut are the most regular and conscious aspect of their observance. The requirement to keep milk and meat foods separate means leaving a certain amount of time between eating meat and milk. In UK communities, this is usually three hours. It also entails having completely separate sets of pots, pans, crockery, cutlery etc for meat and milk foods. Fish, eggs, fruit and vegetables are parev or parve (neutral) and can be eaten with either type of food. A kosher kitchen usually has separate cupboards for the different sets of utensils. There will be separate washing up bowls, brushes and tea towels which are colour coded, so that, for example, those for washing and drying 'milk' and 'meat' utensils can be told apart.

The practical effect of these rules is extensive. First of all, if you wish to make a cup of tea in a kosher kitchen, you would first need to ask which cups and teaspoons were 'milk' and which were 'meat', if you plan to put milk in your tea. If you offer to make a cup of tea for your Jewish host, they might check their watch to confirm that three hours had passed since they had eaten their meat lunch. Otherwise, they would ask for the tea to be black, or use soya milk instead, as soya milk is vegetable in origin and therefore parev. Lemon or herb teas are also commonly drunk at the end of a meat meal.

When travelling abroad, a Jew who wants to eat kosher might want to confirm that the milk they are being served has not come from a non-kosher animal. In some countries, camel's milk or horse's milk is used, and neither of those animals is kosher because the horse does not chew the cud, and neither horses nor camels have split hooves. Goat's cheese is allowed, because goats are kosher. The same goes for duck eggs, goose eggs and quail eggs. Pheasants' eggs are not kosher, because pheasants are not kosher birds.

If you invite your Jewish friend who keeps kosher to dinner, you might make an effort to ensure that you only serve them chicken (a kosher bird) and yet they still may not eat it. This could be because the chicken was not slaughtered according to the laws of kashrut.

You might be even more careful and buy your chicken from a kosher butcher who guarantees that it has been slaughtered correctly. If your friend still declines your invitation, it could be because they are uncertain about the pots you're going to cook the food in and the plates you will serve it on, as these pots and plates will have been used for non-kosher food.

Let us now imagine that you are so determined to invite your Jewish friend for supper that you actually buy a new pot to cook in and you provide plastic cutlery and paper plates which have never been used before. Surely now everything is alright? But when you serve the food, your friend refuses to eat it after all. What's gone wrong? You cooked the chicken in a lovely cream sauce – mixing milk and meat, and thus making the meal non-kosher!

As can be seen, the laws of kashrut are extensive and quite complicated. Jews who have been brought up to observe these laws find them easy and second nature, like a diabetic who has to avoid sugar, or a vegetarian who wants to avoid animal products, but for others it can seem like a nightmare.

Ensuring that food is kosher is important to Jews who observe these laws. The strictest Jews require a rabbinic authority's guarantee of kashrut on packets and tins. While one might think that a tin of beans will only contain beans and tomato sauce, some Jews might be concerned about what other food was processed in the same factory, or using the same equipment. Thus they might only buy beans which are guaranteed kosher and made in a factory that observes the laws of kashrut. This obviously makes these foods more expensive.

Other Jewish people might be prepared to eat a certain brand of beans if they can reassure themselves that the same brand's beans with pork sausages is not made on the same equipment, or that the tomato sauce does not contain non-kosher additives or preservatives. This is achieved by rabbinic supervisors visiting factories and confirming that the process fits the laws of kashrut. The horse meat scandal of a few years ago demonstrated that one cannot always be sure of what is in packaged foods.

The rabbinic authorities regularly publish lists of products on the general market that comply with the laws of kashrut. This even extends to sweets and chocolate; for example, the strong red colouring, cochineal, is made from ground-up beetles, so sweets containing this ingredient would not be kosher.

Since it is very difficult to tell one piece of meat or fowl from another, and impossible to know how it was slaughtered just by looking at it, kashrut-observant Jews will only buy meat from a kosher butcher, or in a sealed and guaranteed package. Fish species are more easily recognised, and can be killed by any method, so most Jews will buy their fish from a regular fishmongers or a supermarket.

The more one investigates, the more unexpected details emerge. For example, caviar is not kosher because it is the roe of the sturgeon fish, which is not kosher because it does not have proper scales. Sharks are not kosher because they do not have any scales, so rock salmon (which is dogfish, not actually salmon) and catfish are not kosher because they are types of shark. When turkeys were first discovered by Europeans in America, rabbis were uncertain as to whether or not they were kosher. They could not be sure whether one of the forbidden birds listed in the Torah was meant to be the turkey. Luckily for the kosher turkey industry and for American Jews at Thanksgiving, the rabbis decided that it was not on the forbidden list, and turkeys are therefore kosher.

Some Jews will eat out only in kosher restaurants, because they know that in regular restaurants, the food is prepared in pots that are also used to cook non-kosher food, and served on plates that have previously held non-kosher meals. In regular restaurants, they also cannot be certain whether the ingredients in their meal may inadvertently have in them something explicitly non-kosher. Kosher restaurants have rabbinic supervisors in their kitchens, who ensure that the laws of kashrut are properly observed. These restaurants are either 'milk' or 'meat' restaurants, so you will not get butter on your bread or milk in your coffee if you eat in a kosher steak house. These items will not be on the premises.

Many kashrut-observant Jews will eat in vegetarian restaurants, because these will not have any meat or fish. However, others will still not be confident that the restaurant is careful enough about the rules to set their minds at rest.

It can be seen from all the above material, that although pork is the most widely known non-kosher meat, it is actually no more unacceptable than any other non-kosher meat. In the Torah, pigs are not considered any more non-kosher than other animals that do not fit the requirements for kashrut. In fact, the Torah states that pigs are only non-kosher because they do not chew the cud. It would not be possible to argue that pork was more non-kosher than, for example, crab or ostrich. In fact, ostrich might be the most non-kosher of those three, as it is explicitly listed in the Written Torah as one of the birds that Jews are forbidden to eat.

DIVERSITY AMONGST JEWS

Haredi Jews will scrupulously abide by all these laws. Other religious Jews will make up their own minds about how the laws are to be applied. Even within the halachah, there is a certain amount of leeway as to how one applies the laws. Generally, Progressive Jews are less concerned with the finer details than Orthodox Jews, but that is not a hard and fast rule. If you are trying to accommodate a Jewish colleague, neighbour or friend, it is best to ask them about their own practice and to make no assumptions.

Most secular Jews will not be concerned about the laws of kashrut, but some might have been brought up to avoid certain foods and still feel that it is part of their Jewish identity to continue to avoid them.

PROBLEMS WITH THE SPECIFICATIONS

None

