Beliefs, Values and Practices: Judaism
What is Judaism?

With the Jewish population in Scotland nearly 6,000, Judaism has a significant presence in Scotland. Judaism is one of the oldest monotheistic (belief in one G-d) religions and dates back nearly 4,000 years to the Middle East. Jews believe they are G-d’s chosen people and in return for the covenant made with Jews, they keep G-d’s laws and aim to bring holiness into every aspect of life.

Judaism, whether orthodox or reform, is a religion of great tradition and places great emphasis on history. Within this section you will find information about how prominent Jewish people put the beliefs and values of Judaism into practice.

What is it like to be a Jewish person?

This video shows one young Jewish person talking about what it means to her to belong to a reformed tradition in Judaism in Scotland today.

Video

Watch: Testimony – Judaism on YouTube - https://youtu.be/8r5k0uKaoNQ
Watch: Testimony – Judaism on GlowTV (Glow login required)

Reflecting on Judaism

- What questions might you ask this young Jewish person?
- How has this young person’s life been shaped by her beliefs?
- What beliefs and values shape your life?
- Is it important to put your beliefs and values into action?
- How might you/do you put your beliefs and values into action?
- In what ways are your beliefs and values similar to/different from those of others?
- Why is it important to understand the diversity of beliefs and values in modern Scotland?
- What skills do you think are important when exploring beliefs and values?
- Why might understanding your beliefs and values and those of others be an important skill in the workplace?
Prominent figures in Judaism: Former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Introduction

Rabbi Sacks, or 'the Rabbi' as he will be referred to in the rest of this resource, was born in London in 1948. His Hebrew name is Yaakov Zvi. Rabbi Sacks took up the mantle of Chief Rabbi in 1991 when he was the Principal of Jew's College and Rabbi to both Golders Green and Marble Arch Synagogues and held this until 2013.

Academic career

Rabbi Sacks has had an amazing academic career. He was educated at Cambridge University where he gained a first class Honours Degree in Philosophy, then continued his studies at Oxford University as well as King's College London, eventually achieving a Doctorate in 1981. He also studied at Jew's College (one the oldest Rabbinical Seminaries) and Yeshiva Etz Chaim, London, after which he was ordained into the Rabbinic Tradition.

The Rabbi has accumulated numerous honorary degrees including a Doctor of Divinity conferred by the Archbishop of Canterbury in commemoration of ten years as the Chief Rabbi. He has received the Jerusalem Prize 1995 for the work he has done in supporting Jewish Lifestyles in the Diaspora, and the Ladislaus Laszt Ecumenical and Social Concern Award from Ben Gurion University, Israel, 2011. The Rabbi has also been awarded a knighthood and a life peerage from the Queen. He took up his position in the House of Lords in October 2009 and sits on the cross benches as Baron Sacks of Aldergate in the City of London.

His position has allowed him to talk on several public platforms including TV, radio and the national press. He frequently presents BBC Radio 4’s Thought for the Day as well as a regular column in the Times Credo column.

Out of all of these achievements it is not difficult to pinpoint times when he has shown witness to the beliefs that have sustained the Jewish faith community for centuries.
The Decade of Renewal

The Rabbi was the Chief Rabbi of the Commonwealth for over 20 years. When he talks about his Rabbinate, he separates it into two decades - the Decade of Renewal and the Decade of Responsibility.

In his first decade the Rabbi worked towards the renewal of the Jewish Community in Britain and during this period more Jewish schools were built and attended whilst the voice of Judaism became a louder one in society in general.

The Decade of Responsibility

The second decade, named 'Responsibility', was the natural next step for the Jewish community to take. Here we see the idea of responsibility being played out within the area of the human condition as seen from Jewish eyes.

In his 'manifesto' for the second decade the Rabbi explains that to glimpse the universe through the eyes of Judaism means searching out the goodness in each person and situation so as to identify, praise and thereby strengthen it.  

By definition this means that Jewish people have a responsibility towards the world and so it follows that the human condition carries with it a responsibility. This is something that is a constant theme of the Rabbi's; the idea that Judaism has something to teach the whole world. The Rabbi uses a phrase that was at first strange. He claims in several of his books and speeches that 'Judaism is not just for the Jews'. You will find out more about this phrase later on in this resource.

In the text of the launch of the second decade of his Rabbinate and his book Future Tense, the Rabbi refers to the historical significance of the ‘smallness’ of the Jews. In population terms, for every Jew there are 164 Christians and 83 Muslims. Yet throughout history against all the odds the Jewish Faith has survived where all the great empires of Babylon, Egypt and Rome are but references in a museum. Why is this?

The Rabbi says it is because Judaism is a criticism of Empires and has a concern for the whole world and not the limited boundaries of countries and is also a criticism of the rule of the powerful. In Judaism all humanity is created equally 'We are all created in the image and likeness of G-d, from the Greatest to the Least.' [Gen 1:26 Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.]

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1 ‘The Decade of Responsibility' speech
3 Beliefs, Values and Practices: Judaism
The ethic of responsibility

One difference between Judaism and Christianity that the Rabbi points out is how the description of the human condition is totally different with the traditional Christian viewpoint, namely that of the doctrine of original sin. Christianity has always interpreted the 'Fall of Adam' as meaning that all humanity has the hardwired urge to evil actions in contravention to G-d’s wishes. Judaism does not have this interpretation.3

The Rabbi explains this teaching through his idea of Jewish Responsibility. All humans are born with the condition of performing good or evil. It is this nature of humanity that is linked to the idea that in being made in the image and likeness of G-d we have the responsibility to choose that which is good over that which is evil. The story of the 'Fall of Adam' is a story of the consequences of the free choice that humanity possesses.

In an interview in the Leeds Student in 2010 the Rabbi was asked about the role of religion in developing a moral sense. His answer reaffirmed his belief in something in the make-up of the human person that drives them towards morality. Religion is the framework that helps humanity to practise morality.

It is this principle of being made in the image and likeness of G-d that is the root of what the Rabbi has called 'The Ethic of Responsibility', which is the subtitle of his book 'To Heal a Fractured World'. Jewish people have a responsibility to the world to live out the Torah, so living in the image of G-d in humanity.

In his speech at the start of the second decade of his Rabbinate, the Rabbi claimed that all Jewish people instinctively know that their lives are meant to show that humans can make a difference. Jewish people are called to live their lives according to this. 'G-d gave us the raw materials – life, our situation in time and space as well as free will – and it’s up to us, under his tutelage, to turn them into a source of blessing. That is the challenge of Jewish Responsibility.4

Jewish people have a responsibility to live according to G-d's laws. This has been borne out time and time again in Jewish history. One of the characteristics in the Jewish identity is the ability to 'consistently [find] unpredictable ways of renewing [themselves]. In other words, the Jewish people are a people of hope', not victims.5

3 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Letters to the Next Generation (London: Office of the Chief Rabbi, 2009), p.34
4 From inaugural speech of the Second Decade of his Rabbinate

5 Beliefs, Values and Practices: Judaism
A culture of hope

Here the Rabbi talks about how we need to foster a culture of hope and how God sustains us through life.

Video

Watch: ‘Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Culture of Hope’ https://youtu.be/nm1u-B8peTg

[Please note: This video has not been uploaded to YouTube by Education Scotland6]

Reflective questions

1. What does this video suggest about the idea of hope?
2. Is hope important in life? Why?
3. What role might belief in G-d have in hope?

Torah in the real world

Here the Rabbi talks about a Jewish person's responsibility to follow the Torah and therefore their responsibility towards others in the world.

Video


[Please note: This video has not been uploaded to YouTube by Education Scotland7]

Reflective questions

1. Do humans have a responsibility to the whole world?
2. How should we put that responsibility into action?
3. How does following the Torah teach a Jewish person about their own responsibilities?
4. What do you follow in your life to help you live it well?

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6 By following this link, you will be moving away from the Education Scotland website. Education Scotland is not responsible for content on external websites. YouTube provides an open forum for users to post comments it is recommended that practitioners check the clips, and any appended comments, in advance so as to assess suitability before directing learners to them.

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The dignity of difference
Here the Rabbi talks about the dignity of difference and how being different can be important.

Video
Watch: ‘Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Dignity of Difference’ https://youtu.be/wpuQHLisQns
[Please note: This video has not been uploaded to YouTube by Education Scotland]

Reflective questions
1. What do you think the phrase “Dignity of Difference” means?
2. How far do you think it is important for individuals and cultures to remain distinct?
3. What does the Rabbi say about G-d and difference? What are your views on this?

Living a responsible life
In this video the Rabbi discusses how each person is responsible for living the best life they can.

Video
Watch: ‘Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on A Responsible Life’ https://youtu.be/Snd2f583x-0
[Please note: This video has not been uploaded to YouTube by Education Scotland]

Reflective questions
1. What does the Rabbi say about responsible living? What are your views on this?
2. According to the Rabbi, how should we respond to difficult situations? How do you respond to difficult situations?
3. According to the Rabbi, what is the link between responsibility and G-d?

Activities to support learning
- What do you think Interfaith work is all about? What might its advantages and disadvantages be?
- Find out more about Jewish beliefs and values. How do you think the life of demonstrates these beliefs and values?
- In what ways are Jewish beliefs and values similar to/different from beliefs and values of other religions and belief groups?
- How has learning about Jewish beliefs and values influenced your own developing beliefs and values?

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