



Modern Traditions and Customs

By Steve Cohen

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Modern Jewish Traditions and Customs

Synagogue

Synagogue, community, home and family have brought about many traditions and customs, which play important roles in Jewish people's lives today. Everything in the synagogue, the center of worship, focuses on the place of the Torah and of the scriptures, which are front and center in worship, literally and figuratively. The scrolls that contain the words of the Torah are kept in an ark, a closet, behind closed doors and are surrounded by symbols that cause man to reflect on the place of the Scriptures in the life of men.

Ten Commandments

Usually two stone tablets near the place where the Scriptures are maintained contain the first two words of each of the Ten Commandments. Above the tablets are sometimes found a crown, and on each side, two lions, helping to focus on the fact that the Word of God is to be central in the life of people today. The Ner tamid, or the eternal light, is a lamp with a candle in it, continually shining to help man see that the light of God and the life of men is not only to be focused on this world, but upon the world to come.

Yarmulke

In Orthodox and Conservative worship settings, men and women traditionally cover their heads; men, with a yarmulke, or in Hebrew, a kippa, and women, with hats. Most often, women sit separately from men. Sometimes the balcony is reserved for women. In a Reform temple, men do not normally cover their heads during worship and both men and women sit together.

Tallit

During services, Orthodox and Conservative Jewish men wear a prayer shawl, called a Tallit, and during the morning services Jewish men would put on Tiffilin, or phylacteries. The phylacteries are small, cubical boxes that contain portions of Scripture, based on Deuteronomy 6. The boxes are bound to the left arm and the forehead with leather straps.

Mezuzah

In Orthodox and Conservative Jewish homes, you would see a Mezzuzah, a long, narrow case of wood or metal fastened to the right doorpost and containing a parchment, on which are inscribed the words of Deut. 6:4-9 and Deut. 11:13-20. Devout Jewish people will touch their fingers to the Mezzuzah and then to their lips, as though kissing it, an act of endearment for the Scriptures it contains. For many Jewish people it is a sign that God's love is present and accepted within the home, and reminds them of the need to live a holy life.



Kosher

Leviticus 11 sets forth the dietary laws known as kashrut, or kosher, based on permissions and prohibitions regarding foods. Yet the Scriptures today have been amplified by traditions that far exceed the Biblical injunctions. The Hebrew word kosher literally means to be “clean” or “fit.” Maintaining a “kosher home” has been an important factor in helping Jewish people to keep their identity as a people in the dispersion, showing that their lives are set apart from the lives of others in the community.

In larger Jewish communities it is much easier to maintain a kosher home and to purchase kosher food. But, in smaller ones, it is difficult at best. For some Jewish people, keeping kosher has come to mean abstinence from pork or pork products, while others follow all the Biblical and rabbinic injunctions. A good set of reference source books for Jewish life and worship are books known as The Jewish Catalogs. The three volumes are edited by Strassfield, and provide good insight into Jewish life and worship.

Circumcision

The Covenant of Circumcision, or the Brit Millah, or Bris, is traditionally performed in the home when a male infant is eight days old. This ritual is so important that it can even be performed on the Sabbath, a time in which no work can be done. Circumcision is seen as a time when a Jewish child is brought into the covenant that God has established with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Because each covenant required a shedding of blood, some blood must be shed by the child during this ritual.

Usually, a trained person, known as a mohel, is called upon to perform the circumcision, and the family and friends gather together to make this a festive occasion in the home.

From the time of the eighth day of the Bris, until the male child reaches the age of 13, the parents' responsibility is to train up the child in Jewish ways, traditions and customs. At age 13, the Jewish male is brought before the congregation and brought into full membership and standing within the community through a ceremony known as the Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah for a daughter. Literally, it means “son (daughter) of the commandment.” Afterwards, the Jewish child can participate in all Jewish functions, religious duties and responsibilities, including the males donning the tefillin (the phylacteries on the forehead and arm worn during prayer) and attending worship.

Chuppah

A Jewish wedding service is a joyous and festive occasion, marked by the order of service being celebrated under the chuppah, or a canopy. Friends and family, chosen and so honored by the wedding couple, hold the four poles that support the canopy. The leader of the congregation leads the service and the cantor chants the blessings and some of the prayers.

Ketubbah

The service is marked by the drinking of wine, signing of the marriage contract called the Ketubbah, and culminates with the groom taking the empty glass and breaking it under his heel. This symbolizes the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, so that rejoicing on this day is tempered by a sad remembrance. Other traditions say that the broken glass reminds us of the transitoriness of life.



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Jewish wedding services are marked by festive meals and dancing lasting long into the night. The family and the community rejoices in God who created the world, who created man and gave man woman, so that the two could be made one, be fruitful and multiply.



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For More Information

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