



Jewish Culture and Traditions

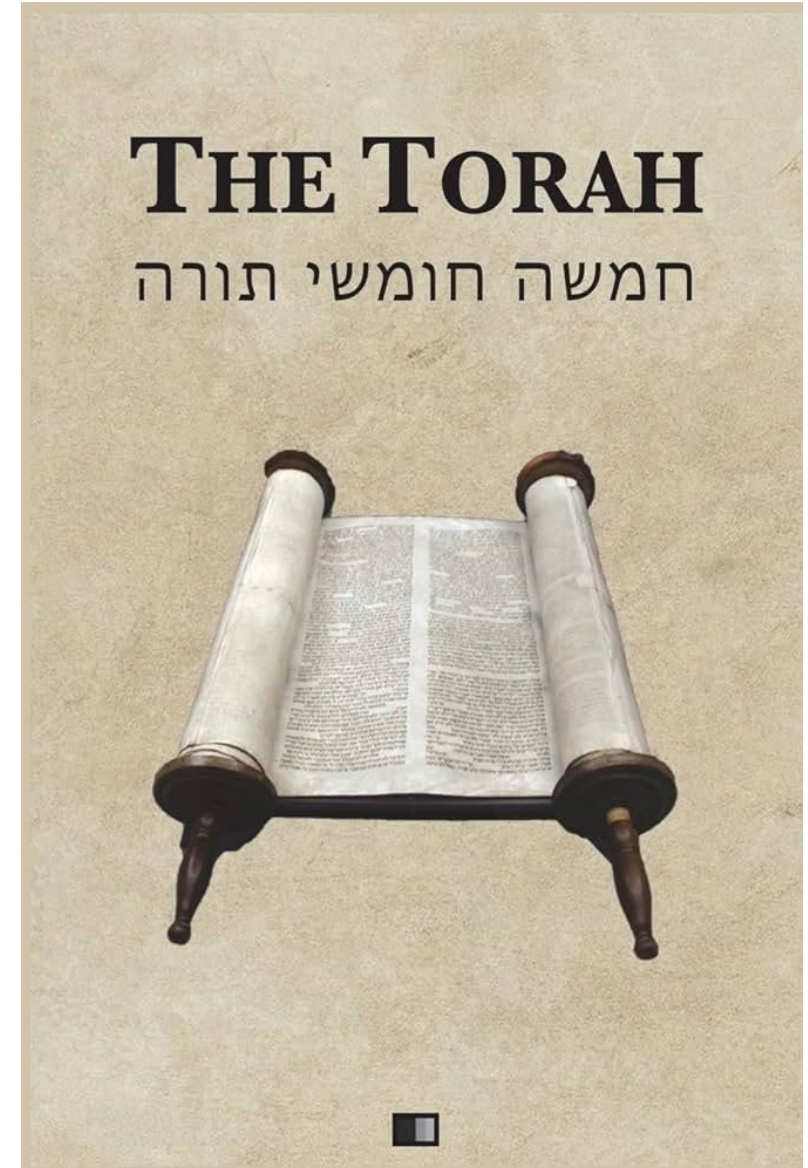


Jewish Beliefs

- Jewish beliefs are extremely diverse, and range from strict belief in detailed Jewish law to atheism. Jews are a people more than a religion. The religion is one aspect of Jewish peoplehood.
- Religious Jews believe in one God. Beliefs about God vary, but most religious Jews believe in a covenant between the Jewish people and God. Some Jews believe that a messiah will one day come.
- Jewish people worship in holy places known as synagogues, and their spiritual leaders are called rabbis. The six-pointed Star of David is the symbol of Judaism.
- Today, there are about 14 million Jews worldwide. Most of them live in the United States and Israel. Jewish identity comes from either birth or conversion.

Torah

- The Jewish sacred text is called the Tanakh or the “Hebrew Bible.” It includes the same books as the Old Testament in the Christian Bible, but they’re placed in a different order.
- The Torah—the first five books of the Tanakh—outlines laws for Jews to follow. It’s sometimes also referred to as the Pentateuch or Five Books of Moses.
- The Talmud (more later) is a vast body of Jewish law (halakhah) and stories (agada) that is based on the Tanakh.
- Jewish sacred text is still being written today!



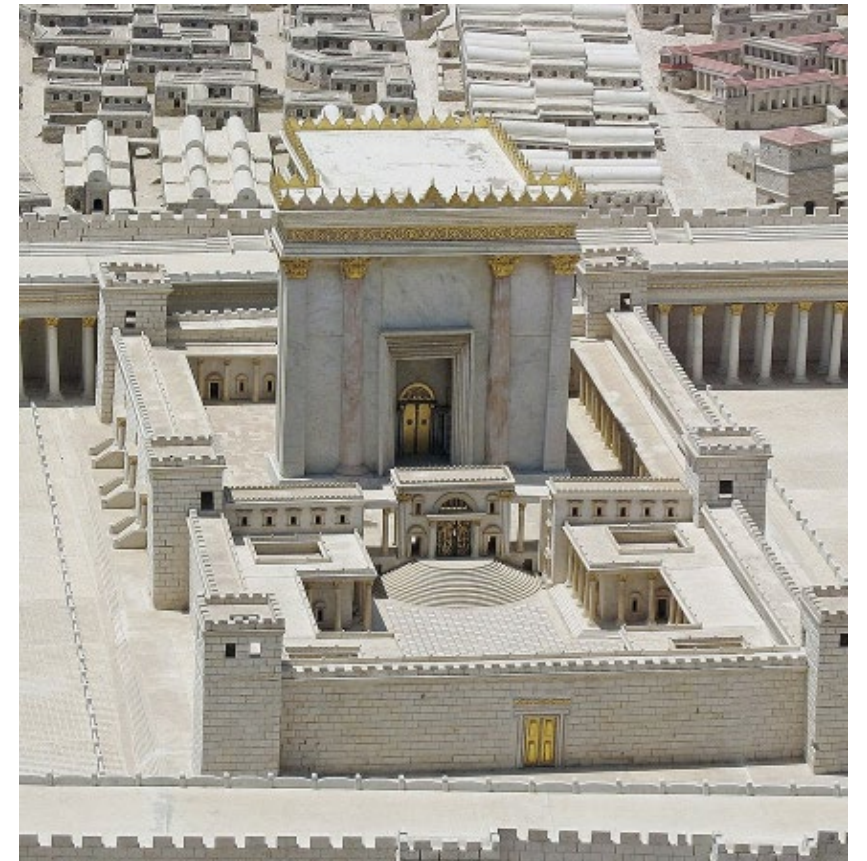


Founder of Judaism

- The origins of Jewish faith are explained throughout the Torah. According to the text, God first revealed himself to a man named Abraham, who became known as the founder of Judaism.
- Many religious Jews believe that God made a special covenant with Abraham and that he and his descendants were chosen people who would create a great nation.
- Abraham's son Isaac and his grandson Jacob also became central figures in ancient Jewish history. Jacob took the name Israel, and his children and future generations became known as Israelites.
- More than 1,000 years after Abraham, the prophet Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt after being enslaved for hundreds of years.
- According to scriptures, God revealed the laws, known as the Ten Commandments, to Moses at Mt. Sinai.

Jewish Temples

- Around 1000 B.C.E., King David ruled the Jewish people. His son Solomon built the first holy Temple in Jerusalem, which became the central place of worship for Jews.
- The kingdom fell apart around 931 B.C., and the Jewish people split into two groups: Israel in the North and Judah in the South.
- Sometime around 587 B.C.E., the Babylonians destroyed the first Temple and sent many Jews into exile.
- A second Temple was built in about 516 B.C.E. but was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E.
- The destruction of the second Temple was significant because Jewish people no longer had a primary place to gather, so they shifted their focus to worshipping in local synagogues.



Jewish Holy Books

- While the Tanakh (which includes the Torah) is considered the sacred text of Judaism, many other important manuscripts were composed in later years. These offered insights into how the Tanakh should be interpreted and documented oral laws that were previously not written down.
- Around 200 C.E., scholars compiled the Mishnah—a text that describes and explains the Jewish code of law that was previously orally communicated





Talmud

- Later, the Talmud, a collection of teachings and commentaries on Jewish law, was created. The Talmud contains the Mishnah and another text known as the Gemara (which examines the Mishnah). It includes the interpretations of thousands of rabbis and outlines the importance of 613 commandments of Jewish law.
- The first version of the Talmud was finalized around the 3rd century C.E. The second form was completed during the 5th century C.E.

Shabbat

- Shabbat is recognized as a day of rest and prayer for Jews. It typically begins at sunset on Friday and lasts until nightfall on Saturday.
- Most observant Jews celebrate Shabbat by reading or discussing the Torah, attending a synagogue or socializing with other Jews at Shabbat meals.



Judaism and Persecution

Throughout history, Jewish people have been persecuted for their religious beliefs. Some well-known events include:

- **1066 Granada Massacre:** On December 30, 1066, a Muslim mob stormed the royal palace in Granada and killed more than 1,000 Jewish families. The group also kidnapped and crucified Joseph ibn Naghrela, the Jewish vizier to the Berber king.
- **The First Crusade:** In the first of the Crusades—a series of medieval holy wars involving Christians and Muslims—thousands of Jews were killed, and many were forced to convert to Christianity.
- **The Spanish Expulsion:** In 1492, Spain’s rulers issued a royal edict that declared all Jews who refused to convert to Christianity would be expelled from the country. Experts estimate about 200,000 people were ousted and tens of thousands died while trying to reach safety.
- **The Holocaust:** In the Holocaust, the most infamous of modern-day atrocities, the Nazis murdered more than 6 million Jews.



Creation of Israel

- From the late 19th century and after the Holocaust, many Jews returned to their homeland (in the Middle East region known as Palestine) and embraced Zionism, a movement for the creation of a Jewish state that emerged in 19th-century Europe.
- In 1948, Israel officially became an independent nation. David Ben-Gurion, one of the leading promoters of a Jewish nation state, was given the title of prime minister.
- This event was considered a success for the Jewish people who had tirelessly petitioned for an independent state in their homeland. However, tensions between Jews and Arabs living in Palestine escalated in the years since Israel became a state and are still ongoing today.



Jewish Movements (or Denominations)

There are several sects in Judaism, which include:

- **Orthodox Judaism:** Orthodox Jews are typically known for their strict observance of traditional Jewish law and rituals. For instance, most believe Shabbat shouldn't involve working, driving or handling money. Orthodox Judaism is a diverse sect that includes several subgroups, including Hasidic Jews, who emphasize a mystical experience with God that involves direct communion through prayer and worship.
- **Reform Judaism:** Reform Judaism is a liberal category of the religion that values ethical traditions over strict observance of Jewish laws. Followers promote progressive ideas and adaptation. The largest part of religious Jews living in the United States follow Reform traditions.
- **Conservative Judaism:** Many people consider this form of Judaism somewhere in between Orthodox and Reform Judaism. Typically, conservative Jews honor the traditions of Judaism while allowing for some modernization.
- **Reconstructionist Judaism:** Reconstructionism dates back to 1922 when Mordecai Kaplan founded the Society for the Advancement of Judaism. This sect believes that Judaism is a religious civilization that's constantly evolving.
- **Jewish Renewal:** Jewish Renewal started in the 1960s under the leadership of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who worked to bring the joy and mysticism of Hasidism to people outside an Orthodox framework. Jewish Renewal is very diverse in terms of observance level.
- **Humanistic Judaism:** Rabbi Sherwin Wine founded this denomination of Judaism in 1963. Humanistic Jews celebrate Jewish history and culture without an emphasis on God.
- While there are various denominations of Judaism, many Jews don't identify with a particular classification and simply refer to themselves as Jewish.

Sects of Judaism



Jewish Holidays

- **Passover:** This holiday, which typically occurs in March or April, lasts seven or eight days and celebrates Jewish freedom from slavery in Egypt. Specifically, Passover refers to the biblical story of when the Hebrew God “passed over” houses of Jewish families and saved their children during a plague that was said to have killed all other first-born babies in Egypt.
- **Rosh Hashanah:** Jews celebrate the birth of the universe and humanity during this holiday, which is also known as the Jewish New Year. It generally falls during the months of September or early October.
- **Yom Kippur:** This “Day of Atonement” is considered the holiest day of the year for Jews who typically spend it fasting and praying. It also falls during the months of September or October.
- **High Holy Days:** The 10 days starting with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur are also known as the High Holidays, the Days of Awe or Yamim Noraim. The High Holy Days are considered a time of repentance for Jewish people.
- **Hanukkah:** This Jewish celebration, also known as the “Festival of Lights,” lasts eight days during late November or December. Hanukkah commemorates the rededication of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem after the Maccabees defeated the Syrian-Greeks in 165 B.C.E.
- **Purim:** This is a joyous holiday, occurring around the month of March, that celebrates a time when the Jewish people in Persia were saved from extermination.



Bris or Brit Milah

- The religious life a Jewish man begins on the 8th day of his birth, marking the first ritual event in the cycle of life.
- *Brit Milah* – or covenant of circumcision – is a ritual performed on the 8th day of the child's life, during the daylight hours.
- The commandment to circumcise is found in Genesis 17:10-14 and Leviticus 12:3
- The word *b'rit* means covenant and the word *milah* means to cut.
- Ritual circumcision is the covenant God established with Jewish people through the commandment of circumcision.



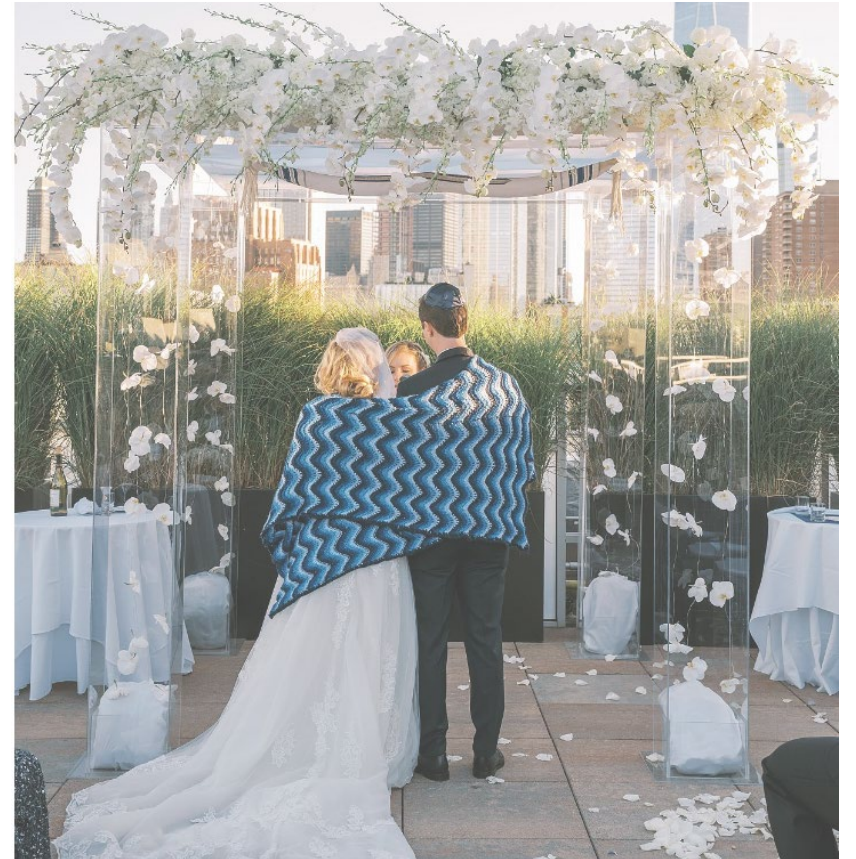
Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah

- *Bar Mitzvah* (for boys) and *Bat Mitzvah* (for girls) mean “one who possesses or is tied to the commandment.” Now nonbinary Jews are using *b’nei mitzvah* (usually a plural, similar to using they/them pronouns) or *b’mitzvah*.
- Jewish coming-of-age ritual. *Bar Mitzvah* (for boys) is at 13 and *Bat Mitzvah* (for girls) is at 12. Nonbinary Jews may come of age at 12 or 13. Jews may have a ceremony after these ages if they didn’t do one at 12 or 13.
- Implies that all of the responsibilities and religious obligations of the Torah and Rabbis are now binding on the person.
- Both typically involve extensive preparation and study, a ceremony at synagogue on Shabbat and a party.



Jewish Weddings – Part 1

1. **Bedeken** - the *bedeken* is an intimate moment where the groom looks at the bride then covers her face with the veil. It is to symbolize that they are two distinct people even in marriage and that he values her inner beauty.
2. **Chuppah** - A chuppah is a structure with four corners and a covered roof to symbolize the new home the bride and groom are building together.
3. **Ketubah** – A *ketubah* is a marriage contract that couples sign with witnesses prior to the ceremony.
4. **Both parents walk you down the aisle**
5. **Circling** - Known as *hakafot*, the bride traditionally circles around the groom seven times under the chuppah. Contemporary couples often circle each other mutually.
6. **Prayer Shawl** - A *tallit*, which is a fringed prayer shawl, may be used in several ways as part of Jewish wedding traditions. Couples may give each other a *tallit* as a wedding gift. A *tallit* may also serve as the cloth portion of the *chuppah*. And during the final blessings, the couple's parents may wrap the *tallit* around the couple's shoulders as a symbol of unity and being surrounded by love.



Jewish Weddings – Part 2

- 6. Sheva B'rachot: Seven Blessings** - Family members or friends are often invited to perform readings at wedding ceremonies and Jewish weddings have a similar tradition. The seven blessings, called the *Sheva B'rachot*, come from ancient teachings and are shared by members of the wedding party. The blessings are often read in both Hebrew and English, and focus on joy, celebration, and the power of love.
- 7. Breaking of the glass** - the groom breaks a glass (usually wrapped in a cloth napkin to avoid injury) with his right foot. The couple will then usually kiss and guests shout “Mazel Tov!” to congratulate the newlyweds. There are several conflicting origins to this Jewish wedding tradition but it’s most commonly thought to reference the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.
- 8. Alone time** - tradition states that couples spend a short time in *yichud* (or togetherness). This wedding custom gives the newlyweds chance to reflect on their new relationship and allows them precious time alone before celebrating with family and friends.
- 9. Celebratory Jewish dances** - the *hora* is a joyful dance that takes place at the reception. As traditional Jewish music plays, guests dance in circles and the couple is seated on chairs and hoisted into the air, where they may hold either a handkerchief or cloth napkin.



Death and Dying

The Jewish grieving cycle takes eleven months with a death in the family, though all of *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish community) will share grief and sorrow.

- **Shivah** (“seven”) is the first stage of mourning. A week-long period of mourning for direct relatives after the burial of the dead.
- **Sheloshim** (“thirty”) is the second stage of mourning which lasts 30 days after the funeral, for everyone related to the deceased.
- **Avelut** (mourning) lasts 11 months for parents.
- **Unveiling:** the unveiling of the gravestone at the cemetery is usually done 11 to 12 months after the person’s death.
- **Yahrzeit** (anniversary of the date of death) is observed each year on the date of death by the Hebrew calendar.



Clothing

- Some Jews wear specific pieces of religious clothing for prayer or other occasions.
- Observant Jews cover their heads with a small cap, called a kippah.
- Another Jewish garment is a Tallit, a traditional fringed prayer shawl worn for morning prayer.
- Kittels are also worn by some Jews. These are a white cotton robe, which are worn on High Holiday services, weddings, and can also be burial gowns.
- In Orthodox Judaism, the above garments are only worn by men. Orthodox Jewish women also have some religious clothing. They are expected to follow the Jewish law Tznius, which is the Hebrew word for modesty. More specifically, Orthodox married women also traditionally cover their hair, often with a scarf, called a Tichel, or a wig, called a Sheitel.



Kosher Food

- Kosher is the word given to Jewish food laws. The two most commonly used laws are the avoidance of certain kinds of meat and seafood, and the need to keep meat and milk products separate.
- All kosher meat from permitted animals, like cows and sheep, must be slaughtered in a special way so that the animal suffers as little as possible. The method used also ensures that the maximum amount of blood is drained from the meat, since blood is not kosher either.

KOSHER



Chews its cud and has split hooves

Ex. Cows, Sheep, Goats, Deer



Domesticated species

Ex. Chicken, Duck, Turkey



Has both fins and scales

Ex. Trout, Tuna, Salmon



Chuck, rib, shoulder, plate



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NOT KOSHER



Doesn't chew cud and/or doesn't have split hooves

Ex. Pigs, Rabbits, Kangaroo



All scavenger and predatory birds

Ex. Vulture, Eagle, Owl



Doesn't have both fins and scales

Ex. Crustaceans, Mollusks, Water Mammals



Meat and dairy together



Loin, sirloin, rump, flank, heel

When prepared properly, some of these cuts may be kosher

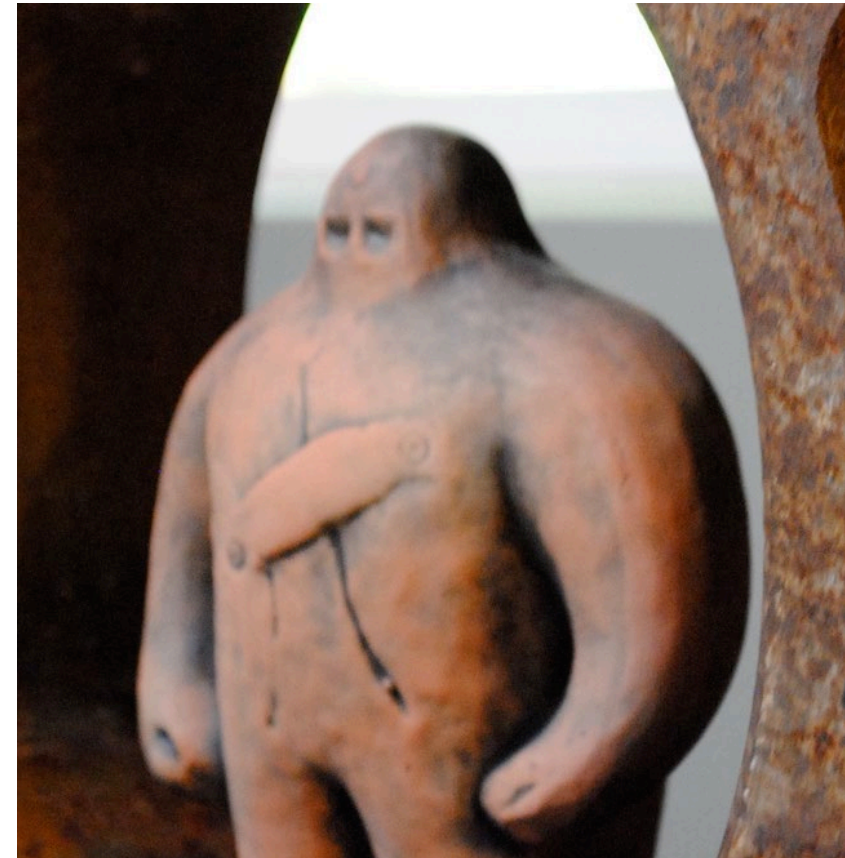


Jewish Items in the Home

- Jewish homes have traditional items kept for religious purposes.
- Some will have a fine goblet, from which the family will share the cup of wine at Shabbat and festive meals. There will also be a pair of Shabbat candlesticks and a Menorah to be used at the festival of Chanukah.
- A Mezuzah may be found on the right hand doorposts of a Jewish home. A Mezuzah is a small box, about as big as a finger, containing a handwritten text from the Torah. It proclaims that there is only one God and commands that “you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates”.
- There may also be prayer books and other religious books in Hebrew, which will open from right to left (in the opposite direction from English books).

Mythical Creatures in Jewish Lore

- **Asmodeus** - Ashmedai or Asmodeus was the prince of the demons. A famous legend about Asmodeus in the Talmud has it that King Solomon outwitted the prince of demons into helping him construct the first Temple.
- **Dybbuk** - Dybbuks are possessor demons from early modern Ashkenazi (Eastern European) Jewish mythology. They were thought to be souls of dead people who temporarily possessed the living in order to accomplish certain tasks.
- **Golem** - The myth of the golem originates in the idea that human beings might be able to form living creatures from clay, just as God made Adam. The most famous golem is the one made by Rabbi Judah Loew, the Maharal of Prague, who inscribed a clay man with the word *emet* meaning truth, and then spoke the divine name and brought him to life. The golem protected the Jewish community from persecution, but was also difficult to control and ultimately dangerous, so the rabbi deactivated him by erasing the first letter of the word *emet*, leaving the word *met* "dead."
- **Leviathan** – The Leviathan is a terrifying primordial sea monster, perhaps having the form of a giant crocodile, sea serpent, dragon, or whale. The Leviathan is referenced throughout the Hebrew Bible, in Psalms, Job, and Isaiah and, according to tradition, is very ancient, having been created by God at the beginning of time. Leviathan has a counterpart land monster, called Behemoth.
- **Lilith** - Lilith was actually the very first woman ever created — before Eve. Lilith, whose name is related to the Hebrew word *laila*, meaning night, was feared because she was believed to kill women in childbirth and snatch their babies. In contemporary Jewish feminist circles, Lilith has been reclaimed as an icon for her independence and she is the namesake of a popular Jewish magazine.
- **Nephilim** – Angels were so attracted to human women that they came down to earth and procreated with them. The offspring produced of these unions were known as *Nephilim*. These semi-divine "heroes" or "giants" stalked the earth for generations.
- **Witch of Endor** – King Saul, the first king of Israel finds the Witch of Endor who helps him to contact the soul of the dead prophet Samuel, the very one who anointed Saul king. But rather than give him winning military advice, the ghost of Samuel berates Saul for turning to necromancy and foretells his death in battle the very next day.





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