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Zeitpfeil

Modul 1:

Religion and Traditions in Judaism

The Western Wall in Jerusalem, in the background the Dome of the Rock
(bviehmann)

Note:
The following provides an introduction to some of the most important Jewish traditions and religious rites. It does not aim to be comprehensive. In Judaism and especially in various Jewish traditions, there are a host of other holidays and rituals that are not dealt with here. You will find tips for further reading and internet research at the end of this text.

A note on the pronunciation of Hebrew terms: In general, this follows English pronunciation, with the exception of "ch", which is pronounced (χ).

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Life Stages

1. Birth and Circumcision

Circumcision
(http://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/הלימת_תירב)

Jewish boys are circumcised eight days after their birth. The act of circumcision (in Hebrew *Brit Mila*) symbolizes union with God and is based on the Bible passage Genesis 17:10-13.

Read this passage from the Bible.

The circumcision ceremony is usually accompanied by a big celebration with family and friends. In Jewish tradition, there is no ritual to celebrate the birth of a girl.

2. Bar/Bat Mitzvah

At the age of thirteen, a Jewish boy becomes a *Bar Mitzva* (literally: "son of commandment", where "commandment" refers to the religious commandments) and must uphold and practice

religious laws and duties like an adult. In many congregations it has become common to combine this transition to adulthood with a first reading from the Torah (*Aliya la-Torah*) in the Synagogue on the Sabbath. The boys prepare for this reading, which is often followed by a celebration.

When they are twelve, girls reach the age of the *Bat Mitzvah* (daughter of commandment). For them too, this means that they must uphold the commandments pertaining to women. However, because women do not play an active role in traditional religious services, in Orthodox communities there is no special celebration for girls.

By contrast, in modern congregations, a celebration for girls has been common since the nineteenth century. In liberal Judaism, where women and men have the same rights and duties, Bar and Bat Mitzvah are both celebrated at the age of thirteen with a reading from the Torah.

The film "Keeping the Faith" (2000) deals with a Bar Mitzvah and all the problems it presents, especially to a boy during puberty. Have a look at this short clip from the film on: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dg-nDLRSbmk

3. Marriage

As in all cultures and religions, in Judaism, marriage is a very special occasion. The most well-known Jewish marriage customs are the wedding baldachin or *chuppah,* and the breaking of a glass to seal the marriage bond.
But let's first describe the steps leading up to the marriage ceremony. Of course, before any wedding can take place, a suitable partner must be found. In Orthodox Jewish communities, the s*hidduch*, a marriage arranged with the help of a match-maker, is still widespread today, one reason being that because the worlds of Orthodox Jewish men and women are so separate, there are few opportunities for them to meet. In less religious families and communities in Israel there are countless possibilities of finding a suitable Jewish partner. However, outside Israel, members of the so-called Jewish diaspora have a harder time finding a partner of the same faith. For this reason internet dating is also very popular among this group.

Check if there are internet dating services for the Jewish community in your country and find out what are the most common criteria given for partner selection on such sites.

Before the wedding, the woman must visit the ritual bath, the *mikveh.* The *mikveh* is built so that water flows in and out of it constantly from a natural spring or well – the water must not be allowed to stagnate. For this reason, *mikwaot* are often built underground, to ensure the natural flow of water into and from the bath. Religious women visit the *mikveh* at least once a month, seven days after menstruation, and sexual intercourse is permitted again only after this visit.

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Mikveh
(Quelle: http://www.dat.gov.il/הליבטהו+הווקמה+תודוא/הרהט+תואווקמ/דרשמה+יתוריש/default.htm)

After the visit to the *mikveh*, there are no more obstacles to the marriage. The marriage ceremony can be performed in the Synagogue or at any other location. In Israel, huge venues are very popular and the marriage ceremony generally forms part of the celebration. In the USA, the *chuppah* is often erected outdoors, for example in a very romantic setting.

Chuppah in the forest
(http://www.sigevents.com/chuppah.htm)

As it is celebrated today, the marriage ceremony actually combines two different ceremonies which were originally separated by a whole year: the couple to be married go under the *chuppah* and, depending on tradition, the bride is led by her mother or another close female

relative or friend. The rabbi then blesses the wine and presents the groom with a glass to drink from. The same glass is then passed to the mother of the bride, and after she has had a drink, she passes it to her daughter.

The groom then places a ring on the bride's right forefinger, reciting the following words: "Behold you are consecrated to me with this ring according to the law of Moses and Israel." The two witnesses must see him place the ring, otherwise the marriage is not valid. This completes the first of the two ceremonies, called *erusin*, the betrothal. The couple is now officially promised to each other. Today it is also common for the groom to receive a ring from the bride, although this was not originally part of the religious ceremony. The *ketuba*, the marriage contract, is read aloud between the two ceremonies. This is a standard contract written in Aramaic (nowadays frequently translated) where only the names and the date are changed. In this contract, the groom commits himself to honouring and providing for his bride, and promises her a certain sum of money. Today, this sum is only symbolic. The groom then presents the *ketuba* to the bride. After that, the real marriage ceremony begins. Seven blessings are recited over the wine, the groom drinks once more and now passes the glass himself to the bride. Then the groom crushes the glass with his right foot on the floor and the guests shout "Mazal tov" (or "Mazel tov" in Yiddish). In some communities it is traditional for the groom to recite the following words after this:

> "If I forget thee, o Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let my tongue cleave to my palate if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy." (Psalm 137:5-7).

In Ashkenazi and Yemenite communities, the couple usually retire then for a certain time before the celebration or wedding feast with music and dance. This is not common in the Sephardic tradition, where the couple only get time alone on their wedding night.

Have a look at how a typical Sephardic wedding proceeds in Israel on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v451BqxsaDw&feature=related

4. Married Life – the Jewish Home

Religion is not confined to religious services, but also and primarily practised in customs and traditions at home. This is particularly true of Judaism, which was throughout its history often a minority religion in the societies where it existed. But what is typical of a Jewish home?

The Mezuzah

A mezuzah is a long, narrow case which is hung on the doorposts of each room and the front doorway. It contains a piece of parchment with the verses from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21.

Read these verses from the Bible to find out why the Mezuzot are hung on the doorposts.

Food and Dishes

In devout Jewish households there are two of many items: especially cooking utensils and dishes. This is because of the Jewish dietary laws, the *kashrut*. To eat and live *kosher*, one must follow these laws.

The most important elements of the *kashrut* are the ban on eating meat and dairy products together, the ban on consuming particular kinds of animals, and the *shechita* as the only permissible method of slaughter.

Animals with cloven hooves who chew the cud are permitted. This rules out the consumption of, for example, pork (pigs have cloven hooves, but do not chew the cud). Yet hare and horse meat are also forbidden. There are also restrictions on the consumption of seafood: only fish with fins and scales are permitted, thus excluding all shellfish, including prawns, etc. The separation of milk and meat is based on a sentence which occurs three times in the Torah: in Exodus 23:19, 34:26, and Deuteronomy 14:21.

Read these sections of the Bible and try to find out the reasons behind the separation of milk and meat.

Later, complex rules were established to regulate the sequence of and intervals between meals with meat and milk. These differ in the different branches of Judaism. However, in general breakfast and dinner are *milchig* (dairy-based) and lunch is *flesishig* (meaty). The Sabbath and feast days are exceptions to this rule. The solemn evening meal on Friday evenings is usually *flesishig*, while the midday meal is *milchig*. To avoid contact between milk and meat, religious households usually have two different sets of kitchen utensils and dishes, which are also washed in separate sinks.
There is also a third category of food, which is neither *milchig* nor *flesishig* and can thus be eaten with either kind of meal. This is called *parve*.
The food industry has developed a range of products to substitute milk in particular. For example, in Israel ice-cream is generally *parve*, i.e. not made of cream, so that it may be eaten as a dessert or during the day without breaking *kashrut* laws.

The American ice cream „Parvelicious"
(http://www.coroflot.com/solgabrielli/packaging/21?country=7&)

Stricter kosher rules apply at *Pessach*/Passover (see below).

Shabbat (Sabbath)

The Shabbat is the last day of the week and marks its high point as a day of rest. The seven days of the week represent the seven days in which God created the world, and people are

supposed to rest on the seventh day just as God did. The sanctification of the Shabbat is one of the Ten Commandments and must therefore be taken very seriously.

A visit to the Synagogue is compulsory on Shabbat eve (Friday evening) and on the following morning. As any kind of work, including household work, is forbidden on the day of rest, the warm meals for the Shabbat are prepared in advance during the day on Friday and kept warm until they are served. The evening meal begins with the lighting of two candles and a blessing recited over the wine. On the Shabbat itself, religious Jews go to the Synagogue once again in the morning. The rest of the day should be spent reading Holy Scripture and resting in a solemn atmosphere.

5. Divorce

Not every marriage lasts until death, and divorce is possible in Judaism. The *ketuba* states that in the event of divorce, the wife is entitled to the sum promised her there. If she is to blame for the marriage breakdown, she is still entitled to the dowry. For antiquity, when the text of the *ketuba* was first composed, this safeguarding of the wife's welfare is very progressive. Today both partners must usually agree to issue the document of divorce, or *get*. This means that either partner can prevent the other from re-marrying by refusing to issue the *get*.
Childlessness is the most common reason for divorce in Orthodox communities, as here the instruction "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28) is understood as an imperative.
The film *Kadosh* (1999) by the Israeli director Amos Gitai describes such a story.

6. Death

After death, the corpse is washed and dressed as psalms and prayers are recited over it. As the belief in bodily resurrection is integral to Judaism, it is important to bury the whole body with all its parts. In Israel, ZAKA, a voluntary humanitarian organisation, tries to collect and identify all the body parts of victims at the scenes of accidents or attacks so that they can have a Jewish burial.
In accordance with the *Halacha*, the law based on the Bible and rabbinic literature, burial must take place as soon as possible after death, ideally within two days.
As a sign of mourning, mourners make a tear in their outer garments. Jews are buried in a simple linen cloth without a coffin. The mourners recite the *Kaddish*, one of the most important prayers in Judaism. The closest male relative of the deceased person is also obliged to recite the *Kaddish* daily for the next eleven months in remembrance of him/her.
The family of the deceased person sit *shiva* (Hebrew for seven) for the first seven days after his/her death. During this time, the family home is open for visits from friends and relatives of the deceased to call and pay their condolence to the bereaved. The mirrors are covered over, and as a sign of mourning, the bereaved usually sit on low stools, or on the floor.

For an impression of how shiva proceeds in a secular household in Israel, watch the short film on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqZ8qClcb_g&feature=related (the first three minutes are enough).

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Festivals in the Jewish Calendar

The Jewish calendar follows the lunar year, i.e. each Jewish month is oriented on the lunar cycle. However, the months do not shift outside the seasons as in Islam. The addition of a leap month every few years ensures that the months, and therefore also feast days, always occur in the same season. The Jewish calendar begins with the creation. We are currently (2010-2011) in the year 5771. The Jewish New Year begins in the autumn.

1. Rosh Hashanah ("head of the year")

The New Year's festival (on 29 September in 2011) Rosh Hashanah is a religious feast day celebrated by Jewish families. It derives from the Torah, more precisely from the Bible passages Leviticus 23:24-25 and Numbers 29:1-6.
Rosh Hashanah is the first of the ten days of penance (*ha-yamim ha-nora'im*, the terrible days). On this first day, the various deeds of the year just passed are recorded. Judgement is passed only on Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is a happy day on which people go to the Synagogue to pray and listen to the blowing of the *shofar* (ram's horn).
Traditionally on Rosh Hashanah people eat *challah*, a round yeast bread, as well as apples with honey, fish heads, and pomegranate seeds. People wish each other "*Shana tova u-mektukah!*", a good and sweet new year, or "*le-shana tova tikatvu!*", may you be inscribed and sealed in the book of life (this refers to the idea that on Rosh Hashanah, the time for taking stock of the old year and determining the new year begins.)

Rosh Hashanah postcard with the greeting "Shana Tova"
(http://www.ikid.co.il/הנשה-שאר/יללכ/ם-ידליל-תובתכ)

Look at the postcard. What elements of Rosh Hashanah customs does it illustrate?

2. Yom Kippur (on 8 October 2011)

Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, is the highest Jewish feast day. Religious Jews spend it in the Synagogue. Like all other Jewish feast days, it starts at sun-set. The evening service begins with the prayer *Kol nidre* ("all vows"). There is a focus on repentance and atonement on Yom Kippur. It is the most important fast day in the Jewish calendar – from one sunset to the next people are not supposed to eat or drink. Religious Jews also dress in white, refrain from wearing leather shoes, and abstain from sexual intercourse.

Many secular Jews also observe this day as a day of fasting and, at least, rest. In Israel there is an unspoken agreement that no cars should be driven on Yom Kippur. For this reason, many secular families undertake long bicycle trips, as even the busier roads are car-free. Before Yom Kippur, people wish each other "*Gmar Chatina tova*!" thus expressing the hope that the inscription into the book of life, which began on Rosh Hashanah, will have a positive outcome. Another typical greeting is "*Tzom kal*", which means "have an easy fast".

The usually very busy Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv on Yom Kippur 2006/5777
(bviehmann)

3. Sukkot – The Festival of Booths/Tabernacles (from 13-19 October in 2011)

Sukkot, the week-long Festival of Booths or Tabernacles, begins just five days after Yom Kippur. It recalls the period of wandering in the desert after the exodus from Egypt when Jews had to live in temporary shelters known as booths, or tabernacles. On these feast days, Jews are supposed to spend as much time as possible in the *sukka* (booth), and use this time to study the Torah. Religious Jews see it as their duty to sleep in the *sukka* for the entire week, while secular families often just use it for eating and receiving guests. On their way to the Synagogue, and where possible on any other journeys by foot, religious men carry a palm branch in one hand and a citrus fruit in the other. For some impressions of *Sukkot* in a religious suburb in Israel watch the following clip: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nbC9D3yrBY&feature=related

4. Hanukkah – the Festival of Lights

Hanukkah is a relatively recent holiday. There is no reference to it in the Bible and it is not based on any passage from the Bible. It commemorates the rededication of the Temple (the word Hanukkah means dedication), the Hasmonean revolt, and the miracle of the oil in the year 164 BCE. On conquering Jerusalem, the Maccabees wanted to rededicate the Temple by lighting the menorah, a traditional lamp. However, there was only enough oil to burn for one day. But miraculously, the oil lasted for eight whole days, until the arrival of new supplies. The central Hanukkah ritual is the lighting of a nine-branched candelabrum, the *Hanukiah*. Its eight candles

symbolize the eight days for which the oil lasted (the ninth raised candle is used only to light the other eight.) During Hanukkah every evening a further candle is lit, until all nine are burning on the last day.

Hanukkah is one of many religious holidays (including Christian feast days) celebrating light at the darkest time of the year. For a long time, it was not a very important holiday, and is still not seen as particularly significant from a religious point of view. However, Zionists were quick to recognize the symbolism in Hanukkah's commemoration of assertive, militant Jewish groupings, which corresponded to the Zionist Jewish identity. For this reason, Hanukkah was promoted to a central holiday by the Zionist movement. Around the same time, the bourgeois holiday Christmas gained importance in Central Europe (especially in Germany). Hanukkah, which often coincides with or comes just before Christmas, offered Jews an alternative holiday where family members could exchange gifts.

It is traditional to eat s*ufganiot* at Hanukkah, a pastry cooked in oil, which looks and tastes like a donut.

Hanukiah
(http://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/חנוכה)

5. Purim (on 7-8 March 2012)

Purim is also not a high feast day, but a two-day holiday in commemoration of the deliverance of the Jewish people under Persian rule, as described in the Book of Esther. Less importance is attached to it as it does not derive from the Torah (the Five Books of Moses), but only from one of the so-called "scriptures". At Purim the Book of Esther is read in the Synagogue.

It is traditional to dress in fancy dress at Purim, making it a particularly popular holiday among children. Other elements of the Purim holiday include wine-drinking (in some religious communities, it is compulsory to get drunk once a year at Purim), eating so-called Haman's ears, and making noise with a Purim gragger.

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Purim gragger and Haman's ears
(http://www.redjuderias.org/red/novedades.php?lang=2)

Read the book of Esther and try to figure out the reasons behind the various Purim customs.

6. *Pessach*/Passover (from 6-14 April 2012)

After Yom Kippur, *Pessach* is the second most important holiday in the Jewish calendar. It commemorates the exodus of the Jews from Egypt. The week-long holiday begins with a festive dinner on *Leyl ha-Seder* known as the Seder Passover. During the meal, the so-called Passover *Haggadah* is read. Even for the most secular Jews around the world, the Seder Passover is still the most important family holiday.

To get an impression of a typical Seder Passover in a secular family watch the following clip: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlPMsG2DTY

The reading from the *Haggadah* lasts several hours with particular foods eaten as particular sections are read to symbolize the wandering of the Jewish people during their years of exodus. The text is often written in the form of questions and answers. At the end of the Seder Passover people wish each other "*Ba-shana ha-baa bi-yirushalaim*", next year in Jerusalem.
On the evening before the first Seder-Passover, Jews remove all foods containing *chametz* (leavening) from their homes, in particular bread. Over the course of the next seven days, Jews are not permitted to eat leavened bread or have it in their homes. As a substitute, matzo, a kind of unleavened flatbread, is eaten. In addition, during Passover only foods certified as "kosher for Pessach" may be consumed.
In Israel even burgers and sandwiches are made using matzos instead of bread or buns during *Pessach*. The matzos are usually placed in water or oil beforehand, so they can be rolled and folded.

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Matzos
(http://www.chef-lavan.co.il/ItemPics/Recipes/3881/תוצמ.jpg)

The order to observe *Pessach* is found in the Book of Exodus 12:1-20. The first and last days of *Pessach* are feast days, while on the remaining five days it is forbidden to eat leavened bread and work is restricted (for example in Israel, people generally only work half-days on these days.)

Read the passage from the Book of Exodus 12: 14-16 and try to figure out why leavened foods are prohibited at Pessach.

7. Shavuot – The Festival of Weeks (26-28 May 2012)

The Festival of Weeks celebrates the harvest of the first fruits. At Shavuot it is traditional to consume mainly milk products. Zionism in particular rediscovered the festival as a celebration especially suited to rural communities. Today, it is still observed in Kibbutzim as a way of celebrating their harvests.

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Judaism(s)

"Three Jews, four opinions" – so goes a Jewish saying, which could also be said of many other religions. Judaism first arose over three hundred years ago and Jews live all over the world. It would therefore be very strange, if there were no variations in their traditions and in their interpretation of their faith.
Historically, a distinction is made between two major groups within Judaism – Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews.
"With the Christianization of the Roman Empire (in the fourth century) and the Arab conquests, the Jewish community became an ethnic minority within states under Christian and Islamic rule. This led to the development of two main forms of Jewish culture: the Sephardic (from the Hebrew word for Spain, *Sefarad*) under the influence of the Arabic-Islamic environment, and the Ashkenazi (from the Hebrew word for Germany, *Ashkenas*) in Christian Europe. In Spain, North Africa, and the Near East, Sephardic Jews shaped a distinct Jewish way of life. In medieval Europe, the cultural centres of Judaism were found in the South of France, the Rhineland, and Northern Italy, until Ashkenazi Jews were forced to take refuge in Central and Eastern Europe as a result of widespread persecution from the twelfth century onwards."[1]

This distinction is both correct and important – even today Israel has both an Ashkenazi and a Sephardic Chief Rabbi. In the Second Module, we will examine both groups in greater detail.
However, in religious traditions and lifestyle nowadays, other factors play a far more important role.
Rosenthal and Homolka[2] broadly distinguish between three main tendencies in modern Judaism – progressive (divided into Reform and Conservative Judaism), Orthodox, and Ultra-Orthodox. This distinction is appropriate as it describes differences in the lifestyles of the three groups.
Today's religious tendencies cannot be summed up in just a few sentences. In what follows only the most striking differences between both poles are described.[3]

Progressive or Reform Judaism:

In Reform Judaism, Judaism is conceived as a continually changing religion. The prophetic ideals of social justice and ethically responsible action represent the fundamental pillars of Judaism. Yet in Reform Judaism, the *Halacha*, the law based on rabbinic literature and the Bible, and the *Mitzvot*, the religious commandments, are recognized as man-made and thus subject to re-interpretation.
The Bible is understood to be an assembly of human thoughts, collected over centuries. It may thus contain statements, which appear inappropriate or even wrong in the modern context.
The *Mitzvot* too may be subject to critical reappraisals, and if necessary, abandoned. This applies to many cleansing rituals, *kashrut* rules, and the rule to rest on the Sabbath. The initiators of Reform Judaism in nineteenth century Germany suggested abolishing circumcision and transferring the Sabbath to Sundays for practical reasons. Yet today, these ideas are inconceivable.
The belief that Jews can live in any part of the world and must not strive to "return" to Israel is another feature which distinguishes Reform from Orthodox Judaism.

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[1] Galley, Susanne: Das Judentum, Frankfurt/Main, 2006, p. 17.
[2] Rosenthal, Gilbert S. and Homolka, Walter, Das Judentum hat viele Gesichter. Die religiösen Strömungen der Gegenwart, Munich, 1999.
[3] Based mainly on ibid.

The equality of the sexes is given high priority in Reform Judaism. Women may be ordained as Rabbis and are permitted to read from the Torah. There is no *Mitzva* valid only for men.
There is a well-known joke on the role of women, which goes as follows:

> "How do you know if you're at an Orthodox, a Conservative, or a Reformist wedding?
> - At an Orthodox wedding the mother of the bride is pregnant, at a conservative wedding the bride is pregnant, and at a reformist wedding the rabbi is pregnant."

The first ever woman to be ordained a rabbi was Regina Jonas in Berlin in 1935. The first woman rabbi to be ordained in Germany since the end of World War II was Alina Treiger in 2010. And the first woman rabbi to be ordained in France was Pauline Bèbe in 1990.

Orthodox Judaism:

Of all tendencies in Judaism, Orthodox Judaism is the least homogenous and also the least institutionalized. However, there are a number of general features:
In contrast to Reform Judaism, the Torah is seen as the direct revealed word of God. Thus the words and commandments of the Torah are binding. This applies not only to the Five Books of Moses, the written Torah, but also to the so-called Oral Torah, the interpretation of the biblical text in the Jewish tradition. The commandments enshrined in the latter are no less important than those of the written Torah. While Reform Judaism acknowledges that the laws and commandments arose in a particular context, in Orthodox Judaism it is assumed that all *mitzvot* have a higher moral purpose, even if this is not immediately apparent. The fact that the believer does not understand a commandment is no reason for it to be abandoned – on the contrary.

Men and women have separate tasks, as determined in the Torah. For Orthodox Judaism, no religious purpose is served by a man assuming women's tasks and vice-versa. Orthodox rabbis have repeatedly pointed out that this does not constitute discrimination against women, claiming that they simply have different tasks from those fulfilled by men. However, the following three lines from the morning prayer would seem to contradict this claim: "Blessed are You who has not made me a heathen! Blessed are You who has not made me a woman! Blessed are You who has not made me an uncouth person!"
For an insight into Progressive Judaism, which arose before World War II in Germany and is today a significant branch of Judaism in the USA, we again recommend the Hollywood comedy "*Keeping the Faith*". The Israeli film "*Kadosh*" mentioned above gives an impression of how ultra-orthodox Jews live in Israel.

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For Further Reading:

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http://www.hagalil.com (this page is addressed to Jews and non-Jews alike. It deals with Judaism and Israel and provides extensive information on feast days and other customs)
http://www.de.chabad.org/ (page of the Hassidic Group Chabad with information and tips on Jewish life)
http://www.liberale-juden.de/cms/index.php (Page of the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany)

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Robinson, George: Essential Judaism : a complete guide to beliefs, customs, and rituals. New York: Pocket Books, 2000

http://www.chabad.org (page of the Hassidic Group Chabad with information and tips on Jewish life)
http://www.wupj.org (page of the World Union for Progressive Judaism)
http://urj.org (page of the Union for Reform Judaism)
http://www.ou.org (page of the Orthodox Union)

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