A synagogue, or ‘shul’, is a meeting place where Jewish people gather together every week for worship and other activities. The synagogue’s main room is used for worship, but there are other rooms used for study, meetings, and social activities.

The main feature of the synagogue is the Aron Hakodesh, or Holy Ark. In front of the Ark burns an everlasting light (the Ner Tamid), which symbolizes the presence of God and reminds Jews of the lamp that burned at all times in the Temple in Jerusalem. During worship, the Torah scrolls are taken from the Ark to a raised platform (the Bimah).

The Torah (see Unit 2.1) is treated with great love and respect. It is ‘dressed’ in a beautiful mantle and adorned with a silver breastplate. When the Torah is read, the parchment is not touched, to avoid damaging it. Instead, the Hebrew words are followed using a yad.

Synagogues are much more than places of worship. They provide a range of different activities including cheder (children’s Hebrew classes), nursery schools, clubs and venues for celebrations.

• In Orthodox synagogues, three services take place at different times of day: morning prayer (Shacharit); afternoon (Mincha), and evening (Ma’ariv). Saturday morning (Shabbat) is the most popular time to attend – when prayer is usually led by the rabbi (or the chazan), and there is reading from the Sefer Torah. Women and older girls sit in a gallery separate from the men, while younger girls sit with their fathers or brothers. Orthodox synagogues use the Hebrew language.

• Progressive synagogues tend not to hold three prayer services a day – concentrating more on Shabbat and festivals. Men, women and children sit together. They also pray in both English and Hebrew, and the participation of women is encouraged.

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Belonging to the Jewish Faith
3.3 Synagogues in the Community

Learning Objectives
In this unit you will:
• explore the importance of synagogues for Jewish people
• identify and explain the key features of synagogues
• evaluate the communal activities in your own life.

Useful Words
Aron Hakodesh/Holy Ark
A special cupboard where the Torah scrolls are kept
chazan
Leader of reading, singing and chanting in the services of some synagogues
yad
A pointer in the shape of a hand, used when reading the Torah

Activities
1 Write as if you were a Torah scroll, telling small children – in a way they would understand – about your different parts and how you like to be treated.
2 Create an eye-catching poster advertising a week’s activities for either an Orthodox or a Progressive synagogue, including prayer services.
3 At a synagogue Jewish people come together to pray and worship, learn about their faith and meet with friends. Which of these do you think should be the most important? Why? Compare and discuss your ideas.
3.7 Celebrating Life Changes: Bar and Bat Mitzvah

Learning Objectives

In this unit you will:
- explain how life-stages are responded to in Judaism
- evaluate real experiences of Jewish rituals and celebrations
- reflect on your views about celebrating life-stages.

Case Study

Nina and Shuli Morris (from the Jewish Reform Movement) explain different Jewish life-stages, and what the Jewish community does to respond to them:

Judaism gives you a marriage ceremony, and there is a given ceremony for when you become Bar and Bat Mitzvah. Judaism also tells you what to say when someone dies. It is very good at making sure the community supports mourners, and there are systems to make sure the grieving family is well looked after—cooking food for them, for example.

As a religion, Judaism really focuses on those important times, and integrates itself into the rhythm of human life. When a boy is born they have brit milah, which is particular to boys when they are eight days old. At a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, they wish you a life of Torah, huppah and masim tovim. I think that’s a good tag-line! In a Reform Jewish Bar or Bat Mitzvah there is no difference between what we [girls] did and what a boy in our community would do. We both read from the Torah. We received a prayer shawl— a tallit. You wear it as an adult. The first time you wear it is at your Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

Case Study

There is great excitement about the planning of Bar and Bat Mitzvah coming-of-age ceremonies within Jewish communities. Jordan and Lorrie Reznik explain what happens in Orthodox Judaism:

A Bar Mitzvah is when boys turn 13. They become obligated to do some of the mitzvot they were not obligated to before. Currently I am doing lessons. On your Bar Mitzvah day, you chant from the Torah and then you read from the Haftarah. After Bar Mitzvah, I can go to shul [synagogue] with my father and, instead of being in the background, I can daven.

A girl, when she turns 12, becomes Bat Mitzvah. I did a different preparation from Jordan. I said a speech called a D’vah Torah (words of Torah) instead of reading from the Torah. We had a celebration with my family and friends from all over.

Useful Words

| Bar Mitzvah | A Jewish boy’s coming of age at 13 years old |
| Bat Mitzvah | A Jewish girl’s coming of age at 12 or 13 years old |
| brit milah | Circumcision |
| daven | Recite prayers |
| Haftarah | Passages from Nevi’im (Prophets) |
| huppah | Happy marital home; also a wedding canopy |
| masim tovim | Good deeds |

Activities

1. What obligations might a Jewish young person have after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah? Create a mind-map with a partner.
2. What would be the impact of Bar or Bat Mitzvah? Write a reflection or poem on how you imagine it might affect a 12- or 13-year-old.
   - Marking occasions adds hugely to the enjoyment of life.
   - There’s no point in marking life occasions. Life goes on regardless.

Reflection

Which event on the journey of life do you think is the most important? Explain why.
Chapter 3 Assessment
Belonging to the Jewish Faith

Objectives
- Consider how Jewish people live day-to-day.
- Apply your knowledge about Judaism reflectively.
- Analyse the diversity in religious expression across the range of Jewish movements.

Task
Choose three of the most significant things that you have discovered about living day-to-day as a Jew. Write a magazine article explaining these for a target audience of young people who know nothing at all about Judaism. Write in a lively and interesting style.

A bit of guidance...
Explain any Hebrew or useful words in brackets as you go along.

To achieve the higher levels, you should show some understanding of any differences between the various Jewish movements in relation to your chosen themes, and also use a wide range of religious vocabulary in your answers.

Hints and tips
To help you tackle this task, you could consider some of the following themes:
- Dietary laws
- Shabbat observance
- Festivals
- Religious dress and what it means
- How life-stages are marked
- Sacred texts

I can...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Level 5</th>
<th>Level 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• describe some key features of Judaism</td>
<td>• show understanding of what it means to belong to the Jewish faith</td>
<td>• explain, using a wide range of religious vocabulary, the impact of belonging to the Jewish faith on individuals and communities</td>
<td>• use religious and philosophical language to evaluate the practice of Judaism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ask questions about what is involved in belonging to the Jewish faith</td>
<td>• explain how belonging to the Jewish faith impacts daily life</td>
<td>• make relevant links to my own life and experiences</td>
<td>• analyse the effect of different movements within the Jewish faith, and how they express their sense of belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• reflect on my own responses to answers.</td>
<td>• support answers with evidence.</td>
<td>• ask questions and suggest answers about different interpretations of sacred texts which impact on how Jewish people express their Judaism.</td>
<td>• analyse, using arguments and examples, how belonging to a faith group such as Judaism impacts on people’s sense of history and identity.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Ready for more?
When you have completed this task, you can also work on your skills for Levels 6 and 7, and perhaps even higher. This is an extension task.

Choose a theme from the hints and tips section that you did not write about in your article.

- Prepare a speech that includes a PowerPoint presentation aimed at conveying information and stimulating discussion. You could also include artefacts or outside speakers. Be inventive!
- Create a practical exercise which will help the audience to understand the topic.