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Understanding Judaism

Jewish interpretation and teaching, the expected Mashiach, and the sacred calendar.

In the traditional rabbinic expectation represented by Maimonides, the Messiah is a human Davidic king and teacher. He is not God incarnate. [1–4]

This expectation represents a major normative account, not every Jewish voice in every century. Ancient Jewish writings contain different expectations of redemption and different kinds of heavenly agents. Calling someone inspired, exalted, anointed, or even associated with divine names does not by itself establish that God has become that person.

A passage's meaning in its literary setting, its interpretation by Jewish readers, and a community's theological claims are related but distinct. Understanding these relationships allows the diversity of Jewish interpretation to remain visible.

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Names and terminology

Maimonides is also known as Rambam. Mashiach is the Hebrew term commonly rendered Messiah.



PaRDeS: four interpretive approaches

PaRDeS joins the initial letters of **peshat, remez, derash, and sod**. It is a useful map of interpretive approaches. It should not be treated as four universal school grades, ranks of rabbis, or a mandatory ladder that every Jewish reader climbs. The fourfold formulation is medieval; James T. Robinson locates its formalization in the thirteenth century. [5]

Peshat: meaning in context

Peshat attends to language, grammar, literary setting, and genre. Calling it the plain sense does not mean reading every expression as woodenly literal. Poetry can remain poetry, and a metaphor can have a contextual meaning. Robert Harris describes the development of medieval contextual commentary, particularly among northern French interpreters. [6]

Remez: hints and allusions

Remez looks for an indirect indication beyond the immediately apparent reading. In a familiar contemporary presentation, this includes word associations and numerical correspondences, or gematria. In some medieval classifications it instead emphasizes philosophical or allegorical interpretation. Its precise scope therefore depends on the author and period. [5,7]

Derash: interpretive exposition

Derash develops the text through exposition and interpretive argument. It can support legal reasoning, ethical instruction, or narrative expansion. It is not simply a modern preacher inventing an application. Rabbinic interpretations participate in inherited textual practices, debates, and traditions. [5,8]

Sod: esoteric or mystical meaning

Sod concerns hidden or mystical interpretation. In Kabbalistic readings, biblical language may be interpreted through the sefirot, divine names, or patterns of letters. This identifies a mode of reading; it does not mean that any proposed secret meaning is accepted by every Jewish authority. [5,7]

An important historical caution

The Talmudic story of four sages entering an orchard, or *pardes*, is not evidence that the later acronym already functioned as a first-century curriculum. The Jewish Encyclopedia explicitly warns against projecting that later scheme into the earlier story. And Shabbat 63a preserves the principle that a verse retains its plain meaning even when interpreted further. [9,10]



Terms that answer different questions

It helps to distinguish a **reading approach**, a **kind of material**, a **reasoning rule**, and a **teaching setting**. A single class can involve all four. None of these labels, by itself, certifies a teacher's authority or proves a proposed doctrine.

Midrash, halakhah, and aggadah

Midrash can refer to interpretive activity, an individual exposition, or a collected work of interpretations. Context tells you which meaning is intended. **Halakhah** concerns Jewish law and practice; **aggadah** generally refers to nonlegal material such as narratives, ethical reflection, and theological teaching. The distinction is useful, although legal discussions can contain stories and stories can carry legal or ethical implications. Sefaria's organization of halakhic midrash illustrates that midrash is not confined to storytelling. [8]

Shiur, d'var Torah, and havruta

A **shiur** is a lesson or class, often devoted to a Jewish text or subject. A **d'var Torah** is a Torah teaching or discourse, often a short reflection drawing on a biblical passage. **Havruta** is partnered study: two learners work through a text, question each other, and test their understandings. These describe how learning happens rather than a special level of scriptural meaning. [11–13]

Middot: rules of interpretation

Rabbinic **middot** are interpretive rules, distinct from the four PaRDeS categories. Two examples in the opening of the Sifra are **qal va-homer**, reasoning from a lesser case to a stronger case, and **gezerah shavah**, an analogy linking passages through shared language. The latter belongs to a disciplined rabbinic practice; identical English words in two translations do not automatically authorize a new doctrinal conclusion. [14]

A small example: Genesis 1:1

Naftali Silberberg's Chabad introduction illustrates several readings of the opening of Genesis: the ordinary account of creation; a numerical allusion to Rosh Hashanah; an exposition connecting creation with Israel and Torah; and a mystical reading through six divine attributes. These are examples within that interpretive tradition. They are not four independently established historical meanings of the sentence. [7]

Context, tradition, and interpretation

A contextual reading, a traditional exposition, and a mystical interpretation make different kinds of claims. Identifying an interpretation's approach and source preserves its value while making the claim clear.



What the Messiah does and teaches

Maimonides offers a particularly clear account in his *Mishneh Torah*. It gives concrete criteria rather than asking readers to identify a redeemer solely from an impressive title or unusual spiritual experience.

A ruler with a public task

In *Laws of Kings and Wars* 11, the expected figure comes from David's dynasty, studies and observes Torah, strengthens its observance, and leads Israel. Restoration includes rebuilding the Temple and gathering the dispersed. Maimonides distinguishes a presumptive candidate from one whose accomplishments establish the identification. Miracles are not a required credential, and the Torah is not replaced. [1]

A teacher with extraordinary wisdom

In *Laws of Repentance* 9:2, Maimonides describes the Davidic king as surpassing Solomon in knowledge and approaching Moses in prophecy. He instructs the people in God's way, and other nations come to hear him. The point is teaching that deepens knowledge and service of God. This passage does not supply a transcript of future lessons or a new curriculum that readers can reconstruct in advance. [2]

The setting for that teaching

Laws of Kings and Wars 12 depicts a world freed from war, hunger, and rivalry, with abundance and attention directed toward knowing God. Maimonides does not require an overturning of the natural order. He also cautions that disputed details and the sequence of end-time events are not securely known beforehand. That caution is part of the account, not an embarrassment to remove from it. [3]

Four prophetic passages to read alongside it

Isaiah 11:1–10: A ruler from Jesse's line, endowed with God's spirit, judges justly; the vision extends to peace and knowledge of God. [15]

Isaiah 2:2–4: Nations seek divine instruction from Zion, and warfare gives way to peace. [16]

Jeremiah 23:5–6: A righteous Davidic ruler governs justly, bringing security to Judah and Israel. [17]

Ezekiel 37:21–28: Gathering, national unity, a Davidic ruler, covenant, and divine sanctuary belong together. [18]

These passages supply themes for Jewish messianic interpretation. Their original literary settings and their later reception should still be distinguished. Christian readings may connect them to Jesus; that interpretive conclusion should not be silently attributed to Jewish sources.



Is the Messiah God embodied?

For Maimonides, the answer is no. His description of the Messiah and his account of God belong to the same theological system. Reading them together rules out identifying this human king as God incarnate. This conclusion follows from the relationship between his account of the Messiah and his teaching about God. [1,4]

What Maimonides says about God

In Foundations of the Torah 1:7-9, God's unity is unlike the unity of a physical object assembled from parts. God has no body or physical form. Biblical descriptions of divine hands, eyes, and similar bodily features are read figuratively. Within that framework, God is not one more embodied being in the world, however exceptional. [4]

Why the distinction matters

A person can act by God's commission without being God. A prophet can communicate God's instruction without becoming the divine source of that instruction. Likewise, receiving extraordinary wisdom, being chosen as king, or bringing redemption does not, by itself, change the person's identity into the Creator. The argument requires more than moving from "God acts through him" to "he is God."

Do titles settle the question?

They do not settle it on their own. Jeremiah 23:6 associates a name invoking the LORD and righteousness with the Davidic ruler. A careful reading asks what the name expresses and how the surrounding passage portrays the figure. A name that speaks about God is not, merely by containing divine language, proof of incarnation. The surrounding passage concerns just government and national security. [17]

And what about Christian belief?

Classical Christianity teaches that the eternal Son assumes a real human nature; it does not mean that God's divine nature is reduced to, or confined inside, a body. The Catholic Catechism states this distinction explicitly. [24] The disagreement with Maimonides therefore concerns divine unity and the Messiah's identity, not merely a crude image of a physical container.

A human Davidic redeemer

The traditional rabbinic Messiah, clearly articulated by Maimonides, is a human Davidic redeemer and teacher. Jewish texts also contain more varied imagery, whose meaning depends on its literary and historical setting.



What ancient and mystical texts add

The clearest answer is not always the whole history. Maimonides gives a powerful normative formulation, but earlier apocalyptic writings and later mystical traditions raise different questions. They should neither be ignored nor turned into evidence for a conclusion they do not state.

Daniel: a heavenly vision with several readings

Daniel 7:13–14 portrays a humanlike figure approaching the Ancient of Days and receiving dominion. Verses 18 and 27 connect the kingdom with the holy ones. Rashi reads the figure in verse 13 as the Messiah. These details matter, but the chapter does not narrate God becoming a human infant or identify Jesus. [19]

Scholars disagree over the history and identity of the figure. Daniel Boyarin argues for a divine or heavenly reading rooted in ancient Israelite traditions. His argument is a scholarly position, not a consensus statement of what every ancient Jew believed. The interpretation of Daniel cannot be settled simply by applying a later PaRDeS label. [20]

Enoch: preexistence is a different claim

In 1 Enoch 48, the Son of Man is named before creation and hidden with God. This is important evidence for an exalted, preexistent redeemer in some ancient Jewish literature. John J. Collins discusses the preexistence question and the disputed relationship to Enoch in chapter 71. None of those descriptions, by itself, states the later Christian doctrine of incarnation. [21]

Hasidism and divine presence

Some Hasidic sources use unusually strong language about divine presence in a righteous leader. Shaul Magid studies such material through the category of incarnational thinking. The meaning and implications of that language are debated. It would be inaccurate either to declare that Jewish sources never use embodiment language or to treat it as a universal Jewish doctrine. Nor should it be assumed to be identical to classical Christian incarnation. [22]

For comparison, Chabad's mainstream introductory presentation identifies the Messiah as a human leader descended from David. One mystical expression, one community, and one messianist interpretation cannot responsibly stand for all Judaism or all Chabad. [23]

Other expectations also exist

Sukkah 52a distinguishes Messiah son of Joseph from Messiah son of David in its discussion. Contemporary Reform teaching often emphasizes a messianic age pursued through ethical human cooperation with God, rather than waiting for a personal king. Neither qualification should be erased by treating Maimonides as every Jew's position. [23]

Texts in their historical settings

Authorship, date, genre, and a text's explicit claims help distinguish an exalted agent from a figure identified as God. Later doctrines are not automatically present in earlier language.



The Jewish year

The Jewish year includes annual observances, fasts, recurring holy days, and community traditions. Practice differs among movements, communities, families, and individuals. A custom can be deeply meaningful without being a command in the Torah.

Dates and the day's boundaries

Hebrew calendar dates begin in the evening. Shabbat and major festival restrictions begin before sunset and end after nightfall; exact times depend on location. Most minor fasts begin at dawn instead. The Hebrew calendar follows lunar months while keeping festivals in their seasons through leap years. An added Adar I precedes Adar II, when Purim is celebrated. Nisan begins the Torah's festival-month numbering; the year number changes at Rosh Hashanah in Tishrei. [25]

Shabbat: the weekly Sabbath

When: Friday evening through Saturday night. **Meaning:** sacred rest, creation, and liberation.

Practices: candles before sunset, Kiddush over wine or grape juice, shared meals, prayer, Torah reading, and refraining from traditionally defined categories of work. Havdalah marks its close. Its Torah foundations include Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15. [26]

Rosh Chodesh: the new month

When: the first day of a Hebrew month, plus the preceding month's thirtieth day when there is one. Biblical new-moon offerings appear in Numbers 28:11–15. Current observance includes additional prayers and Torah reading; some communities hold women's gatherings. It is ordinarily not a full work-prohibited festival. [26]

Three terms that prevent confusion

Yom Tov: a festival day with special traditional work restrictions. These rules are not identical to Shabbat's.

Chol HaMoed: the intermediate days of Passover and Sukkot, with their own rules.

Pilgrimage festivals: Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot, associated with pilgrimage to the sanctuary in the Torah. [25]

Israel and the diaspora

Many diaspora communities observe additional festival days; many Reform communities do not. Rosh Hashanah is traditionally two days even in Israel, while Reform practice varies. Yom Kippur is one day everywhere. A calendar for the particular community is the best guide to actual observance. [27]



Freedom, counting, and receiving Torah

Pesach / Passover • 15–21 Nisan, or through 22

The Torah distinguishes the Passover offering on 14 Nisan from the seven-day Festival of Unleavened Bread beginning on the 15th. Today Pesach generally names the whole period. It lasts seven days in Israel and many Reform communities, eight in many diaspora communities. The seder retells the Exodus through readings, symbolic foods, and questions. Matzah is eaten and chametz avoided; traditional diaspora practice has two seders. The first and last festival days have special work restrictions, with Chol HaMoed between. The Temple sacrifice is not performed in present-day mainstream practice. [25,28]

Fast of the Firstborn • Normally 14 Nisan

A later custom recalls the sparing of Israelite firstborn in Egypt. Traditionally it primarily concerns firstborn males; joining a siyum, the completion of a tractate, and its celebratory meal commonly replaces fasting. Scheduling exceptions apply near Shabbat. [28]

Omer and firstfruits • From 16 Nisan

In rabbinic Judaism, the ancient barley-sheaf offering is associated with 16 Nisan, which begins the forty-nine-day count to Shavuot. The offering belonged to Temple worship; counting remains a living practice. “Firstfruits” should not be presented as a separate, universally observed modern Jewish feast. Shavuot itself is also called the day of firstfruits in Numbers 28:26. Some non-rabbinic traditions calculate differently. [25,29]

Pesach Sheni • 14 Iyar

Numbers 9 provides a second opportunity for eligible people who missed the Passover sacrifice. Some now eat matzah in remembrance. It is not another week-long Passover. [29]

Lag BaOmer • 18 Iyar

The thirty-third day of the Omer has later traditions associated with Rabbi Akiva's disciples and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Outings, celebrations, and sometimes bonfires mark it. Omer mourning customs and their suspension vary. [29]

Shavuot / Weeks • 6 Sivan, also 7 in many diaspora communities

A Torah harvest and pilgrimage festival follows seven counted weeks. Rabbinic tradition connects it with receiving Torah at Sinai. Customs include study, sometimes through the night, reading Ruth, dairy foods, and greenery. Ancient firstfruit offerings and later Sinai commemorations are related layers, not identical historical origins. [25,30]



Repentance, shelter, and renewed reading

Elul and Selichot • Before Rosh Hashanah

Elul is a season of self-examination, charity, and repairing relationships. Many communities sound a shofar on weekdays. Selichot are penitential prayers: many Sephardi communities begin after Rosh Chodesh Elul; Ashkenazi communities begin on a Saturday night sufficiently before Rosh Hashanah. [31]

Rosh Hashanah / Yom Teruah • 1–2 Tishrei traditionally

The Torah describes a day of sounding or remembrance on the first of the seventh month. Later tradition develops its New Year and judgment themes. Shofar, prayer, festive meals, and symbolic foods such as apples and honey are familiar practices; Tashlich is a later custom. It begins the Ten Days of Repentance through Yom Kippur. [25,27,31]

Yom Kippur / Day of Atonement • 10 Tishrei

A Torah holy day of atonement, self-denial, and cessation of work. Traditional observance includes fasting from before sunset to the next nightfall, confession, and extended prayer. Making amends for harm done to other people is essential. Health exemptions matter; see the fasting note on page 10. [25,32]

Sukkot / Booths • 15–21 Tishrei

A Torah pilgrimage and harvest festival recalls wilderness dwelling. Eating in the sukkah, taking the four species including lulav and etrog, and joyful worship are central traditional practices. The first day is Yom Tov in Israel and the first two in many diaspora communities; the remaining days are Chol HaMoed. [25,33]

Hoshana Rabbah • 21 Tishrei

The seventh day of Sukkot has distinctive later liturgy: seven processions with hoshanot prayers and a willow ritual in traditional communities. It is within Sukkot, not an additional eighth day. [33]

Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah • 22–23 Tishrei

Shemini Atzeret, the eighth-day assembly on 22 Tishrei, is a separate Torah festival adjoining Sukkot; prayer for rain is prominent. Simchat Torah is the later celebration of completing and restarting the annual Torah-reading cycle, with singing and dancing with scrolls. They coincide on 22 Tishrei in Israel and many one-day communities. Traditional diaspora practice celebrates Shemini Atzeret on the 22nd and Simchat Torah on the 23rd. [25,33]



Celebration, remembrance, and fasting

Hanukkah / Dedication • Eight days from 25 Kislev

A rabbinic festival commemorates the Temple's Maccabean-era rededication; the oil miracle is central to rabbinic tradition. A light is added each night on a hanukkiah. Songs, praise, and oil-cooked foods are common. Hanukkah has no general Yom Tov work prohibition. [34]

Tu BiShvat • 15 Shevat

The rabbinic new year for trees is rooted in agricultural law. Later practices include eating fruit and a special seder; environmental themes are prominent in some contemporary observances. [34]

Purim and its related dates • Adar

Purim on 14 Adar is established in Esther 9, part of Tanakh but outside the Five Books of the Torah. Reading the Megillah, food gifts, gifts to people in need, and a festive meal are central; costumes are a later custom. Jerusalem and qualifying ancient walled cities observe Shushan Purim on the 15th. In leap years full observance is in Adar II; 14–15 Adar I are the minor markers Purim Katan and Shushan Purim Katan. Purim has no general Yom Tov work prohibition. [35]

The fasts of historical remembrance

17 Tammuz: mourning Jerusalem's breached defenses and other calamities; starts the Three Weeks.

Tisha B'Av, 9 Av: destruction of the Temples and later tragedies; Lamentations, elegies, and mourning. Many communities intensify mourning during the Nine Days from 1 Av.

Fast of Gedaliah, normally 3 Tishrei: the governor's assassination after the First Temple's destruction.

10 Tevet: the beginning of the Babylonian siege.

Fast of Esther, normally 13 Adar: later fast before Purim, recalling fasting and deliverance; not the date of Esther's original three-day fast. [36]

Tu B'Av • 15 Av

An ancient festive day associated in rabbinic literature with courtship and joy; it is sometimes celebrated today as a day of love. [36]

Fast-day care and timing

Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av run from evening to nightfall; other public fasts listed here generally run from dawn to nightfall. Some dates shift around Shabbat. Health exemptions are important: do not endanger health to fast. Seek individual guidance from a clinician and rabbi when eating or drinking is medically necessary. [32,36]



Other important days in the year

These observances are not Torah-commanded festivals. Participation, religious interpretation, and preferred language vary. Modern national dates sometimes move to avoid conflict with Shabbat; the dates below are their nominal Hebrew dates. Community traditions extend well beyond the examples included here.

Yom HaShoah • Normally 27 Nisan

Holocaust and heroism remembrance. Memorial ceremonies and education honor victims and preserve testimony. Its date can shift. [37]

Yom HaZikaron • Normally 4 Iyar

Israel's memorial day for fallen service members and victims of hostile acts, immediately before Independence Day. Ceremonies and moments of silence are prominent. Its date can shift with Independence Day. [37]

Yom HaAtzmaut • Normally 5 Iyar

Israel's Independence Day is marked by civic celebrations; some communities add religious thanksgiving. Its religious status and observance differ across Jewish communities. [37]

Yom Yerushalayim • 28 Iyar

Jerusalem Day commemorates Israel's taking control of East Jerusalem and the Old City in 1967, celebrated by some as reunification. Participation and interpretations vary. [37]

Mimouna • After Passover

A Moroccan Jewish celebration of hospitality, beginning after Passover and continuing the following day. Sweet foods such as mufletta are associated with it. It is now celebrated more widely as well. [38]

Sigd • 29 Cheshvan

An Ethiopian Jewish, or Beta Israel, observance of covenant renewal, involving fasting, communal prayer, and Scripture, followed by celebration. It is also officially recognized in Israel. [38]

Interpretation, belief, and practice

Jewish texts invite different kinds of interpretation; messianic beliefs draw on particular sources and communities; holy days bring together historical origins, religious meanings, and living practices. Attention to these distinctions preserves clarity and respect for differences.



Texts and scholarship

Primary theological texts, institutional explanations, and historical scholarship offer distinct perspectives. Some publisher links provide an abstract or overview rather than the complete work.

- [1] Maimonides, Laws of Kings and Wars 11:1–4.
- [2] Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 9:2.
- [3] Maimonides, Laws of Kings and Wars 12:1–5.
- [4] Maimonides, Foundations of the Torah 1:7–9.
- [5] James T. Robinson, Philosophy and Science in Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Bible (2012), chapter summary.
- [6] Robert Harris, On the Origins of Peshat Commentary (2021).
- [7] Naftali Silberberg, How Is the Torah Interpreted?
- [8] Sefaria, Midrash: Halakhah; collection overview.
- [9] Jewish Encyclopedia, Bible Exegesis, section on Pardes.
- [10] Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 63a.
- [11] Jewish English Lexicon, shiur.
- [12] Reform Judaism, How to Write a D'var Torah.
- [13] Pardes Institute, Text Comes Alive at Pardes; havruta learning.
- [14] Sifra, Baraita DeRabbi Yishmael 1–3.
- [15] Isaiah 11:1–10.
- [16] Isaiah 2:2–4.
- [17] Jeremiah 23:5–6.
- [18] Ezekiel 37:21–28.
- [19] Daniel 7; Rashi on Daniel 7:13:1 (commentary available beside the text). Rashi on Daniel 7:13
- [20] Daniel Boyarin, Daniel 7, Intertextuality, and the History of Israel's Cult, Harvard Theological Review.
- [21] 1 Enoch 48 (Livius excerpt); see also John J. Collins, Is the Son of Man Pre-existent and Enthroned? Collins discussion
- [22] Shaul Magid, Hasidism Incarnate (2014); publisher overview.
- [23] Chabad.org, Who Is Moshiach (the Jewish Messiah)? Sukkah 52a · Reform messianic-age explanation
- [24] Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraphs 461, 464, 469–470.



Festivals, practices, and community days

The Torah passages establish biblical foundations; later institutional sources describe living practice. These sources distinguish biblical observances from later customs.

[25] Torah calendar: Leviticus 23; Deuteronomy 16; Numbers 9, 28–29. The Jewish month · Deuteronomy 16 · Numbers 9 · Numbers 28 · Numbers 29

[26] Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh: Chabad introductions. Rosh Chodesh

[27] Reform Judaism, One or Two Days of Rosh Hashanah?

[28] Passover practice: Reform Judaism food guide; Chabad, Fast of the Firstborn. Fast of the Firstborn

[29] Chabad guides: Counting the Omer, Pesach Sheni, and Lag BaOmer. Pesach Sheni · Lag BaOmer

[30] Shavuot: Chabad meaning guide; Reform Judaism customs guide. Shavuot customs

[31] Chabad guides: Elul, Selichot, Rosh Hashanah, and Ten Days of Repentance. Selichot · Rosh Hashanah · Ten Days

[32] Chabad, Procedure for One Who Must Eat on Yom Kippur.

[33] Chabad guides: Hoshana Rabbah and Shemini Atzeret. Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah

[34] Chabad guides: Hanukkah, the Hanukkah, and Tu BiShvat. Hanukkah · Tu BiShvat

[35] Esther 9; Chabad guides: Purim, Walled Cities, and Purim Katan. Esther 9 · Walled Cities · Purim Katan

[36] Chabad, Fast Days; The Dancing Maidens of Jerusalem (Tu B'Av). Tu B'Av

[37] Yad Vashem UK, remembrance; Knesset memorial/Jerusalem resources; Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, National Holidays. Knesset memorial day · Knesset Jerusalem Day · National holidays guide

[38] Reform Judaism, Mimouna; Ethiopian Jewry Heritage Center, Sigd. Sigd