

# Judaism

## A Beginner's Guide

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O N E W O R L D  
O X F O R D

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## 6 Judaism: A Beginner's Guide

Thou art One, the beginning of all counting, the base of all construction,

Thou art One, and in the mystery of Thy Oneness, the wise are astonished, for they know not what it is.

Thou art One, and Thy Oneness neither diminishes nor increases, neither lacks nor exceeds.

Thou art One, but not as the one that is counted or owned, for number and chance, nor attribute nor form, can reach Thee.<sup>1</sup>

### The names of God

The Jewish God is not merely a philosophical concept, a final cause which explains the existence of the universe. He is a personal God – the true hero of the biblical stories and the guide and mentor of His Chosen People. As such He has a proper name. In the Hebrew scriptures that name is written as יהוה, since Hebrew script originally contained no vowels. God's name was almost certainly pronounced in early times, but by the third century BCE the consonants were regarded as so sacred that they were never articulated. Instead, the convention was to read the letters as *Adonai*, which means 'Lord'. Thus in English translations of the Hebrew text, יהוה is never written as a proper name, but as 'the Lord'.

יהוה is explained in the book of Exodus as 'I AM WHO I AM' and it is clearly derived from the old Hebrew verb היה which means 'to be'. The term 'Jehovah' was introduced by Christian scholars. It is merely יהוה pronounced with the vowels of *Adonai* – thus making JeHoWaH. It is a hybrid and is not usually used by Jews. Over the course of time, even the title *Adonai* was regarded as too awesome to represent the four letters of God's name and today most Orthodox Jews use *Ha-Shem*, which simply means 'the Name'. Terms for God are treated