

“Judaism 101”

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 January 13, 2008

Just last week my neighbor noted that most of my friends are Jewish. Knowing full well that I am a Unitarian Universalist minister she asked me, “Do you want to be Jewish?” The answer is “Yes” and “No.” My affinity with Judaism is a strange and delightful occurrence of liberal ministry in Cincinnati.

In New England where I attended seminary, liberal clergy of all traditions were “a dime a dozen.” I had professional friends from a variety of faith traditions. In more conservative Cincinnati, as a liberal, non-Christian clergy person I have been shunned by many clergy, yet never by Reform or Conservative Jews. And since Cincinnati is the “birthplace” of Reform Judaism in America, and contains Hebrew Union College, a seminary for Reform rabbis, and several vital Jewish congregations, I have had a series of positive personal and professional relationships with local rabbis and members of Jewish communities. These relationships have eased my professional isolation. Through them I have discovered the shared values of Unitarian Universalism and Judaism; the importance of critical thinking, freedom, reason, tolerance, social justice, the one-ness of God, as well as humanist, atheist, and agnostic views.

In addition, I have been personally and professionally enriched by the Jewish tradition of theological and ethical questioning known as Torah study; a spirit of optimism, survival and love of life, devotion to family, an emphasis on community, and civic responsibility, and rituals and holidays integrated with food, prayer, people, scripture, and celebration. Truly I have learned about generosity from my Jewish friends. This is the “yes” to my answer. I have had several rabbis tell me I should be a rabbi. And when I got divorced several of them joked about putting me on “J Date,” the Jewish dating service. I would say “But I am not Jewish.” They would say “You’re close enough.”

The “no” is more complex. I was not born into a Jewish family. I am not culturally or ethnically Jewish. I love my faith, Unitarian Universalism, which has similarities with the Presbyterian faith of my childhood. Interestingly, some of the values that I most treasure about Unitarian Universalism come from Judaism.

Religionist Huston Smith notes of the prophetic Jewish tradition, “Yet one thing was common to them all [the prophets]: the conviction that every human being, simply by virtue of his or her humanity, is a child of God and therefore in possession of rights that even kings must respect.”¹ These values are the source of our first, second and fourth Unitarian Universalist principles, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations,” and “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

¹ Huston Smith, *The Illustrated World's Religions* (1994), 191.

There are only 14 million Jews in the world today, making them a true religious minority. Yet Jewish philosophy and theology shaped Christianity, numerically the largest world religion today. Judaism introduced monotheism, the idea of one God, a very radical idea. We have studied Hinduism, which has multiple gods, and Buddhism, which has both no god and multiple gods. Both of these religions note the illusions of life and the desire to leave this world through reincarnation or enlightenment.

In a radically different vein Judaism introduces one God. Judaism affirms life and the pleasures of life focusing on the here and now. Most Jews don't believe in heaven or hell, though some believe in a version of temporary purgatory after death. In addition, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures might be all powerful, but Jewish tradition affirms that he can and should be questioned and challenged, and that differences of opinion among Jews are good (again I should add that there is a wide diversity of belief in Judaism). Judaism is a religion of engagement in life.

It is hard to know when Judaism began. Like Hinduism, we are entering the realm of pre-literate cultures. The ancestors of the Jews lived in Canaan (the modern land of Israel) and were known as Hebrews or Israelites. Most likely the Hebrews existed, passing on stories through an oral tradition, for several hundred years before writing anything down. The earliest stories in *Genesis*, the first book of the Torah, date from the 10th century B.C.E., three thousand years ago. Yet, scholars believe that the story of the Exodus, the Hebrew deliverance from slavery in Egypt, is even older, from the 13th century B.C.E. There is no archeological evidence of the Hebrew Exodus from Egypt, so the historical truth of this story is possible, but doubted.

However it happened, by the time Hebrews began recording their oral stories three thousand years ago, they included a story of God's covenant with the Hebrews, both through Abraham and Moses. They included the Ten Commandments (although if you took Torah study with Rabbi Barr and I last year you know that there are two sets of commandments in the second book of the Torah, *Exodus*, and they don't entirely agree). The stories included the Egyptian captivity and redemption by God and Moses (celebrated in the Jewish holiday of Passover).

When Abram makes his covenant with God in *Genesis* (Chapters 15-17), he is promised a child by his wife, Sarai, that will continue his family. In return, his name is changed to Abraham ("father of a multitude") and his wife to Sarah, and he and his children must be circumcised as a sign of the covenant (the scriptural reason Jewish children are circumcised). In return, he and his children must believe in this one God. Abraham already had a son, Ishmael, by Hagar an Egyptian, who will later become the father of the Ishmaelite, or Arab people, who will ultimately become Muslim. In addition, Abraham is given the land of Canaan (modern Israel) to inhabit. This begins the triangle relationship we discussed in Tuesday night's class with Rabbi David Burstein, God, Torah, and Israel (as people and land).

Many scholars consider the early Israelite religion as henotheistic, having one God above many other gods, rather than monotheistic, only one God. The Torah, containing the first five books of the Bible (*Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*) is full of stories of the Hebrews struggling with gods. Baal, a Semitic god, makes regular appearances, as does Astarte, another Semitic goddess. When Moses goes to Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments for the first time he returns to find the Hebrews worshipping a golden calf, the symbol of another Semitic god. Read carefully

the Torah describes a millennium long struggle for the development of monotheism interwoven with stories from the Hebrews and other Semitic people.

In addition, a close reading of the scriptures uncovers interesting pronouns. *Genesis* 1:26 reads “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image.’” Who is the “us” is “let us?” Is “us” a male and female version of God, multiple gods, a heavenly court (if so who is in it and what is the order?), etc. While in seminary I was introduced to the theory that the oldest stories of God, where God is referred to as “Yahweh,” contain images of a male god merged with a female consort.

Modern scholars believe that *Genesis* itself was created from different “schools” or edited stories about God. There is the “J” tradition that refers to God as “Yahweh” probably from the 10th century, the “E” version that refers to God as “El” probably from the 8th century, the “P” version concerned with priestly codes, and the “H” version concerned with Holiness codes.² In the original Hebrew, the stories in *Genesis* about God refer to God as “El” or “Yahweh.” In *Leviticus* there is a combination of priestly and holiness code stories which is why *Leviticus* is essentially a litany of rules on proper ritual and cleanliness.

Rabbis have noted and struggled with these discrepancies for three thousand years. Even the most conservative or traditional strands of Judaism have engaged with Torah study. There is the written Torah and “Midrash,” rabbinic commentaries on the Torah. Today it is possible to purchase Torah commentaries which display scriptural texts side by side with the most famous midrash stories and commentaries by rabbis and teachers such as Rashi (11th century), Nachmanides (13th century), Moses Mendelssohn (18th century), and Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th century).³

These midrash agree, disagree, explore, clarify, and question with word play and varying translations. They also use scripture to take on moral issues such as “What is loyalty to God?” “Is lying ever justified?” or “Is there a good war?” Jews today are encouraged to create their own midrash. I regularly talk to Rabbi Barr of Congregation Beth Adam and he says “I am writing a midrash for the High Holy Days. No moral, social, linguistic, poetic, or translation stone is left unturned in Torah commentary. It is truly a living tradition. Christians would understand and struggle with their Bible much more if they engaged in similar study.

The Hebrew Scriptures or Tanakh includes the Torah, the “Neviim,” or prophetic writings such as *Joshua*, *Judges*, *Isaiah*, and *Jeremiah*, and the “Ketuvim,” or writings that includes books such as *Psalms*, *Proverbs*, *Ruth*, and *Ecclesiastes*. Other scriptural writings important to Jews include the Mishnah, an oral Torah revealed to rabbis and ultimately written down that includes laws of Judaism. Commentaries on the Mishnah are known as Talmud, “that which is studied.” In modern yeshivas, or Orthodox seminaries, Mishnah and Talmud are extensively studied.

In the tenth century the Hebrews, or Israelites, divided into the Northern Kingdom known as Israel, and the Southern Kingdom known as Judah. In 722 B.C.E. the Assyrians conquered Israel and in 586 B.C.E. the Babylonians conquered Judah and destroyed the Temple for the first time. Historically it would have seemed this would be the end of the Hebrews. But as has happened so often in their history, the people of Israel found a way to survive. While in captivity in Babylon, the people of Judah, even while

²The HarperCollins Study Bible (1993), 151-152

³Harvey Fields, *A Torah Commentary for our Times, Volume I: Genesis* (1990).

picking up the Aramaic language of their captors, began to write their own stories. This is the period when much of the Hebrew Scriptures were finally written down. This is also the period when the Talmud was completed. Both of these efforts enabled the remaining Jews to survive in captivity. It is in fact the Babylonian captivity that ultimately created Judaism. When the descendants of Judah were freed and returned to their homeland over the next several hundred years, they returned as Jews, with written scripture and laws, capable of sustaining a religion and culture while living in a foreign country and speaking another language.

This structure and flexibility was invaluable in 70 C.E. when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple for the second time and the Jewish people fled into Diaspora. As Jews moved into different countries they brought with them the Torah and Talmud. In addition, a group of rabbis known as the Pharisees devised another way to sustain Judaism. The Temple in Jerusalem had been the focus of Jewish ritual and practice. With its destruction the Pharisees moved ritual into individual Jewish home life, focusing on Shabbat (the day of worship that begins Friday evening with dinner and prayers in **the home**) and defined holiday celebrations that could be recognized wherever Jews lived.

As the years went on Jews struggled with Hellenization (leading to the Maccabee revolt and the holiday of Hanukah), the rise of Christianity which was particularly hostile to the Pharisees who sustained Judaism but excluded Christians by not recognizing Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, European ghettos where Jews lived segregated lives of Jewish practice without the rights of citizens, forced conversions and expulsion from Spain in 1492, the Enlightenment which challenged Orthodoxy with newer branches of Conservative and Reform Judaism, periodic announcements of Jewish Messiahs, anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and the formation of modern Israel in 1948 with all its challenges.

In many ways Judaism faced traumatic crises five times, probably more, the Babylonian captivity, the Diaspora, the Holocaust, the Enlightenment, and one particularly controversial Jewish Messiah, Shabtai Zvi from the seventeenth century. Every time Judaism has survived. Why? While on sabbatical I took a class on modern Judaism at the University of Cincinnati. The class began with Jews in Europe prior to the Enlightenment and continued through Jewish immigration to the United States. I was truly surprised by the problems, controversies and difficult balance of Judaism – imagine living in a country for hundreds of years but not being a citizen because you are Jewish?

I asked the professor of the class why Judaism had survived. The more I learned, the more amazing this fact became to me. Agreeing with my initial premise that it is amazing, he said he didn't know. He thought maybe it had to do with the emphasis on family. I have asked many of my Jewish friends, rabbis, and professors this question and most of them acknowledge that it is amazing and say "I don't know." But family does seem to be key, that families worship together at home. It is good to have a synagogue, a rabbi, a shared community, but if all of these disappear for some reason, if a family knows the prayers, and rituals, and keeps faith in God, Judaism survives.

This is why the question of intermarriage has been so controversial. The concern, with anti-Semitism alive and well (inside Jewish books at Joseph Beth, bizarre moments of maps in the Middle East) is that intermarriage will dilute Judaism. If Judaism survives in the family, this concern becomes more reasonable. Is it exclusionist if Jews want to

learn Hebrew, keep kosher dietary laws (which are scriptural), send their children to Jewish Day School, and marry other Jews (even Reform Jews, the most liberal branch), or is it a realistic fear of assimilation that would end Judaism. The marriage of a Catholic and a Presbyterian will end neither faith at this point, but Judaism, somehow after the Holocaust and the systematic murder of 6 million Jews within ten years in just the last century; this question becomes more relevant and complex. There are relevant concerns about survival that exist in Judaism that I don't believe exist in any other major world religion. Of the five major world religions, Judaism is by far the smallest.

This is why the question of who is a Jew is also so controversial. Within Jewish law a child is Jewish if the mother is Jewish. This is the standard in Israel. For Reform Jews a child is Jewish if either parent is Jewish, mother or father. Reform Jews recognize conversions and intermarriage. Yet this is much more controversial in Israel. And yet here in America I know many Jews who struggle with questions like "Am I a Jew if I don't keep kosher and never attend synagogue?" Yet I have known several Jews from Israel who eat pork and shellfish and never attend synagogue yet are certain they are Jewish. And out there is the never ending question; is Judaism a religion, a culture, an ethnicity, or a belief? I don't think there is a definitive answer to any of these questions. Rather, like all those midrash stories, there are a variety of conflicting opinions, and somehow, the whole tradition does not sink under the weight of the difference.

Judaism is strong and flexible. It has given the world the idea of monotheism and critical religious inquiry. It has affirmed the need for social action and civic responsibility. It spawned the world's largest religion, Christianity, which claims as a Messiah a man named Jesus, born as a Jew. I can't explain how it has survived I just know that I myself and this world, are the richer for it.

