Introduction to Judaism

Judaism is a religion which prescribes through a set of doctrine how Jews should live their lives. With regard to whether the Jews are a race, it is generally agreed that Jews are not a race. Most Jews identify their Jewishness in terms of a culture or ethnic group.

The Bible states that human beings were created in the image of G-d. To avoid any misunderstanding, humanity was not created in the physical image of G-d because for Jews G-d is incorporeal—having no physical appearance. The word image as it is used to describe humanity refers to the essence and or nature of something. Further, G-d created in man two impulses which are goodness and evil. The impulse to do good is driven by the moral conscience and the impulse for evil is driven by our selfish desires to indulge and ignoring how our behaviors affect others. In Judaism Satan did not create evil. The good and evil impulse are internal to an individual meaning that one who behaves in an evil way cannot blame an external agent for their unacceptable, evil behavior.

In Judaism the existence of G-d is a logical necessity for the existence of the universe; thus concluding that the universe is evidence of the existence of G-d. Jews hold that there is only one Almighty G-d who created the world. G-d is a single, indivisible entity without any human attributes and is infinite. G-d has no body and Jews are forbidden to create statues or other objects intended to represent G-d. For Jews, G-d is omnipresent—in all places at all times and he is available and near to us at all times. The G-d of the Jews is the G-d for all humanity. G-d is also omnipotent—meaning he can do anything and he is omniscient; knowing all of the past, present and the future. Jews also view G-d as eternal, meaning that he transcends time; has no beginning and end. Finally, G-d knows what human beings are thinking all the time.

There are three elements that make Judaism a living religion: G-d, Torah and Israel. The G-d of Judaism is the one and only G-d who created heaven and earth and who gave the Torah to Moses; who directs our lives; infusing it with the capacity for mercy and justice. For the Jews, Torah refers to G-ds revelation to the holy people of Israel, through Moses at Mount Sinai when he received the Torah. Judaism holds that the Torah was revealed by G-d not just in written form but also in oral form. The oral tradition refers to the teachings transmitted from sage or master to student or disciple—from Moses to Joshua and to other great students. A famous sage named Hillel lived around the time of Jesus is credited for crafting a form of the Golden Rule: “What is hateful to yourself, do not do to anybody else” Judaism proposes some theological dogma such as: the belief that the Torah was revealed by G-d, G-d is manifest in the Torah and that G-d wants humanity’s love expressed as “You will love the Lord your G-d with all your heart.” Jews believe that man was not self-created—meaning that humankind derived from an entity other than itself and that man’s power is limited.

The Jewish people are credited with establishing monotheism—the belief in one G-d because they could not divide their loyalties between more than one G-d. With regard to attaining meaning in life, the Jews believed that this journey toward meaning could only be fulfilled through enduring life’s challenges and leading righteous lives through performing commandments to perfect humanity. Like Christianity Judaism obligates its followers to perform acts of kindness to repair the world—which is termed “Tikkun Olam” in Hebrew. So, Judaism is a faith of progress—a linear one making each adherent responsible for perfecting ourselves and the world.

The G-d of Judaism revealed himself to mankind through action—although it was also in words; it was primarily in action beginning with leading the Jews out of bondage in Egypt and protecting his people. For the Jews, G-ds goodness and ultimate power is expressed through the Ten Commandments. Israel is defined as the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. With regard to practices and rituals, Judaism incorporates these elements like other religions to assist its followers through life’s difficulties—with the focus being on the process; evident in sayings/adages such as “ashes to ashes” and “dust to dust.”

The Messiah

The Jews are considered an expectant people—because of their historical struggles and ultimately prevailing over their oppressors; they are waiting for the Messiah. The word Messiah means “the anointed one.” According to the Torah references, the Messiah will be a great political leader who is a descendant of King David (Jeremiah 23:5). One can expect that the Messiah will be a righteous human being who understands Jewish law, is observant and

who fulfills G-ds commandments. The Messiah may also be a military leader or a great judge. He will not however be a G-d or a supernatural human being. How do we know when the Messiah has arrived? It is difficult to predict when the Messiah will appear on earth. Scholars believe that G-d has a date in mind for when the

Messiah will come. The Messiah may come when humanity loses hope that conditions can improve—such as when sin and war prevail on earth the Messiah will come to alter these conditions. With regard to the treatment of Jesus, Jews do not believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

Denominations in Judaism

In Judaism there are denominations: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist and Humanistic

Reform Judaism emerged in mid-19th century Europe and, of the three denominations is considered to exercise the greatest autonomy when interpreting the Torah. In contrast to Orthodox Judaism and its absolute, literal and fundamental interpretation of the Torah, the Reform movement rejects strict adherence and interpretation of the dictates of the laws of Torah. Reform Jews believe that the Torah was not only written by G-d but by other sources and it remains an inspiration to all Jews. In sum, the Reform movement attempts to retain Judaic life by modifying their meaning and practice in contemporary times.

Conservative Judaism strikes a balance between the Reform and Orthodox movements. Although these Jews do not strictly adhere to tradition, they retain a strong commitment to honor past practices and halakhah (Jewish Law), and when necessary they adapt law to contemporary times.

Orthodox Judaism is the literal, fundamental practice of their faith. These Jews are unswerving to the written law and Torah. Orthodoxy is strongly committed to preserving rituals and doctrine, and not taking liberty to reinterpret law in efforts to adapt to contemporary culture. Thus, Orthodox Judaism is uncompromising in relation to its degree of conformity to Torah and halakhah.

Reconstructionist Judaism believe that Judaism is a faith that continually evolves. These Jews reject the idea of a personified deity and that Jews are G-ds chosen people. Reconstructionsit Jews observe Jewish rituals and practices because of their cultural importance and less so due to their religious meaning.

Humanistic Judaism, created in 1963 by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine in Michigan is a nontheistic approach to Jewish life. These Jews lead a meaningful Jewish life in a secular way and emphasize humanistic elements such as pursuing their fullest, creative and unique human expression rooted in their secular Jewish roots.

The Jewish Holidays

Yom Kippur

The holiest holiday for the Jewish people is Yom Kippur. On this day of atonement, Jews refrain from work and attend synagogue services. Yom Kippur means “Day of Atonement” and it is a day Jews atone for sins they have committed in the past year, to repent and ask G-d for forgiveness. On this day, one fasts for 24 hours, not eating or drinking. For some Jews, they also refrain from bathing, wearing leather shoes, using cosmetics and engaging in sex. In some cases, these restrictions do not apply should someone’s health status be compromised.

Rosh Hashanah

The holiday Rosh Hashanah means “Head of the Year” and is commonly known as the Jewish New Year. In contrast to the American New Year, it is not celebrated in the same way by staying up until midnight and enjoying a party. For Jews, it is a time to reflect on the past year and look to modifying one’s life in a positive way in the new year. In the synagogue for services, a shofar is blown to symbolize a call to repentance. The shofar is a ram’s

horn which is blown like a trumpet. On Rosh Hashanah, Jews are prohibited from working . Jews do not fast for this holiday and a common tradition is to eat apples dipped in honey to symbolize having a sweet new year. Another common practice during this holiday is called Tashlikh which means “casting off” our sins. Jews usually find a river, lake or flowing water on the afternoon of the first day of the holiday and empty their pockets in the body of water. It is a gesture to symbolize the casting away of our sins.

Passover

Passover is probably one of the most observed Jewish holidays. It contains primarily historical and agricultural significance because it represents the beginning of the harvest season in the land of Israel. The historical significance is related to the exodus of the enslaved Jewish people from Egypt. The name Pesach means “Pass Over” or to spare. In biblical history, it means G-d passed over the houses of the Jews when he slayed the first born of the Egyptians. In Hebrew Passover is spelled Pesach and it also refers to the sacrificial offering of a lamb that was made in the Temple during this holiday. During this holiday, Jews remove leavened items from their home. The significance of this procedure is to remind us when the Jews left Egypt they did not have time to allow their bread to rise. On the first night of Passover, we have a special meal called a Seder, which carries much significance in terms of the food items placed on the Seder plate. Passover lasts seven days during which time we eat Matza unleavened bread.

Rambam’s 13 Principles of Faith

Rambam was a physician born in Moorish Cordoba and lived from 1135 to 1204 C.E. He lived in Spain, the Middle East and North Africa. He is credited with writing the Mishneh Torah, a book of the codes of Jewish law.

1. G-d exists
2. G-d is one and unique
3. G-d is incorporeal
4. G-d is eternal
5. Prayer is to be directed to G-d alone
6. The words of the prophets are true
7. Moses was the greatest prophet, and his prophecies are true
8. The Torah was given to Moses
9. There will be no other Torah
10. G-d knows the thoughts and deeds of men
11. G-d will reward the good and punish the wicked
12. The Messiah will come
13. The dead will be resurrected

The Ten Commandments

1. I am the Lord your G-d
2. You shall not recognize the G-d of others in My Presence
3. You shall not take the Name of the Lord your G-d in vain
4. Remember the day of Shabbat to keep it holy
5. Honor your father and your mother
6. You shall not murder
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. Do not give false testimony against your neighbor
10. You shall not covet your fellow’s possessions

##### Differences Between Christianity and Judaism

1. In Judaism G-d is pure spirit, eternally transcendent and there exists no notion of corporeality. Christianity asserts that G-d became man in the form of Jesus.
2. Judaism is committed to ethical monotheism. Christianity subscribes to the belief in the Trinitarian nature of the Divine Being; the belief in and worship of G-d, Son and Holy Spirit.
3. The Christian Doctrine of Original Sin suggests that sin rules man and in Judaism man rules sin. Although Jews admit that sin exists and the Torah recognizes that man is inherently tempted to sin—
4. man can resist temptation to sin and sin does not rule man. Christians believe that to gain liberation from Original Sin a special act of grace is needed—of the sort given by Jesus’ sacrificial death which atoned for the sins of mankind. Judaism teaches that G-d infused in man the capacity for being good and evil; and that without freedom to sin there would not exist the freedom to act ethically or righteously.
5. Judaism declares that G-d is available and near every human being and Christianity teaches that G-d is reached through Jesus the Son of G-d.