

## World Religions: Judaism

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A month or so ago I promised you a series of services focused on the various major world religions. That series begins today with a look at Judaism. In case you're wondering about the timing and order of these services, I'm trying to schedule each of them near some date significant to the tradition in question. While Hanukkah is not the most significant Jewish holiday, it is one of the more popular, and this year Hanukkah begins two days from now on Tuesday, Dec. 4. So today, Judaism it is.

The structure of my remarks today will establish a general pattern that I expect to follow when talking about other religions as well. I'll start by talking about some of the nitty-gritty aspects of Judaism as a religion: its origins; its sacred texts; some of its basic beliefs; its holy days, festivals and celebrations; and some of the varieties of its expression and practice in today's world. Then I'll try to capture, as well as can be done in a brief description, the essence of the Jewish religion, with help from Huston Smith and his classic text, *The World's Religions*. And finally, I'll reflect a little bit on particular gifts that Judaism bestows on those of us who are not Jewish; nuggets of wisdom that can enrich our religious and spiritual life.

Judaism, along with Christianity and Islam, had its origins in the Middle East. In fact, all three of those "religions of the Book" trace their heritage back to the great patriarch Abraham, whose history – or legend – is recorded in the early books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. Those texts, all dating back more than two thousand years, give us an account of a people, their struggles with each other, with other peoples, with God, and with basic religious questions.

At the core of the Hebrew scriptures is the Torah, a name which means Law or Teachings. The Torah – also called the Pentateuch - consists of five books attributed to Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These texts are seen as God's instructions to the Jewish people, from which Jews learn how to act, think and even feel about life and death. In addition to narrative that tells the story of God's relationship with the Jewish people, there are many explicit commandments attributed to God – 613 of them, to be exact. Of course the most important of these are the "Ten Commandments" found in the book of Exodus:

1. I am the Lord your God
2. You shall not recognize the gods of others in My presence
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God 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

In addition to the Torah, there are two other sections of the Hebrew Bible. These are the Nevi'im, or Prophets, and the Ketuvim, or Writings. From the first letters of these three divisions (T, N, K) comes the name Tanakh, which refers to the Hebrew Bible as a whole.

As I said before, these texts all date back over two thousand years and form the basic scriptures of Judaism. However, they are by no means the only sacred writings of the tradition. For instance, the Talmud, compiled during the first century C.E., is a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs, and history. And over the centuries, there have been vast quantities of commentary and interpretation of both the Tanakh and the Talmud.

One of the most widely-accepted formulations of basic Jewish beliefs has been the Thirteen Principles of Faith compiled by Moses Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages:

1. God exists
2. God is one and unique
3. God is incorporeal
4. God is eternal
5. Prayer is to be directed to God 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. God knows the thoughts and deeds of men
11. God will reward the good and punish the wicked
12. The Messiah will come
13. The dead will be resurrected

One notable feature of Judaism is its strong sense of history. Indeed its history is reflected in the wide array of rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations that make up a large part of its religious practice. There is Passover, which commemorates the story of the Exodus, the deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. There's Hanukkah, which commemorates the victory of the Jews over a repressive regime, and the reconsecration of their defiled Temple. There's Purim, which celebrates the story of Esther, the Jewish woman who became queen of Persia and saved her people from a plot to exterminate them. These are just a few of the historically-based celebrations in the Jewish calendar.

The most sacred annual observance occurs at the High Holy Days, beginning with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, followed by the Days of Awe (or Ten Days of Repentance), and culminating in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. And then there is the weekly observance of the Shabbat, or Sabbath, which begins at sundown on Friday and lasts until sundown on Saturday. For Jews who observe Shabbat, it is a time to let go of the stress and drudgery of everyday life, and to enjoy a time of tranquility and spiritual reflection. Of course it is during Shabbat – either Friday evening or Saturday morning – that weekly religious services are typically held.

One point that I must make about Judaism – and which I will probably make about every world religion I discuss – is that it is not monolithic in its beliefs and practices. Despite the existence of sacred scriptures, and lists of commandments, and principles of faith, there is no single official creed. The diversity of the Jewish faith is reflected in the variety of its branches in contemporary times. For instance, there are several different Jewish movements currently active in this country. There are three major ones that I would like to mention specifically.

Most traditional, and least liberal, is Orthodox Judaism. Orthodox Jews hold to the notion that the Torah was divinely revealed to Moses, and that the interpretive process of law is divinely guided and authoritative. The law of the Torah is not to be tampered with, and so more modern forms of practice are rejected as deviations from divine truth.

The most liberal of the three is the Reform movement, which began in early nineteenth century Germany. This branch sees Judaism as an ongoing process of relationship between God and the Jews. The Torah is seen as subject to individual interpretation. Also, there is a particular emphasis on the ethical and moral messages of the prophets as inspiration for helping to create a more just world.

The Conservative movement began in the mid-nineteenth century as a reaction to the “radical” Reform movement, and represents a mix of traditional and modern views. The Torah is recognized as divinely inspired, but belief and practice are subject to the influence of new ideas. There is considerable variation among Conservative congregations, which may fall nearly anywhere along the continuum between Orthodox and Reform.

Huston Smith has done perhaps more than anyone else to educate the reading public concerning the essentials of the world’s great wisdom traditions. In doing so, he has emphasized the inner, rather than the institutional, dimensions of the various religions. And so it is to his book, *The World’s Religions*, that I turn for help in trying to summarize the gist of what Judaism is really about.

Smith suggests that the key to the achievement of the Jews in world history and culture – what lifted them from obscurity to permanent religious greatness – was their passion for meaning. He goes on to elaborate on that claim by discussing numerous dimensions of that passion for meaning, which I would like to mention at least briefly.

First there is meaning found in God. “From beginning to end, the Jewish quest for meaning was rooted in their understanding of God.” As I mentioned earlier, most of their scriptures can be understood precisely as a record of their relationship with their God.

Second, there is meaning in creation. There is an affirmation of the goodness of the God-created world, even when it seems less than hospitable. There is meaning found through embracing the possibility “that when things go wrong the fault lies not in the stars but in ourselves.” This leads to the notion that our lives and our actions can make a difference, thus giving them meaning.

So there is meaning in human existence. A part of the story of the Jewish people is the quest “to understand the human condition so as to avail themselves of its highest reaches.” The Jewish view of human nature has not been sugar-coated. There has been a realistic acknowledgement of human limitation, both physically and morally. At the same time, there is an unquestioned belief in human freedom.

I mentioned earlier that many Jewish observances are tied to their history. Indeed history is another significant source of meaning. “To the Jews history was of towering significance. It was important, first, because they were convinced that the context in which life is lived affects that life in every way, setting up its problems, delineating its opportunities, conditioning its outcomes. . . The events the Hebrew Bible relates are profoundly contextual.” And “if contexts are crucial for life, so is collective [social] action. . . There are times when the only way to get things changed is by working together – planning, organizing, and then acting in concert,” and thus making history.

The Ten Commandments, as well as the whole of the Law, demonstrates Jewish concern for ethics and morality, which arises from their awareness of the double fact that “Human beings

are social creatures,” and yet “living with others, they are often barbaric.” And so there is the effort, through the formulation of the Law, to provide “those wise restraints that make men free.”

Yet another dimension of meaning is to be found in the area of justice. Smith tells us that

It is to a remarkable group of [people] whom we call the prophets more than to any others that Western civilization owes its convictions 1) that the future of any people depends in large part on the justice of its social order, and 2) that individuals are responsible for the social structures of their society as well as for their direct personal dealings. . .

So it is that wherever men and women have gone to history for encouragement and inspiration in the age-long struggle for justice, they have found it more than anywhere else in the ringing proclamations of the prophets.

There are yet other dimensions of meaning-seeking and meaning-making in the story of Judaism, but let me stop here to take a few minutes for the last piece that I promised you. That is, what are some of the gifts of Judaism that we can acknowledge and celebrate? Well, some of the most important ones were touched on in Huston Smith’s contribution. For instance, we can benefit from Judaism’s example with regard to the respect for history. We do not live in a vacuum, but are products of our social and historical context. We need not be defined and limited by our history, but we will be if we do not understand it and learn from it.

Two other important gifts that I’ve already talked about are the emphasis on the quest for morality and justice. Again, we need not subscribe to the particularities of traditional Jewish commandments and visions of justice, but we can find in their sacred record inspiration for our own quest and struggle to live ethically and to build a more just world.

Two final gifts I would like to mention. First is the tradition of study, commentary, and interpretation of received wisdom. We often decry the way of biblical literalists and fundamentalists. But Judaism has modeled another way. A way in which reflection and discussion and debate and interpretation is valued. Traditional wisdom is not discarded, but neither is it unquestioned. Tradition is not where we end, but where we begin. We build from there into the future.

And finally, there is the gift of story. There are some wonderful stories in the Hebrew Bible itself. But there has been a huge treasury of stories emerging from the Jewish experience ever since. I’d like to close this morning with just two small examples. First is “The Tree of Sorrows” (in *Doorways to the Soul*, edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain):

In a small village in Poland there lived a wise rabbi. His followers loved him and came often to tell him of their woes. After a while the rabbi grew tired of hearing each one claim that their lot in life was so much more difficult to bear than their neighbor’s. They were constantly asking, “Why doesn’t he have to suffer as I do? Why doesn’t she have a nagging husband, or why doesn’t he have a lazy wife? Why doesn’t she have back trouble, and why don’t his children still live at home contributing nothing to the family income?” On and on it went until the rabbi came up with a plan.

HE sent out word that there was to be a new holiday celebrated. “Bring your sorrows and troubles,” he announced. “Bring them in a bag with your

name on it and hang the bag from the great tree in the center of the village. All will be allowed to exchange trouble and to go home with those of your neighbor rather than your own.”

The villagers were excited, imagining how much easier their lives would be from that day on. When the day came, they assembled beneath the tree with bags in hand. With bits of rope they tied their bags to the low branches of the tree so that all might inspect them. “Now,” said the rabbi in a very official voice, “if you will all move about inspecting the bags, you may choose someone else’s troubles to take home, thus freeing yourselves from your own.”

The villagers rushed at the tree and began grabbing at and peering into the bags, one after the other, around and around, around and around the tree

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Finally, quite tired out and feeling both foolish and wiser, they each sought out their own bags and walked home. The rabbi smiled. It was just as he had hoped. The villagers had seen the sorrows of others as they really were, and had decided to stick with their own lots in life because, at least, they were familiar.

And the last story I leave you with is that of “The Trial of God,” adapted from Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel:

Once, in a concentration camp during World War II, the Jewish people imprisoned there decided to put God on trial for failing to live up to his promises to protect them. Officiating at the trial were three rabbis, who appointed a lawyer for the people and a lawyer for God. There was much evidence introduced and many days of deliberation. Finally the verdict was read, and God was found guilty.

When the trial was over, the people were quiet. They looked at the rabbis and one person asked, “What do we do now?”

The only answer that made sense to the people, the only answer in the face of reality, was that they must pray.

So may it be.