



Basic Jewish Beliefs

By Steve Cohen

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Basic Jewish Beliefs Today

In order to witness effectively and lovingly, it's important for non-Jewish people to understand the foundation of what Jewish people believe today. There is no single answer. The term dogma, which is much better applied to Christianity, has little place within Judaism. In Judaism, the need for a profession of belief did not arise, and rabbis saw no necessity for drawing up concise formulas stressing Jewish beliefs and faith.

Theologically speaking, it is understood that Jewish people are born into God's covenant with the people of Israel in Genesis 12:1-3:

The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'

Membership in the community of Israel does not depend upon creedal affirmations of a formal nature, so Jewish beliefs are voiced in the form of prayer.

The most important is the twice daily recited prayer known as the Sh'mah. In English it says this: "Hear Oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." These words enfold Judaism's greatest contribution to religious thought. They constitute the confession of faith and the religion of the synagogue declaring that the Holy God worshiped and proclaimed by Israel is One, and that He alone is God, Who was, Who is, and Who is to come.

In addition to declaring the unity of God, we find voiced 13 principles of faith by Rabbi Moses Maimonides (Rambam), the foremost of the rabbis. His 13 principles of faith appear as a part of the Siddur, the prayer book. They are:

1. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is the author and guide of everything that has been created, and that He alone has made, does make, and will make all things.
2. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is a unity. And there is no unity in any manner like unto His, and that He alone is our God who was, is and will be.
3. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is not a body, and that He is free from all properties of matter, and that He has not any form whatsoever.
4. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is the first and the last.
5. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, and to Him alone, is the right to pray, and that it is not right to pray to any being, besides Him.
6. I believe with perfect faith that all the words of the prophets are true.



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7. I believe with perfect faith that the prophesy of Moses our teacher, peace be unto him, was true, and that he was our chief of prophets, both of those that preceded and those that followed.
8. I believe with perfect faith that the whole Torah, now in our possession, is the same that was given to Moses, our teacher, peace be unto him.
9. I believe with perfect faith that this Torah will not be changed and there will not be any other law from the Creator, blessed be His name.
10. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, knows every deed of the children of man, and all their thoughts, as it is said. It is He that fashioneth the hearts of them all that giveth heed to all their works.
11. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, rewards those that keep His commandments, and punishes those that transgress them.
12. I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and, though He tarry, I wait daily for His coming.
13. I believe with perfect faith that there will be a revival of the dead at the end of time, when it shall please the Creator, blessed be His name, and exalted be His name forever and ever, for thy salvation I hope, Oh Lord.

Though the uttering of these 13 Principles of Faith took place when modern divisions among Jews did not yet exist, statements were given in order to help men clarify, set down, and understand the basic principles of the scriptures. Today, as we understand the Orthodox and Conservative movements, the scriptures are given great emphasis and are regarded as being from God. However, within the Reform movement, the scriptures are not viewed as verbally inspired, in a Biblical sense. Rather they are seen as setting forth moral principles, in figurative language, to help us gain understanding in how to lead our lives.

Both Orthodox and Conservative leaders believe the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) are inspired, but to differing degrees. Those things that were given face-to-face to Moses on Mt. Sinai, the 10 commandments, have the highest degree of inspiration. Next come the things that were revealed to Moses, then those revealed to other prophets, and finally the writings.

Reform Judaism indicates that the Torah has some errors, but does stress that there is an ethic from which our moral code is derived. The oral law, the Talmud, as regarded from an Orthodox and Conservative viewpoint, has a high, authoritative position within the community of belief. Yet Jewish people within the Reform movement do not regard the Talmud as authoritative.

Deuteronomy 6:4-6, the Sh'mah, is the clearest statement of Jewish beliefs about the nature of God today. He is but One God (not three). He is a personal God, who is interested in the lives of men today, and has indicated His interest by His communications to the prophets and the writings we have. A



Christian, Trinitarian viewpoint of the nature of God is expressly denied within Judaism today in all its major branches except Messianic Judaism.

Basic Jewish Teaching: Man's Nature and Sin

Basic Christian teaching today concerning man understands that man is totally depraved. He is in a state of sinfulness and therefore separated from God because of this condition. The Jewish emphasis on sin is different. Man is recognized as sinful, as evidenced by the Holy Days, such as Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

But man also was born into this world with two inclinations – one evil, one good. It is a person's task in this life to struggle to overcome evil by doing good through following moral and religious principles. So, man's potential is greatly emphasized within Judaism today. Orthodox and Conservative teaching recognize that death is a result of sin. However, the concept of original sin is not acknowledged or emphasized.

Orthodox and Conservative Judaism greatly emphasize understanding sin. The scriptures are full of pictures to alert us to the nature of sin within man. Sin is pictured as an evil bent, or a crookedness, as a perversion of righteousness, even a twisted morality. The Hebrew language has many terms that define the wide range of sins with a fine-tuned sensitivity. Many Jewish laws and commandments spell out the correct ethical procedures for our lives. If these laws are broken, then sin has been committed.

The major emphasis of the law stresses interpersonal relationships between man and his fellow-man. But it also stresses the relationship between man and his Creator. The collective teachings of the scripture say that when sin takes place a separation exists between man and his Creator. Judaism seeks to emphasize reconciliation and restoration between man and God, as well as between man and man.

Basic Jewish Teaching: Reconciliation

The concept of salvation in the Christian sense is not emphasized in a traditional Jewish setting. Three elements are necessary for reconciliation to take place between man and his Creator. First, there is repentance, or teshuva, which literally means to change a course of action, to turn around. In effect, if man is walking in his own way, he is asked to turn 180 degrees to walk in God's way.

The second is prayer, or tefillah and the third is tzedakkah, or the doing of good deeds, such as giving to charity, meeting the needs of others, etc.

These three — repentance, prayer and good deeds — have today become traditional substitutes for the sacrificial system instituted by God through Moses and Aaron. The sacrificial system had a central place within the Jewish community until the destruction of the temple in the year 70 A.D. Atonement was an important part of restoring the severed relationship between man and God. Key to the emphasis was that sacrificial system. The principle applied is stated in Ezekiel 18:4, "For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son — both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die."

Yet how can a merciful and a loving God, who desires that man not die, provide a means of reconciliation? When the sacrificial system was put into place, animals were offered up as a substitute



atonement, so man might understand the consequences and nature of his sin. Man saw the consequences of his sin through the animals' sacrifice and death.

The scripture speaks more of a temporal separation from God, but it also speaks about eternal separation due to sin. Since no sacrifices are offered today, rabbinic traditions have substituted these three — repentance, prayer and good deeds — as the means of being restored. Thus Judaism as it is practiced today is very much a works-righteousness centered religion. Man is attempting to work his way toward God as he seeks to correct his errors, earn forgiveness from God, and do good deeds to make up for his committed misdeeds.

However, apart from Jesus and faith in Him, all human efforts fall short. The scriptures teach that there is only one way to this living relationship with God in John 14:6 "Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' " It is a matter of spiritual life and death that the Gospel be brought to our Jewish brothers and sisters today!

Basic Jewish Teaching: Life After Death

Jewish people also hold a diversity of opinion concerning life after death. Both Orthodox and Conservative Jewish people believe life exists after this life. Some would say that those who are wicked will suffer punishment. That punishment may be short, long, or lead to utter eternal destruction. The righteous will find themselves in paradise: gan eden, the Garden of Eden.

However, Reform Judaism today emphasizes this life. Some Reform leaders would go so far as to say that eternal life is not life after this life, but is rather based on the good deeds we do during this life. The memory of those deeds, passed down from generation to generation, ensure us eternal life through the memories of those deeds.

Basic Jewish Teaching: Messiah

Several opinions predominate about the Jewish understanding of the Messiah, or "the Anointed One." Orthodox Jews may say they are still looking for a personal Messiah, a human being, maybe even with super-human qualities, but not divine. They look for that person to come, and bring with him an age of peace where the Messiah will dispense world justice and peace from King David's throne in Jerusalem. Yet, before that can happen, Jewish people must first be able to meet the laws of God and follow his commandments, in order to bring Messiah to this age.

Reform Jewish people are not looking for Messiah to come as a person, but for a Messianic Age. The Messianic Age, similar to the "Age of Aquarius," will bring peace throughout the world. Man will have lifted himself up by his bootstraps to create a better world, with better conditions. Reform, Orthodox and Conservative Judaism agrees that Messiah has yet to come and that Jesus is not the Jewish Messiah.

Attitudes towards Jesus

Jewish attitudes towards Jesus today fall into four basic categories:

- 1) Jesus never existed



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- 2) Jesus was despised, hated and rejected
- 3) Jesus was the greatest Jewish person who ever lived
- 4) Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah

Only a tiny minority believe that Jesus never existed. They claim He was not even a historical figure, living nearly 2,000 years ago. They say the New Testament and teachings about Him are a hoax and a myth.

The majority of Jewish people today, however, acknowledge that Jesus lived during the time the Bible claims He lived. Jewish people hold various degrees of attitudes toward Jesus. A second category are those Jewish people who say that Jesus was despised, hated and rejected, while, at the other end of the spectrum, a third group says that Jesus was the greatest Jewish person who ever lived. They positively maintain He was a prophet of prophets, a teacher of teachers, and one whose teachings should be highly regarded. But, sadly, neither group believes that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah.

Attitudes toward Jesus have changed considerably in the past generation. At one time, Jewish people could not even speak His name without having to spit on the ground, or request that His name be blotted out of their memory. This attitude came about not so much because of people's understandings of Jesus' teachings, but because of the misdeeds some people have done to Jewish people in the name of Jesus, culminating in the Holocaust.

A fourth attitude in a growing minority of Jewish people today is to believe in Jesus, the promised Messiah of Israel. Most Jewish people today, however, are ignorant of His teachings or what the New Testament claims about Him. One significant thing you can do for your Jewish friend is lend a copy of the New Testament, and encourage the reading of the Book of Matthew. Lending a copy is less threatening to a Jewish person. By lending your Jewish friend the book, he will be mindful that you will request it back, and so perhaps will look at it a little sooner.

When you see him again, ask whether or not he has read certain portions of the scripture, and what he's learned so far. It's best to keep in mind that Jewish people hold a wide range of attitudes concerning Jesus and the New Testament. It's best for you to find out what your Jewish friend thinks about Jesus before you speak at any great length about your personal faith in Him. In this way, you can know where to begin your testimony.



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