

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH: ONE MAN'S OPINION

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I. Introduction

Before getting to the spirit of the religion, let's dispense with the technicalities: what do the different branches of the Jewish religion take to be the requirements before someone can consider themselves to be Jewish?

According to Jewish tradition, as reflected in today's Orthodox and Conservative branches, a Jewish person is someone who is born to a Jewish *mother* or who has converted to Judaism. Far from being a people who proselytize, Jews are actually urged to *discourage* non-Jews from converting. Traditionally, when prospective converts approach a rabbi, the rabbi is supposed to turn them away three times before finally accepting their request as a sincere one. Even after that determination is made, the conversion process takes a considerable amount of time (at least when the conversion is taking place in adulthood), as the prospective convert is trained as to the meaning of Judaism and the responsibilities of being Jewish.

The Reform and Reconstructionist branches may or may not "turn people away" three times before accepting them into the conversion process, but they also require prospective converts to undergo a significant educational process before they formally convert.¹ These branches differ from the others mentioned above in that they accept as Jews children who were born to a Jewish *father*, as well as a Jewish mother. However, not every child born to a Jewish parent is viewed as Jewish. The following is taken from the Reform Movement's Resolution on Patrilineal Descent, dated March 15, 1983:

"The Central Conference of American Rabbis declares that the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent. This presumption of the Jewish status of the offspring of any mixed marriage is to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people. The performance of these mitzvot serves to commit those who participate in them, both parent and child, to Jewish life.

¹ Despite this fact, some Orthodox communities do not accept the legitimacy of conversions performed by Reform or Reconstructionist rabbis – or, for that matter, Conservative rabbis. At times, Jews who have been converted by non-Orthodox rabbis choose to convert a second time so that their Jewishness is accepted in an ultra-Orthodox community.

“Depending on circumstances, mitzvot leading toward a positive and exclusive Jewish identity will include entry into the covenant [circumcision], acquisition of a Hebrew name, Torah study, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and Kabbalat Torah (Confirmation). For those beyond childhood claiming Jewish identity, other public acts or declarations may be added or substituted after consultation with their rabbi.”

Note that according to the Reform movement, a person who is born to a Jewish mother and who does *not* undertake “public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people” would not be considered Jewish.

II. Beyond the Technicalities – What Makes a Person Spiritually Jewish

A. Two Basic Points

First and foremost, a Jew is someone who was at Mount Sinai. We are taught that all of us – including those who are not yet born -- were metaphorically present at Sinai to receive the revelation there. To be Jewish is to be part of an extended family, the family of those who entered into the Sinai covenant. This sense of being in an extended family is one reason why so many Jews were able to become economically self sufficient relatively soon after they immigrated to America – they took care of each other. Before they immigrated, most Jews identified themselves fundamentally with their Jewish heritage, and only secondarily with the country (say, Russia or Germany) in which they resided.

In the present day, when Jews have full equal rights in countries like the United States, that sense of identification may be changing somewhat. But still, Jews tend to strongly identify with their religious and/or ethnic heritage.

Second, Judaism is a folk as well as a faith. A Jew tries to develop him or herself both with respect to the religion and to the culture. Each of the two builds on the other.

In trying to understand Judaism from the outside, do not make the mistake of associating us exclusively with our religion. You will, among other things, fail to appreciate that there are hundreds of thousands if not millions of people who are doing little to connect with the religion, but view themselves as *deeply* Jewish in an ethnic or cultural sense of that term.

B. The Three Special Things We Relate to

1. God

Attend a worship service in a synagogue and you will see a constant focus on God. All Jewish prayers go to God; there is no intermediary.

To be Jewish is to be a “God-wrestler.” (That’s literally what the term “Israel” means, and it is taken from the Biblical character of Jacob, who wrestled with an angel of God.) God-wrestlers ask such questions as: Who or what is God? What does He want from us? Or does it even make sense to say that God has “wants”?

Devout religious Jews commonly encounter God not merely as a concept but as one who we *address*. The Jewish God is traditionally experienced in the second person as a Thou.

To be sure, a substantial fraction of the Jews of today have not only questioned the existence of God, but have decided either to reject the belief in a deity or remain “agnostic.” These people are still viewed as Jewish.

2. The Torah and the Commentaries to which it has given rise

The Torah, our holy scripture, is deeply beloved by the Jewish people. Books that interpret the Torah – the books of the Talmud or even certain Kabbalistic works – are also viewed as sacred by different segments of the Jewish people.

At synagogue, as the Torah scroll is brought down the aisle, Jews commonly touch the scroll with their prayer book or with their prayer shawl (Tallit) and then kiss the book or the Tallit. Practices like this one has led to a still-ongoing debate as to whether the Torah is so revered that it has turned into an icon.

The Torah is accepted as the story of the Jewish people. It has been referred to both as man’s book about God and as God’s book about man. Most Jews do not take the Torah literally, and yet it largely determines our sense of identity as Jews, and especially our sense of morality.

Jews venerate their Holy Book as a source of countless lessons for how to live generally, and particularly, how to live Jewishly. But the Book is viewed not merely as a source of teachings, but of commandments – and this may apply even for those Jews who do not believe that the words of the Torah come from God. The sense of being commanded is simply ingrained in the culture. “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” for example, isn’t something a Jew takes as a mere (optional) suggestion.

3. Israel

The Land of Israel (Zion) represents a spiritual “home” for a people who, for nearly 2,000 years, have not had a physical place that they could truly call their own. Jews weren’t simply denied their own homeland while they were in exile, but they were denied equal rights. The word “ghetto” comes from the treatment of the Jews and, in particular, the fact that they were typically confined to limited areas. It is no wonder that even before this past century, Jews pined for Zion. Hence the common refrain, “Next year in Jerusalem.”

B. Elements of the Culture That Has Emerged From This Identity

1. A Healthy Sense of Self

While there are always exceptions, the Jewish culture excels at forging egos that, on the one hand, are secure and built for achievement, and on the other hand, are far from enormous. How is this healthy ego formed? By a combination of support and destruction.

First, the support. The Jewish mother plays a big part. Her son or daughter is treated as precious – the nicest, kindest, smartest, etc. Also, the family teaches Jewish children to look out for themselves – as

Rabbi Hillel said, “if I am not for me, who will be?” We are taught that anti-Semites and other predators abound, and if you are not prepared to fight for your rights, they will be denied to you. We’re also taught to be proud of our heritage, which is not to say that we believe that the Jewish people and/or the State of Israel are incapable of engaging in abusive practices.

Now, for the ego destruction – or should I say, the source of our humility. The Jew learns that to be human is to be an animal, made “in the image of God” (an anthropomorphic phrase that is commonly used within our tradition), yet still a mortal who cannot look God in the face. In the *Ethics of the Fathers*, which is a commonly-read portion of the Talmud, you can find the following statement:

“Reflect on three things and you will not come into the grip of sin: know whence you came, whither you are going, and before whom you are destined to give a strict account. Whence you came – from a putrid and disgusting drop of semen. Whither you are going – to a place of dust, worms and moths. And before whom you are destined to give a strict account – before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.”

The Jew is taught that Moses is the greatest of Prophets, But we’re taught that this is the case not because he was the wisest or most able, but because he was the humblest.

All of this keeps our own egos in check. Still, thanks to our mothers’ praises and the pride we’re taught in school about being Jewish, our egos likewise shouldn’t get too small either. This has been one of the secrets of our success as a people, and as individuals.

2. A Healthy Sense of History

Jews are people of history. In fact, I’d argue that our sense of history is unsurpassed.

We’re taught that the Jewish community doesn’t exist simply through space but through time. Perhaps reflecting the fact that for most of the past 2,000 years, there’s been no place where Jews can call home, we need that sense of history to reflect back on the days when we did have a home ... and when those who ruled our lands were Jewish.

Even today, in Israel, which many view to be a place where Jews horribly oppress Gentiles, what is on the holiest piece of Earth to the Jewish people? A Muslim shrine -- the Dome of the Rock.

By necessity, then, our minds frequently turn to the past. To study it, to make sure that we won’t repeat its mistakes, and to receive inspiration from its glories.

3. A Healthy Appreciation for *This* World

Unlike many other great religions, Judaism does not lend itself to an escape from this world into a present nirvana or a future heaven. Rather, we are trained above all else to focus on the world around us – on the society, in other words – and work diligently to make the best of it. For most of us, this is all we have.

Traditionally, Jews are taught to believe in the afterlife. But we're also taught that we can't know much about that afterlife. And many, many Jews think the whole idea of an afterlife is a myth, or at least that, if there is something in us that is eternal, we haven't a clue what it is.

These views operate to make Jews concentrate their energies on the here-and-now. It makes us strive to nurture the world and assume responsibility for healing it, rather than depending primarily, if at all, on miracles from heaven.

You might wonder why Jewish people step on glass – or these days, light bulbs – during our wedding ceremonies. It is to acknowledge the pain that must inevitably be endured even in an institution as wonderful as marriage. To be alive in this world is to have to endure a plethora of pain, but hopefully, the pleasure we can experience will not only be more abundant but more profound as well.

To make that possible, we have all sorts of rituals that are designed to help us appreciate the awesomeness and beauty of this world. You may be familiar with some of our special holidays – Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, Passover, to name a few. But the most important holiday takes place 52 times a year – the Sabbath (Shabbat). On Shabbat, the observant Jew does not “work,” and instead celebrates both our physical and our spiritual blessings. Shabbat is intended to be a deeply joyous occasion, and it comes every week of the year.

To be Jewish is to appreciate the holiness of the human condition, and not merely its most spiritually refined facets. In fact, some of our traditions would seem positively bizarre to a Muslim. For example, on Friday night, married Jews aren't merely permitted to have sexual relations, but are encouraged to do so. What's more, on the holiday of Purim, tradition directs us to get drunk on alcohol to the point where we are just on the good side of the line between good and evil. Why? Because even though our religion and our culture causes us to develop (if not *over-develop*) our superegos, we are admonished not to belittle the id. We are rational, spiritual beings, but we are also animals with physical inclinations, and our religion teaches us to nurture those inclinations and make them holy.

So yes, Jews drink alcohol, but historically we have had very few alcoholics.

4. A Healthy Sense of Mission in Life

Modern philosophers have often said that the characteristic type of existential anxiety in our culture is the sense of a lack of meaning in life. While this might be true generally, such anxiety really should not be as much of a problem for a devoted Jew. Anxiety from guilt? Believe me, *that* we know about. But as for anxiety stemming from meaninglessness, our religion and even our culture does a nice job in keeping this to a minimum..

Jews atone on Yom Kippur for the sins of commission as well as the sins of omission. It is not enough for us simply to refrain from doing harm; we are *commanded* affirmatively to do good. And if we

are taking our religion seriously – or even if we are firmly embedded in Jewish culture – we are going to work passionately and diligently to improve this world.

Traditionally, the Jewish community was considered “chosen” – chosen to be a “light onto the nations.” (That’s a phrase from the Book of Isaiah, 42:6.) In our modern individualistic society, Jewish boys and girls are encouraged as individuals to fulfill a mission: to make our mark on the world and render it a better place because of our presence. More and more often, Jews talk about the importance of “*tikkun olam*.” Fifty years ago, this term was associated primarily with a particular conception of Jewish mysticism, and refers to the idea of healing and repairing the world. Recently, though, it has come to connote social action generally, and especially attempts to help the poor, the sick, or those who are being mistreated (including our environment). Jews feel commanded to engage in acts of *tikkun olam*. The more “Jewish” the person is, the more tireless of a fighter they will be for *tikkun olam*.

This attitude, this mission, manifests itself most dramatically in two ways. First, in the Jewish love of justice (or perhaps it is more honest to say “hatred of injustice”). Jews are typically fans of the underdog, which is not surprising given the history of our people. We want to combat injustice root and branch. This could explain why, even after we have become so affluent as a people relative to our communities, such a high percentage of American Jews have remained political liberals, even progressives. Jews commonly vote against their own wallets.

In the early 80s, when I was a student at a top-ranked law school in a city that did not boast a particularly high Jewish population, Jews comprised roughly 30% of my class, which is more than 10 times our representation in the nation at large. Of my Jewish classmates, an incredibly high number have ignored opportunities to make many hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in law firms, and devoted their careers instead to public service. Now that I’m at the Justice Department, a high percentage of my attorney colleagues are Jewish. We seem to have the word “justice” embedded in our DNA, which is ironic, given the number of people who believe that the state of Israel has fallen short precisely in its commitment to justice. But remember, for nearly 2,000 years, we never had a state of our own, so we did not have as many opportunities as other peoples to manifest injustice on such a grand scale. Now, it is our turn to be tested.

The second way that our mission manifests itself is in a deep love for learning, and not merely as a means to an end, but for its own sake. Traditionally, the Jew is said to prefer studying the Torah and Talmud to just about any other activity. Remember the lyrics of “If I Were a Rich Man,” from Fiddler on the Roof:

If I were rich, I'd have the time that I lack
To sit in the synagogue and pray.
And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall.

And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day.

That would be the sweetest thing of all.

Historically, a person born Jewish has been roughly 80 times as likely to win a Nobel prize than a person who is not. Many have tried to figure out why that is so, and surely it comes from a combination of factors, but there is no denying that one such factor is the traditional Jewish spirit of intellectual inquiry. That spirit comes from the Jewish mission – to make a difference, to honor God, and to better appreciate the part of God's domain that we can best hope to understand. I'm referring to the world we can experience through our senses, our faculty of reason, and our intuition. We can accomplish very little of anything if we do not study, study and study some more.

So what is more important in the pantheon of Jewish values, studying or engaging in *tikkun olam*? While others may disagree, I would say that the answer is that *tikkun olam* is supreme. Consider the following Talmudic passage, which again is from the Ethics of the Fathers.

“One whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, to what is he like? To a tree that has many branches and few roots, so that when the wind comes, it plucks it up and turns it over. ... But one whose deeds exceed his wisdom, to what is he like? To a tree that has few branches and many roots, so that even if all the winds in the world come and blow upon it, they cannot move it out of its place.”

If you want more modern support for my position, consider the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, who is widely viewed as one of the greatest Jewish theologians of the 20th century. This is taken from chapter one of Heschel's *The Prophets*.

“What manner of man is the prophet? A student of philosophy who turns from the discourses of the great metaphysicians to the orations of the prophets may feel as if he were going from the realm of the sublime to an area of trivialities.

... He is thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place. Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind, the prophets take us to the slums. ... [T]he prophets are scandalized, and rave as if the whole world were a slum. They make much ado about paltry things, lavishing excessive language upon trifling subjects. What if somewhere in ancient Palestine poor people have not been treated properly by the rich? ... Why such intense indignation?

...

To us, injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people, to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence; to us, an episode, to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world.

...

To the prophet ... no subject is as worthy of consideration as the plight of man. Indeed, God Himself is described as reflecting over the plight of man rather than as contemplating eternal ideas.”

5. A Healthy Sense of Doubt

Jews are people of doubt -- people of questioning -- people who wrestle with ideas. We're also people of rules. This was summarized well in a slogan that Alan Dershowitz included in his book *Chutzpah* – “Question authority, but raise your hand first.”

Because of this encouragement to question, and the ability of modern Jews to move as they please both inside and outside of Jewish communities, you will find many Jews whose questioning has led them to reject the Jewish religion and even the belief in God. But what is perhaps even more interesting is that among those of us who do “believe,” our views about God are all over the map. This applies to the teachings of our greatest philosophers and theologians, as well as to the rank and file of the Jewish community.

Frequently, Jews like to invoke the phrase, “two Jews, three opinions.” This old saw reflects many truths, including that: (a) we tend to be passionate about what we believe, (b) we don't tend to be particularly bashful about sharing our beliefs, and (c) notwithstanding our passion, we are also people of doubt, who recognize that to be human is to be anything but omniscient.

6. A Healthy Sense of Humor

Check out any brilliant Jewish comedian and you will see the essence of moral humor – we laugh at ourselves. It's known as self-deprecation. “I can't get no respect.” “Take my wife -- please.” Ultimately, it's all intended to encourage us to laugh at our own deficiencies .

The seriousness and urgency of Jewish existence requires humor as a means of relaxation. We may have bland food, but our sense of humor is state of the art – as is illustrated by the percentage of Jews in the highest circles of American comedy. Humor can't prevent us from taking ourselves seriously (perhaps too seriously), but it can enable us to cope with the fact that, to get down to brass tacks, our poop really stinks, and perhaps more than other peoples, we feel compelled to talk about it.

III. Conclusion

Moses the Heretic, my second novel, was about a modern-day rabbi and lover of Islam named Moses Levine. I created the character to be someone who is truly worthy of the name “Moses,” but who is also very human, meaning that he has his own foibles.

At one point in the novel, a Unitarian-Universalist character who finds a lot in Moses' ideas and attitudes that resonates with her faith suggests that “deep down,” Moses is really a Unitarian-Universalist who can't bring himself to renounce his own religion. At that point, Moses' friend, Richie Gold, another rabbi, explains why it is that Moses is not a Unitarian, but a Jew. The following is what Rabbi Gold says.

If you've read what has been said above, you'll recognize many of the ideas he expresses. Fiction aside, however, Gold's speech conveys pretty well what it is that makes *me* proud to call myself Jewish. It also reflects the fundamental truth that the Jewish religion and the Jewish culture are inexorably intertwined:

"He's a Jew because it connects him to his family, especially his mother. He's a Jew because he loves the aesthetics, the chanting of the old melodies, the Seder plate and the bricks of Jerusalem. He's a Jew because it's so holistic – it doesn't just connect people across space, it connects people through time.

"He's a Jew ... because he loves the Hebrew language – he adores listening to music sung in Hebrew; those aren't songs to him; those are *prayers*. He's a Jew because he loves God, and our religion permits him to worship the God that he himself has chosen, not one he was required to worship as part of some official dogma.

"He's a Jew ... because he loves Jewish ethics. The same universalistic spirit that [is found in] Unitarianism came from Jewish roots. He's a Jew because he's totally committed to *tikkun olam* He feels personal responsibility for making sure that the Jewish community becomes a "light unto the nations," and especially a beacon of peace. I've never seen anyone so devoted to that goal as Moses.

"He's a Jew ... because Hillel was a Jew, and so were Jesus, Akiva, Spinoza, the Baal Shem Tov, Freud, Einstein, Buber and Heschel.

"He's a Jew ... because our culture venerates education. Why do you think the Ivy League needed quotas to keep us out so soon after our families emigrated here from Europe?

"Finally ... he's a Jew because he likes the jokes. He likes to laugh at himself, and that's what Jewish humor is all about.

"Hey Don," Moses interrupted [addressing another character]. "What happens when a Jew ..."

And that's as far as I'll go. The next line, you see, is an off-color, self-deprecatory joke that Jewish men tell about their anatomy. If you want to see it, you'll have to buy the book.