

JUDAISM

A Brief Overview of the History of Judaism

In circa 2000 BCE, the God of the ancient Israelites is portrayed in the Hebrew Bible as having established a "covenant" or *b'rit* with Abraham. Four religious traditions trace their roots back to the Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam and, more recently, the Baha'i faith. The book of Genesis describes the events surrounding the lives of the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—who, along with other characters in Jewish lore, may not be connected to any historical reality. Moses was mythologized as the next leader of the ancient Israelites. The Bible depicts him leading his people out of captivity in Egypt and receiving from the one true God the revelation at Mt. Sinai of the five books of the Torah—"the Law." The story continues with four decades of wandering through the wilderness, and Joshua then leading the tribes into the fertile promised land of the covenant, where the Hebrews were to become a populous nation.

According to the biblical narratives, the original multi-tribal alliance was converted into a kingdom by Samuel, with its first king being Saul, followed by David, who established Jerusalem as the religious and political center. While scholars continue to debate evidence for all these characters, after the third king, Solomon was said to have died in 922 BCE, the division into the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah occurred. Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BCE; Judah fell to the Babylonians in 587 BCE. Alexander the Great invaded the area in 332 BCE. From circa 300 to 63 BCE, Greek became the language of commerce and Greek/Hellenistic culture had a major influence on Judaism. And in 63 BCE, the Roman Empire took control of Palestine.

Several major religious sects were formed by the 1st century CE including the Essenes, Pharisees and Sadducees. Many anticipated the arrival of the Messiah who would drive out the Roman invaders and restore independence. Christianity was established initially as a Jewish sect centered in Jerusalem when Paul broke with Judaic tradition by spreading the religion to the Gentiles. Jews were now scattered throughout the world in what is known as the Diaspora. Their religion was no longer centered in Jerusalem and Jews were prohibited from setting foot there. The local synagogue became the center of Jewish life as authority shifted from the centralized priesthood to local scholars and teachers, giving rise to Rabbinic Judaism.

This period gave rise to heavy persecution of the Jews throughout Europe and Russia. Many false stories were spread, accusing Jews of ritual murder, the desecration of the Catholic host, and responsibility for the execution of Jesus. Unsubstantiated rumors continue to be circulated for centuries. As we know, in the 1930s and 1940s, Hitler and the German Nazi party drew on

centuries of anti-Semitism and their own warped beliefs in racial purity. The result, as we know, was the Holocaust.

The goal of the Zionist movement was the creation, in 1948, of a homeland, the state of Israel. There are currently about 18 million Jews throughout the world. They are mainly concentrated in North America (about 7 million) and Israel (about 6.5 million).

Principles of Judaism

Attempting to summarize the principles of Judaism is like trying to fit a hat on different heads because the forms are widely differentiated. Below is a brief overview of the principles in the various branches of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and Humanistic, from the most traditional and familiar to the most recent and innovative.

Orthodox Judaism is made up of sub-groups including the modern Orthodox, who have largely integrated into modern society while maintaining observance of Halakhah/Jewish law; the Chasidim who live separately and dress distinctively (commonly, but erroneously, referred to in the media as the “ultra-Orthodox”), and the Yeshivish Orthodox, who are neither Chasidic nor modern. The Orthodox movements are similar in belief in that they all believe that God gave Moses the whole Torah at Mount Sinai. The “whole Torah” includes both the Written Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and the Oral Torah, an oral tradition interpreting and explaining the Written Torah. They believe that the Torah has come down to us intact and unchanged and that it contains 613 commandments binding upon Jews but not upon non-Jews.

While there is no one official statement of principles, most of Orthodox Judaism observes a particular form of theology based on Maimonides’ 13 principles of Jewish faith. Maimonides (1135 – 1204 CE) presented these principles as “the fundamental truths of our religion and its very foundations.” While we will not list all of them here, the following will indicate the strictly theistic nature of Orthodox Judaism:

- Belief in the existence of the Creator, who is perfect in every manner of existence and is the Primary Cause of all that exists
- Belief in God's non-corporeality
- Belief that God communicates with man through prophecy
- Belief in the divine origin of the Torah
- Belief in the immutability of the Torah
- Belief in God's omniscience and providence
- Belief in divine reward and retribution

Conservative Judaism is represented by the Leadership Council of Conservative Judaism's official statement of beliefs in 1988 which affirmed belief in God and in the divine inspiration of the Torah. However, it also affirmed the legitimacy of multiple interpretations of these matters. The Council presented the following several main beliefs shared by representatives from different parts of the Conservative movement:

- Affirmation of faith in God as the Creator and Governor of the universe
- Authority of the Halakhah (Jewish law)
- Pluralism which has characterized Jewish life and thought through the centuries
- Centrality of ethics in the life of the Jews
- Regard for Israel as the Holy Land
- Jewish law and tradition that enriches Jewish life and that helps “mold the world closer to the prophetic vision of the Kingdom of God”

Other aspects of Conservative Judaism include that Jewish law is not static but has developed in response to changing conditions. Jewish law is both still valid and indispensable, although Conservative Judaism holds to a more open and flexible view than the Orthodox view of how law has and should develop. Conservative Judaism generally accepts the binding nature of Jewish law but believes that the law should adapt, absorbing aspects of the predominant culture while remaining true to Judaism's values.

Reform Judaism's most recent official platform was developed by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1999 in “A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism.” One of the central principles is the autonomy of the individual who had the right to decide whether to subscribe to a particular belief or practice—even belief in God, which only a small majority of Reform Jews accept. The statement includes sections on God, Torah and Israel. The following are two examples from each section:

- We affirm the reality and oneness of God, even as we may differ in our understanding of the Divine presence.
- We encounter God's presence in moments of awe and wonder, in acts of justice and compassion, in loving relationships, and in the experiences of everyday life.
- We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God's creation.
- We seek dialogue and joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom and justice to our world.
- We embrace religious and cultural pluralism as an expression of the vitality of Jewish communal life in Israel and the Diaspora.
- We pledge to fulfill Reform Judaism's historic commitment to the complete equality of women and men in Jewish life.

Reconstructionist Judaism has a naturalist theology as developed by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan in the late 1920s. The theology combines atheistic beliefs with religious terminology in order to construct a religiously satisfactory philosophy for those who had lost faith in traditional religion. There is diversity in the movement in that most Reconstructionist Jews reject theism and define themselves as religious naturalists. Kaplan believed that ultimately the world will be perfected but only as a result of the combined efforts of humanity over generations. Kaplan viewed Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people. Each generation is responsible for guiding that evolution in order to meet the needs of contemporary Jews.

Reconstructionist Judaism holds that the Torah was not inspired by God but that it comes from the social and historical development of Jewish people. Most Reconstructionists do not believe in divine revelation, as this is dismissed as supernaturalism. Jews following Halakhah/Jewish law vary within the Reconstructionist movement. However, legal texts and traditions are treated as evolving human works that contemporary Jews continue to learn from, adapt, and apply when they are useful.

The 1986 “Platform on Reconstructionism” includes these principles which are not mandatory but rather a consensus of current beliefs:

- Judaism is the result of natural human development. There is no such thing as divine intervention.
- Judaism is an evolving religious civilization.
- All classical views of God are rejected. God is redefined as the sum of natural powers or processes that allows mankind to gain self-fulfillment and moral improvement.

Jewish Renewal is a recent American movement begun in the 1960s by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a Hasidic rabbi. It focuses on spirituality and social justice but does not address the issue of Jewish law. The term Jewish Renewal describes a set of practices that attempt to reinvigorate Judaism with mystical, musical and meditative practices drawn from a variety of traditional and non-traditional Jewish and other sources. It describes itself as “a worldwide, trans-denominational movement grounded in Judaism’s prophetic and mystical traditions.”

The movement incorporates social views such as feminism, environmentalism and pacifism. Jewish Renewal takes its members from all streams of Judaism and also includes many Jews who are unaffiliated or who are solely affiliated with Jewish Renewal. Jewish Renewal brings Hasidic theory and practice into a non-Orthodox, egalitarian framework. Like Hasidic Jews, Renewal Jews often add to traditional worship contemplative and ecstatic practices such as meditation, chant and dance. In augmenting Jewish ritual, some Renewal Jews borrow freely from Buddhism, Sufism and other faiths.

Humanistic Judaism, founded in 1963 in Detroit, Michigan by Rabbi Sherwin Wine, offers a non-theistic alternative in contemporary Jewish life. Humanistic Jews believe in creating a meaningful Jewish life free from supernatural authority and in reviving the secular roots of Judaism. It should be noted, however, that secular Judaism is a relatively new phenomenon. Humanistic Judaism embraces a human-centered philosophy that combines the celebration of Jewish culture and identity with adherence to humanistic values. Humanistic Judaism includes the following principles:

- Judaism is the historic culture of the Jewish people and religion is only one part of that culture.
- People possess the power and responsibility to shape their own lives independent of supernatural authority.
- Ethics and morality should serve human needs and choices should be based on consideration of the consequences of actions rather than on pre-ordained rules or commandments.
- Biblical and other traditional texts are the products of human activity and are best understood through archaeology and other scientific analysis.
- The freedom and dignity of the Jewish people must go hand in hand with the freedom and dignity of every human being.

The Society for Humanistic Judaism, the congregational arm of the Humanistic Jewish movement in North America, offers the opportunity for the celebration of cultural Judaism and a way for those who identify themselves as secular or humanistic to celebrate their Jewish identity. Two related umbrella groups in the United States are the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations and the Workmen's Circle. Similar groups are found in Israel, Latin America, Europe, South Africa, and Australia.

A Common Bond. Along with the diversity in the branches of Judaism, one principle serves as a common bond, that is, the principle of *tikkun olam*, literally, *world repair*. The phrase, which had origins in classical rabbinic literature, had esoteric theological implications. It has, however, come to connote social action and the pursuit of social justice. The phrase “*tikkun olam*” was often used to refer to social action in the 1950s. Subsequently, it has been used to refer to *tzedakah* (charitable giving) and *gemilut hasadim* (acts of kindness). The phrase, however, remains connected with human responsibility for working for the improvement of society, fixing what is wrong with the world.

Principles of Humanism

There are numerous sources that present the key principles of humanism. We have drawn from several of them and listed a number of them below.

From Humanist Manifesto I (1933)

-- In place of the old attitudes involved in worship and prayer, the humanist finds religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being.

--The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good.

From Humanist Manifesto II (1973)

-- From the Preface: "Humanism is an ethical process through which we all can move, above and beyond the divisive particulars, heroic personalities, dogmatic creeds, and ritual customs of past religions or their mere negation."

-- From the Closing: "We will survive and prosper only in a world of shared humane values.... At the present juncture of history, commitment to all humankind is the highest commitment of which we are capable."

From Humanist Manifesto III: Humanism and Its Aspirations (2003)

-- Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis.

-- Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change.

-- Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.

-- Life's fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals.

-- Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships.

-- Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness.

"....Thus engaged in the flow of life, we aspire to this vision with the informed conviction that humanity has the ability to progress toward its highest ideals. The responsibility for our lives and the kind of world in which we live is ours and ours alone."

From the Amsterdam Declaration 2002 (International Humanist and Ethical Union)

-- Humanism is a lifeway aiming at the maximum possible fulfillment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. *Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.*

From "The Humanist Philosophy in Perspective" by Fred Edwords

Former AHA Executive Director Fred Edwords has written prolifically about the basic principles of humanism. The following are several of the main points in his essay on "The Humanist Philosophy in Perspective":

-- We make reasoned decisions because our experience with approaches that abandon reason convinces us that such approaches are inadequate and often counterproductive for the realization of human goals.

-- We ground our ethical decisions and ideals in human need and concern as opposed to the alleged needs and concerns of supposed deities or other transcendent entities or powers.

-- We practice our ethics in a living context rather than an ideal one.

In a related essay on “What Is Humanism?” Fred Edwards concluded:

“So, with modern humanism one finds a lifestance or worldview that is in tune with modern knowledge; is inspiring, socially conscious, and personally meaningful. It is not only the thinking person's outlook but that of the feeling person as well, for it has inspired the arts as much as it has the sciences; philanthropy as much as critique. And even in critique it is tolerant, defending the rights of all people to choose other ways, to speak and to write freely, to live their lives according to their own lights.

“So the choice is yours. Are you a humanist?”

“You needn't answer ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ For it isn't an either-or proposition. Humanism is yours -- to adopt or to simply draw from. You may take a little or a lot, sip from the cup or drink it to the dregs.

“It's up to you.”

For additional essays on Living the Humanist Life, Humanism and Traditional Religion and related issues, see: http://americanhumanist.org/Who_We_Are/About_Humanism

Comparisons and Contrasts : On Common Ground

Whereas Mordecai Kaplan edged the door open to humanism, Sherwin Wine pushed it wide open. Kaplan affirmed that God is not anthropomorphic in any way and that all such descriptions of God are used metaphorically. The theistic aspects of Reconstructionism are seen as analogy and not to be taken literally. Sherwin Wine coined the term “agnostic”, which is defined as one who refrains from making any judgments about “god” until a coherent definition is provided.

In addressing the question of “What do Humanistic Jews believe about God?” The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York City wrote that “Some (of its members) are atheists who are certain that God does not exist. Some are agnostic; they do not dismiss God but do not rely on God either. Some believe that God or a higher power does exist as a force in the universe or as a provider of purpose in their lives. The common denominator is that a belief in God does not affect how we live our daily lives. We don't expect a deity to answer prayers, nor do we turn to God as a source for wisdom and truth.”

(<http://www.citycongregation.org/about/faq/>)

Helen Bennett voices this central principle in her poem “What Humanism Means to Me” from her book, *Humanism, What's That? A Book for Curious Kids*. Here are the first and last verses:

Humanism means to me

I've got the opportunity
To realize that I am free
To take responsibility.

But best of all, my brains the one
That figures out what must be done
To help me run a better race,
To make the world a better place.

Where then do we differ? For some Jews that difference is found in six words from the definition on humanism: "Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, *without theism and other supernatural beliefs*, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity."

We are, however, on common ground in agreeing on what needs to be done. What *motivates* people to act is not as important as the act itself.

We are on the Same Page

When you read and compare the following quotations, you will see that, indeed, we are both on the same page.

"The world rests on three things: justice, truth, and peace." -- Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel

"It is not what one says, but rather what one does that makes all the difference in the world."
-- Shimon, the son of Rabbi Gamliel

"Whatever I want for myself, I want the same for that other person.
And whatever I do not want for myself or my friends, I do not want for that other person.
This is the meaning of the verse: And you shall love the other person as yourself."
-- Maimonides

"Intolerance lies at the core of evil.
Not the intolerance that results from any threat or danger.
But intolerance of another being who dares to exist.
Intolerance without cause. It is so deep within us,
because every human being secretly desires
the entire universe to himself.
Our only way out is to learn compassion without cause.
To care for each other
simple because that 'other' exists."

-- Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern of Kotsk, a Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Together as a community we evaluate the consequences of our behavior using the preservation of human dignity as our guide.” -- From a statement of The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, New York City

“When all is said and done, the Humanist way is simply the way of mutual respect, of passionate loyalty to all our human kindred everywhere on this good earth, and appreciation of life as a priceless pearl to be devoutly cherished.” -- Edward L. Ericson

“... Our Humanistic approach is to change the focus: instead of looking above and beyond for help, let’s celebrate what we can do, how much we have achieved ... We believe that all cultures, including Jewish culture, are responses to the human experience, and so we can find parallels and points of common ground between ours and others, and even learn from them.”
– Rabbi Adam Chalom is the Rabbi of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in suburban Chicago and the Assistant Dean for the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism.

Sherwin Wine composed a poem that is considered to be the central expression of the outlook of Humanistic Judaism:

Where is my light? My light is in me.

Where is my hope? My hope is in me.

Where is my strength? My strength is in me – and in you.

Humanism As The Next Step

Humanism As The Next Step by Lloyd and Mary Morain presents a brief overview of the history of modern humanism and the cultural and philosophic movements that have led to it. As the Morains put it, “Whether or not one looks at humanism as a religion, as a philosophy, as a life-stance, or as a way of life is, we believe, largely a matter of personal temperament and preference.”

Is humanism *your* next step for living your beliefs and acting on your values?

A Final Note

Humanistic Judaism and humanism value reason and education as the best way to reach conclusions about the world and, most importantly, hold that we can create a better world through service for the welfare of humanity.

The areas in which the various principles of Judaism and humanism concur are very clear and, indeed, obvious: “the human responsibility for working for the improvement of society,

fixing what is wrong with the world.” Whether we call it “tikkun olam” or “the pursuit of social justice” we are on common ground.

For additional information and for answers to any questions you might have about the humanist worldview and life-stance, please contact at: aha@americanhumanist.org

