

## Introduction to Judaism

-Hand out "*Statements about Jews and Judaism: True or False?*" [Below.]

-All the statements are false, all are recorded misconceptions.

-Golden Rule. Hillel (1 BCE) to the pagan who wanted him to teach him Judaism while he was standing on one foot:

What is hateful to you, do not do to others. That is all of Jewish teaching. All else is commentary. Now go and study it. [Shabbat 31a]

Note last point: "God" is in the details.

-Judaism began 4,000 years ago when a man named Abraham heard a voice that told him:

Go to the land that I will show you. I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. I will make you a great nation. Your seed shall be as the dust of the earth.  
[Genesis 12:1-3, 13:15-6].

-Basis of Judaism laid out, Jewish history foretold in that statement:

-Judaism began with a commandment: Go!

-Religion of commandments, not belief.

-In exchange for us following commandments, God makes **promises**.

-This "covenant" (*brit*) defines Judaism: We do our part and God does his.

-The promises:

-Property: "I will give [the land] to you and to your descendants forever".

-Permanence: If the Jews are to own the land "forever", then surely the Jews will be around forever to enjoy it.

-Protection: "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you".

-Performance: "I will make you a great nation".

-Progeny: "Your seed shall be as the dust of the earth".

-Preference: Implicit, since God spoke to Abraham and to no one else.

-Promises NOT made:

- Peace
- Prosperity
- Power
- Perfection
- Popularity

-The “dust of the earth” is also scattered all over the earth, and trampled upon, yet it cannot be destroyed. [Gen. R. 41:9] So Jewish history revealed:

-When Frederick the Great asked his protestant pastor to give him proof of the existence of God quickly, as he was not inclined to long theological discussions, the pastor replied simply: "Your Majesty, the Jews." (That was proof enough.)

-Mark Twain: “The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dreamstuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew: all other forces pass but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?”

[*Harper's Magazine*, September 1899]

-Was covenant kept by both parties?

-Property: Jews lived in the Land of Israel more or less as masters for 1500 years, then Romans expelled them and they were out for 1900 years, then they came back in 1948 and have been there for the last 63 years.

-Permanence. Jews are still here.

-Protection. Worst antisemites don't last long (Nazis), kindness to Jews is rewarded (US), many in between (Communism, Spain, France, England).

Note: Promise was not prevention of bad things (stronger protection), but reward and punishment after fact (weaker protection).

-Performance. Jews have performed for the benefit of humanity

-One objective measure: Jews are 1/3 of 1% of humanity, yet get 1/3 of Nobel Prizes.

-Progeny. By numbers only, no; by influence, yes:

-Christianity: Jesus and all early Christians were Jews.

-Islam: Born from Jewish influences, Medina built by Jews.

I will make Ishmael a mighty nation, but my covenant shall be through Isaac.  
[Gen. 17:21]

-Social justice: Very important to Jews. Jews very active in civil rights.

-Justice, justice, shall you pursue. (Deut. 16:20).

-Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt. [Deut. 15:15]

-Preference (Chosenness). Jews imbued with sense of mission because of feeling of being chosen. Everybody should feel that way.

Tanach [Bible] says:

"You shall be my treasured possession from among all the nations." [Ex. 19:5]

"You shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation." [Ex. 19:6]

"You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God, am holy". [Lev. 19:2]

"You shall be a light unto the nations". [Is. 42:6]

-Why the Jews?

- "I did not choose you because you were the most numerous [Deut. 7:7]... or the most virtuous... for you are a stiffnecked people [Ex. 32:9]."

-May be understood positively: "I need someone with the stubbornness, endurance, and staying power to keep my Torah throughout history and give it to the world."

-Chosenness has infused Jews with a sense of mission: We are here for a reason, we have a purpose in life.

-If everybody felt that way within his own tradition, everybody wins.

-Jews do feel an extra push with 4,000-year-old tradition behind the feeling, with the highest authority as its source.

-Judaism differs in at least four respects:

-Emphasizes action (commandments), not belief

-Midrash: "It is written, "They have forsaken Me and have not kept My law" (Jer. 16:11). This means: Would that they had forsaken Me but kept My law, since by occupying themselves with it, the light that it contains would have led them back to the right path." [Midrash Rabbah - Lamentations Prologue I]

-Teaches that there is nothing wrong with not being Jewish

-The righteous of all nations have a share in the World to Come [Sanhedrin 105a]

-Did not co-opt previous religions, but resolutely broke from them

-Stems from a collective (not individual) experience

-Exodus and giving of Torah witnessed by 600,000 men and their families.

-Commandments

-613 in the Torah: 248 positive and 365 negative

-Positive is more restrictive

-Show *Taryag* book.

-Some are specific (Don't eat pork)

-Some are general (Justice, justice shall you pursue)

-Some can be rationalized (Don't murder)

-Others can't (Don't mix wool and linen – Shaatnez) (Lev. 19:19, Deut. 22:10-11).

-Only profession of faith is the Shema:

- "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Deut. 6:4).

-As a result, no theology

-Maimonides: Negative theology; can only talk about what God is \*not\*.

-After all, what is "belief" when there is no practical test that one indeed believes?

-Example: I believe in gravity and so I won't jump off a cliff, but how do I know whether I believe God parted the sea?

-Story of Niels Bohr, who had a horseshoe on his door: "I don't believe in the power of the horseshoe, but I am told it works whether or not you believe in it."

- "God is One" is central. No intermediary between people and God. Any Jew can conduct services. Home-based religion. "Rabbi" means "my teacher".

-Science and Judaism. Three parallels:

-Synthesis

- Judaism says God is One. Yet dualism or polytheism, not monotheism, is what comes naturally.
- Likewise, science has strong urge to unify, synthesize, find connections between events and ideas that seems unrelated at first.
- Even though there seems to be no need to unify.

#### -Action

- Judaism emphasizes commandments (not belief), action (not words), imitation of God [by doing the commandments] rather than trying to explain God [by theology]. Naaseh v'nishma' -- We will do and we will understand.
- Likewise, science asks how (not why); describes (does not explain.)
- Feynman: Science is: 'If I do this, what happens?'

#### -Doubt

- Judaism encourages critical mind, irreverence re authority (no idolatry, iconoclasm -- idols can be ideas, not just wood and stone). No centralization in Judaism, no pope. Very independent-minded people.
- Rabbi Moshe Feinstein on how he became such an authority: "One day a man asked me a question and liked my answer; he told his friends..."
- Likewise, in science, "Once a theory, always a theory." Only working hypotheses, no certainties.

### -Challenging God. "Israel" means "He who struggles with God".

- Abraham bargaining with God over Sodom and Gomorrah
  - "Shall the judge of the whole world not deal justly?" [Gen. 18:25]
- Moses pleading with God to spare Israel.
- Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*.
- Trial of God in the concentration camps: Verdict "guilty". What to do now? A rabbi replied: It is time to say the afternoon prayers.
- Talmud story of Oven at Aknai [below]: People on earth will interpret Torah, not God.

### -Gentiles

- Where does that leave non-Jews? No denial of salvation outside Judaism:
  - The righteous of all nations have a share in the World to Come [Sanhedrin 105a]
  - 36 times in the Hebrew Bible: Love the stranger, for you were a stranger in the Land of Egypt. [E.g., Lev. 19:34]
  - All mankind must obey seven *Noahide* laws:
    - No idolatry, no murder, no blasphemy, no adultery, no stealing, no eating live animals, and establish courts of justice.

### -No proselytizing

- Jews have responsibilities Gentiles do not have. But converts are welcome.

### -Pikuach nefesh [Saving a Life]

- Any commandment can be broken to save a life, except murder, idolatry, and adultery.

### -Talmud

- Two parts:
  - Mishnah (Oral Law given on Mount Sinai, as recounted by Tannaim)

- Gemara (commentary on it, based on Tanach).
- Two Gemaras: Babylonian (Bavli) and Jerusalem (Yerushalmi).
- Compiled 150 BCE - 500 CE. Mishnah closed 200 CE, Gemara 500 CE.
- Arguments between 1,000 rabbis spanning 17 generations.
- 6 sections, 63 tractates, 4 million words (0.5M + 3.5M), yet telegraphic style.
- If stories, cures, poetry, science, etc., frequently no conclusion (Aggadah).
- If practical law or ethics, frequently there is a conclusion (Halachah)
  - Decided by majority vote among the Sages of the Sanhedrin.
- Rabbis were unpaid, usually poor, and had everyday professions
  - Woodcutters, well-diggers, carpenters, shoemakers, blacksmiths, etc.
- The Talmud consecrates the very process of argument.

Then Rambam's Mishneh Torah, then Caro's Shulchan Aruch, then Responsa.

#### -Worship service. Five main parts:

- Barchu (Benediction and call to worship)
- Shema (Watchword of faith)
- Amidah (18 blessings)
- Alenu (Adoration)
- Kaddish (Prayer for the dead, yet does not mention death)

#### -Holidays

- Shabbat. Weekly day of rest. The most important holiday.
- Rosh Hashana [Head of Year]. New year. Book of Life.
- Yom Kippur. Day of Atonement for sins against God.
  - For sins against man, must work it out with victims.
- Sukkot [Booths]. "Dwell" eight days in "booths".
- Simchat Torah. Rejoicing over the Torah. Reading cycle end and begins again.
- Hanukah [Dedication]. Festival of lights. Victory of Maccabees.
  - First fight for religious freedom.
- Tu B'shvat [15<sup>th</sup> of Shevat]. Festival of trees.
- Purim [Lots]. Deliverance from the evil Haman. Carnivals.
- Passover. The Exodus from Egypt.
  - Reminds us that we were slaves [others boast of their royal blood].
  - Remember that \*You yourself\* went out of Egypt. (Easy for me to say!).
- Yom Hashoah. Day of remembrance of the Holocaust.
- Yom Haatzmaut. Israeli independence day.
- Shavuot [Weeks]. Commemorates giving of Torah on Mount Sinai.
- Tisha B'Av [9<sup>th</sup> of Av]. Mourns destruction of Temple.

#### -Final quote

Albert Einstein: "The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence: These are the features of the Jewish tradition that make me grateful I belong to it."

## STATEMENTS ABOUT JEWS AND JUDAISM: TRUE OR FALSE?

1. Judaism teaches that one must retaliate in kind: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.
2. Jews use the blood of Christian babies to make ritual food for their Passover holiday.
3. Judaism teaches that divorce is a sin.
4. Judaism teaches that Jews are superior to non-Jews.
5. When a rabbi blesses food, it becomes kosher (i.e., fit for consumption).
6. Hanukkah is the most important Jewish holiday.
7. Judaism is based on belief in the appropriate theological doctrines.
8. Judaism teaches that the outstanding figures in Jewish history were free from sin.
9. Most of the difference between Judaism and Christianity is belief in Jesus.
10. The aim of Jewish justice is to punish the criminal according to his crime.
11. Judaism teaches that sex in marriage is a man's right and a woman's duty.
12. Rabbis are empowered by God to administer certain sacraments for their Jewish flock.
13. A Jew who converts to another religion ceases to be Jewish.
14. Judaism teaches that it is sinful to experience pleasure.
15. Jews call their Scriptures the 'Old Testament'.
16. Jews can eat cheeseburgers, as long as the meat and the cheese are kosher.
17. Rabbis are intermediaries between man and God.
18. Judaism teaches that Jews must vigorously attempt to convince non-Jews to convert to Judaism.
19. Judaism teaches that there is no salvation for non-Jews.
20. Judaism is based in the synagogue, and attendance at religious services is essential.

\*TOTAL NUMBER OF TRUE STATEMENTS:\* \_\_\_\_\_

\*TOTAL NUMBER OF FALSE STATEMENTS:\* \_\_\_\_\_

## **Talmud sample [Bava Metzia 59a-b]**

-We learnt elsewhere: If he cut it into separate tiles, placing sand between each tile: Rabbi Eliezer declared it clean, and the Sages declared it unclean...

-It has been taught: On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them.

-Said he to them: 'If the Law agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!' Thereupon the carob-tree was torn 100 cubits out of its place - others say, 400 cubits. 'No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,' they retorted.

-Again he said to them: 'If the Law agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!' Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards. 'No proof can be brought from a stream of water,' they rejoined.

-Again he urged: 'If the Law agrees with me, let the walls of the House of Study prove it!' Whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But Rabbi Joshua rebuked them, saying: 'When scholars are engaged in a legal dispute, what business do you have to interfere?' Hence they did not fall, in honor of Rabbi Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honor of Rabbi Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined.

-Again he said to them: 'If the Law agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!' Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: 'Why do you dispute Rabbi Eliezer, considering that in all matters the Law agrees with him?'

-But Rabbi Joshua arose and exclaimed: '[The Torah] is not in heaven.' [Deut. 30:12] What did he mean by this?

-Said Rabbi Jeremiah: That the Torah has already been given at Mount Sinai. We pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because You have long ago written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, 'After the majority must one incline' [Ex. 23:2].

-Rabbi Nathan met Eliyahu [the Prophet] and asked him: 'What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do at that time?'

-He replied, "He laughed [with joy], saying, 'My children have bested me, My children have bested me!'"

-It was said: On that day all objects which Rabbi Eliezer had declared clean were brought and burnt in fire. Then they took a vote and placed him under cherem [ban].