

# WHAT I LIKE ABOUT JUDAISM

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Perhaps a better title would have been "How I Understand Judaism." As it stands, the "how to" title is simply the one I use in the server filing system for my articles. The subtitle is actually the original heading of a set of handwritten notes that I have made over the decades that I have sat and stood in different synagogues, attended Torah study groups, and participated in Passover Seders in homes of my Jewish friends. I make no claim that the opinions or statements expressed herein are free of error, although I welcome any corrections in terms of any empirical or factual inaccuracies.

- ✓ I like how Judaism gave us the world's oldest calendar. <sup>1</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism gave us the world's oldest continuous monotheistic religion. <sup>2</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism is the oldest of the three Abrahamic traditions. <sup>3</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism gave birth to two other great world religions.
- ✓ I like how Judaism gave us a culture, an ethnicity, and a nation. <sup>4,5</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism gave us one of the world's first ethical codes of conduct. <sup>6</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism gave us the world's first free health care for the sick.
- ✓ I like how Judaism gave us the world's first free meal plan for the poor.
- ✓ I like how Judaism welcomes the stranger, because we have all been a stranger at some time or place in our lives. <sup>7</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism gave us Pesach (English: "Passover"). <sup>8</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism gave us Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. <sup>9</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism reflects one large family around the world. <sup>10</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism observes Shabbat, setting aside one day each week to cease "doing" and to refocus on "being." <sup>11</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism encourages moderation rather than abstinence or asceticism. <sup>12</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism respects the religions and traditions of others. <sup>13</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism does not impose or proselytize religion onto others. <sup>14</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism gave us the Talmud. <sup>15</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism gave us Midrash, which is to the imagination what the Bible is to knowledge (Wiesel, 1976, p. 41). <sup>16</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism encourages study of the Torah (English: "instruction"). <sup>17</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism is home to both House Hillel and House Shammai, each informing the other even when they disagree. <sup>18</sup>
- ✓ I like how Judaism values diversity of opinion in the interpretation of sacred texts.
- ✓ I like how Judaism allows two rabbis to have three different opinions. <sup>19</sup>

✓ I like how Judaism thrives on asking questions.  
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✓ I like how Judaism emphasizes belonging more than believing (Levine & Brettler, 2021).  
21

✓ I like how Judaism focuses more on being in relationship than on being right (Kushner, 2015).<sup>22</sup>

✓ I like how Judaism focuses more on actions and behavior than on beliefs or creeds.  
23

✓ I like how Judaism recognizes that religion and science are complimentary.

✓ I like how Judaism gave us physicians such as Jonas Salk, who gave us the polio vaccine.

✓ I like how Judaism gave us scientists such as Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr.

✓ I like how Judaism gave us psychotherapists such as Sigmund Freud and Viktor Frankl.

✓ I like how Judaism gave us psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Erik Erikson.

✓ I like how Judaism gave us composers such as Gustav Mahler and Leonard Bernstein.

✓ I like how Judaism gave us music artists such as Bob Dylan and Neil Diamond.

✓ I like how Judaism gave us theologians such as Martin Buber and Abraham Heschel.

✓ I like how Judaism gave us my favorite comedians, too numerous to mention.<sup>24</sup>

✓ I like how Judaism gave us one of my favorite professors, Harold Finkelstein, Ph.D., Dept. of Mathematics, Emory University.

✓ I like how Judaism gave us Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.<sup>25</sup>

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## Notes

1. According to Guinness World Records (2021), the oldest calendar still in use is the Jewish calendar, which has been in popular use since the 9th century BCE. It is based on biblical calculations that place the creation at 3761 BCE. For those interested in doing the calculations, the Gregorian calendar year 2019 (which was the date "How to Understand Judaism" was published) corresponds to the Jewish year 5782. October 8, 2019 was the beginning of the Year 5782 in the Jewish calendar. It represents the supposed 5782<sup>nd</sup> year since the world was created on Saturday night, October 6, 3761 BCE. There is some archeological evidence of the Labombo bone, which may have been a lunar based calendar that was used for farming as early as 43,000 years ago, although it is no longer in use.

2. In the section titled "Moses and Akhenaten" (pp. 137-141) of Chapter 4 (The Mystery of Midian: From Where Did God Come?) in *The Exodus*, Richard Friedman (2017) explains that the first monotheistic religion may have developed in Ancient Egypt during the reign of the Egyptian King Akhenaten, who called his people to worship a single sun god. The king's name had been Amenhotep (aka, Amenophis IV), but he changed it to Akhenaten (meaning "One is effective for the Aten") to incorporate his god's name (Aten). As explained by both Friedman (2017, p. 136) and Egyptologist Jan Assman (1998, p. 148), Sigmund Freud (1939) proposed in *Moses and Monotheism* that Moses (a name that is Egyptian in origin) had been either a noble in the king's court who followed Akhenaten or a priest of Akhenaten. With the death of Akhenaten and the subsequent religious revolution, in which monuments were effaced and the king's name was erased from history, Moses may have taken a group of Aten followers from among Egypt's slaves and "led them to a new life in a new faith" (Friedman, 2017, p. 138).

Historian Elizabeth Burton (2020) contends that Akhenaten's form of monotheism had similarities to the three Abrahamic religions of more modern times. Scholars have argued over whether Akhenaten's religion was actually monotheistic in the contemporary sense of the term. As Friedman points out, "scholars have long argued over when Israel's religion became truly monotheistic as well" (p. 139). It seems likely that Atenism and the early religion of Israel were henotheistic (i.e., recognizing the existence of other gods but focusing on worshipping just one). Monotheism did not become a permanent perspective in the world until the adoption of monotheism by the Hebrews in Babylon. Atenism disappeared soon after Akhenaten's death, followed by the ascension of the nine-year old child-king Tutankhamun (1324 BCE). Akhenaten was essentially erased from history until the archeological discovery of the Amarna Letters in 1887 (Burton, 2020; Friedman, 2017).

3. Dating back nearly 4,000 years, Judaism is the oldest of the Abrahamic traditions and the oldest monotheistic religion. By contrast, Islam is the world's youngest monotheistic religion, dating to the 7th Century during the lifetime of the prophet Muhammad (c. 570 - 632 CE). Among the majority who consider Christianity to be monotheistic (i.e., because some do not consider Trinitarian theology to be monotheistic), the general consensus is that it became in the First Century of the Common Era. Jesus of Nazareth (c. 4 BCE - 30 / 33 CE), who became known as Jesus the Christ, was the central figure. As noted by Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), the Lutheran theologian and professor of the New Testament at the University of Marburg (Germany), it was in the faith of the early Christian community that Jesus "the proclaimer became the proclaimed" (Bultmann, 1951). According to Bultmann, the theology of Paul (born Saul of Tarsus, c. 5 - c. 64/67 CE) was not the same as the message of Jesus:

"Paul's theology proper, with its theological, anthropological, and soteriological ideas, is not at all a recapitulation of Jesus' own preaching nor a further development of it, and it is especially significant that he never adduces any of the sayings of Jesus on the Torah in favor of his own teaching about the Torah. The concept, Reign of God, which was basic for the message preached by Jesus, has lost its dominant position in Paul" (Bultmann, 1951, p. 189).

The Apostolic Age of Christianity refers to the period when the first the first apostles of Jesus were still alive (c. 30-100 CE). In 313, the Roman Emperor Constantine I issued the Edict of Milan, which legalized Christian worship in the Roman empire. In 325, Emperor Constantine organized the First Council of Nicea, which supported the Trinitarian doctrine as codified in the Nicene Creed. In 380, the Emperor Theodosius (aka, Theodosius the Great) established the Edict of Thessalonica, by which the Roman Empire officially adopted Trinitarian Christianity as the state religion.

4. Thomas Cahill (1998) is an American historian whose *The Hinges of History* series provides a recounting of some of the formative moments and trends in Western civilization. In *The Gifts of the Jews*, which is the second book in this series, Cahill provides evidence from multiple historical sources to support his contention that historical human progress in ethics, justice, and morality was based on a foundation built by the Jews. One of Cahill's perspectives is that Judaism has even shaped our concept of time itself. In contrast to the endless cycle of birth and death in which ancient religions saw time as a ceaselessly spinning wheel, Cahill makes a compelling case that the ancient Jews began to see time differently. For them, time was a human narrative that had a beginning and an ending whose triumphant conclusion would come in the future. From this insight came a new conception of men and women as individuals with unique destinies--a concept that has shaped Western thought to include the hopeful belief in progress

and the sense that tomorrow can be better than today.

5. Shalom Goldman, Ph.D. is Pardon Tillinghast Professor of Religion at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont. In *Jewish-Christian Difference and Modern Jewish Identity*, Goldman (2015) explores what would seem to be a simple question, but is actually the object of a profound quest—"Who is a Jew?" This question involves deeply complex considerations, both within Judaism and in interactions between Jews and Christians. Goldman's thesis is that in the twentieth century, the Jewish-Christian relationship has changed to the extent that definitions of Jewish identity were reshaped. His stories of converts—in both directions—illustrate how the borders dividing Judaism and Christianity are more permeable than ever before.

6. The Code of Hammurabi, regarded as the longest, best-organized, and best-preserved legal text from the ancient Near East, predated the Ten Commandments by almost a thousand years. The German scholar George Duncan, Ph.D. estimated that Hammurabi's Code was composed around 1755-1750 BCE, whereas the Ten Commandments were probably recorded around the 7th century BCE (Duncan, 1904, p. 191). By tradition (e.g., Babylonian Talmud Makkot 23b-24a), there are 613 commandments (מצוות תרי"ג, mitzvot [plural], English: commandments), which include 248 imperatives ("positive commandments") to perform an act (mitzvot aseh) and 365 prohibitions ("negative commandments") to abstain from certain acts (mitzvot lo taaseh).

Following the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (from March to September in 70 CE), many of the mitzvot can no longer be observed although they retain their religious significance. According to Rabbi Yisrael Meir haKohen (1990), in today's world there are 77 positive and 194 negative commandments that can be observed, of which there are 26

commandments that apply only within the Land of Israel.

Duncan (1904) is one notable scholar who had raised the question of whether in ancient Babylonia, the laws of Hammurabi may have been originally grouped in pentads (five laws) or decads (ten laws) as aids to memory. According to Duncan's hypothesis,

"Each law would correspond to a finger of the hand. This old custom may have influenced the grouping in Exod., chap. 20, where we have the Ten Commandments, the decalogue, because we have ten fingers. It is noticeable today that children, in memorizing the Ten Commandments, of use their fingers as mnemonic aids" (Duncan, 1904, p. 192).

7. Emeritus Chief Rabbi Jonathan Henry Sacks (1948-2020), Ph.D., MBE was a British Orthodox rabbi, theologian, politician, and prolific author. He served as the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013. In 2005, he was knighted. Four years later, he was made a life peer, becoming Baron Sacks of Aldgate in the City of London. Sacks was a Member of House of Lords of the United Kingdom. In 2016, Lord Sacks was awarded the Templeton Prize for "bringing spiritual insight to the public conversation through mass media, popular lectures and more than two dozen books." According to Sacks (2002), "The Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to 'love the stranger'" (p. 58). Similarly, Professor Richard Elliot Friedman observes that through his many years of studying the Hebrew Bible, he has been impressed with the repeated concern for the fair and just treatment of the alien (זָרַי *zar*, English: "alien," "stranger," "foreigner," "outsider"). Friedman asks the question: "How many things are mentioned in the Five Books of Moses fifty-two times?" (2017, p. 201). Parenthetically, Friedman (2017) points out that the Hebrew word for sanctuary (מִקְדָּשׁ *miqdash*, English: "holy place,"

"sacred place," "sanctuary") also occurs 52 times—but throughout the entire Hebrew Bible. In comparison, "The treatment of aliens occurs fifty-two times in the Five Books of Moses alone!" (p. 270).

8. *Pesach* (English: "Passover") commemorates the Biblical story of Exodus — where God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The celebration of Passover is prescribed in the book of Exodus. In highlighting the core meaning of *Pesach*, Rabbi Sacks (2003, p. 106) provides this perspective: "Pesach is the story of the defeat of probability by the force of possibility. It defines what it is to be a Jew: a living symbol of hope."

9. Yom Kippur (English: "Day of Atonement"), which has a scriptural basis in Leviticus 23:27-28, is Judaism's holiest day of the year. Based on the central themes of atonement and repentance, the purpose of the day is to effect individual and collective purification by the practice of forgiveness of the sins of others and by repentance for one's own sins against God. Although *kippur* (כִּפּוּר) is usually translated as "atonement," the literal translation of *kippurim* is "cleansing." Thus, Yom Kippur is a day to atone for misdeeds and become cleansed and purified from them. As Rabbi Sacks (2009) writes in his *Letters to the Next Generation*, "The single most important lesson of Yom Kippur is that it's never too late to change, start again, and live differently from the way we've done in the past. God forgives every mistake we've made so long as we are honest in regretting it and doing our best to put it right. Even if there's nothing we regret, Yom Kippur makes us think about how to use the coming year in such a way as to [p. 6] bring blessings into the lives of others by way of thanking God for all He has given us" (pp. 5-6).

10. The Talmud (Shevuot 39a) concludes with the Aramaic phrase, "*Kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*," which means all of Israel are responsible for each other. The idea is also translated as "All Jews are responsible for one another (*kol Yisrael*



*arevim zeh la-zeh*)" (Sanhedrin 27b), with "zeh la zeh" transliterated as "this one to that one." In the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus of Nazareth restates this duty in his response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:19). In a masterful interpretation of Torah with a twist, the itinerant sage of Galilee reveals to the lawyer that his neighbor is not only an unlawful alien but also one who is a despised outcast.

**11.** The Shabbat (שַׁבָּת *shabbath*, English: "Sabbath," also called "Shabbos") is the only ritual or holiday mentioned in the Ten Commandments, and the commandment to rest on the Shabbat is mentioned 12 times in the entire Torah. "Of all the holidays in the Jewish year," according to Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein (1951-2019), "the weekly Sabbath is the most cherished and beloved" (1984, p. 81). It was not only to Judaism but through Judaism that God gave Shabbat to the entire world. As Eckstein observes, "Of the many contributions Judaism has made to humanity through its two great daughter religions, Christianity and Islam, the Shabbat is perhaps the most important" (1984, p. 81). In a daily devotional reader written by a Jewish rabbi and a Christian theologian, it is described this way:

"The concept of Sabbath is central to the Jewish faith and life. More Jewish literature--legal, mystical, and homiletic--has been written on this topic than on any other. It is described by the rabbis as *shekulah kineged kol hamitzvot* 'of equal import to all the rest of the commandments put together.' Those who observe the Sabbath are regarded as if they have observed the entire Torah" (Eckstein & Longman, 2013, Week 3, Day 2).

According to Exodus Rabbah 25:12, the Shabbat is equivalent to "all of the commandments" (Rabbi Levi) or "all the other commandments together" (e.g., Rabbi Yoahanan). As an aside, Exodus Rabbah (רבה שמות *Shemot Rabbah*, English: "Exodus Rabbah") is a midrash to the Book of

Exodus that consists of two distinct parts compiled in two different eras. The first part, known as Exodus Rabbah I (sections 1-14, covering Exodus chapters 1-10), provides verse-by-verse interpretations of the first ten chapters of the Book of Exodus. The second part, known as Exodus Rabbah II (sections 15-52), offers commentaries and sermons related to chapters 12-40. Although the dating of each section is subject to debate, the two parts were likely compiled into one work around the 11th or 12th century.

**12.** The Jewish tradition of moderation dates back at least to the "golden middle way" between sensual luxury and tortured self-deprivation as advocated by Moses ben Maimon (1138-1204), commonly known as Maimonides. Also referred to by the acronym Rambam, Maimonides was a Sephardic Jewish philosopher, physician, and astronomer who became one of the most prolific and influential Torah scholars of the Middle Ages. In Jewish tradition, the material world is seen as being created as intrinsically good, and those who refuse to partake of its goodness have even been described as sinning by their refusal. According to Abba Arikha (175-247 CE), born Rav Abba bar Aybo and commonly known as Rav (רב), "Man in the life to come will have to account for every enjoyment offered him that was refused without sufficient cause" (Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddishin 4:14). Rav was a Jewish amora of the 3rd century, and the Amoraim were Jewish scholars from about 200 to 500 CE, who "said" or "told over" the teachings of the Oral Torah. They were primarily located in Babylonia, Israel, Palestine, and Mesopotamia. Their legal discussions and debates of Mishnaic law were eventually codified in the Gemara. In contemporary terms, a more gender neutral translation of Kiddishin 4:14 might be rendered as follows: "You will one day give reckoning for everything your eyes saw which, although permissible, you did not enjoy" (AJWS Staff, 2011).

**13.** In *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Sacks (2002, p. 56) provides the analogy of a loving parent: "God no more wants all faiths and

cultures to be the same than a loving parent wants his or her children to be the same." In exclaiming the expansiveness of God that cannot be codified or confined by any religion, Sacks writes, "The truth at the beating heart of monotheism is that God is greater than religion; that He is only partially comprehended by any faith. He is my God, but also your God. He is on my side, but also on your side. He exists not only in my faith, but also in yours" (2002, p. 65). Written in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, when the importance of interfaith dialogue was experienced most urgently, Sacks' comments were received with some controversy. Writing for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Richard Allen Greene (2003, para. 1) reported that Sacks' book "sparked a storm of criticism from fervently Orthodox rabbis in Britain and Israel." To the dismay of many British Jews, reports Greene, Sacks backed down to the fierce opposition of prominent Orthodox rabbis and he agreed to issue a revised edition of the book. In the second edition (March 1, 2003) of *The Dignity of Difference*, Sacks softened his tone by using substitute language, "God communicates in human language, but there are dimensions of the divine that must forever elude us. As Jews we believe that God has made a covenant with a singular people, but that does not exclude the possibility of other peoples, cultures, and faiths finding their own relationship with God within the shared frame of the Noahide laws. God is the God of all humanity, but between Babel and the end of days no single faith is the faith of all humanity."

**14.** Judaism not only does not proselytize religion to others, but conversion to Judaism is itself a complex and time-consuming process. According to tradition, a rabbi will turn away a potential convert three times before allowing him or her to begin the conversion process. The basic idea is that an observant Jewish lifestyle is so much to take on that when would-be converts ask multiple times, it shows their determination to make that commitment. Regardless of denomination, a minimum of one year is usually required so that the prospective convert can experience the full cycle of Jewish holidays.

During this time, conversion candidates study the Hebrew alphabet, Jewish law, and basic tenets of the faith. At the same time, however, becoming a Jew is not simply a religious change. The convert not only accepts the Jewish religion, but essentially becomes a member of the Jewish people by embracing Jewish culture and history.

**15.** The Talmud is the source from which the code of Jewish Halakhah (הֲלָכָה law, English: "the way," "the law," "the way to behave," "the way of walking," "something to go by") is derived. The Talmud is comprised of the Mishnah (the original written version of the oral law) and the Gemara (the subsequent record of the rabbinic discussions that follow the writings, which includes the differences of opinions of the rabbis). As explained by Tracey Rich (2020, para. 2), "The word 'halakhah' is usually translated as 'Jewish Law,' although a more literal (and more appropriate) translation might be 'the path that one walks.'" Halakhah is also variously transliterated as *halacha*, *halakhah*, and *halacho*.

In contrast to Jewish Law, the earlier Noahide (or Noachian) Laws (שבע מצוות בני נח, *Sheva Mitzvot B'nei Noach*, English: "Seven Laws of Noah") include prohibitions against worshipping idols, cursing God, murder, adultery and sexual immorality, theft, eating flesh torn from a living animal, as well as the obligation to establish courts of justice. According to the Talmud, the Noahide Laws are given by God as a binding set of universal moral laws for the "sons of Noah" (i.e., all of Humanity). According to cultural anthropology scholar Rachel Feldman is a Ph.D. (2017, 2018), non-Jews who choose to follow the Noahide Laws are regarded as "Righteous Gentiles" (העולם אומות חסידים, *Chassiddei Umot ha-Olam*, English: "Pious People of the World"). In her *Bnei Noah Timeline*, Feldman estimates that between 4 BCE and 2 CE, Gentiles known as "God-sympathizers" (*sebomenoi*, Greek: "worshipping one", or *sebomenoi theon hypsiston*, Greek: "Worshippers of the All-Highest God") observed Jewish practices but did not convert to Judaism.

**16.** Midrash (מִדְרָשׁ midrash, English: "study," "textual interpretation") is a form of exegesis and interpretation by the rabbinic sages. Midrashim (מִדְרָשִׁים plural form of Midrash) are seen in explanatory comments, illustrative anecdotes, legendary stories, and perplexing parables. In his chapter titled "Cain and Abel: The First Genocide," author, activist, and professor Elie Wiesel (1928-2016) provides insight into the function of Midrash: "Sensitive to the complexities and inner tensions of the Biblical narrative, the Midrash, as usual, tries to adorn it with details and commentaries, the Midrash being to the Bible what imagination is to knowledge" (Wiesel, 1976, p. 41). Biblical scholar and Episcopal priest Wilda ("Wil") Gafney, Ph.D. provides these observations:

"As religious readings, rabbinic readings discern value in texts, words, and letters, as potential revelatory spaces; they reimagine dominant narrativational [sic] readings while crafting new ones to stand alongside--not replace--former readings. Midrash also asks questions of the text; sometimes it provides answers, sometimes it leaves the reader to answer the questions" (Gafney, 2017, p. 3).

From a cultural perspective, the Rev. Dr. Gafney recognizes *sanctified imagination* as a type of African American indigenous midrash. As an outgrowth of her experience from the pulpit and pew, Gafney has found that the use of a preemptive declaration (e.g., "In my *sanctified imagination...*") is useful "in order to disclose that the preacher is going beyond the text in a manner not likely to be challenged, even in the most literal interpretive communities" (p. 3). Biblical scholar and theologian Will Coleman, Ph.D. describes how, in some African American congregations, "The preacher and congregation organically extend the words of the text into an oral commentary or midrash" (W. Coleman, personal communication, January 12, 2022). The Rev. Dr. Coleman has hypothesized that some form of Hebraism may have made its way to West African a long time ago and from there to the Americas within the African Diaspora.

**17.** With respect to learning Torah, Rabbi Coopersmith (2014, item 2) states, "The Jewish people received God's instruction manual for living, the blueprint to the universe whose wisdom and values have changed the world. We have the privilege to plumb its endless depths and refine ourselves by wrapping our heads around the source of Truth that transcends this world." With regard to transcendence, "The Torah has no beginning and no end" (A. Robertson, personal communication, September 15, 2020). With regard to living, "Jews do not follow Torah in order to 'earn' salvation or divine love—but rather to respond to that love" (A-J Levine, personal communication, October 23, 2021).

Although some Christians translate the word "Torah" as "the law," Jews more commonly translate the word as instruction (תּוֹרָה, Torah; English: "instruction," "teaching," or "law"). In Judaism, the phrase "the law" more properly refers to Halakhah (English: "the way," "the law," "the way to behave"). In Judaism, the Torah is also known as the Five Books of Moses (i.e., Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), whereas many Christian scholars use the term "Pentateuch" (πεντάτευχος, pentáteukhos, pentateuchos, Greek: "five implements," "five scrolls"). According to Old Testament scholar Michael Grisanti, Ph.D. (2011), "The Greek term was apparently popularized by the Hellenized Jews of Alexandria, Egypt, in the first century AD" (p. 163).

**18.** Although they were contemporaries, Hillel (c. 110 BCE, died 10 CE) was nearly 60 years old at the time of Shammai's birth (50 BCE - 30 CE). Although the two were often depicted in disagreement, the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 15a) states that they disputed in only three matters. With the passage of time, however, differences between their respective schools multiplied to the point that hundreds of differences between them are recorded in the Talmud. The followers of Hillel (בֵּית הַלֵּל Beit Hillel, English: "House of Hillel") and Shammai (בֵּית שַׁמַּי Beit Shammai, English: "House of Shammai") had vigorous debates on matters of ethics, theology,

and ritual practice, which were crucial in the shaping of the Oral Law and Judaism itself. With few exceptions, Beit Hillel's opinion is generally the more lenient and tolerant of the two. To use an old adage, "*The school of Shammai binds, whereas the school of Hillel looses*" [sic]. Originally a Jewish Mishnaic phrase, "binding and loosing" is a concept mentioned in Isaiah 58:5-6, the New Testament (Matthew 16:19; Matthew 18:18), and the Targum (Jewish Aramaic translations of books of the Hebrew Bible). In nearly all cases, Hillel's opinion has been accepted as normative by halakha ("Jewish law"), and it has become the opinion followed by most modern Jews. As reflected in the Talmud, the purpose of debate is not consensus but illumination. The Hebrew phrase "Machlochet L'Shem Shamayim" (שמחים לשם מהלוקה, English: "argument for the sake of Heaven) can be loosely translated as "conflict [or debate] for the sake of Heaven."

**19.** The expression "two Jews, three opinions" is axiomatic of how Jewish tradition has always placed value on engaging different opinions. The expression is even the title of a book comprised of a collection of 20th-century American Jewish quotations (see Brawarsky & Mark, 1998). To use another adage, "One rabbi says this, and one rabbi says that; the sages say this, and everyone else believes what they want." In his advice on how to give a d'var Torah, Rabbi Richard Israel cautions speakers against getting carried away by their conclusions:

"Any sentence that starts by saying "Judaism teaches that..." probably ought to make your listeners a little nervous. It is less pretentious and more honest to note that "Rabbi X teaches that..." or, "It is possible to interpret the text in the following manner"" (Israel, 1993, p. 49).

Judaism emphasizes *orthopraxy* (i.e., what one does) more than *orthodoxy* (i.e., what one believes), which allows room for diversity of beliefs and opinions. As the sages say in the Talmud: *Shavim panim letorah* (English: "There

are 70 faces of the Torah"), which is a phrase that compares each verse to a diamond with 70 brilliant interpretations.

Rabbi David Wolpe, of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, makes this observation: "Judaism is the contrapuntal poetry of points of view contending with each other, seeking always to find the more refined, more accurate, more crystalline view" (para. 3). In the title of an article, Rabbi Wolpe (2020) writes, "Debate is a Jewish sacrament." As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks expressed it, "Jewish faith is not primarily about creeds or theologies; it is not faith thought, but faith lived" (2004, p. 165).

In contrast to the acceptance of divergence of thought and opinion within Judaism, Christianity has become more convergent and creedal and narrow in belief since the First Century. At least since the First Council of Nicaea, a council of Christian bishops convened in the Bithynian city of Nicaea (now İznik, Turkey) by the Roman Emperor Constantine I in 325 CE, Christianity has focused more on orthodoxy. This ecumenical council was the first effort to attain consensus of belief, in contrast to which those not in agreement were considered heretics. Although contemporary creedal Christianity continues to place an emphasis on belief (Fairchild, 2021), asking for a candid "statement of faith" from 12 Christians is likely to result in 12 different opinions. Thus, Judaism may simply be more honest and open in tolerating—even encouraging and certainly valuing—diversity of theological thought.

**20.** As stated by Rabbi Sacks (2003, p. 105) states, "In Judaism, to be without questions is not a sign of *faith*, but of lack of depth." In other words, "Questioning is at the heart of Jewish spirituality" (Sacks, 2003, p. 106). This truism is reflected in the story of the person who asks his rabbi, "Why does a rabbi always answer a question with another question?" The rabbi thought for a moment and then relied, "Why shouldn't a rabbi answer a question with another question?"

**21.** Amy-Jill Levine, Ph.D. (Professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School) and Marc Z. Brettler, Ph.D. (Professor in Judaic Studies at Duke University) explain how Jews and Christians approach texts so differently:

"That same point holds for Jews, who do not have major problems with most alternative readings of scripture. In Judaism, orthopraxy, what one does, is more important than orthodoxy, what one believes. There are Jewish atheists; technically, however, "Christian atheist" would be an oxymoron. If one enters a movement by belief, by being born from above, disagreement is a greater problem, and this scriptural interpretation is more likely to be constrained. If one enters a group by belief, one also leaves by belief. Christianity therefore developed creeds to assure that its members would all hold the same major beliefs. Otherwise put: orthodoxy, correct belief, is paramount in Christianity" (Levine & Brettler, 2021, p. 33).

**22.** To use an old adage, "If we insist that we are right, then we are insisting that they are wrong." On an individual level, I can be right or I can be in a relationship. In a brief comparative commentary on a major difference between the three Abrahamic religions, Rabbi Harold Kushner (2015) mentions the importance of belonging—being in relationship—in Judaism. Kushner provides insight into the Akedah (עֲקֵדָה binding, English: "binding") referring to the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22:

"For Jews, Abraham is first and foremost an ancestor, the progenitor of a people living in the service of God. Theology is a distant second to peoplehood in the biblical account—believing is secondary to belonging. This perspective continues to this day. For Christians, Abraham is the believer par excellence, the pioneer of monotheism. In

a world of idol worshippers, Abraham affirmed the existence of a single all-powerful deity. Paul refers to him as "the father of all who have faith" (Romans 4:11). For Muslims, Abraham is the symbol of unquestioning obedience, as exemplified by his readiness to sacrifice his beloved son (Isaac in the Hebrew Bible, Ishmael in the Quran) in response to God's demand" (Kushner, 2015, p. 157).

**23.** Although intent and motives are important in everything we do—or do not do—the Torah is more concerned with action. One can perform a *mitzvah* (English: "commandment"), such as engaging in an act of kindness, even if one is not feeling kind. As Rabbi Baruch HaLevi (2013, p. 1) says, "At the end of the day, we are measured, in this world and on high, by what we do, not merely what we believe." At the same time, the rabbis hold that action without proper intent does not fulfill duty. An example is provided in the first sentence of Ben Zion Sobel's Preface to *The Concise Book of Mitzvoth* (Chafetz Chayim, 1990):

"In the Mishnah Berurah, section 60, sub-paragraph 10, the Chafetz Chayim rules that unless one performs a Torah-ordained mitzvah with conscious intent, he has not fulfilled his duty and must perform it a second time with the proper intent. In this light, he once commented that it is a shame that so many mitzvot slip through our fingers, due to our lack of intent" (Chafetz Chayim, 1990, p. vi, Preface, para. 1).

Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor expresses a perspective similar to that of Rabbi Baruch HaLevi. According to Rev. Taylor, "Right beliefs do not change a thing unless they lead to right action" (2013, TC 8:35). In her sermon on the "Parable of the Good Samaritan," Brown points to another teaching in the story that is easy to miss: "Jesus does not care what the Samaritan believes. It's only what the man does that matters. So he reads a different scripture. So he goes to a different temple. So he follows a

different path. So what? Jesus is focused on the man's actions—not his beliefs. This can be upsetting to Christians, who have been taught that it is our faith—and not our works—that matter, but there you have it: Jesus was not a very good Protestant. He was Jew who knew that right belief does not put a cup of water in the hand of a thirsty person, or bandage a wound, or offer a traveler a bed. Right beliefs don't change a thing unless they lead to right action" (2013, TC 7:50—8:48).

In the field of psychology, Daryl Bem's (1967, 1972) counterintuitive self-perception theory asserts that people develop their attitudes (i.e., when there is no previous attitude based on their experience) mainly by observing their own behavior and concluding what attitudes must have caused the behavior. In a reversal of conventional wisdom of cognitive-behavioral psychology, "behavioral-cognitive" psychotherapists observe that most people act their way into new ways of thinking better than they are able to think their way into new actions. For example, if we act and behave with kindness, compassion, and respect, then we will become kinder, more compassionate, and more respectful. To use an old adage, "If I take my ass, my head will follow."

**24.** By tradition, a Jewish joke is one that Gentiles will never understand and Jews will have already heard before. The first one I heard was from Steven J. Zier (September 14, 1937 - August 22, 2020), a *tzaddiq* (English: "righteous man"):

A woman on a train walked up to a man across the table. "Excuse me," she said, "but are you Jewish?"

"No," replied the man.

A few minutes later the woman returned. "Excuse me," she said again, "are you sure you're not Jewish?"

"I'm sure," said the man.

The woman was not convinced, and a few minutes later she approached him a third time.

"Are you absolutely sure you're not Jewish?" she asked.

"All right, all right," the man said. "You win. I'm Jewish."

"That's funny," said the woman. "You don't look Jewish."

**25.** Amy-Jill Levine, Ph.D. and Marc Z. Brettler, Ph.D. provide discussion of some of the most popular Hebrew Bible passages that are quoted in the New Testament to show what the texts meant in their original contexts and then how Jews and Christians eventually came to understand these texts from different perspectives. In some of her other books, Levine (2006, 2014), an Orthodox Jew, contends that Jesus of Nazareth cannot be understood without an understanding of the culture, customs, and context of historical Judaism. Levine is a member of Congregation Sherith Israel, an Orthodox Synagogue in Nashville, Tennessee. A-J, as she calls herself, is a self-described "Yankee Jewish feminist who teaches in a predominantly Protestant divinity school in the buckle of the Bible Belt" (A-J Levine, personal communication, October 23, 2021).

Other: D'var Torah-Pesach 5782-Passover 2022-  
[Strangers and Miracles: Four Questions](#)

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