

Judaism

by Steven Cory

Never great by world standards, the small nation of Israel was repeatedly defeated and finally dispersed throughout the world. But the Jews are unique in that they maintained their identity in the midst of a large number of diverse cultures. Thus, although a religion closely tied to one ethnic group, Judaism has had a profound effect on beliefs and practises throughout the West and the Near East.

There is a bewildering variety of Jewish groups and nationalities, many of whom are strange to each other. One loose way of dividing modern Judaism into four groups:

1) Orthodox Jews - maintain strict adherence to traditional customs.

2) Reform or Liberal Jews – attempt to apply broadly Judaic notions to contemporary culture in a humanistic manner;

3) Conservative Jews – try to forge a middle way between the previous two, hoping to maintain strong Jewish identity;

4) Hasidic Jews – follow a mystical path with the element of Qabala mysticism, although many Hasids are little other than the right wing of Orthodoxy.

Jews hold a large number of writings besides the Old Testament as authoritative.

The Holocaust, in which they claim over six million Jews were killed under Nazism and other forms of anti-semitism, has become a major theme of Judaic thought in recent years.

God

The complete unity of God – both as a powerful, just ruler and as a merciful, loving deliverer – is central to Judaism. That means that Jews do not flinch from confronting the problem of the existence of pain and suffering, although they freely admit that it is a mystery. Somehow God is Lord even in the midst of a painful and evil world.

God is not merely some supreme force but is a person, one with emotions and anger, sadness and joy. He is above all a person with whom one can have a relationship; He desires to share the full gamut of emotions with men.

God is seen as continually active in a creative way, constantly working in the world to offer men the opportunity to fulfill their obligations toward Him and toward fellow men.

Man And The Universe

The material world is considered on the whole ‘very good’ (Genesis 1:31), and man has a unique responsibility to order it according to God’s purposes. Some Jews go so far as to say that all people, animals, and things contain a ‘divine spark’, which man is assigned to call forth to completeness through loving action.

The personhood of God and His need for relationship form an analogy for man's most pressing need: to live in harmony with other men.

History is the arena of God's purposeful activity, and Jews often look for signs of His approval or judgment in historical events.

The great responsibility of man as well as his frailty and wickedness are emphasized. The distinguishing mark of humans is their ability to make ethical choices: it is to those choices that Judaism most often addresses itself directly.

Salvation And The Afterlife

One's eternal existence in the hereafter is determined by moral behavior and attitudes. Although there is no Christian notion of saving grace in Judaism, it is taught that God always offers even the most evil men the possibility of repentance (teshuva, 'turning'). After such repentance one can atone for one's rebellion against God's way by positive action.

But the notion of individual salvation and heavenly existence is not prominent in Judaism. In fact many Jews criticize Christianity for being a 'selfish' religion, to concerned with personal eternal rewards.

The notion of an afterlife is not well developed in the Old Testament. Later writers speculated unsystematically about a final day of judgment.

Jews still hope for the coming of the Messiah, who will hand our eternal judgment and reward to all. This hope is largely communal; the entire Jewish race and the whole creation is in view more than individual men.

In the end the moral life of man here on earth is considered the most proper concern of man; final judgments are best left to God.

Morals

Torah ('to point the way, give direction'), **often translated 'law'**, refers in Judaism to a total pattern of behavior, applicable to all aspects of communal and individual life. It is to be found not only in the Old Testament Scriptures but also in a wide variety of oral traditions, rituals, ceremonies, stories, and commentaries on Scripture.

Jews have often tried to develop rules of behavior to cover each situation encountered in various cultures. Thus a gigantic literature covering codes of conduct has arisen. From time to time movements have emerged that have tried to cut through those rules and get back to the original torah, but legalism has been a perennial problem of Judaism.

As can be seen in the Ten Commandments, much of Jewish morality is related primarily to the good of the community. The Jewish prophets were perhaps the first strong proponents of social justice in the ancient world, and concern with economic justice continues to be an integral part of Judaism.

But material possessions are generally not considered bad in themselves; even the prophets did not denounce wealth as such, but wanted a greater number of people to have more.

Marriage and children are held in high regard by Judaism. Singleness is looked down on even for religious leaders, and much time is spent teaching children the precepts of the faith.

Worship

Ritual and ceremony are still important within Judaism. The purpose is to hallow all life, to share one's life with God. Jewish writings say, for instance, that to eat or drink without praying is like robbing God of His property. Thus Jews have a full calendar of daily, weekly, and yearly celebrations.

A major part of such celebrations is the remembrance of sacred history. Stories, both of biblical and nonbiblical, relating God's deliverance of Israel are retold countless times.

There is sometimes a certain boldness mixed with piety in Jewish worship, as can be seen in the story of the Jews in a Nazi concentration camp who put God on 'trial' for allowing the Holocaust: they found Him guilty and then resumed their humble prayers of worship and praise.