

## WHY JUDAISM?

A Holy Day Sermon by Rabbi Dr. Herbert M. Baumgard  
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A few days ago, a young man, a believing Christian, was in my office. He was kind enough to want me to perform the ceremony in which he would be wedded to the daughter of one of our members. I informed the young man that I was honored by his request but that I was not a notary public and that my function as a rabbi was to perform weddings between two believing Jews. The young man was not satisfied with my answer, and he continued to prod me. I then began to talk about the importance of Jewish children and the fact that a child living in a household where each parent was committed to a different religion would inevitably have severe difficulties. As we continued the talk, I spoke about the importance of Jewish survival. In spite of the fact that I was cordial to the couple and understanding of their dilemma, in spite of the fact that I assured the young man that I was not Billy Graham, and that I believed that he was as much beloved in God's eyes as a Christian as I was as a Jew, he could not control his anger that I would not officiate at the wedding ceremony. Finally, he blurted out, "What's so gosh awful important about the survival of Judaism anyhow? The world would be no different if it vanished from the earth!"

When two people fall in love and want to get married, they are not ready to participate in a calm discussion about different religions, but perhaps you and I can talk with some objectivity. This young man asked a question which is being asked in one way or another by many Jews today: "What's so gosh awful important about the survival of Judaism, anyhow? Why can't I live my life the way I want to, without regard to Jewish standards and Jewish survival?" It is true that Judaism is a yoke, and being Jewish has never been easy. Is the game really worth the candle?

There are eight hundred million people today who are members of the Islamic faith. There are five or six hundred million who are members of the Christian faith. Only twelve million are members of the Jewish faith. Why, we might well ask, should we continue to hold out? Or, to put it another way, why should we continue to choose Judaism?

As we begin our research for the answer to this question, we are confronted with the fact that both of these religions, Islam and Christianity, with hundreds of millions of followers, are rooted in Judaism. One cannot read the Koran, the bible of those who follow Mohammed, and one cannot read the New Testament without learning that each of these testaments are built on the foundation of the Hebrew Bible. Each of these documents is presented as a continuation of the Jewish testament. Neither of them intends to describe a different kind of God or to introduce a different kind of ethics. In these two central matters, the nature of God and the standard by which mankind is asked to live, both Islam and Christianity infer that they are preaching a kind of Judaism. If this be so, if Judaism is so vital a religion that it can inspire hundreds of millions of human beings to adopt some of its basic teachings, should we conclude that for some reason the time has come that we no longer need the mother religion?



In the Koran, the most common phrase for God is "Al Rachman, the Merciful God." The very phrase "El Harachaman, the Merciful God," occurs not only in our Bible but repeatedly in our Talmudic literature which precedes the Koran. The New Testament authors tell us that when Jesus was asked, "Which are the main commandments?", he answered, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might; and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." You will recognize that the first of these commandments is from the fifth book of our Torah, and the second one is from the third book of our Torah. Christians have carried these teachings to every corner of the world for centuries. In this sense, Jews owe Christians a great deal, but has the time come for the people through whom God worked to give the world these great teachings to say, "We have done the spadework; let us sit back in reflected glory and let others do our work for us?"

Mohammed, it is well known, was illiterate. The Judaism that he presents in the Koran as the basis for his own religion is the Judaism he learned in the market place, not from the scribes and the learned Jews, but from Jewish merchants. The Koran is filled with Jewish folkore as if this were basic Judaism. Mohammed did a great service for the Arab peoples. They were lost in paganism and superstition, and he mediated to them some of the popular teachings of the folk Judaism of that day. He tried nobly to raise his people to the monotheism of the Jews. Still, one does not find in the Koran the majesty of the Hebrew Prophets. Neither the literature nor the call to ethical action is comparable.# The very name for the religion, Islam, implies submission. Islam is a call to the passive acceptance of what God grants us. Islam provides a pattern for spiritual piety. Judaism is the source of that pattern, but there is much more in Judaism than the call to piety; there is also the demand for social and democratic reform. Judaism is a call to an active partnership with God (L'taken et ha-olam) to change those inequities in the world which mar God's creation and which deviate from God's plan for mankind.

The Prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah addressed a highly cultured and urbanized citizenry and sought to inspire them to revolt against selfish leaders and inbred institutions. Mohammed addressed an illiterate and peasant people and sought to elevate them from their primitive and self-destructive paganism. The learned Jews of the time of Mohammed could easily tell the difference between his message and that of the Hebrew Prophets.## Consequently, they could not accept him as the next in the line of God's Prophets. For this refusal, Mohammed, who truly admired "The People of the Book," as he called the Jews, later turned upon them and called them "infidels".

Iran's Islamic leader of modern times, Khomeini, is no less anti-Jewish. He has openly condemned the Jews for rejecting God's Prophet, Mohammed.

Jesus, on the other hand, never seems to have asked his fellow Jews to surrender their faith. Indeed, in the New Testament Jesus seems to urge them to have pride in their faith and to propagate it more intensely. "Why," he is purported to have asked his co-religionists, "Why do you hide your light under a bushel?"

# See the introduction to "The Koran", translated by E.H. Palmer, Oxford University Press, London.

## In time, Arabs became more cultured, of course. Their philosophy, especially was on a high level.



Paul, who never saw Jesus, except in a vision which he claims to have experienced, is the true author of Christianity. Paul, also a Jew, was an admirer of Judaism, but he felt that the non-Jewish nations would never be willing to accept the yoke of the Torah with its hundreds of legal and ethical requirements. Paul was looking for a way for the Gentiles to have a relationship with the Jewish God, and he decided that that way was through Jesus, whom Paul understood not simply as a Jewish teacher but as the Christ. Paul taught that the "goyim", the gentiles, did not need to follow the Torah in order to be acceptable to God. All they had to do, according to Paul, was to believe that Jesus had died for their sins, participate in the mystery of the sacrificial supper, which included the wafer and the wine, and follow the golden rule.

St. John, who wrote still later than Paul, had nothing but contempt for Jews. John taught that the Jews would surely go to hell because they did not accept Jesus as their savior. St. Augustine, still later, was of like mind. It is interesting that important teachers in each of the daughter religions of Judaism ultimately consigned the Jews to eternal punishment because they would not surrender what they considered to be the purest form of ethical monotheism.

Judaism was about 2,000 years old when Christianity was born, and it was about 2,600 years old when Islam was born. During all of the subsequent generations when Christianity and Islam were attracting (or conquering) hundreds of millions of people, Judaism continued to exist and to serve, at the very least, as an important complement or counterpoint to some of the doctrines of her daughter religions. Progressively, her daughters began to change character and to assume a new personality much different from their mother. In time, the changes in the new religions became so great that they began to lose their family resemblance.

During the long centuries in Medieval Europe when the Catholic Church consigned to hell all those who rejected its doctrines and who would not accept the Church's sole authority as the way to salvation, the Jews made their case simply by continuing to exist. By maintaining their loyalty to the God of their ancestors and to the particular tradition of learning associated with His worship, the Jews challenged the Church's claim to be the sole representative of God.

When Martin Luther in the 16th century had the courage to oppose the authority of the Church, it was to the Jews that Luther turned for support - to the Jews and to their scripture which the Jews had so zealously studied and guarded. The very Jewish Bible which had inspired the development of Christianity fifteen hundred years earlier was still alive in the time of Luther to teach all who would heed its message that it is God alone who is the root of moral authority and that no king, no secular government, and no religious institution has the right to claim that he or it is God's sole agent and interpreter.

Martin Luther, as you know, was a giant of a man in his time. He is the founder of that part of Christianity which we call Protestantism. Once Luther had made his radical claims in favor of the authority of scripture, however, he became almost as dictatorial in his new found authority as the Church had been in its power. When the Jews would not accept him as their new leader. Luther turned on the Jews and assigned them to hell. When the German peasants were aroused by Luther's attack against monolithic religious authority, they found the courage to rise up against their cruel landlords and princes. Instead of supporting the people, however, Luther sided with the governing authorities and said, "The mob is anti-Christ." When he was accused by some of his disciples of causing the people to be butchered, Luther replied, "God is the butcher." When democratic philosophers arose and attempted to use logic and reason to challenge the ancient basis of political authority, Luther proclaimed, "Reason is the devil's whore."



One does not have to read too deeply into European history to see that humanism did not arise from the religion which emphasized man's sinfulness. Rather, it was from Judaism and its emphasis that man is born in the image of the divine that humanism got its impetus. A decade ago, the gifted psychoanalyst and humanist, Erich Fromm, published a book called, "Ye Shall Be As Gods". In this book, Fromm describes how his humanism, his belief in human potential, came from the Bible he studied as an Orthodox Jew in the yeshiva. Historians like Lecky tell us that it is from the Old Testament rather than from the New that the founders of American Democracy got their inspiration. When the American revolutionaries in the 18th century wanted scriptural support for the right to revolt against King George III of England, they could not find it in the New Testament. Indeed, the Book of Romans in the New Testament tells us specifically, "He who disobeys those who govern is twice damned, once because the king is the ruling power and it is sinful to oppose him, and secondly because the king is the agent of God and to disobey him is to disobey God."

The pro-revolutionary churches in early America did not quote this passage from the New Testament. It would have mitigated against their purpose. Instead, they quoted from the Book of Samuel in the Old Testament, for it was Samuel who told the early Hebrews that he who desires a king rejects God.##

It is no wonder that the Hebrew language was an important part of the curriculum of the early colleges in America like Yale and Harvard. Indeed, one could not graduate from Harvard in those days without opening the Torah and reading from it at sight. Because those who sought democracy in America identified so closely with the spirit of the Hebrew Bible, they chose a teaching from the Book of Leviticus to engrave on the Liberty Bell, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants thereof."

When Benjamin Franklin and his committee were asked to choose an official seal for the United States, they proposed a seal which pictured Pharaoh, that ancient Egyptian king, being overwhelmed in the waters of the Red Sea, and under that scene the committee proposed the slogan, "Rebellion against tyrants is obedience to God."

When you look back upon the history of the western world for the last 2,000 years, you really don't have to ask the question, "Why should Judaism continue to exist?" The answer is clear. Judaism has something its two daughter religions do not have. They have absorbed some of the tenets of Judaism, but they have not been able to digest all of its spirit, and the reason is that a religion is much more than a bundle of abstract teachings. Especially is this true of a law centered religion like Judaism. Judaism is the result of 4,000 years of the experience of a truly unique people. It is the interaction with many cultures without being absorbed into any of them which has made Judaism and the Jewish people what they are today.

Judaism, through the Bible and through the living example of the bearers of the Bible, the Jewish people, has given the western world precisely those ideas, those ethics, that view of man's purpose, that view of how humans should govern themselves, which have become the foundation and the goal of western society.

## For a full discussion of the reliance of revolutionary Christian ministers on the Hebrew Bible, see "Origin of Republican Form of Government", Oscar J. Straus, 2nd Edition Revised, G.P. Putnam's Sons, N.Y. & London, the Knickerbocker Press, 1926.



It would seem that Judaism is needed in the world today more than ever before, because it alone of the major religions in the western world clings tightly to the doctrine of innate human goodness and potential.

Fundamentalist Christians, that is to say, those Christians who take the New Testament literally, take as their starting point that myth in the Jewish Bible which tells us that the primal couple, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Fundamentalist Christianity is based on the assumption that because of this original sin, all human beings subsequently born are born in sin. There is no basis for this doctrine in the Hebrew Bible, as I study it. Nowhere does our Bible say that all subsequently born souls shall be worthy of eternal damnation. Indeed, not even Adam and Eve received such a terrible sentence for their sins. As a Jew, I reject this doctrine which seems calculated to place humankind under fear, so that we will clutch at any straw and accept any authority that claims to save us from this damnation.

As a Jew, I point instead to that second myth in our Book of Genesis which tells us that when God created the world, He gave it to the man and the woman and said to them, "Here is my gift. It is wonderful indeed. It is yours to use and command. Only do not abuse it. You must use the world responsibly and morally." ### This part of the Genesis story tells us that God thought enough of humankind to appoint them as His stewards in caring for this wonderful world. Judaism emphasizes the myth of human stewardship and responsibility. The Christianity of St. Paul, St. John, and Luther emphasizes the myth of human corruptibility.

There are, of course, many modern liberal Christians who do not accept some of the basic New Testament ideas. Many liberal Christians accept the Jewish view of human worth and potential, and they deny that view of human sinfulness which is derived from St. Paul. To this extent, liberal Christians affirm that part of Christianity which is Jewish and deny that part of Christianity which is more consistent with ancient Greek teaching. More power to the liberal Christians who are our allies in the battle to make the Jewish view of life the predominant one in America and the world! ####

We are grateful to our liberal Christian friends when they take issue with some of their brethren who have a low opinion of Jews. Only recently, the President of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest assembly of Baptist ministers in the south and in the country, was quoted by the United Press as saying that God does not hear the prayers of Jews, "For how in the world can God hear the prayer of a Jew...who says that Jesus Christ is not the Messiah? That is blasphemy." As some of you know, I have been especially active in interfaith relations with Baptists, and our local Baptist friend, Rev. Lloyd Whyte, of the Miami Baptist Association, was quick to respond in yesterday's Miami Herald, "We do not feel that anyone has the right to say that God does not listen to all people..." Dr. Conrad Willard, Pastor of the Central Baptist Church in Miami, was equally forceful in his repudiation of the President of the Southern Baptist Convention. Thank God for our Christian friends, without whom we would be lost. But we must be aware that there is both good will and ill will directed to Jews from the Christian community.

### A paraphrase of the spirit of Genesis 1: 26-31.

#### To the extent that Christians teach this Old Testament view of the nature of man, it becomes a "Judeo-Christian" idea.



Short years ago, I was listening to a program on Miami's Channel Two. It was a program on Christianity featuring the Presbyterian minister who was then Pastor of the church on Key Biscayne which was frequented by President Nixon when he visited his home there. The format of the program was that this minister, the Rev. John Huffman, and a Catholic priest would answer questions phoned in by the public. As I listened, a woman from Miami Beach phoned and said, "Rev. Huffman, I have heard it said that if a Jew does not accept Jesus as her savior, then she is going to hell. Do you teach that?" The Rev. Huffman answered, "Christianity teaches that if you have not heard about Jesus, then you are all right. You will not go to hell if you are simply ignorant about him. But if you have heard about Jesus, and you reject him, then you will go to hell. Now, you can't say that you haven't heard about him!" I don't have time to tell you now what I did after hearing this exchange on public television. Suffice it to say that the Reverend Huffman stated a position shared by many fundamentalist Christians.

Is there still a role for Judaism to play in modern times? Not if you believe that humankind is chained to an error made by Adam and Eve. There is no role for Judaism in modern times if you believe that human beings today will inevitably, like Adam and Eve, make decisions which flout God and which make for evil and destruction. But if you believe in the potential of humankind, if you believe that with proper instruction and training we can make reasonable choices that will make life meaningful, then you will be willing to make that kind of commitment which will enable Judaism to survive. Judaism is that religion which teaches that no one person, even a great Jew like Jesus, can do for us what we must do for ourselves. Judaism is that religion which teaches that no one can save us but ourselves as we try to do the job that God has placed before us. Judaism is that religion which emphasizes that all of us are created in the image of the divine, not just one of us.

We know from human history that Judaism has had an impact upon human civilization which goes far beyond the immediate influence of those who call themselves Jews. Judaism has vitalized at least two great world religions, but beyond that, it has inspired the founders of political democracy, because Judaism is a religion devoted to the improvement of secular institutions as well as to the improvement of human beings. Islam and Christianity have their special way of trying to make humankind good, but there are important differences in their way and in our way, just as there are significant differences between Islam and Christianity.

Is it really time for us to close the books on Judaism? Is there no need for its teachings which have for so long inspired so many? The answer is in your mind and in your hands.