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What Do You Know About Judaism? - Part 3
The Branches and Holidays of Judaism

By Tal Davis

One of the greatest pitchers in Major League history was Sandy Koufax of the Los Angeles Dodgers. On October 6th, 1965, he was scheduled to be the starting Dodger's pitcher in Game One of the World Series against the American League champions, the Minnesota Twins (now the Texas Rangers). There was one problem, however, Koufax was Jewish, and Wednesday, October 6th, just happened to fall that year on the date of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement on the Jewish calendar. Koufax asked to be excused from pitching that day in honor of his faith. Dodger's owner, Walter O'Malley, and manager, Walter Alston, gladly obliged Sandy and named Don Drysdale to be the starter that day. Koufax started on Thursday.

Jewish people in America are sometimes torn between doing a specific job or duty and keeping the High Holy Days of their faith. In part three of this series on the Jewish faith, we will look at two important aspects of modern Judaism: the three main branches of the faith and the importance of its High Holy Days. We will also review key principles for Christians who want to share Christ with their Jewish friends.

To read part one, go here:
<http://www.marketfaith.org/2023/04/what-do-you-know-about-judaism-part-1-tal-davis/>

To read Part two, go here:
<http://www.marketfaith.org/2023/04/what-do-you-know-about-judaism-part-2-tal-davis/>

The Three Main Branches of Modern Judaism

Modern Judaism in America and most other countries consists of three major divisions. They are Reform (not Reformed), Conservative, and Orthodox. According to a recent survey by the Pew Research Center, more than half of U.S. Jews identify with the Reform (37%) or Conservative (17%) movements, while about one-in-ten (9%) identify with Orthodox Judaism. One-third of Jews (32%) do not identify with any particular Jewish denomination, and 4% identify with smaller branches – such as Reconstructionist or Humanist Judaism – or say they are connected with multiple streams of U.S. Judaism.

Among religious Jews, branch affiliation generally mirrors the broader pattern among Jews overall. Most of them identify with either Reform (44%) or Conservative (23%) Judaism, and fewer say they do not belong to a particular denomination (15%). Most non-religious Jews, on the other hand, do not identify with any institutional branch or stream of Judaism (79%), while the remainder largely describe themselves as Reform Jews (17%).

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-identity-and-belief/>

Reform Judaism

Reform Judaism was founded by an 18th century German rabbi named Moses Mendelssohn. Reform Judaism is, by and large, culturally adaptive, meaning that they do not enforce traditional Jewish beliefs and practices on its members. Its practices are not fixed but may be revised over time with societal and cultural changes. The Talmud, while honored for its historical impact, is not standard for religious or personal prac-

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tice. Reform Judaism does not anticipate, or hope for, a coming messiah, nor does it anticipate or hope for a future Jerusalem temple restoration for renewing the Mosaic sacrificial system.

The meeting places of Reform congregations are called temples, not synagogues. One such Reform congregation is Temple Israel of Tallahassee, Florida. On its website it describes Reform Judaism this way:

"Reform Judaism encompasses beliefs and practices firmly rooted in Jewish tradition, while asserting that a Judaism frozen in time is an heirloom, not a living fountain.

"Reform Judaism has enabled the Jewish people to introduce innovation while preserving tradition, to embrace diversity while asserting commonality, to affirm beliefs without rejecting those who doubt, and to bring faith to sacred texts without sacrificing critical scholarship.

"Reform Judaism affirms the central tenets of Judaism – God, Torah and Israel – even as it acknowledges the diversity of beliefs and practices. We see the Torah as God-inspired, and a living document that enables us to confront the timeless and timely challenges of our everyday lives. We believe that all human beings are created in the image of God, and that we are God's partners in improving the world. Tikkun olam – repairing the world – is a hallmark of Reform Judaism as we strive to bring peace, freedom, and justice to all people.

"We welcome you to our inclusive Reform synagogue, Temple Israel-Tallahassee!"
(<https://www.templeisraelth.org/>)

Reform Judaism generally accepts the theories of higher biblical criticism. This means they do not nec-

essarily believe the Bible was written by its accredited authors or is historically accurate. Reform services are modeled somewhat on Protestant Christian worship forms and are done in the vernacular of the people in the congregation. Nonetheless, Scripture readings and cantor songs are done in Hebrew. Reform temples may have male and/or female rabbis. They are gender inclusive, including having LGBTQ+ members and support LGBTQ movements.

Conservative Judaism

Conservative Judaism was founded by Rabbi Zecharias Frankel, a 19th century German, as a sort of middle-way between Orthodox and Reform Judaism. It keeps the Talmud but also accommodates culture, just to lesser degree than Reform. Members are encouraged to keep the traditional diet and moral codes. It does permit contemporary language, dress, and worship. It, like Reform, is gender inclusive and also may have female rabbis.

Orthodox Judaism

Orthodox Judaism tends to be much stricter in its beliefs and practices than either Reform or Conservative. Orthodox Jews dutifully keep a Kosher diet (one that is approved by certified rabbis to follow Scriptural guidelines). That is, they only eat meat from clean animals with no blood, and they do not have dairy products and meat in the same meal. Eggs and vegetables are permitted.

The meeting places of Orthodox congregations are called synagogues. Each synagogue includes the following items: the "Ark" (a cabinet where the Torah scrolls are kept), the Bema (a platform where the leaders stand during the service), and a Menorah (a seven branched candelabra, used at Hanukkah services).

The services are led by the Rabbi who leads in the rituals and gives a homily.

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321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

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Phone: 850-383-9756 (Tallahassee, Florida)

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The congregation also has a Cantor who sings the Scriptures in Hebrew.

General Practices

Most practicing Jews of all of the various branches observe the following traditions:

- Infant boys are to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. This ceremony also includes the official endowment of a name (boys and girls).
- Jewish children are encouraged to learn Hebrew as they grow up. At the age of thirteen, boys participate in the Bar Mitzvah (son of the commandment) ceremony. This is an important celebration and marks their coming of age and accountability to the Law. In Reformed and Conservative congregations, girls have a Bat Mitzvah (daughter of the commandment) commencement.
- Other important ceremonies for the congregations are marriage, funerals (which are performed as quickly as possible), and the Sabbath. During the Sabbath (Friday night to Saturday evening), Orthodox Jews are not supposed to work, travel, cook, use electric lights, watch TV, or talk on the telephone. Synagogues will have services on Friday evening, Saturday morning, and Saturday night.

Jewish High Holy Days

Another important aspect of modern Judaism is the keeping of the special High Holy Days. We need to keep in mind that the degree to which Jews observe them varies from person to person. Some Jews are very strict about keeping the holy days along with the weekly Sabbath. Most Jews, like Sandy Koufax, try to make special efforts to honor the High Holy Days. Secular Jews, do not necessarily concern themselves with keeping the religious traditions. The Holy Days include the following celebrations.

Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah is the new year held on the Hebrew calendar date Tishri 1 (Sept./Oct.). It is a time of reflection and repentance when a horn, called a Shophar, is blown to inaugurate the New Year.

Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, held on Tishri 10. This was the date when the annual sacrifice for Israel's sins was performed in the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple. Since A.D. 70, when the temple was destroyed, it has become a day for personal reflection and repentance.

Sukkoth

Sukkoth is the Feast of Booths, on Tishri 15-22. On those days, families eat meals in outdoor shelters (booths).

Hanukkah

Hanukkah commemorates the purification of the Jerusalem temple by Judas Maccabeus in 167 B.C. after its desecration by Antiochus. It lasts for 8 days beginning on Keshiv 25 (Dec.). Candles are lit and presents exchanged on each of the days. Note: Hanukkah is not found in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). It comes from accounts found in the inter-testamental Apocryphal books of 1 and 2 Maccabees.

Purim

Purim is a social and cultural event commemorating Queen Esther's role in stopping the extermination of the Jews by the Persians. It is held on Adar 14 and 15 (Feb.-March).

Pesah (Passover)

Pesah is on Nissan 14-21/22 (March or April). It commemorates the Exodus and deliverance from the last plague on Egypt. It involves ridding the house of leaven before the Passover Seder meal. This is a formal family meal on the first night which

includes ritual washing, wine, bitter herbs, unleavened bread, and meat.

Shavuot (Pentecost)

Shavuot commemorates the giving of the commandments. It takes place fifty days after Passover.

Principles for Sharing Christ with Jewish People

We need to admit that sharing Christ with Jewish people is not easy. Because of centuries of persecution done, unfortunately, in the name of Christianity, most Jews do not want to hear about the Gospel of Jesus. They are convinced that Christianity is not relevant to them. Many believe they are already in right relationship with God because of His covenant with Abraham and their heritage.

Most Jews are greatly offended by any efforts by Christians to convert them. Some even (wrongly) equate Christian evangelism and missions to Jews as anti-Semitic (anti-Jewish). Nonetheless, as followers of Jesus, we are obligated to witness to our Jewish friends just as we are to any other people group. So here are a few basic principles to keep in mind.

First, it is important to take the time to pray. Just as we do with everyone we witness to, we should lift them up to God to open their hearts to listen to the story of Jesus.

Second, study and learn the history and culture of ancient and modern Jews and Judaism. If Jews see that you have made the effort to investigate who they are, they are more likely to be willing to dialog with you about faith subjects.

Third, look for points of contact with Jewish people around you. Perhaps they are your neighbors, fellow workers, classmates, business associates, etc. Nonetheless, be prepared to be received with suspicion. Establishing a friendly trusting relationship is paramount for witnessing to Jewish people.

Fourth, emphasize that if a Jewish person accepts Jesus as his or her Messiah and Lord, they are not rejecting their Jewish identity. Call attention to the fact that Jesus and most of the early Christians were themselves Jewish and maintained their Jewish customs. Sad to say, most Jews regard those of their people who become Christians as no longer Jewish. Some families may even disown their relatives who convert, or treat them as if they had joined a cult. This is another reason to tread lightly when sharing with them.

Furthermore, fifth, when witnessing to Jewish people keep the focus on Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah of Israel. You may want to take the time, if they will listen, to discuss the many Old Testament prophecies fulfilled by Jesus. Do not get into a debate about ancient persecutions, the holocaust, or religious denominations. The only issue that matters is: Who is Jesus?

Finally, do not presume that they are committed to Judaism as a faith. They may not even believe in God, so it is necessary to ask meaningful questions about what they actually believe. Also, do not assume they understand the temple and sacrificial system of the ancient Hebrews. Most Jews are not taught very much about those subjects simply because they are not considered relevant for modern times.

This concludes this three part study of Judaism. We hope it has helped you to better understand more about Jewish people, what Judaism is all about, and how we can better share Messiah Jesus with them.

Sources:

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