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A Comparative Study of Religions

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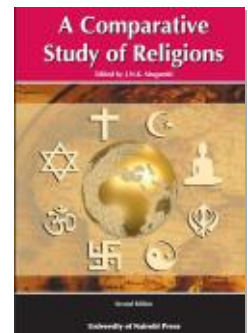
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Basic Teachings and Practice of Judaism

B.J. Ekeya

Introduction

In the preceding chapter on Judaism, we explored briefly, its 4000 year history. We ended the brief exploration by asking why Judaism has endured as a religion distinct from Christianity. In this chapter we shall try to answer that question by outlining the central beliefs of Judaism, including its worship. We shall conclude by discussing its continued relevance and importance in the world of religion.

The Essential Features of Judaism

Although Judaism shows a unified and continuing spiritual pattern throughout its history, it is a simple and homogenous entity. In his book: *Basic Judaism*, Milton Steinberg lists the following seven strands that are woven together:

1. A doctrine concerning God, the universe and man;
2. A morality for the individual and society;
3. A regimen of rite, custom and ceremony;
4. A body of law;
5. A sacred literature;
6. Institutions through which the foregoing find expression;
7. The people, Israel – central strand out of which and about which the others are spun.

The seven strands are closely intertwined to form one organism: Judaism.¹ Today, there are two distinct versions of the Jewish religion: the strict traditionalists and modernists. They differ in their interpretation of Judaism, although they have more in common than apart. They agree on what constituted Judaism in its very beginning. What brought it into existence was a particular conception of God and it is that conception of God which has kept it alive ever since.

Assertions About God

The fact of God's existence is assumed, it is given. God is not demonstrated. God is understood to be a person with attributes which can be expressed as:

1. God is one, not many, not two, not three, not none. By this affirmation of the oneness of God, Judaism from very early in its history declared war against idolatry in all its forms. It has maintained this declaration down the ages by refuting:
 - (i) the deistic quality of Zoroastrianism;
 - (ii) the Trinitarian idea of Christianity, particularly its incarnation doctrine of the God-man;
 - (iii) the atheism of modern society.
2. God is the creator of all things through all time. God's creative activity is not viewed as an action that took place once in the past, but as a continuing reality. God continues to give life to all the universe, sustaining it and calling forth newness.
3. God is spirit, that is, at one and the same time, it is a Mind that thinks and a power at work, a Reason and a Purpose.
4. God is lawgiver in that He is the source, not only of the natural law to which the whole universe conforms, but also of the moral law which regulates human existence.

¹ Milton Steinberg, *Basic Judaism*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947, p. 3–4.

5. God is the guide of history. God directs and works in human history to realize His will and purpose for humanity.
6. God is humanity's helper. God is humanity's helper through:
 - (i) the resources of the physical world which are considered dependable;
 - (ii) the sum total of all that makes up the human personality;
 - (iii) the medium of other people and all their achievements and inventions;
 - (iv) the inspiring, meaning-giving, hope inspiring thought of Himself; by the strength he gives humanity.
7. God is Liberator of human beings and their societies. He is the power which works in individuals and nations and will not permit them to acquiesce in servitude of their own making or that of other people's making.
8. God is the Saviour of souls. Judaism understands salvation as humanity's victory over its limitations such as ignorance and insensitivity. Salvation is understood also to be the conquest of sinfulness and evil within the person, such as pride, selfishness, hate, lust, cynicism and deliberate rejection of goodness and truth.

God saves human beings from these and other perversions by helping to free the human spirit from all that restrains and frustrates it. These assertions about God have not led Judaism into formulating any creeds or dogmas, which people confess as such. The main reason for lack of dogmas is that the Jews whose religion is Judaism are members of a religious community, a historic people and participants of a culture. In its origins and growth, Judaism started first with a people, then with a religion. The religion rates the good life higher than doctrines. Moreover, Judaism cherishes and encourages freedom of thought. Creeds and doctrines would restrict free thought.

This is not to say that freedom of thought in Judaism is unlimited. Certain standards have been set to which ideas and speculations about God must conform, if they are to be acceptable. The idea of God as being transcended or immanent, for example, is freely discussed, reflected and demonstrated by Jewish philosophers. The individual is left free to decide just how God should be envisaged.

The very first of the commandments of God to Israel forbids making images of God. There are no pictorial representations of God in Judaism.

God is understood to transcend the universe and to be independent of it. He is understood to be all-good. Like all religions in the world, although God's being and presence are affirmed, as His goodness and benevolence, there is the ever-present shadow, which evokes the question:

If God is, why is the world spoilt and weighed down with so much disorder and suffering, as if it were not the hard work of a God of goodness?

Theories have been advanced to account for the presence of evil in the world, some of which are:

- (i) Evil may be the result of the sin of the one on whom it is visited, and its visitation is a chance to expiate that sin;
- (ii) Evil is a necessary aspect of life, for if human are moral beings; evil enables them to choose the good.
- (iii) The existence of evil is a necessary opposite of good.
- (iv) Evil is illusory in that it is merely an absence of good.
- (v) Evil is temporary. After this life humanity will be compensated for the evil they suffered.
- (vi) Evil represents a low aspect of the human character, which has survived. Time will erase it as human nature develops further.

- (vii) Evil is an incomprehensible enigma, whose unraveling is God's alone.

Despite all these theories, which are advanced to account for evil, Judaism makes no effort to attain conformity on the issue. Each person is encouraged and expected to recognize evil as something to be fought by:

- (i) Caring for the victims of evil; those who mourn, who are hungry, the naked, the sick, the ignorant, the oppressed, the enslaved.
- (ii) Rooting out evil from the world of nature, oneself, and society.
- (iii) Enduring those evils, which cannot be fought, with dignity and courageous faith, and refusing to be demoralized by evil however large or grim it is.

Judaism affirms the goodness of life, when lived properly. Each person stands directly under God's gaze. Judaism does not advocate vicarious salvation. Each person must redeem his/her soul. One way by which a person is enabled to do this is by the observance of the commandments, the Torah.

The Importance of the Torah – Book

After the destruction of the temple in AD 70, the synagogue replaced the temple as the center of Jewish of worship. The distinctive features of a synagogue are:

- (i) the ark which houses the Torah – book;
- (ii) a lectern from which the Torah – book is read;
- (iii) an ever burning lamp;
- (iv) a congregation made up of a minimum of 10 men;
- (v) the Torah – book.

Judaism is a scriptural religion. It derives from, centers about and makes explicit the contents of a sacred document. The most sacred of the scriptures of Judaism is the Torah.

The Torah book, which is used in the synagogue for worship services, is a succession of parchments sewn together breadthwise and rolled about two wooden poles, making twin cylinders. The parchments contain a hand-written, painstakingly edited (for absolute accuracy), Hebrew original of the first five books of Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These books contain an account of the world from creation to Moses. Besides this, the Torah – book contains:

- (i) A doctrine or teaching about one universal God who is understood to be the Creator of all things, the Lawgiver, Liberator and Redeemer of all people.
- (ii) An outline of the ethic of justice and loving-kindness.
- (iii) A prescription of rituals, holy days, festive seasons and pertinent forms of worship observance.
- (iv) An ordinance of religious, domestic, social, philanthropic and political institutions.
- (v) An explanation of Jewish people as a Kingdom of priests, a holy nation through whom all families of the earth are to be blessed.

The Torah-book is the source of all that a Jew is as a religious person and as a member of the Jewish nation. The traditionalist Jews differ in their understanding of the significance of the Torah – book from the modernists. Both agree on the understanding of the Torah as teaching, guidance for the life of the Jewish people. The teaching originated with Moses on Mount Sinai and was carried on by the prophets, sages and poets who composed in the Torah spirit. The extra-biblical literature of the classical rabbinic age (3rd – 5th Centuries BCE) that is, Mishnah, Talmud, Gemara, Halakha consolidated, expounded the Torah. They all form the vastness of Jewish Tradition.

The following table gives the different interpretations of the significance of the Torah in Judaism according to the traditionalist and modernist views.

Despite the differences that exist between the traditionalist and modernist interpretation of Torah, both revere it, each in their own way, and both look to it for guidance and inspiration; the two share a common purpose.

Worship

Judaism recognizes the need for an individual to address God in prayer. In individual prayer, a person enters into a one-to-one dialogue with God, laying bare before God all the needs and moods of daily life. As social beings, humans need to worship in a group or community. There is a schedule of times and seasons laid down in Judaism when people should get together as Jewish people to worship God. Particular rituals have been worked out for weekdays, Sabbaths, festivals and holy days.

In the Torah, the seventh day, the Sabbath is a day of rest and of worshipping God in community. Sabbath worship is carried out in the synagogue and is characterized by a festive air.

The Synagogue

The synagogue can be square or an oblong building, with the Ark to the east. All worshipers face the Ark. In older orthodox (traditionalist) synagogues, there is a gallery, which is reserved for women. In reform or modernist synagogues men and women sit together. The Ark containing the Torah book is draped by a curtain or grill, in front of which hangs an ever-lighted lamp. The reading desk or platform from which prayers and the law are read is directly in front of or facing the Ark. Some modern synagogues have pipe organs with a choir behind a grille.

Table 3: Interpretations of the Torah

<i>Traditionalist Interpretation of Torah</i>	<i>Modernist Interpretation of Torah</i>
1. The whole Torah, every word and letter was God revealed directly to the whole community of Israel on Mount. Sinai, or indirectly through Moses. The nature of revelation and inspirational guarantees its absolute intellectual and moral validity.	1. The Torah is inspired to the extent to which truth and goodness are present in it. Torah is tested against the standard by which everything else is judged. It is not the work of the single person or period, but is a composite of several documents written by different authors and put together by unknown editors.
2. Judaism was revealed completely on Mt. Sinai and cannot change. Under all the various ways it has been restated down the ages it has persisted as one and the same from Moses to the present time.	2. The law of change is universal and Judaism has been no exception. It continues to grow.
3. The revelation of the Torah overflows into the rest of scripture and into classical Talmudic literature, and in diminishing degree into later rabbinic writings. Both the book and the Torah Tradition are divinely inspired.	3. Accepts the rest of scripture and Traditional as generally inspired. It is not regarded as beyond criticism, but the natural unfolding of a particular people's pilgrimage from darkness to perception. It is a record of how that people face and tried to answer the deepest question of human existence.

The interior of the synagogue has no pictures although it can be decorated with stained glass windows, hanging candelabra, decorated crowns to the scrolls or Torah and panels containing the first words of each of the ten commandments.

Synagogue Attire: Men wear hats or skullcaps and white prayer shawls around their shoulders. Women can wear hats but no prayer shawls.

Synagogue officers: A synagogue is usually headed by a rabbi who is a teacher and lawyer (in Torah). He need not be the worship leader, although he may preach in service in large synagogues, he is the minister and he preaches, assisted by the reader.

The reader is the chief officiant at the synagogue worship services. He reads lessons and recites prayer. He must have a good voice and be musically trained in chant and song.

Order of service

In orthodox (traditionalist) synagogue the service starts at 8.30 a.m. on Saturday morning (Sabbath) and lasts three hours. In reform (modernist) synagogue, it starts later and lasts 1½ hours. The order of the service is as follows:

- (i) The Reader in a black robe, hat and prayer shawl recites, from the lectern, a prayer of praise to God, praising His unity and providence. This is followed by 18 blessings in which God is praised for His goodness and care for Israel. These prayers and blessings are recited in Hebrew in orthodox synagogues and in part English, part Hebrew in Reform synagogues. The congregation sits during most of the service.
- (ii) The shema is recited in a Hebrew. It is the prayer, which all Jews must recite daily. It goes like this: *“Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might”* (Deut.6.4 – 5).
- (iii) The Ark is then opened and the Torah book is carried round the synagogue in procession. As it passes the people they turn towards it and bow. The congregation keeps their faces turned towards the Torah–book as it makes its way round

the synagogue. When the holder of it reaches the lectern, he unveils it for all to see, places it at the desk and unrolls it to the lesson prescribed for the day.

- (iv) The reading of the law follows. Any layman may read the lesson. In some reform synagogues, women too may read the lesson. The law is read in Hebrew and may be followed by an English translation. This is followed by a lesson from prophets from a printed book.
- (v) After reading, the Torah-book is rolled up, veiled and returned to the Ark in procession as when it was taken out.
- (vi) A short teaching follows, then traditional hymns, prayers and blessing. After this, the congregation may disperse.
- (vii) Special services may be held, followed by a sanctification of a cup of wine and two loaves, which are blessed and later eaten by all present.
- (viii) No collection is taken during the service because the handling of money is forbidden during the Sabbath, as are mourning and fasting. Regular and special donations are promised and the names of donors are announced at the lectern.
- (ix) The worship service at the synagogue is concluded at home by the family meal, which is eaten in an atmosphere of festivity.

At Passover, this meal is called the *Seder*. The table is lightened with candles and wine is drunk. The food consists of unleavened cakes, dishes with eggs, roast sheep bone, nuts raisins, salt water and bitter herbs to commemorate the bondage in Egypt. Songs and hymns are sung. Strangers and non-Jews are welcome. A special cup of wine is set-aside for Elijah and the door left open in case he comes in to announce the day of the Lord.

Festivals and Their Significance

The Jewish tradition orders that a number of festivals be observed throughout the year. The Sabbath commemorates the creation and the Exodus from Egypt. It is a day of rest for man and beast; a day to lay aside striving and anxiety so that all may enjoy a foretaste of the world to come. The Sabbath institution answers the human need for creation.

Rosh Hashanah – the New Year, is, according to Jewish legend, the anniversary of the creation of the world. On this day, God's sovereignty is reaffirmed, as is the quest for the regeneration of the heart.

Yom Kippur – The day of the Atonement. On this day, all in Judaism fast from evening to evening in atonement for all the sins each has committed in the past year. Each person scrutinizes his or her life, confesses the evil done and seeks to be regenerated in God and His goodness.

The Pesach – Passover commemorates the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. It is also the spring festival in which the whole nation awaits expectantly for the deliverance of the whole of humanity.

Purim – the Day of Lots commemorates Israel's deliverance from the hands of Haman. On this day, the nation also renews its faith in its ability to outlive the humans of other times.

Hanukkah – the Festival of Lights, commemorates the victory Judaism won when it faced extinction at the hand of Antiochus Epiphanies IV. The Maccabees led in this struggle.

Tish'a B' Ab – the ninth day of the month of Ab, when the nation mourns over the destruction of the Temple.

These are the principal religious festivals which adorn the year, each with its particular ritual and prayers. Through these rituals and many others, the Jew affirms certain things about human life and the place of God in it.

1. For the traditionalist, the various rituals and observances revealed and so ordained by God. This alone justifies their observance.
2. Judaism is understood to be more than just a church, a community of people but rather a way of life, full and complete. Ritual is the instrument, which moulds the belief, morals and worship of the Jew, making religion penetrate every aspect of life.
3. Judaism seeks to sanctify life. Ritual enables the ordinary person to be constantly aware of God. This awareness is also encouraged by the various rituals that govern all aspects of life.

The Continuing Relevance of Judaism

Judaism has service as a distinct religion chiefly because of the way it understands itself in relation to other nations. To speak of Judaism, as we have tried to show, is to speak about the Jewish people:

1. Judaism came into existence because the people of Israel accepted God's choice of them at the beginning of their history.
2. Having accepted God and His Torah, Israel accepted the responsibility, the mission God gave them for the rest of the world. Judaism has not yet fulfilled the mission and continues to believe that the future of the whole humanity is closely tied up with that of Israel.
3. Judaism dreams of the Kingdom of God, a perfected world where all people are regenerated. This Kingdom of God will be bought about by the Messiah, a human being especially appointed by God and equipped by Him with the power and authority to cleanse the world of its evils and to establish good on unshakable foundations. The Messiah will usher in this golden Messianic age, during which time God's sovereignty over all the nations will be established.

This is the torch of hope that Judaism holds for the rest of humankind. Judaism will exhort all people meanwhile to do whatever they can in preparation for the advent of this cosmic redemption. Each person should hope, pray and await the coming of the Messiah.

Activity

Read the following Biblical passages and discuss their implications for the claims, which Judaism makes of being a religion revealed by the one God for the regeneration of the rest of Humanity.

Gen. 12:1–3

Deut. 7:1–5; 32:45–47

Isaiah 49:18–23

60:1–22

62:1–12

66:5–13

Joshua 23:6–4:28.

Further Reading

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