

Chapter 17

Jewish Faith and Practice

Chapter Summary

I. Jewish philosophy

From at least the time of the Hellenized Jewish scholar Philo (20 BC–AD 50), Jews have taken a close interest in philosophy. Probably the most famous of all Jewish philosophers was Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), one of the great medieval exponents of Aristotle. His *Guide for the Perplexed* is one of the great classics of medieval thought, wherein he argued that God was incorporeal, or purely spirit, and that his existence could be known by following Aristotelian logic. He provided Jews with a thirteen-point creed, written in poetic form. After his death, his creed was attacked by Jewish scholars who claimed that the creed made too many concessions to Christians and Muslims.

Another important Jewish thinker was Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786). His significance within Judaism is summed up in the saying: “From Moses [the Old Testament figure], to Moses [Maimonides], there is none like Moses [Mendelssohn].” The three represent a continuous Jewish intellectual and practical tradition. Like his predecessors, the latter Moses was concerned to equip Jews to compete intellectually with their contemporaries, using the best in modern Western scholarship at his time to defend Judaism. In the twentieth century, this tradition was represented by Martin Buber (1878–1965).

II. Jewish Mysticism

Although Jewish mystical systems clearly existed around Christ’s time, it was not until the European Middle Ages that any clear idea emerged regarding such. It arose out of earlier speculation by rabbis based upon study of biblical texts. The books of Genesis and Ezekiel particularly provided intriguing symbolism and imagery for mystical thinkers. These systems flourished between the seventh and eleventh centuries based on asceticism.

Alongside speculation about God and creation, more complex systems of mystical thought developed incorporating ideas found in the Talmud along with early mystical texts like the *Book of Creation*. Life and creation, it was advanced, were involved in a cosmic struggle for salvation and freedom from evil with the goal of the mystics being to redeem the cosmos as well as themselves.

The three main centers of Jewish mysticism in the Middle Ages were Germany, southern France, and Spain. German mystics were captivated by the nature of God, believing it was beyond human reasoning so that anthropomorphisms and scriptural accounts of God needed to be interpreted as representations of divine truths hidden to ordinary men. The community these mystics created developed the concept of a pious individual, Hasid, as a role model. Their mystical powers were associated with numerology.

Another group of Jewish mystics flourished in southern France in the twelfth century and produced the first kabbalistic text, the *Bahir*, which interpreted the *Book of Creation*. Isaac the Blind (1160–1235) incorporated Neoplatonic ideas into mystical experiences.

Since certain mystical ideas originated in Muslim Spain, scholars see in them the influence of Islam and movements like Sufism. Azriel ben Menaham (1160–1238) was an important figure here who reconciled kabbalistic mysticism with rabbinic traditions. As a result of his work, skeptical rabbis began to accept the kabbalah.

The mystics developed the concept of the Divine Infinite to express the belief that God was absolutely perfect, an idea expressed in the mystical work *The Zohar*, which was circulated in Spain in the thirteenth century. Although these Jewish communities were demoralized when one leader converted to Islam and Jews in Poland were harassed and massacred, the Hasidic movement arose with a message of personal piety and salvation.

Hasidism was founded by a Pole, Israel ben Eliezer (1700–1760), and spread throughout Poland, Ukraine, and Lithuania encountering growing opposition from the rabbinate. Its persistence, however, did lead to its being recognized by Jewish and secular authorities. Hasidism made two major innovations in Judaism: (1) it democratically allowed ordinary people to achieve religious ecstasy; and (2) it introduced the rebbe into leadership, a different sort from the traditional rabbi. This charismatic leader became a superior spiritual being who gained his authority from spiritual experiences and introduced new beliefs and customs. The Hasidic movement was looked down upon by educated Jews from the mid-eighteenth to late-nineteenth centuries. The writings of Martin Buber in the twentieth century made it more acceptable.

III. Key Ideas of Judaism

The relationship between God and man found in the Hebrew Bible are actually quite different than that relationship as portrayed in the traditions of other Near Eastern peoples.

An infinite gulf exists between the God of Israel and his creation. He is the supreme creator and sovereign to whom all things owe their existence. We cannot see God, and to turn him into an object is the root of idolatry. The relationship between humans and God is the essence of biblical religion and concerns ethical and personal relationships rather than metaphysical and ontological issues. This revolutionary notion of God has an equally revolutionary impact on our understanding of humanity. These are just some of the concepts that distinguish the Hebrew Bible from the ancient Code of Hammurabi.

Another key principle of Jewish thinking is that no human being is equal to God, thus no human ought to be worshiped. Contrary to ideas in China, India, and elsewhere, Jews believe that no human is more divine than another. God in his sovereign majesty is the dominant figure in Jewish thought.

The reality of an afterlife has been disputed in Judaism. Today, most Jews affirm such.

IV. Jewish Calendar

Jews believe creation took place 3760 years before Christ's birth. Thus, to know which Jewish year it is, add this figure to whatever date it is today (e.g. 2011 + 3760 = 5771). Most Jewish months have 29–30 days, but the Jewish calendar works on a 19-year rotation with 12 years of 12 months

(beginning in our September) and 7 years of 13 months. Consequently, there is no relationship between Jewish and Western months. Because the Jewish day begins at sunset, it is also calculated in a different way.

V. Jewish Holy Days

As with all major religions, Jews have their own cycle of holy festivals:

- A. Rosh Hashana: the first day of Tishrei (Jewish new year) marks the creation of the world and the opening of the book of life by God. It is a communal celebration in the synagogue.
- B. Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement): the holiest, most solemn day in the Jewish year, when Jews come to terms with themselves and make peace with any they have wronged.
- C. Hanukkah: celebration in remembrance of the miracle that took place when a sacred lamp burned for eight days after the Jewish revolt against Syrian domination. It is a merry time of joy, blessing, and the exchange of gifts commemorated by lighting of the menorah, an eight-branch candlestick.
- D. Pesach (the Feast of Passover): recalls the liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Unleavened bread or matzot is eaten as is a special meal called the seder.
- E. Purim: joyful feast on the fourteenth of Adar celebrating the Old Testament story of Esther and the preservation of the Jews.
- F. Shavuot: a harvest festival celebrating the reception of the Ten Commandments by Moses.

VI. Other Jewish Practices

Jewish worship focuses on the synagogue which serves as a worship/community center.

A small skullcap known as a kapah or yarmulke is worn by devout Jewish men during worship and beyond as a sign of respect to God and one's Jewish identity. Some Jewish men wrap themselves in a tallit (prayer shawl) and both men and women may wear phylacteries (small boxes containing bits of the Torah worn on the arm and forehead).

Strict dietary laws regarding acceptable (kosher) foods play an important role in Judaism. Today, many Jews do not keep kosher or do so only at home or on special occasions.

Observance of the Sabbath (Saturday) is by far the most important of all Jewish rituals. Remembering the Sabbath is what makes Israel, Israel.

Marriage and family are very important in Judaism. According to orthodoxy, the only true Jew is someone born of a Jewish mother, but most now believe it is possible to convert to Judaism. Male circumcision signifying the covenant relationship between God and his people is essential. Bar mitzvah marks a boy's ritual coming of age at twelve or thirteen, and bat mitzvah for daughters is

becoming more popular. These ceremonies are like extravagant birthday parties or celebrations that follow confirmation or adult baptism in Christian circles.

Traditional Judaism prohibits cremation and requires a funeral take place as soon as possible upon the confirmation of death.

To reiterate, the family is the most important social institution for Jews and is closely intertwined in their thinking with the Sabbath; both institutions remind Jews of eternal Israel and their relationship to God. The ritual practices associated with the family and the Sabbath are at the heart of Judaism.