The Universality and Uniqueness of Judaism: An Insider's Perspective

The dialogical format of this book enables the reader to see each religious community from the outside looking in as well as from the inside looking out. In much the same way that history is different from memory, this essay will be selective and intentional, choosing aspects of Judaism that balance its universality and its uniqueness, its ancient roots and its contemporary fruits, and its eternal relevance. The phrase "eternal relevance" is a riposte to Christian supersessionist claims that Judaism has been eclipsed, that its Testament is "Old," and that its theology has become obsolete or anachronistic. Judaism is a living tradition that represents an evolving relationship between a people and God expressed in Torah. Therefore, this essay intends to provoke questions more than to provide answers about Judaism. It aims to challenge some typical operating assumptions with the hope of facilitating a more nuanced and complex understanding of Judaism.

Both the form and the content of this chapter may prove unfamiliar. I write about Judaism Jewishly, inviting readers into a place and a time inhabited by a people that has had to learn to live as a minority, to live as a part of and yet apart from society, and that has suffered too many times as a scapegoat. I am a Reform Jew and a rabbi. Reform Judaism represents one branch on the Tree of Jewish life, a branch dedicated to egalitarianism, to inclusion, to social justice, and to progressive revelation as well as to the shared sacred values of Jewish life: God, Torah, and Israel. A Jew who identifies with Conservative, Orthodox, or Reconstructionist Judaism would likely address the same subjects from a different perspective.[1] I am but one voice in a choir that does not always sing in harmony. As a rabbi, I have accepted the sacred responsibility of being a student and teacher of Torah. I am not a dispassionate observer of Judaism. Rather I am a passionate practitioner of Judaism, who seeks to lead by example. To paint a portrait of Judaism, I will cite some Jewish beliefs and practices that I have chosen not to incorporate into my own life. This struggle is embedded in the very name *Israel*, which means "to wrestle with God."

What Makes Judaism Unique

Judaism began before there were Jews. The moniker *Jew* was never applied directly to Abraham or Sarah (nee Abram and Sarai, respectively) or to any other person in the Pentateuch (hereafter referred to as Torah),[2] but their identities originate Judaism and reverberate through Jewish time. When Abraham met with the Hittite landowners of Canaan in order to bury his wife Sarah, he said, "*ger v'toshav anochi imachem*," which means, "I am a stranger and a resident among you" (Gen. 23:4).[3] One cannot be both a stranger and a resident, yet that is precisely the dual identity of Abraham and arguably the identity of every Jew since. Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik (1903–1993), in his classic essay "Confrontation,"[4] wrote about this dialectic, the hybrid identity of a Jew seeking a dynamic equilibrium between otherness and brotherliness, counter-cultural distinctiveness and shared cultural norms.

When the Hebrew word for identity (*zehut*) was coined by Eliezer ben Yehuda in the nineteenth century, it expressed the essence of this balancing act. *Zehut* can be rendered "thisness." What makes this (*zeh*), in this case, Jew, unique? At the same time, *zehut* connotes identity in mathematics, when two sides of an equation are identical (*zehim),* thereby emphasizing the commonality between Jews and other human beings. After thousands of years, Jews are still living out the meaning of being a stranger and a resident, a unique and a universal identity. Where do we Jews diverge from the surrounding culture and where do we converge with it? In the same way that differentiation and integration are related in calculus, so are they related in life. Jews strive to be both apart from and a part of the surrounding culture and society. It is precisely in the province of a both/and dialectic and not in an either/or dichotomy, that the complexity and sanctity of Jewish life is experienced. This dialectic underlies the relationship between Jews, Judaism, and the rest of the world. A Jewish identity is complex, a hybrid composite as social as it is soulful, sometimes biological, frequently cultural, multiethnic, and especially since the advent of the State of Israel in 1948, national. Jews and Judaism defy neat definitions and therein lies an element of Jewish survival.

One manifestation of Judaism's otherness, despite its inclusion in this or any book on world religions, is that Judaism does not neatly fit the definition of a religion. Judaism is a religion, but it is not only a religion. When Ruth turns to her mother-in-law Naomi and pledges her loyalty, she says, "*Ameich Ami, v'Elohayich Elohai,*" meaning "Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God" (Ruth 1:16). To this day, proselytes invoke Ruth's words as a paradigmatic expression of embracing Judaism. It may be difficult to discern from the outside looking in, but from the inside looking out, a Jew is doubly covenanted: to a people and to God.

Sources

Even before the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, the authority to define Judaism was transferred from priests to rabbis. Since the rabbis lacked the divine imprimatur of a prophet and the historical authority

2. See Zech. 8:23 and Esther 2:5 for explicit examples of the word *Jew* in the Prophets and Writings, respectively.

3. Biblical citations throughout this chapter are taken from *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, revised edition (New York: Union for Reformed Judaism Press, 2005).

4. J.B. Soloveichik, "Confrontation," in *Tradition* 6, no. 2 (1964): 5–9.

Two men study and discuss the sacred texts together. This common mode of engaging in Torah study in pairs, called *chevrutah*, meaning "friendship" or "companionship," encourages debate and the bringing of multiple perspectives to the interpretation of texts.

of a priest, they needed to establish a new strategy for defining the scope and depth of their leadership. The rabbis' method of discourse was often dialogical and dialectical; they used it to teach ethical lessons as well as to inform Jewish practice. A famous and trenchant illustration of the rabbinic method involves a prospective proselyte issuing a challenge to the Rabbis Hillel and Shammai: "Teach me Torah while I stand on one leg" (not entirely unlike this essay). Shammai dismissed the questioner as a fool whose question did not justify a substantive response. Hillel responded by saying, "Do not do unto others what you would not have them do to you. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it!"[5] Hillel not only demonstrated the power and presence of a compassionate, empathic teacher; he also managed to state an enduring Jewish educational principle over and above his timeless ethical teaching. "The rest is commentary, go and learn it" was not only a charge to the questioner but rather a charge to anyone who aspires to understand Judaism. Judaism is a learner-centered tradition and the learner is engaged in a lifelong pursuit of understanding and meaning-making.

To be sure, not all commentary is equal. First among equals is Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (eleventh century), known with respect and affection as Rashi. The first Jewish book ever printed was the Bible with Rashi's commentary, emblematic of its preeminence in the field of Jewish hermeneutics. Similarly, to this day the Babylonian Talmud is printed with Rashi's commentary on

5. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Eiruvin 13b (slightly adapted) in Seder Moed, vol. 2 (London: Soncino Press, 1935), 85–86.

the inside, closest to the binding, so that it will be preserved and not easily susceptible to wear and tear.

"*Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim Hayyim*"—"These and those are words of the Living God"[6]—is the quintessential rabbinic statement on pluralism in Jewish thought. Two first-century-BCE schools of Jewish thought are represented by Hillel and Shammai, the paradigmatic dyad (*zug* in Hebrew), who reach different conclusions in the course of adjudicating principles and policies in Jewish practice. While Hillel most frequently wins these debates, Shammai establishes the validity of a minority opinion. By preserving the opinion of Shammai, the rabbis taught that a minority opinion in one case at one time can in another case and time become the majority opinion. Protecting the rights of the minority remains a challenge as we endeavor to learn from the precedent of Hillel and Shammai.

These and those: two conflicting opinions can both have validity. And some conflicting views cannot exist without the other. The phrase *eilu v'eilu*, these and those, emphasizes the incompleteness of any single opinion. The Hebrew letter *vav* that connects "these" to "those" (*eilu* to *eilu*), means "and." This conjunction is essential—uniting and complementing the two opinions without choosing one or compromising the integrity of the other. Even if one of the opinions becomes the standard of practice, both "are the words of the Living God." The debate between Hillel and Shammai is a *machloket l'shem shamayim*, "an enduring dispute in the name of heaven."[7] The sages hastened to note that not all disputes are enduring since not all disputes are for the sake of heaven, and they cite Korah's demagogic challenge of Moses' and Aaron's leadership (Num. 16:1–40) as a case in point.[8] Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that the *machloket l'shem shamayim* is a recurring leitmotif in the symphony of Jewish thought. From the rabbis of the Talmud to the rabbis of today, principled disputes have ironically preserved and promoted Jewish life.

The Hebrew word for debate is *makhloket*, the root of which is *halek*, which means "part." To begin to understand Judaism from the inside involves accepting the idea that each perspective has a part of the whole truth. We need each other. We need community in order to accept and appreciate our differences. Truth is a mosaic. We each have a vital piece to contribute to that mosaic, yet none of us is self-sufficient. This perspective is elemental to the holy work of dialogue, intra-religious and interreligious, since dialogue is predicated on listening to and learning from, about and with the other in order to cocreate a better world.

A History of Internal Dialogue and Dialectic: The Tree of Jewish Life

Jewish history per se has not been a Jewish preoccupation. The Passover Haggadah is a text that tells stories of the Jewish people, has thousands of versions, and is used to conduct the single most observed annual Jewish rite, the Seder. By contrast, between *Antiquities of the Jews* by Josephus in the first century and the *History of the Jews* by Heinrich Graetz in the nineteenth century, practically the only Jewish book of Jewish history is *Shevet Yehudah* by Ibn Verga in the

sixteenth century.[9] The dispassionate, objective pursuit of Jewish history is trumped by the passionate, subjective search for collective Jewish memory. As tendentious and even outrageous as this claim may seem on its face, it helps to reveal one of the salient differences between an outsider's and an insider's view of Judaism. In order to re-member, one must first be a member. Outsiders, so to speak, have tried to understand the "secret" of the Jews' survival. Mark Twain wrote about the Jewish people defying logic and refusing to be consigned to history.[10] But as insiders, Jews are more interested in collective memory.

The history of the Jewish people resembles one of the symbols ascribed to the Torah itself, an *eitz hayyim,* a tree of life. Judaism has adapted and grown new branches over time, especially during the nearly 2,000-year Diaspora when the Jewish people lived without political sovereignty. Some branches, such as Karaites,[11] have withered. Others, for example, Rabbinic Judaism, have grown in length and strength and borne fruit. True to the ironic and humorous aphorism that where there are two Jews there are three opinions, there are multiple contemporary expressions of Judaism. Some see this as a weakness, as evidence of internal strife within the Jewish people, a divisive intra-religious factionalism. However, this same phenomenon can also be seen as a source of strength, since each expression of Judaism is a branch on the tree of Jewish life—providing shade to its adherents and fruit to its future. Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist all modify the noun *Jew.* As long as each of these communities remembers that it represents a part of a holy whole, diversity can be an invaluable asset. Only when one of them thinks and acts as though their part has the whole truth is there cause for serious concern.

The *makhloket,* or dispute, has multiple and powerful expressions in Jewish life. The various streams of Jewish thought and practice reflect different, and at times divergent, understandings of Jewish identity. Jews have never been a monolithic group. For example, at the time of Jesus, Pharisees and Sadducees and Essenes and Zealots offered alternative Jewish voices. This was the religious maelstrom out of which Christianity emerged. Rabbanites and Karaites and Kabbalists dominated at various points during the medieval period. In the last 200 years, especially but not exclusively in North America, the Jewish community has included Ultraorthodox,[12] Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and secularist forms.

To this day the Orthodox Jewish community operates on the basis of accepted halakhah, that is, Jewish law as articulated in codes such as Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* (thirteenth century), Joseph ben Asher's *Arba'ah Turim* (fourteenth century), Joseph Karo's *Shulchan Arukh* (sixteenth century), and Moses Isserles's *Ha-Mapah* (sixteenth century) and further expounded by sages, an honorific title ascribed to the rabbis

who composed authoritative works in Jewish thought and practice, in subsequent generations. The existence of many codes provides further evidence of the significance of arguments for the sake of heaven. One code may be authoritative for a particular Jewish community whereas another code with seemingly minor differences may be the binding force that unites another. Halakhah incorporates all aspects of Jewish life—social, familial, legal, ethical, ritual, spiritual, medical, educational, and theological. Halakhah is an ever-expanding universe. This halakhic process is a distinguishing if not defining characteristic of Orthodox Judaism.

In the Conservative Jewish community, a Committee on Jewish Law and Standards votes on questions of Jewish practice that emanate from the field. The committee consists of eminent and learned rabbis as well as leading members of the volunteer community who serve in an ex officio capacity. The classical texts used by the Orthodox community also play a role in the deliberations of the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. However, in the latter the balance between tradition and innovation is more weighted to modernity. For example, the proscription against driving on the Sabbath is tempered to permit driving to synagogue. Women now serve and lead congregations and communities as rabbis and cantors in the Conservative movement, but not in Orthodoxy. As the twenty-first century began, a divided committee allowed for openly gay and lesbian rabbis and cantors to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the primary academic seat of

Conservative Judaism, again in contrast to the practices of Orthodox Judaism. Nevertheless, Conservative Judaism represents itself as an evolving halakhic expression of Judaism.

In the Reform movement, the balance between tradition and innovation often tilts even further in the direction of modernity than in the Conservative movement. In the last generation, after having initiated the rabbinic ordination and cantorial investiture of women, the Reform movement embraced gays and lesbians as full partners in Jewish life. Furthermore, Reform Judaism has long espoused outreach, the warm embrace of intermarried families, and their acceptance into varying aspects of Jewish communal life. Halakhah does play a role in Reform Jewish life, but that role is more of a voice than a veto. Rulings of the Responsa Committee to questions of religious practice are not binding on the Reform Jewish community. They constitute a guide, not a requirement. Autonomy plays a significant and at times dominant role in the life of Reform Jews.

In the mid-twentieth century, Reconstructionist Judaism emerged primarily out of Conservative Judaism. Mordecai Kaplan wrote *Judaism as a Civilization*, which provided the cultural and theological context for an expression of Judaism that rejected chosenness as a fundamental principle and asserted the peoplehood dimension of Jewish life.[13] Peoplehood (*amiut* in Hebrew) prioritizes the secular aspects of Judaism over its sacred and religious dimension. The Reconstructionist prayer book, for example, changes the blessing prior to the reading of the Torah from "the God who has chosen us from among all the peoples" to "the God who has brought us near to divine service." The de-emphasis of Jewish religious particularity and the reemphasis on the ethnic and cultural practices of the Jewish people are emblematic of Reconstructionist Judaism.

The Reconstructionist movement often aligns itself with the Reform movement on issues of inclusion and ideology, such as the roles of women, gays and lesbians, and Zionism, the movement that advocates for Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. However, theologically there are salient differences between the two movements. Reconstructionist Judaism emphasizes a God that is the power that makes for salvation, a force for good rather than a personal, providential deity. The rationale for keeping Jewish customs is therefore based on the folkways that act as a centripetal force on the people of Israel rather than the commanding voice of a transcendent being.

These multiple contemporary expressions of Judaism do not exhaust the extant alternatives, which include Haredi (or Ultraorthodox), Renewal (or neo-Chasidic), as well as a group that has been growing in North America called "just Jewish," which defies altogether the labels and modifiers of the word *Jew*. However, the array of Jewish streams illustrates a living example of *makhloket l'shem shamayim*—a dispute for the sake of heaven—proof that Judaism is alive.

Conceptions of the Holy: Expressions of Jewish Faith

The preeminent Jewish philosopher, Moses ben Maimon (1135–1204), affectionately known as the Rambam (a moniker arrived at via an acronym) and more dispassionately known as Maimonides, proposed thirteen articles of Jewish

faith. These have been the source of controversy in Jewish thought.[14]

- The first foundation is the existence of the Creator.
- The second is God's unity.
- The third is the denial of divine corporeality.
- The fourth is God's precedence.
- The fifth is that God, may God be exalted, is the One whom it is proper to worship and to praise.
- The sixth is prophecy.
- The seventh is the superiority of the prophecy of Moses.
- The eighth is that the Torah is from Heaven.
- The ninth is the denial of the Abrogation of the Torah.
- The tenth is that God, may God be exalted, has knowledge of the acts of human beings and is not neglectful of them.
- The eleventh is that God, may God be exalted, rewards one who obeys the commandments and punishes him who violates its prohibitions; and that the greatest of God's rewards is the World to Come while the severest of God's punishments is "being cut off."
- The twelfth is the days of the Messiah, the belief in and the assertion of the truth of the Messiah's coming.
- The thirteenth is the resurrection.[15]

Writing in the twelfth century, Rambam was profoundly influenced by the Muslim milieu in which he lived. There is little, if any historical evidence that he was responding to Christian creedal statements. Other medieval Jewish thinkers proposed their own articles of faith. Still others argued against any such formulation. At various times and in various rites, Rambam's thirteen articles of faith have been included and excluded from the Siddur, the daily prayer book, where they would be read and ideally internalized by the people who used them. They were translated into the verses of a hymn, (Yigdal Elohim Chai), which commonly concludes Jewish worship to this day.[16] Nevertheless, even the great Rambam remained unable to institute a statement of essential belief into regular Jewish practice. As a result, Jews and non-Jews alike have concluded that Judaism is a religion of deed (mitzvot) rather than creed. Yet scholars such as the architect of Conservative Judaism, Solomon Schechter, argue compellingly for the falsity of such a dichotomy. Certainly, Jews have developed a nuanced, rich, and deep system of faith. However, there is no creedal articulation that has been universally accepted by Jewish people as a comprehensive statement of belief.

The Shema proclaims the uniqueness of God and of God's relationship to the people of Israel. It goes on to proclaim the acceptance of God's sovereignty, the authority of the mitzvot, and the remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt. Nevertheless, it falls short of constituting a litmus test for Jewish identity. Indeed, there are differing versions of the Shema and its blessings in the prayer books of the different branches of

the Jewish community, attesting to the diversity of belief and opinion.[17]

Chain of Tradition

The responsibility and authority to interpret Jewish practice is embedded in revelation and an unbroken chain of tradition. "Moses received Torah from God at Sinai. He transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, the Prophets to the members of the Great Assembly (the Sanhedrin)."[18] Rabbinic Judaism is predicated on the axiom that Moses received both the Written Torah (consisting of three parts: the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Writings) and the Oral Torah (which was eventually written down as two versions of the Talmud: Jerusalem—350 CE, and Babylonian—500 CE).

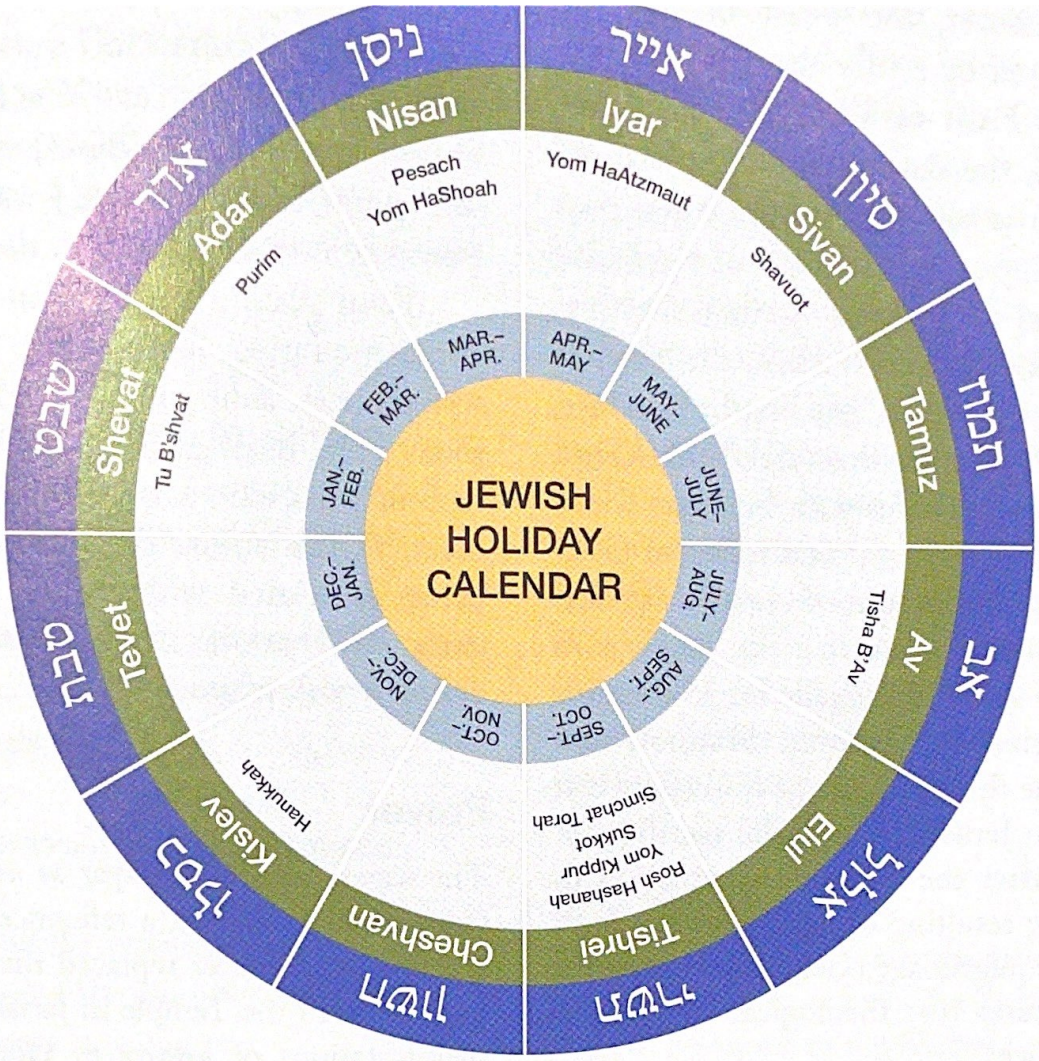
Holidays

After the Bible, the Talmud (which contains the Mishnah), and the Siddur (the prayer book), the most significant book of the Jews may be the *luach*, the calendar that determines the rhythm of Jewish time. So powerful is this temporal mode that it trumps the spatial realm. Even the construction of the Tabernacle, the story of a sacred space that takes up a third of the book of Exodus, is adumbrated by the words, "Build Me a tabernacle that I may dwell among them" (25:8). God says, "among them" and not "in it." God lives in people, not in places. This perception has led Jewish thinkers to claim that time, the fourth dimension, transcends space, the third dimension. A prime example of this prioritization is manifest in the Sabbath Kiddush, or sanctification, generally over wine or grape juice:

> Praise to You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe who finding favor in us, sanctified us with mitzvot. In love and favor, You made the holy Shabbat our heritage as a reminder of the work of Creation. As first among our sacred days, it recalls the Exodus from Egypt. You chose us and set us apart from the peoples. In love and favor You have given us Your holy Shabbat as an inheritance. Praise to You, Adonai, who sanctifies Shabbat.[19]

The intentional juxtaposition of the Creation and the Exodus, the universal and the particular, reinforces the double rationale for sanctifying time in general and Shabbat in particular. God celebrated the first Shabbat, and therefore, we imitate God when we do so, and God freed the children of Israel from slavery, thereby determining a unique destiny for the Jewish people. This conflation of themes enables the Jews to emphasize universality and uniqueness simultaneously. The first mitzvah (commandment) in the Torah explicitly addressed to the embryonic people of Israel is found in Exodus 12:2: "This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months for you." This refers to Nisan, the month in which the Exodus from Egypt took place. When the Jewish calendar became fixed nearly 2,000 years ago, Nisan lost its status as the first of the months, and the New Year celebration, Rosh Hashanah, was moved to the beginning of Tishrei, the seventh month according to the Torah.

Shema (Deut. 11:13–
Tefilah: A



The Jewish liturgical year, showing the rough equivalences of the Jewish lunar months and the Western solar months.

The details of the Jewish calendar are remarkably complex and sophisticated.[20] The Jewish calendar is a solar and lunar hybrid, and as a result, seven times in a nineteen-year cycle a leap year occurs during which Jews add an entire month (second Adar) to the calendar. This intercalation, along with other more subtle adjustments, enables holidays to be celebrated in their appropriate seasons and to preserve the preeminent sanctity of the Sabbath. The sanctification of time is a powerful motif in Jewish life. The most complete holiday calendar in the Bible is contained in Leviticus 23. Shabbat is first among equals, and fittingly it comes first in the catalog of holidays: "On the seventh day, God had completed the work that had been done, ceasing then on the seventh day from all the work that [God] had done, Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, and ceased from all the creative work that God [had chosen] to do" (Gen. 2:2–3). Just as God had set aside the Sabbath and sanctified time for all people, so God spoke through Moses to the children of Israel to set aside and sanctify what has become Jewish time. Shabbat is the only holiday included in the *Aseret haDibrot* (often rendered Ten Commandments, but better translated as Ten Utterances).

Next is Passover, the Feast of Matzot, which is connected by a fifty-day sacred tether to Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks. Then comes Rosh Hashanah, the day on which the shofar (the ram's horn) is sounded, followed ten days later by Yom Kippur, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, a day of physical fasting and spiritual feasting. Just five days later begins Sukkot, the Festival of Booths, as a reminder of the booths in which the Israelites lived during their trek from Egypt to Israel. Sukkot concludes with Simchat Torah (the Joy of Torah), when the last verses of Deuteronomy and the first verses of Genesis are read to reify the rabbinic axiom that the Torah is to be turned over again and again for it contains everything within it. Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot were the three pilgrimage festivals, when people came to Jerusalem to make sacrifices at the Temple. After the Temple's destruction in 70 CE and the resulting dispersion of the Jewish people, the pilgrimage celebrations morphed from agricultural to theological as prayer replaced sacrifice.

The holidays described in the Torah have been supplemented over Jewish time. Tu B'Shvat marks the New Year for trees and serves as a reminder to celebrate the delicate ecological balance that provides us with food and drink. Purim celebrates triumph over an archetypal enemy, Haman, recounted in the book of Esther. Hanukkah celebrates the victory of the Hasmoneans over the Syrian Greeks, recorded in the Apocrypha, and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem. Tisha B'Av commemorates a whole series of catastrophes that have beset the Jewish people, starting with the destructions of the first and second Temples. In the twentieth century, two related events, the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel, led to the establishment of two holidays that punctuate the Jewish calendar, Yom HaShoah v'HaGevurah (Day of Catastrophe and Heroism) and Yom HaAtzmaut (Day of Independence). Additional minor holidays for fasting and feasting enable Jews to live in Jewish time wherever and whenever they may live.

Food plays a vital role in celebrating and commemorating Jewish time. From the prescribed (e.g., lamb on Passover) and proscribed foods (e.g., birds of prey) in the Bible, to the rabbinic disciplines of separating milk from meat, to the ethnic customs of certain foods being associated with specific holidays (e.g., dairy on Shavuot), law and lore combine to define Jewish practice.

Prayer

The sages described prayer as *avodah she-balev* (service of the heart), a reference to the understanding that prayer replaced the sacrifices that took place in the Temple in Jerusalem. External manifestations of loyalty to God had become internalized. While prayer can and does take place in individual lives, communal prayer is normative in Jewish life. Indeed, a minyan, a group of ten,[21] is the minimum required to recite certain prayers, including the Kaddish, a doxology often recited in memory of a deceased first-degree relative. The times during the day when Jews pray are linked to the times when sacrifices were made in the Temple (morning, afternoon, and optionally in the evening). The Hebrew word most often translated as "prayer" in English, *tefillah*, comes from the root that means "assess" or "judge." *Tefillah* can be understood as a process of self-assessment, seeking to close the gap between who we are and who we could and should become in the sight of God. Prayer is but

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one expression of *avodah*, which also includes ritual acts of faith throughout the Jewish year and indeed throughout a Jewish life.

The following excerpt is from the Mishnah, the foundation of Rabbinic Judaism. It is included in daily worship, specifically in the morning prayers:

> These are the things that are limitless,
> Of which a person enjoys the fruit of this world,
> While the principal remains in the world to come.
> They are: honoring one's father and mother,
> Engaging in deeds of compassion,
> Arriving early for study, morning and evening,
> Dealing graciously with guests, visiting the sick,
> Providing for the wedding couple,
> Accompanying the dead for burial,
> Being devoted in prayer,
> And making peace among people.
> But the study of Torah encompasses them all.[22]

This text espouses infinite values, yet it also presents a taxonomy. Talmud Torah, the study of Torah, encompasses all of the previously listed virtues, presumably because study includes action.[23] The values are universal rather than explicitly or exclusively Jewish, yet they emanate from the Torah, the covenant between God and the children of Israel. The values are also humanistic, that is, they are between people, yet their basis is theological, that is, the Torah is a gift from God. This combination is a motif in Jewish thought and indeed in Jewish life. What makes any of the actions mentioned above Jewish are the intention and the contextual basis for their performance. Jews do not own goodness or diligence or piety or kindness or devotion or peace-making acumen. On the contrary, these are universally accessible virtues and abilities. They become Jewish expressions when a Jew consciously acts in consonance with them, especially as a result of Jewish learning. Talmud Torah has multiple meanings. In a narrow sense, it can refer to the study of the Torah, the Pentateuch. In its broadest sense, Talmud Torah can refer to all Jewish wisdom. The elasticity of Talmud Torah has helped to enable Jews and Judaism to survive under duress and to thrive when given the cultural oxygen to be creative.

Mitzvah

The relationship between the God of Israel, the people of Israel, and the Torah of Israel is succinctly expressed in the blessing recited prior to a public reading of the Torah. "Praised are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who has chosen us from among the peoples, and given us the Torah. Praised are You, Adonai, who gives the Torah." The Torah is a gift from God, a gift that keeps on giving, a gift that depends on the Jewish people receiving it, most explicitly and publicly on the Festival of Shavuot (Weeks).[24] Both Jews and non-Jews frequently misunderstand the role and the rule of law in Judaism. Mitzvot, divine commandments that are accepted as human obligations, represent the terms of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. According to rabbinic tradition there are 613 mitzvoth, corresponding to 365 negative

A young Jewish woman at her bat mitzvah and a young Jewish man at his bar mitzvah. The reading aloud in Hebrew from the Torah scroll signifies the full entry of the young person into the observances of the commandments (mitzvot).

commandments ("you shall not") and 248 positive commandments ("you shall"). These numbers are hardly arbitrary. The number 365 corresponds to the number of full days in a solar year, and 248 was thought to correspond to the number of bones in a human body. Furthermore, 613 corresponds to the numerical equivalent of the word *Torah* (since Hebrew letters are also numbers): taf (400) plus vav (6) plus resh (200) and hay (5) equals 611, plus two commandments that the entire people of Israel heard at Mount Sinai—the first two according to the Jewish counting of the Ten Commandments—namely, (1) "I am Adonai your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exod. 20:2), and (2) "You shall have no other gods beside Me" (Exod. 20:3).[25] According to the sages, these two commandments were heard by the children of Israel *mipee haGevurah,* "from God directly."

The commandments relate to every aspect of life—from individual to global, private and public, ritual and ethical. Nevertheless, from the inside looking out, the mitzvot are intended to create a structure, a discipline that gives meaning to life, and not a stricture, an imposition that predetermines human actions. The Talmud teaches that an action performed because it is a mitzvah is held in higher esteem than the same action that is the result of free choice.[26] This is countercultural in a society that venerates free will, but it forms an integral part of the rabbinic worldview. The mitzvot are often subdivided into *bein adam l'chavero* (between human beings—ethical) and *bein adam laMakom* (between a person and God—spiritual) as well as *sikhliot* (those rationally derivable, such as murder and stealing) and *shemiyot* (those heard directly from God, e.g., mixing wool and linen). When a Jewish boy reaches the age of thirteen he becomes Bar Mitzvah (son of the commandment), and thereby, reaches the stage of accepting responsibility and accountability. In non-Orthodox streams of Judaism, this status (Bat Mitzvah—daughter of the commandment) applies to teenage girls as well.

An evening prayer contextualizes the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people:

> Everlasting love You offered Your people Israel by teaching us Torah and mitzvot, laws and precepts. Therefore, Adonai our God, when we lie down and when we rise up, we will meditate on Your laws and Your commandments. We will rejoice in your Torah forever. . . . Praise to you, Adonai, who loves Your people forever.[27]

This *chatimah*, closing signature line of a blessing, leads immediately into the Shema, the proclamation of God's singularity:[28] "Hear, O Israel! The Eternal is our God, the Eternal alone." (Deut. 6:4). This declaration is literally surrounded by prayers of love, since it is followed by a paragraph that begins with the words,

> You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6: 5–9)[29]

Israel—Still Wrestling with God

The State of Israel changed the image of a Jew from powerless to powerful in the eyes of the world including in the eyes of the Jews themselves. The "people of the book," a name given to Jews in the Qur'an, were transformed into the people capable of making the desert bloom. A subject people had become a sovereign people. Rather than waiting for God to give the Land of Israel to the people of Israel, the people of Israel were going back home to reassert their covenantal claim and realize a hope that had been latent for 2,000 years. "So long as within the inmost heart a Jewish spirit sings, so long as the eye looks eastward, gazing toward Zion, our hope is not lost—the hope of two thousand years: to be a free people in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem." These lyrics by Naftali Herz Imber became the national anthem of the State of Israel, a hope that did not and will not die.

The relationship between the people of Israel and the Land of Israel is intimate and ultimate. The Hebrew word used to describe the process of moving to Israel in our time and to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices in ancient times is the same word used to describe someone called to bless the Torah—*aliyah*, "ascent." The ascent is spiritual and existential, intended to depict a powerful, personal transformation. Similarly, a Jew who decides to make *aliyah*, to move to Israel, is accepted under the *chok hash'vut,* "the law of return." Even a Jew who goes physically to Israel for the first time is considered to be returning home. This characterization defies logic, yet it testifies to the transcendent power of attraction between a people, a land, and God.

The *Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel* provides the best articulation of her foundations and aspirations, encompassing the historical, spiritual and political spheres: "Eretz

27. Ahavat Olam from *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur*, 8.

28. Two of the enlarged letters in the Torah scroll are the ayin in the word *Shema* and the dalet in the word *Ehad*. These two consonants spell the word *eid* or "witness," thereby witnessing the unity and uniqueness of God.

29. The sages termed this the acceptance of the yoke of the Sovereignty of Heaven.

Yisrael was the birthplace of the Jewish people. . . . After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people remained faithful to it throughout their dispersion, and never ceased to pray for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom."[30]

Having established its essential Jewish character, the founders made explicit Israel's fundamental commitment to democracy. Having been in a minority, stateless status for nearly 2,000 years, since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, the children of Israel clarified their intention regarding minorities in the State of Israel:

> The State of Israel . . . will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions.[31]

The *Declaration* concludes with a subtle reference to God, one left purposely ambiguous, allowing for avowedly secular understanding: "Placing our trust in the Rock of Israel,[32] we affix our signatures to this proclamation at this session of the provisional council of state, on the soil of the homeland, in the city of Tel Aviv, on this Sabbath Eve, the 5th day of Iyar 5708 (14 May 1948)."[33]

Judaism and Christianity in Dialogue

There is a fundamental asymmetry in a Jewish-Christian dialogue—perhaps everywhere outside the State of Israel. There are approximately 13.5 million Jews in the world, and nearly 12 million of them live in either Israel (6 million) or the United States (5.8 million). Only in the State of Israel does the Jewish population constitute a majority. By contrast the American Jewish community represents less than 2 percent of the US population. This demographic reality has profoundly influenced the course of Jewish memory and destiny. Jewish survival is not taken for granted. The lessons of history, ancient and recent, have left indelible impressions on the collective memory of the Jewish people. The Jews have experienced state-sponsored anti-Semitism, exile, expulsion, and genocide. These experiences have left enduring scars and indelible memories. They have fostered a deep sense of distrust in diplomatic rhetoric and a reliance on self-determination. Since the birth of the State of Israel in 1948, the Jewish people have acquired a new image, a new identity, and a return to power. Jews have tried to live with political and military powerlessness but have learned that this combination is untenable in the contemporary world. This effort led, in part, to the nadir of Jewish history, symbolized by the crematoria in Auschwitz-Birkenau. And the murder of 6 million Jews during the Shoah,[34] more widely known as the Holocaust,

will continue to have profound, indeed incalculable, effects on Jewish life. Even as survivors, perpetrators, bystanders, and "up-standers" (an appellation that refers to those people who righteously stood up for justice and against oppression) age and die, there are those who try to erase history and deny truth, claiming the Shoah never occurred or that it has been exaggerated.

Nostra Aetate ("In Our Time," 1965), a Roman Catholic document from the Second Vatican Council, a council called by Pope John XXIII and overseen by him until his death in 1963 and then by his successor, Pope Paul VI, profoundly and positively changed the narrative of Catholic-Jewish relations. Two of the leading Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, Rabbis Joseph Baer Soloveitchik and Abraham Joshua Heschel, chose differing strategies in response to the papal invitation for dialogue. Soloveitchik entitled his definitive article on the subject "Confrontation," in which "the community of the many" (Christians) confronts "the community of the few" (Jews).[35] Soloveitchik focuses on the divergence of the Jewish and Christian communities. He argues that the community of the many cannot impose its theological will on the community of the few, although he leaves room for the community of the few to engage the community of the many, outside of the theological domain, for example in the field of social justice.

Rabbi Heschel decided to accept the invitation and engage in private and public dialogue with representatives of the Catholic Church hierarchy. In May 1962 he responded to Cardinal Augustin Bea's[36] invitation to submit proposals for the document on the Catholic Church and the Jewish people. He submitted a memorandum entitled "On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations," which in its introduction stated,

> Both Judaism and Christianity share the prophets' belief that God chooses agents through whom His will is made known and his work done throughout history. Both Judaism and Christianity live in the certainty that mankind is in need of ultimate redemption, that God is involved in human history, that in relations between man and man God is at stake, that the humiliation of man is a disgrace of God.[37]

In contrast to Rabbi Soloveitchik, Rabbi Heschel took the convergence of Judaism and Christianity as his point of departure. He emphasized the shared portion of the Venn Diagram, while acknowledging the distinctiveness of both Judaism and Christianity. Rabbi Heschel went on to make four recommendations to improve mutually fruitful relations between the Church and the Jewish community.

1. That the [Vatican] Council brand anti-Semitism as a sin and condemn all false teachings, such as that which holds the Jewish people responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus and sees in every Jew a murderer of Christ.
2. That Jews be recognized as Jews . . . and that the council recognize the integrity and the continuing value of Jews and Judaism.

3. That Christians be made familiar with Judaism and Jews.
4. That a high-level commission be set up at the Vatican, with the task of erasing prejudice and keeping a watch on Christian-Jewish relations everywhere.[38]

If Rabbi Heschel's perspective on the need for interreligious dialogue could be distilled to a single sentence, it would be one of his own: "No religion is an island since we are all involved with one another."[39] Heschel's thinking profoundly influenced the document that would ultimately emerge from the Vatican, *Nostra Aetate*, and open the door for a Jewish-Christian dialogue that animates this very work.[40]

There was no immediate official Jewish response to *Nostra Aetate*. The Jewish community is not organized around a central hierarchy like the Roman Catholic Church, but this fact alone does not explain the lack of a clear, univocal Jewish response to the outstretched arm of comity extended by the leadership of the Catholic Church. Written documents—even those that record official ecclesiastical rhetoric—may be necessary to change the relationship between Christians and Jews, but they are not sufficient. Confidence-building measures must support these theological claims—evidence on the ground is needed that Catholics in the pews and in catechism classes have studied the changes in attitude and belief that the Second Vatican Council has endorsed. The words of Catholic conciliation and acceptance of Judaism as an older, living sibling also need to withstand the test of time lest they die with the people who first articulated them. This skepticism from a Jewish perspective has been hardened in the crucible of historical experience. The question remains: will the words of the Roman Catholic leadership translate into the actions of the Roman Catholic membership?

It took thirty-five years until a significant Jewish response was offered in 2000 to the profound changes *Nostra Aetate* marked in Christian theology relating to Judaism. The book *Christianity in Jewish Terms* states,

> We believe that living as a minority in a still largely Christian America—and Christian West—Jews need to learn the languages and beliefs of their neighbors. . . . Jews need to learn ways of judging what forms of Christianity are friendly to them and what forms are not, and what forms of Christian belief merit their public support and what forms do not. They need, as well, to acknowledge the efforts of those Christians who have sacrificed aspects of their work and of their lives to combat Christian anti-Judaism and to promote forms of Christian practice that are friendly to Jewish life and belief.[41]

Christianity in Jewish Terms is a commentary on "*Dabru Emet*: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity," which is predicated on the premise that changes in Christian theology

merit a significant Jewish response. The authors acknowledge their lack of official standing, noting that they represent only themselves. However, several hundred Jewish leaders subsequently signed onto the statement. *Dabru Emet* (Speak the Truth) offered eight principles or points about Christianity that its authors wanted the Jewish community to become aware of:

1. Jews and Christians worship the same God.
2. Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book—the Bible (what Jews call "Tanakh" and Christians call the "Old Testament").
3. Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel.
4. Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of Torah.
5. Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon.
6. The humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture.
7. A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice.
8. Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.[42]

It is not only noteworthy that thirty-five years elapsed between *Nostra Aetate* and *Christianity in Jewish Terms*. Of added significance is the asymmetry between them. The hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church stands in stark contrast to the "ad-hocracy" assembled to develop a Jewish response. Whereas Christianity is a derivative of Judaism, and therefore, has a compelling need to assert its Jewish origin, Jews feel no such need to relate to Christianity. Nevertheless, the unprecedented opportunity for Jews to relate to Christians who seek mutual understanding and respect is worthy, if not holy.