

JUDAISM

A SIMPLE EXPLANATION

First a disclaimer I am no expert on Judaism and I have tried to make the presentation simple but avoid being simplistic. What I wish to do is to give some idea of its history, its observances and an idea of its practices and their significance.

Judaism in simple terms I would suggest is a History of the Jews, a system of Religious Worship and practice, evolving from Temple Worship, and Social practices evolving from their History.

In Temple Worship the observant Jew was required to go up to Jerusalem to the Temple several times a year if he could, to fulfil his duties. Hence the Biblical story of Christ's presentation in the Temple roughly at about the age at which a young Jew has his Bar Mitzvah

Judaism has a different view in practice and thought to both Islam and Christianity. Christianity has its Messiah and its basis were accomplished by the life, death and resurrection of Christ and is Trinitarian in its basic faith.

Islam is monotheistic and its revelations came to an end with the Prophet Mohamed. Judaism is Monotheistic and is still, awaiting its Messiah who will deliver them from their travails. To the devout Jew, Jerusalem is not only a city it is the Holy City there to re-group as a nation once more, as Israel was, before the Exile.

Hence, it becomes easier to understand the attitude of Israel, which, is not only a secular state but also a religious one, in desiring to hang on to Jerusalem and not to allow other religions to have any part of it as a capital.

The History of the Religion as well as the Jewish nation is contained in what the Christian world in its bible, refers to as the Old Testament such a description is an

of the Sabbath and the day should be devoted, after Synagogue, to rest and recreation. What constitutes work is a complex set of rules which have been developed by the Rabbinical Courts and the Mishna over years of disputation, at the last count that I knew of there were 33 activities which could constitute work and which are forbidden on the Sabbath or Festival days.

Affecting the Family as much as the Synagogue is the Jewish Year, which is thirteen months long. Some are of greater importance than others because it is within these months that the major and minor festivals take place observed in the Home and the Synagogue

The really Major Festivals are Rosh Hashanah, the New Year which is celebrated within the seventh month of the Jewish year, immediately followed by Yom Kippur and the Day of Atonement which is a fast day. On this day the Synagogue service goes on for nearly twenty four hours, five days later in the same month is celebrated the Feast of the Tabernacles or Sukkoth when some form of shelter open to the elements should be erected (this is to remind them of their ancestors wandering in the wilderness, in Rural areas devout Jews often live in them but in Urban areas they are usually used for the taking of meals. The celebrations usually last two days and on the second there is a very jolly and important service in the Synagogue, of thanksgiving to God for giving them the Torah. The scrolls are paraded round the Synagogue the final reading of the Torah for the year, is immediately followed, by the first reading of the new year. There is much kudos in being selected to do these two readings

Probably the most important solemn and significant Festival in the whole year takes place in the first month of the Jewish Year, this is the Feast of the Passover, it commemorates the Flight out of Egypt and the period of affliction in Egypt while slaves. The period before the day of Festival is a busy one the house has to be cleaned from top to bottom and every piece of leaven bread discovered and removed. The Bakers only make unleavened bread or Motzot. So that they do not lose their yeast an arrangement is made with a Gentile who will for a nominal sum purchase the leaven from the bakers and when the Festival over sell it back to them for the same sum.

anathema to a devout Jew though most are too polite to tell you so, except in Israel. The devout Jew refers to the Scriptures.

The books of the Scriptures are called the Pentateuch and are considered in Judaism as the History of its religion, from Abraham to Moses the Law Giver.

From about 1800 they were presented as orally preserved legends from various Hebrew tribes which became, after the Exile in the second half of the first millennium B.C. to provide historical justification and divine sanction for the for the religious beliefs, practices and rituals which the post- Exilic Israel established.

I don't intend at this stage to rehearse the Scholastic Arguments for and against this theses they are mind bending, if any one is interested a very good publication is A History of the Jews by Paul Johnson published in paper back in 1988 by Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

The first five books of the Pentateuch are in Hebrew the Torah which are the Scriptures read in the Synagogue during the Sabbath or Sh'abat services and it follows a yearly cycle, the best description of them is they are the Law Books, the rest of the Pentateuch, often referred to as the Wisdom Literature are called the ~~Torah~~ ^{TALMUD}, the other important book is the Mishna which is the Rabbinical commentary for guidance in interpreting the Talmud and the Torah

We are I think familiar with the legend of the Wandering Jew. From the time of the Exile in Babylon in the 6th century B.C. the majority of Jews lived outside of Israel in what is known as the Diaspora.. Therefore to say that Judaism is the religion of the Hebrew Race is to my mind a misnomer, because of the different races among the Jews from which the family originates. For about two thousand years until about 1900 they had no country of their own as a Jewish nation.

There is however a distinction between Jews originating from the West, those descended from the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 are known Sephardi and those whose ancestors lived in Eastern Europe are known as Askenaze .

That quick run through the History, I would suggest puts Judaism as a Religion and a Social construct in a frame from which to have a look now at the beliefs and practices of practioners.

The Jewish Religion is in two parts, the Worship and the Social Construct which, are closely intertwined. Both are contained in the Family, the Festivals of the Jewish year and the Synagogue . The Festivals which, are observed in the Home act as a bridge to the worship services in the Synagogue,

Obviously the foundation of the family, to the Jews is marriage, in that sexual intercourse before marriage is forbidden. Contrary to some belief circumcision does not make a man a Jew, his mother does if she herself is a Jew. That is why Jews are far more exercised about men marrying out as it is described . If a man marries a gentile even though he be a Jew the children will not be Jews, in the case of a girl, obviously they do not like it she marries out, but it is not quite so bad, as, any of the children because of her, will be considered to be Jews.

Marriage is highly esteemed and in Jewish tradition obligatory, .Jewish teaching about marriage is that it serves three purposes. The first of these is the propagation of the human species to fulfil the biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply. Orthodox Talmudic Law is that this is fulfilled when the family consists of a boy and a girl, until then contraception is forbidden and so is vasectomy. Progressive Judaism leaves this to the couple to decide for themselves

The second reason for marriage is for companionship, in the belief that

marriage makes for happiness and should be for life. Divorce is a matter for great sadness it is recognised by the Rabbinical Courts on the grounds of a serious matrimonial offence or where attempts at reconciliation have failed. Civil Divorce usually takes place before Rabbinical Court proceedings, but a writ of divorce is only granted to the man irrespective of who obtains the civil divorce. Without this writ, called a Get it is impossible for a woman to remarry under Jewish law.

Thirdly marriage is highly esteemed in Jewish tradition because it establishes the family as the basic social unit and the home as the little sanctuary with the father as priest, the mother as priestess and the dining room table as the altar.

A Marriage may take place on any day of the week except on the Sabbath or a Festival day and does not need to take place in the Synagogue. It can take place anywhere so long as the Canopy, supported at the four corners, is big enough to enable the bride, bridegroom and the Rabbi to get under it. In very observant marriages but not so much these days, a few days before the wedding the bride to be would visit a Mikveh or ritual immersion pool for a ritual cleansing.

Another necessity within the Jewish family is circumcision, which is supposed to take place on the eighth day after the birth. This affirms the child's membership of God's chosen people. It does not make a person a Jew. It is carried out by a carefully trained man called a Mohel and can be performed either in a Synagogue or the Hospital where the birth takes place. What the position is if the birth is premature the books do not say. It is probably provided for by some decision of the Rabbinical Court.

Jews place great store by education and, as it is the father's duty to ensure that the boy is circumcised, so it is also his duty to teach him the Law or Torah ready for his Barmitzvah. This is done usually at classes in the Synagogue or in schools, it includes the ability to read the Hebrew of the Torah because the readings in the Synagogue are in that language.

The age of majority, for the purposes of the Jewish religion, was fixed by the Rabbis in relation to puberty. For boys thirteen and for girls twelve. The first records of the coming of age ceremony or Barmitzvah date from the Middle Ages. The central feature of the ceremony is the reading by the Boy wearing his prayer shawl the Tallit having been shown by his Father how to wear it, reading the section of the Torah in public in the Synagogue for the Sabbath service and the Rabbi will have shown him how to wear the Tefillin which are leather prayer boxes containing the Shema a ritual prayer these are worn on the forehead and on the arm when at prayer and he would be wearing a skull cap or Yahmulka.

In Progressive Synagogue as distinct from the Orthodox there is a similar occasion for Girls called a Batmitzvah.

Another rite of passage affecting the family is Death. When a person is dying or is expected to die relatives seek to gather round the dying person, it may be that the person wishes for a Rabbi to be near them and if at all possible, tradition is that the person should spend their last moments in prayer, reciting the Shema and their last confession. Traditionally the body is left for eight minutes while a feather is placed over the mouth and nostrils.

As soon as a Doctor has certified death the Burial Society take over, the body is thoroughly Washed, if male he would be buried with the prayer shawl that he has used all his adult life, placed in a plain linen shroud and put in a plain wooden casket without adornment and padding and the funeral should take place within 24 hours of death. Orthodox law does not permit cremation but progressive Jews do allow it.

After the funeral there is an intense period of mourning lasting for seven days when the family will not, if at all possible leave the house and three times a day recite the prayers for the dead, the Kaddish.

Mourning, less intense goes on thereafter for eleven months, saying the Kaddish every day, On the anniversary a candle is lit and left burning for twenty four hours and this candle is lit and

kept burning every year on the anniversary thereafter.

Belief in life after death in Judaism, Heaven and Hell and God as Judge are all accepted concepts. Bodily Resurrection and or Spiritual Resurrection of the soul, these were separate concepts and beliefs but at this time are very ill defined and it is not easy to judge their strength.

Something that does very much concern the Family is the keeping of the Sabbath and the laws on what is Kash'rat or Kosher and also the Law concerning work on the Sabbath, Firstly what is Kosher and what is not, chicken, turkey duck and goose are all Kosher to be Kosher an animal must chew the cud and have a cloven hoof ,so this rules out pork or bacon and anything made from either also all other birds of the air, Fish must have both scales and fins this rules out all kinds of shell fish. These rules are set out in the Torah or the Law . Another rule is that dairy and Animal should not be served at the same meal and should not be prepared in the same kitchen space. Completely separate cooking utensils must be used and separate plates dishes and cutlery, they may not be washed in the same place.

All animals must be ritually slaughtered, in a particular manner, and by a Butcher usually licensed by the Beth Din ,in special slaughter houses, usually supervised by a Rabbi. Before cooking every effort must be made to remove any blood from the flesh.

The Sabbath or Shab'at is the seventh day of the Jewish week, our Saturday and, lasts from dusk on Friday until dusk on Saturday It starts with the meal on Friday evening this commences by the Women of the House lighting the candles and pronouncing a blessing on her home husband and children and the meal ends with a final blessing by the father blessing his wife and children.

Just before dusk at the end of the Sabbath day there is a simple ceremony. The woman of the house says a prayer of thanksgiving for the Sabbath she says a Blessing and the youngest child lights a special candle a prayer is said as a memorial that the first thing God created was Light

During the Sabbath no work is allowed so food for the day is cooked before the beginning

The meal of Seder on the night before the day of Passover is full of symbolism and contains dishes to remind them of the bitterness of their captivity, of the plagues that fell upon the Egyptians who despite their requests would not release them and the Matzot to remind them of the bread baked in a hurry prior to their escape. The youngest child is coached to ask the question what it is all about and the senior male recounts the story of the captivity and the escape the whole ends with prayer Next Year in Jerusalem

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