

# Judaism: its identity and position to society

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



Judaism is more than a religion. It is the way of life of the Jewish people. Culture, customs, ethics, and sense of self – these are a part of Judaism as much as the faith and the rituals of the Jewish religion. A Jew can be defined in more than one way. Within Jewish law, being Jewish is a kind of citizenship. One is a Jew if one is born of a Jewish mother or has undergone a conversion. Conversion to Judaism is like a bestowal of citizenship – it makes one a member of the people.

A person who fits the legal definition of a Jew is recognized as a fellow Jew by the Jewish community. Even if a Jew does not share the religious beliefs of Jews and does not participate in the customs and practices of Judaism, one is still considered a Jew if he or she fits the legal definition. One could define a Jew religiously to the religious beliefs and practices of Judaism. A Jew is one who believes in the One God, Creator and master of the Universe, the God with whom the people Israel have a special relationship. Many Jews believe God chose them to be his people.

They follow the laws that God revealed to Moses. The Ten Commandments are the most important of these laws. In ancient times the Jews were the only people who worship a single, exclusive God, and the only people who worshiped without physical images of God. The Jews were resented by other people for not participating in the worship of all gods. This led to the accusation that Jews were antihumanitarian, since sharing gods was considered to be an act of friendship and universalistic concern for other people.

When Christianity replaced the pagan religions of antiquity, the old misunderstanding of Jews did not die out. Added to it was the resentment that the Jews, Jesus' own people, has not become Christians. Jews were protected under Christian law but were restricted in many ways. The laws in Christian lands called for Jews to be humiliated and despised in order to encourage Jewish conversions to Christianity. When Jews did not convert they were accused of stubbornness or spiritual blindness (Wyllen).

Judaism teaches that God is the God of all humankind and that He wants all people to serve Him by living their lives the way He wants. The guidelines for this lifestyle are set down in the Noachide Laws, the basic framework for a moral and spiritual life. They believe that every person is completely free to choose whether to do good or evil for God is completely free to do as He wishes, so are humans. Jews regard any religion which upholds the Noachide Laws as an acceptable way for non-Jews to serve God.

This does not mean that they agree with everything that other religions teach, but that they can recognize some religions as pointing out a path to God. For this reason, Jews do not see the need to convert other people to their religion. In particular, Jews recognize that Islam teaches pure monotheism and that Muslims have a strict morality that upholds the principles of the Noachide Laws. The same may be said of the Sikh religion. Jews have always been less certain about Christianity.

Although they acknowledge Christianity's high moral principles, they feel uneasy about the Christian belief that Jesus is God. They are also unhappy about the use of images and icons in Catholic and Orthodox worship. They

feel that this comes rather close to idolatry. Nonetheless, Jews have always recognized a special relationship with Christianity and Islam. Rabbi Judah Halevi, a twelfth-century scholar, described Judaism as the seed of the tree and Christianity and Islam as the branches, since through these religions, millions of people have come to worship the one God (Forta).

At the turn of the twentieth century, a movement of interfaith dialogue between Jews and non-Jews served as a medium that facilitated the changes upon conflicts in religion. Although there had been some obstacle along the process, the interfaith dialogue helped to develop a better relationship between Jews and non-Jews in America. As a result it came into advancement of the well-being of the Jewish community in America.

This interfaith dialogue took place in America in 1893 when the World Parliament of Religions (WPR) convened in Chicago bringing together Protestants, Catholics, Greek Orthodox Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Bahai, Muslims, Native Americans and representatives of other faiths as well. It offered Jewish religious leaders such as Alexander Kohut, Isaac M. Wise, Kaufmann Kohler, Emil G. Hirsch, and Marcus Jastrow, an opportunity to present their views to a non-Jewish audience and make a case for Judaism (Kaplan).

The majority of Jews, especially in North America, resided in religiously pluralistic communities where people of diverse backgrounds and faiths, including many who had themselves experienced religious persecution, live side by side. Perhaps for this reason, they felt more comfortable interacting with Christians than Jews did in most parts of the world – so much so that we

know of Jews and Christians who joined forces in business, witnessed each other's documents, and socialized in each other's homes (Bernardini and Fiering).

Over the century new discoveries, new methods of manufacture, new social conditions have changed people's way of living and thinking about the world. For Jews, this has always created the need to reapply the halakhah (Jewish religious law) to ever-changing conditions for living by halakhah is essential for Jews to fulfill their part of their covenant relationship with God.

During this century advances in technology have led Jews to raise questions which could not have been thought of in earlier times – questions about the use of automated electrical machinery on Sabbaths, whether computer hacking is theft, whether surrogate mother is permissible, whether a person on a life-support machine is alive or dead. To enable rabbis to answer these questions, up-to-date commentaries have been added to the Shulchan Aruch (written catalogue of halakhah), and whole books concerned with specific topics of halakhah are now being published. The continued reapplication of halakhah is an ongoing process (Forta).

## **Works Cited**

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