

How have aspects of jewish belief been modified

[Religion](#)



Judaism spans centuries of reform and change, but unlike many religions it is seen by many as the most traditional and unified denomination. However, like all major religions of our time change due to modern scholarship and scientific enquiry has become inevitable and for Judaism rather significant. In this essay I wish to highlight a minority of the vast amount of topics within Judaism which are questioned today. Specifically, my essay will comprise of two main parts; Jewish religious doctrines and their reform and the changes to Jewish lifestyle as a result.

Traditional Jewish beliefs can be summed up effectively in Maimonides' 13 principles/articles of faith. " Maimonides, in his commentary on the Mishnah, compiles what he refers to as the Shloshah-Asar Ikkarim, the Thirteen Articles of Faith, compiled from Judaism's 613 commandments found in the Torah. " (fordham 09/01/04). For example, the nature of the divine, how God is seen as the creator of all, his unity, omnipotence, eternity, omniscience, and that only him shall be worshipped.

Also included are the beliefs in Moses teachings, the torah and its truth, reward and retribution, the messiah and the messianic age, the resurrection of the dead and the belief that God communicates through prophecy.

Modern scholarship and science have however challenged such beliefs and different segregations of the Jewish faith have dealt with these challenges differently. Ultra-Orthodox and orthodox Jews tend to reject the findings of scholarship and science, therefore leaving the traditional aspects of the religion to remain more or less unaffected.

Yet, other Jews such as Reform Jews seek to reconcile traditional beliefs with science and scholarship, therefore denoting some kind of modification of traditional beliefs and at times rejecting certain commandments as unsuited to the modern world. Thusly Orthodox Jews still view the Torah as the word of God and literally true. Whereas, Reform Jews realise it has been written by people and is therefore truth bearing rather than actually true. I have looked at the work of Joseph L. Blau who I found has provided an in-depth account of the origins of variety with Judaism and its basic history.

Blau proposes that with most religions or denominations change is relatively slow and not usually noticed. However, Judaism has developed so rapidly and moved to so many corners of the globe that its changes seem impulsive and hard to live with. One of the most controversial issues that Judaism has faced is their denial of the messianic role of Jesus Christ. With this denial Jews have faced persecution and martyrdom to affirm their faith in the absolute unity of God. With the Jewish opposition to the supposed good (Jesus) they have become the bad and with this they have become the feared.

Christians were careful to impose a choice of either conversion or segregation to the Jews as a clear portrayal of their feelings. However you were frowned upon if you neglected your Jewish duties and tried to remain indifferent. As a result the Jewish communities became stricter and to stray was an abomination. An inward Jewish community was on borrowed time and interaction between various other cultures became more frequent. The Enlightenment and its effect on mankind made it easier for Jews to gain citizenship, especially in the USA. However the Enlightenment brought with it emancipation which did not come as easily.

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Jews first encountered the modern world during the protracted struggle in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe to attain political emancipation... assessing Judaism's eligibility to participate in the modern world. " (myjewishlearning 2003: 1). Jews gained emancipation but at the cost of their lifestyles. The rabbi's were now not the only one that dictated the Jewish community. Jews found they needed to educate or even prove their beliefs so that outsiders would understand. This caused Jews to firmly re-establish fundamental principles, like those found in Maimonides articles.

This became all the more pertinent in the twentieth century with the disastrous events of the Holocaust. Judaism began to develop and change, " modern Jewish thought [became] more protean. " (myjewishlearning 2003: 2). With all this in mind I now turn to the ritual of Shabbat. Jews hold a revered place for the celebration of Shabbat that many who don't observe don't understand. It is the most well known Jewish observance by secular society and it is viewed by the Jewish community as " a precious gift from God... and is the only ritual observance instituted in the ten commandments. " (us-israel 2003: 1).

It is a symbolic day of rest to gather energy, strengthen family bonds and to rejuvenate spiritually. A day of rest does not seem such a bad idea to our society today but " we forget what a radical concept a day of rest was in ancient times" (us-israel 2003: 1). Shabbat can at times be viewed as a prime example of an unchanging ritual of Judaism, which through the ages has survived relatively unchanged. Although in our age resting is nearly as important as working in ages before the Jewish day of rest added fuel to the already growing flames of distrust and hatred toward the Jewish community. <https://assignbuster.com/how-have-aspects-of-jewish-belief-been-modified/>

In the commandments the Jews are told not to just observe Shabbat but to always keep in mind its meaning and significance. It is not just about rest but about celebrating freedom, freedom from work and the historic freedom from slavery. Many questions that are posed today concerning Shabbat are what in this day and age are viewed as work and what needs to be avoided? As an answer to this most Jews quote Exodus 31: 35-38, the building of the sanctuary. Anything that related to the building of the temple was considered work (or 'melachah' to use the most accurate Jewish definition) and was prohibited on the day of rest.

For example one of the many tasks is kindling a fire. In the day in which the sanctuary was built I would presume that kindling a fire was a pretty arduous task, whereas now you can light a fire by just flicking a switch. Can this prohibition still be relevant in a society of an instant flame? How do Jews class electricity and cars of which both use flames of a sort? This argument all comes down to what the meaning of work is now. The word 'work' in the English sense denotes hard labour, employment and doing something you'd rather not.

Whereas the Torah forms another word for work, the word 'melachah'. Melachah generally refers to the kind of work that is creative, or that exercises control or dominion over your environment. " (us-israel 2003: 2). An example of melachah is God creating the universe. " God's work did not require a great physical effort, he spoke, and it was done. " (us-israel 2003: 2). Ironically, the issue of whether Jews can use cars on Shabbat is not an issue with Jews, just those who study it. However, " As with almost all the

commandments, all of these Shabbat restrictions can be violated if necessary to save a life. " (us-israel 2003: 2).

As I study Judaism the question of whether the ancient religion Judaism can effectively coincide with modern science and lifestyle is a common occurrence. Much of the time the Torah hits the most trouble as its main ideals and scripture usually clashes with those of science. However, I found an interesting viewpoint that says; " Torah and science can never contradict each other, because two truths cannot be contradictory.

When we find an apparent contradiction between the two, it is generally due to misunderstanding regarding what one is saying. (askmoses 02/11/03). Science and religion seem to me to be constantly at odds with one another. For example, science says it has defined the age of the universe and can detail its history. However scientists can never fully say that the universe is such and such an age, whereas the Torah can. Science and Judaism create a paradox regarding the age of Adam and the fact that he was born looking like a twenty-year-old man. Judaism says that Adam was born twenty, whereas science would contest that he was only a day old, both would be right.

One must remember although the Torah tells us the age of the universe, it still relies on belief that the Torah is truth. This is obviously not an issue with Jews. Staying with the topic of questionable Jewish doctrine, I would like to examine a more philosophical point of view. Judaism has always been a monotheistic faith based on the all powerful, benevolent God. In the twentieth century Judaism has faced horrendous tragedy and which leads to

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question the attributes of their absolute God. God has seemed at times more distant in time of need, " The mournful cry 'Why God? is as ancient as belief in God itself. " (Clark 2000: 207).

The problem of evil contests the basic Jewish ideology of the existence of a compassionate and omnipotent God. Clark highlights two classifications of evil; natural evil, earthquakes etc. and moral evil, human free choices like war. In contrast with Jewish belief scientific and philosophical enquiry has proved many explanations on why God can't exist. The basic philosophical argument consists; " 1-God is omnipotent and wholly good. 2-If God is omnipotent, he can eliminate evil. -If God is wholly good, he would want to eliminate evil. 4-There is evil. 5-Therefore, God does not exist. " (Clark 2000: 207). Does God have the power to stop evil but not the knowledge? The argument above does not conclusively prove evil exists, God's omnipotence may be what is really in question. However if God's omnipotence is not in question then why would someone want to worship a God who would let such atrocities happen? Does God allow evil or in an extreme point of view, is God evil himself since he lets evil to happen?

Judaism takes the position that God has an overall plan, an idea that dates back to Augustine ('the free will theodicy'). Judaism states that mankind were given free will as a test to our humanity and anything you do which abuses your right to free will will be punished in the messianic age. " If God values free will, then the evil that free will unleashes might be justified. " (Clark 2000: 208). In an attempt to answer these questions Jews have formed many theories. Many say that for God to give us free will he must

also step back and never interfere, " Jewish history is a human story" (Sherbok 1994: 196).

God is not taking active measures in our history so to truly grant us free will. Some Jews have taken a different slant and said that God's actual omnipotence and its limits are in question. Is he really as powerful as we may have thought? " It is no longer possible to believe in an all-good God in the light of the terrible events of the Nazi period. " (Sherbok 1994: 195). Some Humanistic Jews contrive to get rid of the idea of an all-powerful being such as God altogether. Is it " possible to live a Jewishly religious life without any acknowledgement of a divine reality. (Sherbok 1994: 164). This is a huge leap from the post-Jewish beliefs in God and proof that many aspects, even those that seem most sacred, are vulnerable to different interpretations throughout history. I would now like to turn to the changes in Jewish lifestyle in response to modern scholarship and scientific enquiry. To do this I have narrowed this huge field of study down to the Jewish feminist point of view and how the place of women has changed due to modern influences. But firstly I would like to show the traditional standpoint on the place of women by reviewing the Halakhah laws?

The Halakhah provides a wide variety of laws, from general to specific. When it comes to sexual relations the Halakhah is rather prohibitory on the interaction between the sexes and usually opts for segregation. Temptation is taken seriously and much is done to avoid it. The Halakhah makes " the assumption that no-one can consider himself totally master of his sex drive. " (Unterman 1996: 134). Masturbation is considered prohibited although it is not so clear-cut for women. Homosexuality in men is less of a problem since <https://assignbuster.com/how-have-aspects-of-jewish-belief-been-modified/>

most Jews are not suspected of it, however it is not totally ruled out and being alone with a man is discouraged.

Conversely women are usually viewed dimly by Judaism and homosexuality is not put past women. " Female homosexuality, though not explicitly prohibited in the Bible, is forbidden by the Halakhah on the grounds that it is one of the 'deeds of the land of Egypt' which Jews must avoid. " (Unterman 1996: 135). Traditionally Jews found it pertinent to follow the Halakhah and the Torah to the word, however modern influences has called for compromise in every aspect of life. More scholarly debate has been over defining how a man must behave to a woman rather than how a woman is meant to behave to a man, so in essence there are less rules.

Women are viewed as " peripheral Jews" (Heschel 1983: 13) and are conveniently excused from many positive commandments which, in so many words, celebrate the male form. Women have historically had little or no credibility in court. Few Jewish women have stepped out of the oppressive category and succeeded and those who do are always viewed with a dim light. Women are encouraged to stay within their supportive role as housewife and the extent at which wives will go to look after their families can at times seem masochistic.

Jewish battered wives usually view their beatings as punishment for doing something wrong. Saving face and preserving Jewish image account for many battered but silent women. It seems that the effects of modernisation hasn't reached every part of the Jewish faith. However " It is time for the golem to demand a soul. " (Heschel 1983: 17). As mentioned above female

homosexuality or lesbianism is viewed dimly by Judaism but this does not mean that it does not exist. In Heschel's book a Jewish lesbian gives account to her experiences and the problems of sexual preference within such of confined religion.

Her name is Alice Doreen, her family were very liberal with their practise of Judaism and in a spell in Paris her landlord said; " I was different from other Jews (who were crass, money-grubbing, lustful and filthy) because I didn't go to synagogue. " (Heschel 1983: 172). This however spurred her on and she developed a wide knowledge of Jewish law and scripture. She was determined to hold onto her Jewish identity even after being rejected when she came out as a lesbian. She moved to America and attended the Beth Chaim Chadashim gay synagogue in Los Angeles, but found it hard to avoid the underlying patriarchal roots of the religion.

Alice (in a surprising move) opposes the more secular view that Judaism, for women, is oppressive and limited as I highlighted above. " I am tired of feminist books that sum up all Jewish thought in that one stupid prayer, 'Blessed art thou... who did not make me a woman. ' That has probably been invoked more times in this decade by Christian women to condemn Judaism than by Jewish men to thank God. " (Heschel 1983: 174). She describes that Christians seem not to understand that you are born a Jew and this identity will always stay with you.

A feeling of belonging which Christians find hard since they are so tied up in religious belief. The place of women, in contrast with its main doctrines, has refused to move its opinion. It seems that the lifestyle of the Jew has

remained constant even with the influences of the modern secular world. In-keeping with my research on Jewish feminism an interesting scientific issue that has led some Jews to reconsider attitudes is the debate over surrogate mothers. " The major argument in favour of surrogacy, of course, is that it enables infertile couples to have children with the gametes of at least one of them... t is also a way for that couple to fulfil an important Jewish value and hope. " (myjewishlearning 09/01/04). An Orthodox viewpoint is that lending one's body in such a way is rather demeaning, " an affront to human dignity" (myjewishlearning 09/01/04). A supporting view is that of Conservative Jews who feel it is like putting a price on the human body to be traded at market. It is seen as a degradation of the woman and feminist Carole Pateman highlights that participating are limited in what they can eat, drink and do.

She makes the rather extreme claim that it is " the enslavement of women. " (myjewishlearning 09/01/04). Surrogacy limits the body and is usually a pursuit of the rich and economy of the poor. Reform rabbi Marc Gellman expresses the concern that a woman using her body in this way can also be accused of putting a strain on her marriage (if married), although by Jewish law it is not technically adultery her reproductive organs are being 'used' by another.

However, in response to these concerns extensive studies have been made to ascertain just which women become surrogate mothers. the typical surrogate mother was twenty-eight years old, married with children, employed full-time, and had thirteen years of education. Her husband was supportive of her decision to serve as a surrogate... While money was a factor in choosing to become a surrogate, it rated consistently lower than the <https://assignbuster.com/how-have-aspects-of-jewish-belief-been-modified/>

desire to help another couple. " (myjewishlearning 09/01/04). In response to the enslavement claim many surrogate mothers partake in legally binding contracts where the pregnancy is controlled by the surrogate in so much as it concerns her physical well-being.