

# Judaism: the tree of life



Judaism is one of the oldest religions that are being practiced today. It is a monotheistic, patriarchal religion that is both down to earth and mystical. Though it is patriarchal with an all male priesthood there is a sprinkling of powerful women in both the Torah and the Jewish history. This is a religion ground by numerous laws and commandments, yet have managed to retain a sense of continue dialogue about God and what it means to be a Jew. The Jewish people can be defined as either a religious or as an ethnic group.

As a religious group, To be Jewish or a Israelites is to be one who answer the call of God and is willing to obey the one God through the Torah and the teaching of the prophets (Fisher, 2005). Many Christians are intrigued by the Jewish tradition, the foundation of both the Christian and the Muslim faith. It began with a man named Abraham, who answered the call of God and travel to a new land, and brought a whole new way of life for his future descendent. The tree of life is a symbol in both the Kabbalah the Jewish mystical tradition as well as in traditional Judaism.

This is a fitting symbol for a religion that is the root of so many branches (Tracey, 2008). In The Beginning. The story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden is a familiar to most people. The Hebrew scripture begins with two parallel story of creation. In the first version God create heaven and earth, day and night, separated water from land, and after all the fishes of the sea and the animals of the land created man and woman in God's image. In the next account God create man first and from Adam's ribs create a helpmate Eve for Adam.

Adam and Eve were placed in a garden of paradise where Eve ate from the tree of knowledge against God's command after being promised wisdom by a serpent. Eve gave the fruit to Adam and this ended their innocence as well as the gift of immortality, and they were banished from paradise. This is the first of many exiles for God's chosen people. It is important to point out that Judaism does not believe in the original sin, nor do they blame Eve for the loss of paradise. Under Judaism this story is seen from a different perspective (Tracey, 2008). The beginning of the Journey with Abraham.

The Jewish religion is based on a special reciprocal relationship with God. The first covenant was with Noah and with all life on earth. After God destroyed the earth with a flood for the people had become wicked. God promised that the earth will never be destroyed again and used the rainbow as a sign of this covenant. Later God entered into a covenant with Abraham who was a descendant of Noah. Judaism began around 1900-1700 BCE with a man named Abram. Abram left his home, religion and even submitted to circumcision without hesitation in answer to the call of God.

God renamed Abram as Abraham and his wife Sarai to Sarah as part of the covenant with them and all of their descendants. All male children will be circumcised on the eighth day as part of this covenant. That Abraham will be the father of many nations and Sarah will be a mother of nations and kings. God also said that he will enter into a covenant with Isaac the future son of Sarah and his seeds. Isaac is the father of Jacob renamed Israel. Israel's 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel. This makes Abraham the father of the Jewish people (Tracey, 2008).

According to Jewish traditions Abram was the son of Terach, who was an idol merchant, Abram had always question the faith of his father. He came to the conclusion that there was one creator who created the whole universe. He begins to share his belief to his Father and to others. One day he smashed all the idols in his Father shop except the largest one, he place the hammer that he had use in the hands if this idol. When his father returned and question Abram. Abram said that the idols got in a fight and that the large one smashed all the other ones. His father said “ Don’t be ridiculous. These idols have no life or power.

They can’t do anything” This allows Abram to ask” Then why do you worship them? ” One day God called to Abram and told him that if he would leave home and family then God would make him a great nation and bless him. Abram accepted this offer and the covenant between God and the Jewish people had begun. It is said that Abram was subjected to 10 test of faith, leaving home was the first and the willingness to sacrifice Isaac was the final test. Not all of Judaism agrees that Abram did the right thing, some of the source thought that Abram fail this test by not refusing to sacrifice his son (Tracey, 2008).

Isaac to Joseph Isaac married Rebecca, who gave birth to twins boys: Jacob and Esau. The two were at war with each other even before they were born. Esau was Isaac’s favorite because he was a good hunter while Jacob was Rebecca’s favorite because he was more spiritual and thoughtful. Though Esau was first born, he sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew to Jacob. Later when Isaac was old and dying, Rebecca tricked him into giving Jacob

the blessing that was meant for Esau. Jacob flees to his uncle because he feared Esau's anger. This is where Jacob met his beloved Rachel.

Jacob was deceived into marrying Rachel's older sister Leah but was allowed to marry Rachel as well. Later both sisters gave their maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah to Jacob for wife as well. Jacob fathered 12 sons and one daughter (Tracey, 2008). After many years of service to his father-in-law, Jacob returned to his homeland. He prayed to God and bought gifts to his brother. On the night before he was to meet with Esau, he sent his whole family and camp ahead across the river. That night Jacob wrestled all night with a man who was an angel.

This angel blessed Jacob and gave him a new name Israel (Yisrael). This means "one who wrestled with God" or "the Champion of God". The word Israelite referred to the children of Israel or the Jewish people. The next day Esau welcomes Jacob or Israel (Tracey, 2008). Jacob fathered 12 sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph, and Benjamin. They are the ancestors of the tribes of Israel (Tracey, 2008). Joseph, son of Israel, was the favorite, and his brothers were jealous of him. Joseph had visions that he would rule over his brothers.

This made his brothers so angry that they sold Joseph into slavery and told their father that Joseph was dead. Later Joseph's ability to interpret visions earned him a special place with Pharaoh. This allowed Joseph to settle his family in Egypt to escape from the famine. As time passed, the descendants of Israel became slaves and suffered under the hands of Pharaohs (Tracey, 2008). The children of Israel prayed and called out to God for deliverance.

God answered with Moses. Moses The Law giver. Moses is considered to be the greatest prophet and teacher of Judaism.

This is one of the 13 principles of Faith that is considered to be the basic beliefs of Judaism. Moses was born in Egypt to Jewish parents, at this time all male children of Jewish slaves were to be killed. Moses mother hid him for three months than put him in a basket on the river where the pharaoh's daughter bathed. The pharaoh's daughter found the child and raised him, she even hired Moses mother as the wet nurse at Miriam Moses sister's suggestion.

Moses may have been raised as an Egyptian but his mother was able to teach Moses about his heritage and instill in Moses a love for his people. 0 years later Moses was force to flee from Egypt for killing an Egyptian, who was beating a Hebrew slave. He spends the next 40 years as husband to Zipporah and tending sheep for his father in law. Jewish writing taught that Moses was chosen to lead the children of Israel because of his kindness to animals. Most Christians are familiar with the rest of the story; Moses talks to God through the burning bush, and he was chosen to lead his people out of Egypt and to the promise land with the help of his brother Aaron.

Ten plagues later and the parting of the red sea brought Moses and his people to Mount Sinai where God gave the Torah to the people of Israel. The Torah includes the first five books of the Bible and was given to Moses by God. Judaism teaches that the Torah was dictated to him, including the history and prophecies that Moses will be written down later. Moses spends the rest of his life writing the first five books (Tracey, 2008). My interest in

Judaism My interest in Judaism began with a book called kosher sex: A recipe for passion and intimacy written by Rabbi Shmuley Boteach.

At the time I thought the book was named in fun and written toward creating more sacredness in the marriage relationship. I loved the down to earth and godly advice. I read the next book called the Ten Commandments of dating. I was surprise and intrigue by the comprehensive discussions on each commandment. I begin to respect the Jewish traditions and their knowledge of the Old Testament. This is my opportunely to learn more about a religion that is the foundation of mine. I taught a yoga class to the Congregation Beth Shalom last year and knew a couple of women in this congregation.

After telling them of my interest and my project, I was invited to the next Shabbat and arranged an interview with a couple of the women. Celebrating Sabbath The Beth Shalom congregation at 315 First ST. Maryville California celebrates Sabbath on Friday evening at around six p. m. This congregation starts their Shabbat with a potluck in a common room upstairs. Everybody was very friendly to each other and to any visitors. This congregation is small so they have a part-time Rabbi and they celebrate Shabbat together once a month as well as all the holidays.

Before the meal begin the Rabi Greenbaum sang the blessings for the challah (special braided bread) and grape juice. This could be a reminder that the Christian tradition of communion came from the Jewish tradition. The share meal was very pleasant with plenty of good food and conversation. Bookshelves lined the room filled with books. Members and visitor were encouraged to borrow the books. After the meal everyone went

down stairs to the worship room. A small podium is in front, and a cabinet called the ark in the back that that holds the Torah and plenty of chairs.

This is a reform church so men and women are able to sit together. The prayer/song book was written in Hebrew with English transitions, the book was written from right to left and Most of the prayers were sung in Hebrew, about the wonder of God. The rabbi had a nice voice. He read the Torah in Hebrew than translate it to English. Share his thought on a subject “ Should we celebrate the death of a murderer Osama ? ” share both side of the issue, read passages where the Israel sang and dance after the defeat of their enemy and when God scold his angles for rejoicing for the same reason.

He had more examples on both side of the issue. It was more like a discussion, in which each member come to their own conclusions but was encourage to take the higher path. Everyone touch the Torah with their song book and sing song of blessing and songs for the passing of a family member. The service was simple and touching, much like an evening visiting with God and his family. The torah study class is on Saturdays morning. My Interview My interview was with a women name Kitty Gold. She was a convert from over 26 years ago. Later she married a Jewish man whose parents were from the orthodox tradition.

My first question was how has the Jewish religion shaped your life? She explained to me that she was raised by a strict Methodist father. She had to go to church but was never comfortable with the trinity. The concept of three God as One God did not make sense to her. By becoming Jewish she found a faith that makes sense to her. She said that she pray directly to God, she is



able to read the scripture in Hebrew for herself. Even the dietary rules she follows reminds her of her path with God. She also mentions being a part of a 4000-years old religion (Gold, 2011). My next question is if there were any challenges to being Jewish.

She mentioned the shock of Christian at her rejection of Jesus and anti-Jewish sentiments that still exist (Gold, 2011). I asked if she felt fully accepted as a convert by the rest of the congregation. She said yes very much so. As long as she was willing to study and learn Hebrew, the laws and rituals that is part of being Jewish. She was considered a Jew by both the reform and the conservative movement but not by the orthodox movement. In fact her orthodox mother-in law never accepted her as a wife of her husband. She would tell her that she was not really married to her son.

Her mother-in law did not consider her to be Jewish and therefore the marriage did not count (Gold, 2011). I know Kitty is very involve with her synagogue and has taken leadership positions in the past. I ask her which of the holidays or high days are the most important to her. She talked about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The Jewish New Year, Days of Awe which is the Ten days between the new year and Yom Kippur; The Day of Atonement. New Year is not celebrated with parties but this is a day of remembrance. A ram's horn is blown like a trumpet perhaps as a call to repentance.

She shared that this is an important time for introspection about your behavior thought out the year. The Ten Days of awe led to Yom Kippur the Day of Atonement. This is a fast day with no food or water from sundown to sundown. She also mentioned that all the name of those who has passed

away will be named as part of the remembrance. On these two special holidays work and sexual relations are not permitted (Gold, 2011). Next we talked about heaven and hell. Personally she did not believe in either heaven or hell and she believed she would cease to exist at her death.

She also mentioned that this is not necessary Jewish doctrine, but this is not something that is taught or emphasized in Jewish traditions (Gold, 2011). In my research I have found some belief in a heaven and a soul, but none concerning a Hell (Tracey, 2008). I ask her about the nature of God, God is an essence without form nether male or female (Gold, 2011). My next question is how a reform member feels about an orthodox member. She share that most reform member look at the orthodox as extremist, but because her husband family was orthodox, she also see that the orthodox tradition is why the Jewish traditions still around (Gold, 2011).

I asked her how she feels about her spiritual role as a woman? She said that, both the reform and the conservative movement allow women rabbis. She feels that she has a special place as a woman and she experience more respect as a women in the Jewish congregation than at her father's church. She mentions that the Jewish traditions give the wife certain rights (Gold, 2011). Kitty have not study the Kabbalah, she knew that it was Jewish mysticism and that you are not suppose to study the kabbalah until you are at least 30. She did participate in a Kabbalah meditation once, on the sound of the first Hebrew letter.

She did not receive any special insight from the meditation though her friend did (Gold, 2011). My last question was about the lack of sacrifices? She

thought that sacrifices is not needed in the Jewish tradition and has not been part of the tradition for over 2000 years (Gold, 2011). Research shows that once the temple is rebuild the traditional sacrifices will resume. There are many reasons that it is almost impossible to rebuild the temple; the location is only one of the many obstacles. It is forbidden to enter the area of the temple site without being ritually pure; this would need the ashes of a red cow.

This is administered by a Cohen priest, with a traceable genealogy that can be verified. Then the altar has to be rebuilt and in an exact spot, a prophet or Elijah need to show up and tell them where to build the altar. There are other obstacles that are too lengthy to discuses in this paper. For now it is considered to be an impossible task. Tradition say, Elijah the prophet will return and reveal himself before the Advent of the Messiah. He will have the necessary knowledge and will be able to restore the High priest (Housman, n. d). Comparison Though Christianity came from Judaism, there are major differences.

The Jewish tradition is based on a contract with God. This contract requires obedience to the laws as well as sacrifices. With the destruction of the temple, prayer, and good works is the sacrifices. The Jewish people are waiting for a human messiah to bring in a time of peace and to establish a government that will be the center of all world government (Housman, n. d). While Christian's believe that Jesus is the messiah. Christianity is a religion of Grace and relationships, a close intimate relationship with God and Christ. Christians are invited to become one with Christ. The church is often described as the bride of Christ.

With God as the Father, and the Holy Spirit as the comforter and helper who dwell within all Christians. Though Christians are not under the law yet Christians are to imitate Christ in his perfection with his help. Both groups are looking forward to the Messiah. The Christian messiah will bring peace and God's kingdom. Their focus is not on world peace but on eternal life with God. Some denominations believe in a Hell and others do not (ReligionFacts, 2007). Though both faiths are monotheistic or believe in one God. The Christian's version of the one God includes Jesus and the Holy Spirit; three as One with Jesus as both human and God.

This concept is unacceptable to the Jewish people. Without a temple and the sacrifices of the Jewish tradition, it is easy to see mostly similarity of the two religions. Both group believe in the God of Abraham, both are looking forward to the coming of the messiah, both follow the Ten Commandments and attempt to follow the moral teachings of God. Both groups pray for forgiveness. However Once the temple is rebuild, there will be sacrifices of animals once again for sins and transgression (Housman, n. d). While Christian's belief that Christ sacrificed himself for all sins.

It is easy for a Christian to ask, how a group of people with such knowledge of God and the Old Testament would miss Jesus as the messiah, but it is important to understand that in Judaism there is only one God. The messiah is not God but a man who will be anointed as King. In fact the word mashiach means the anointed one. In Jewish tradition the word mashiach does not mean savior. That is a different word Moshiah. The idea that an innocent divine being who will sacrifice himself to save people from sin, is said to be a

purely Christian concept, there are scriptures that a Jew would point to counter Christian belief.

The idea of needing a mediator is also contrary to Jewish teachings (Housman, n. d). Regardless of the difference between the two religions, it is important to practice tolerance and respect toward each other. The Jewish religion has spent thousands of years striving to understand the Torah, the Old Testament. The Jewish and the Christian faith have at least one more belief in common, both groups believe that the Jewish people are set apart by God for a special purpose.