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Judaism: An Overview

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A Religion Profile from International Students, Inc.

The Numbers

There is a distinction between the Jewish people and the religion of Judaism. Not all Jewish people consider themselves to be religious. Many profess to be atheists, agnostics, or secular. While not all Jewish people follow religion of Judaism, when Jews choose to be religious, they generally choose some variety of Judaism rather than another religion. Judaism is considered "our" religion, available for those Jews who choose to adhere. In contrast most Jewish people would consider Christianity to be "their" religion, that is, a religion appropriate for non-Jews.

With this in mind we can say that there are over 13 million Jewish people in the world today. Two surveys conducted by the Graduate Center of the City of New York found that Jews comprised 1.3% of the U.S. population, and 14% of Jews in the U.S. are secular. New York has the highest population of Jews with 1.75 million.

Jewishpeople.net gives the following population statistics as of 2002: of the over 13 million Jews in the world, 4.8 million are in Israel, over 6 million are in North America, 365,500 in South America, and Russia has 275,000.

Introducing Judaism

The term "Judaism" is sometimes loosely used to include not only the faith of modern Jews but also that of the Old Testament. Sometimes it is used to include the entire Jewish way of life. It is best, however, to use the term "Judaism" to refer to the religion of the rabbis that developed from about 200 B.C. onwards and crystallized following the

destruction of the Temple in A.D 70. In this way Christianity is not described as a daughter religion of Judaism, but more correctly as a sister: both branched out from Old Testament faith.

The Development of Judaism

From around 200 B.C. onward, new institutions and ways of life developed that distinguished rabbinic Judaism from the religion of ancient (Old Testament) Israel. New institutions arose such as the synagogue (the house of worship and study), the *yeshivot* (religious academies for the training of rabbis), and the office of the rabbi (a leader holding religious authority).

One of the greatest catalysts in the development of Judaism was the destruction of the Temple in A.D 70, which meant the abolition of sacrifices and the priesthood. Rather than being guided by priests, prophets, or kings, the rabbis became the authorities who established various laws and practices that had normative authority.

Before the 18th century, there was basically one kind of Judaism. In contrast, one of the distinguishing features of modern Judaism is the existence of the three main movements or "branches." These branches are not quite equivalent to what Christians understand by denominations, where one's identity is often tied strongly to a particular denomination, and in which one's affiliation is often determined simply by family tradition. The branches of Judaism are more like voluntary associations, with classifications according to cultural and doctrinal formulas (like denominations) but with adherence to a particular branch often governed by personal preference, nearness of a synagogue, or one's agreement with the rabbi's style and views (like voluntary associations).

Within each branch you will find adherents with varying degrees of observance. Many Jewish people formulate their own informal version of Judaism, and do not fit exactly into any one of these categories. Nevertheless, knowing the distinctions between the branches and to which branch your Jewish friends adhere can be helpful in most witness situations.

ORTHODOX JUDAISM

There was only one kind of Judaism until the Age of the Enlightenment in the 18th century. Only later, to differentiate it from the other branches of Judaism, was this called "Orthodox." Today, Orthodox Judaism is characterized by an emphasis on tradition and strict observance of the Law of Moses as interpreted by the rabbis.

REFORM JUDAISM

Reform Judaism began in Germany in the 18th century at the time of the Enlightenment, or *Haskalah*. It sought to modernize what were considered outmoded ways of thinking and doing and to thus prevent the increasing assimilation of German Jewry. Reform Judaism emphasizes ethics and the precepts of the prophets.

CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

This branch developed from 19th-century German roots as a middle ground branch.

How to Think about the Three Branches

It can be helpful to compare Orthodox Judaism with Roman Catholicism or Greek Orthodoxy, where there is a heavy emphasis on tradition. Reform Judaism can be compared with Unitarianism, emphasizing humanism. Conservative Judaism can be compared to modern liberal Protestantism, emphasizing form over doctrinal content.

Notice that there is no equivalent to evangelical Christianity, emphasizing a personal relationship with God. Orthodox Judaism is sometimes mistaken for this, but it is more concerned with living according to the traditional understandings than with a personal relationship with God.

The "Three Branches of Judaism" chart on page three highlights the main distinctives of the three branches. In using this chart, it is important to understand that Judaism, in all its branches, is **a religion of deed, not creed**. It is possible to be an atheist and yet an Orthodox Jew! One may identify oneself as Orthodox because of attending an Orthodox congregation or because one keeps a traditional Jewish lifestyle (observing the Sabbath strictly, keeping kosher, etc.). What one believes about God, sin, or the afterlife is not nearly as important as living a proper life here and now, as defined by the branch to which one belongs. We can say that it is probable that someone who is Orthodox will in fact believe in God, while an atheist would be more likely to align with the Reform branch, if any. There are many exceptions. Though one can pair doctrinal positions with the three branches, doctrine is not taught in Judaism as it is in Christianity, and one may easily adhere to a particular branch without adopting the doctrines of that branch.

In other words, one can surmise correctly what an individual's **lifestyle** is likely to be on the basis of the branch to which he or she adheres. The only way to find out what a Jewish friend **believes**, however, is to ask. Do not assume what his or her beliefs are on the basis of the branch with which he or she affiliates.

Other Kinds of Judaism

The following are not major branches but should be known:

RECONSTRUCTIONIST

Reconstructionist Judaism is an American offshoot of Conservative Judaism. It maintains that Judaism is a "religious civilization" that must constantly adapt to contemporary life.

HASIDIC

Hasidic Judaism, usually called Hasidism, is an ultra-Orthodox movement characterized by strict observance of the Law of Moses, mystical teachings, and is socially separatist. Several different Hasidic groups exist. Each finds its identity in its leader, called the *rebbe*, who is the dynastic head of the particular Hasidic group in which leadership is passed down through the generations from father to son.

ZIONIST

Zionism is listed here because it is sometimes mistaken as a form of Judaism. In reality it is a political movement.

dating from the late 19th century, concerned with the return of Jews to the land of Israel.

Beliefs and Practices

BELIEFS

Above we referred to the fact that Judaism is a religion of deed, not creed. If there is any religious principle (what Christians would call a "doctrine") that Judaism explicitly affirms and teaches, it is the "unity of God." [Deuteronomy 6:4](#)—called the *Sh'ma*—proclaims: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Beyond the affirmation of *Sh'ma*, there have been attempts at compiling various statements of faith (such as the Thirteen Principles of Maimonides), but they have been few and not widely studied or accepted as binding.

The three branches do have their more or less "official" doctrinal positions on various matters such as the person God or the nature of humankind. These are described in the chart of "The Three Branches of Judaism." In no way, however, are they binding on any Jewish person.

The Three Branches of Judaism

Orthodox

Conservative

Reform

History

Orthodoxy dates back to the days of the Talmud (2nd to 5th centuries A.D.). It was the only form of Jewish practice prior to the 18th century and the emergence of Reform Judaism. Orthodoxy today seeks to preserve classical or traditional Judaism.

Conservative Judaism is an American movement with roots in 19th century Germany. It arose as a reaction to what some viewed as the extreme assimilationist tendencies of Reform Judaism. It tried to be a middle ground, attempting to maintain basic traditions while adapting to modern life.

Reform Judaism emerged following the emancipation from ghetto life in the late 18th century. It sought to modernize Judaism and thus stem the tide of assimilation threatening German Jewry. It was thought that Jewish identity could be maintained by modernization, but others saw it as contributing to assimilation and a loss of Jewish identity.

Other Terms

Traditional or Torah Judaism

Historical Judaism

Liberal or Progressive Judaism

U.S. Membership by Percentage *(Source: 1992 American Jewish Yearbook)*

6% of all American Jews

35% of all American Jews

38% of all American Jews

View of Scripture

Torah, the teaching of the Five Books of Moses, is truth. One must believe in its essential, revealed character.

The Bible, both the Torah and the other books, is the word of God *and* people. It is not inspired in the

The Bible is a human document preserving the history, culture, legends and hopes of a people. I

True Jews believe in revelation and the divine origin of the oral and written Torah. "Oral Torah" refers to various interpretations of the written Torah given to Moses along with the written Torah. The Torah holds a higher place than the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

traditional sense, but rather dynamically inspired. Revelation is an ongoing process.

valuable for deriving moral and ethical insights. Revelation is an ongoing process.

View of God

God is spirit rather than form. He is a personal God; omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, and compassionate.

The concept of God is nondogmatic and flexible. There is less atheism in Conservative Judaism than in Reform, but most often God is considered impersonal and ineffable.

A varied interpretation of the "God concept" is allowed with wide latitude for naturalists, mystics, supernaturalists, and religious humanists. It holds that "The truth that we do not know the truth."

View of Humankind

People are morally neutral, with a good and an evil inclination. They can overcome their evil bent and be perfected by their own efforts in observance of the Law.

This group tends toward the Reform view, though it is not as likely to espouse humanism. Perfectibility can come through enlightenment. People are "in partnership" with God.

Human nature is basically good. Through education, encouragement and evolution people can actualize the potential already existing within them.

View of Sin

Orthodox Jews do not believe in "original sin." Rather, one commits sin by breaking the commandments of the Law.

Conservative Jews do not believe in "original sin." The individual can sin in moral or social actions.

Reform Jews do not believe in "original sin." Sin is interpreted as ills of society. People are sometimes held to have a "divine spark" within

View of Salvation

Repentance, prayer, and obedience to the Law are necessary for a proper relationship with God. "Salvation" is not a Jewish concept. Jewish people presume a standing with God.

Conservative Jews tend toward the Reform view, but include the necessity of maintaining Jewish identity.

"Salvation" is obtained through the betterment of self and society. It is social improvement.

View of the Tradition of the Law

The Law is the basis of Judaism. It is authoritative and gives structure and

Adaptation to contemporary situations is inevitable. The demands

The law is an evolving, ever-dynamic religious code that adapts to ever

meaning to life. The life of total dedication to *Halakhah* (body of Jewish law) leads to a nearness to God.

View of the Messiah

The Messiah is a human being who is not divine. He will restore the Jewish kingdom and extend his righteous rule over the earth. He will execute judgment and right all wrongs.

View of Life After Death

There will be a physical resurrection. The righteous will exist forever with God in the "World to Come." The unrighteous will suffer, but disagreement exists over their ultimate destiny.

Distinctives in Synagogue Worship

The synagogue is a house of prayer as well as study; social aspects are incidental. All prayers are recited in Hebrew. Men and women sit separately. The officiants face the same direction as the congregants.

Books to Read

Herman Wouk, *This is My God*, orig. 1961.

A. Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, orig. 1932.

S. Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, orig. 1923.

of morality are absolute. The specific laws are relative.

Conservative Jews hold much the same view as the Reform.

Conservative Jews tend toward the Reform view, but are less influenced by non-traditional ideas such as Eastern Mysticism.

The synagogue is viewed as the basic institution of Jewish life. Alterations listed under Reform are found to a lesser degree in Conservative worship.

Emet Ve-emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism, 1988.

Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism*, 1972.

age. If religious observances clash with the just demands of civilized society, then the observances must be dropped.

Instead of belief in Messiah as a person or divine being, Reform Jews favor the concept of a Utopian age toward which humankind is progressing, sometimes called the "Messianic age."

Generally, there is no concept of personal life after death. It is said that a person lives on in the accomplishments or in the minds of others. Some are influenced by Eastern mystical thought, where souls merge into one great impersonal life force.

The synagogue is known as a "Temple." The service has been modernized and abbreviated. English, as well as Hebrew, is used. Men and women sit together. Reform temples use choirs and organs in their worship services.

Eugene B. Borowitz, *Reform Judaism Today*, 1983.

Eugene Borowitz, *Liberal Judaism*, 1984.

PRACTICES

The Annual Holiday Cycle

Almost all Jewish people, regardless of the branch to which they belong, observe at least some of the Jewish holidays. Two notes on terminology: Jewish people usually speak of "observing" the holidays rather than "celebrating" them. And while it is common for Christians to speak of the "feasts of Israel," they are spoken of by Jewish people as the "Jewish holidays." The major holidays in Judaism are explained on the chart on page five.

The Life Cycle

Besides the annual holidays, there are various distinctive lifestyle events that characterize the lives of most Jewish people. Three of them are mentioned here. Consult resources in the bibliography to learn about the others.

Circumcision of sons on the eighth day. The accompanying ceremony is called *brit milah*.

Bar mitzvah (for boys) and *bat mitzvah* (for girls—not traditional). The coming of age ceremony at age 13. Generally consists of a synagogue service followed by an extended and elaborate reception with full meal.

Jewish weddings are typically characterized by the ceremony under a canopy (the *chuppah*, rhymes with "I do a wedding!") and the "ch" is pronounced gutturally as in German) and the smashing of a glass wrapped in a cloth to symbolize the destruction of the Temple.

The Jewish Scriptures

The Old Testament portion of the Bible is the Scripture of Judaism. Some Jewish people prefer the term the "Hebrew Bible" so as not to imply that they accord any validity to the idea of a "new" covenant in contrast to an "old" one. In practice, however, many do use the term "Old Testament." It should be noted that even though many Jews do not consider the Old Testament to be the Word of God and inspired, it is generally accorded respect as part of Jewish tradition and history.

There are other books, such as the Talmud, considered by Orthodox Jews to possess divine authority. The Talmud consists of the Mishnah and the Gemara. The Mishnah consists in large part of various legal rulings and was compiled around A.D. 200. The Gemara elaborates and comments on the discussions in the Mishnah and was compiled around A.D. 550. Most Jewish people consider the Talmud and other rabbinic interpretations to be useful for ethics and instructive for life but not binding as divine authority.

Holiday	Time of Year	Observance	Relating to Jewish Friends
<i>Rosh ha-Shanah</i> (the Jewish New Year). In the U.S., most often pronounced as "Russia Shunna."	September or October	Joyful atmosphere. Many attend synagogue services. Marks the first part of a ten-day period known as the High Holy Days or, less commonly, the Days of Awe.	Send a Jewish New Year greeting card, found in most shops at this time of year. An appropriate greeting: "Ha! New Year."

Approaching Jewish People with the Gospel

How Jewish People View the Gospel

"CHRISTIANITY IS FOR THE GENTILES"

Christianity is considered to be "their" religion. It is perfectly fine for Gentiles to believe in Jesus. Jews, however, neither need to nor should they consider Christ. If a Jewish person is considering any religion, it should be Judaism. Furthermore, a Christian is considered to be any Westerner or churchgoer who is a Gentile. Since Jews are Jewish by virtue of birth, they assume that Christians are those born into a Christian home. The idea of a personal faith commitment is not understood. You can respond by explaining that even though you were born a Gentile, you have become a Christian by personal faith in Jesus. A Christian does not mean a follower of a Gentile religion but rather someone who is a follower of the Jewish Messiah—and "Christ" is Greek for "Messiah." You can further underscore the Jewishness of what you believe by explaining that by believing in Jesus, you came to believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the three patriarchs of the book of Genesis.

THE UNSPOKEN OBJECTION

There is one underlying objection that almost all Jewish people have concerning placing one's faith in Jesus: that it is not a Jewish thing to do, that they will cease to be Jewish if they believe in Jesus, and that becoming a Christian means turning one's back on one's people, history, and heritage. In addition, many Jewish people fear social consequences that they would experience should they come to faith in or even consider Christ.

"JEWISHNESS IS A WAY OF LIFE."

Whether or not a Jewish person adheres to some form of Judaism, his or her Jewishness is a way of life to be lived out in varying degrees. There are Jewish ways of thinking and doing that differ from Gentile ways. To a Jewish person, Gentiles can seem puritanical in dress and behavior, subdued in interpersonal communication, overly conservative in politics and lifestyle. Church services differ considerably from synagogue services, and church hymns are much different than the haunting chant of a cantor or the jazzy sound of an East European *klezmer* band. To a Jewish person, being a Christian means identifying with a way of life different than the Jewish one.

A Jewish friend needs to be encouraged that in following Jesus, he or she does not abandon Jewish identity. Perhaps your friend would be willing to meet with a Jewish believer in Jesus, or to read the story of a Jewish person who came to faith in Jesus (see the bibliography for testimony resources).

JEWS PRESUME A STANDING WITH GOD

Jews do not speak of "salvation," for there is nothing to be saved from. If there is a God, then Jewish people already have a relationship with Him. Jesus is superfluous for Jews. In spite of these views, Jewish people are continually coming to the Lord in record numbers. Many have come to faith through the witness of a Gentile Christian. The following sections can help you more effectively witness, both by showing what you might avoid and the positive things you can do.

Some Things to Avoid in Witnessing Situations

Avoid certain offensive words. The Gospel will always offend because of the message of the cross, since none of us like being told we are sinful. However, there are other points at which Jewish people can take offense or exception is not necessary to be rigidly on guard, but one can avoid unnecessary negative emotional overtones if one chooses certain words rather than others.

First, avoid Christian jargon in general. Some Christians speak in a language that carries little meaning for the unchurched: "the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ," "saved" and "born again" all carry meaning for the Christian but not for the average secular or Jewish person.

Second, avoid certain terms and utilize others.

"The Jews" or "you Jews" sounds anti-Semitic on the lips of a Gentile (though Jewish people will refer to "Jews" when speaking among themselves). It is better to say "the Jewish people." "A Jewish man" is better than "a Jew." "How do Jewish people observe Passover" is a better question than "What do Jews do at Passover" which has an alienating sound to it. Also do not call a Jewish woman a "Jewess" but "a Jewish woman." And do not call the Jewish people "Hebrews." That term was in use among the Jewish people a hundred years ago but is no longer.

"Jewish" is a word that should be used only to describe people, land, religion, or language. If you refer to "Jewish money" or "Jewish control of the media," you may well be harboring anti-Semitic attitudes.

It is best to avoid the terms "missionaries" or "mission." They tend to connote rescue missions that help derelicts, or those who work overseas among primitive peoples, or even worse, those who are paid to "snatch Jewish souls."

"The cross" symbolizes persecution for many Jews. It is better to speak about "the death of Jesus." "Conversion" also implies leaving behind one's Jewishness. It is better to speak about "becoming a believer (or follower) of Jesus." But it is appropriate to explain that biblical conversion was spoken of by the prophets as meaning "turning back to God" rather than "changing one's religion" (see, for example, [Isaiah 44:22; 48:17](#); [Jeremiah 4:1; 24:7](#); [Joel 2:12](#)).

Some suggest replacing the name "Jesus" with the Hebrew equivalent of "Y'shua." While it is good to refer to "Y'shua"—and explain that such is his Hebrew name—no one will realize that you are referring to the historical person Jesus of Nazareth unless you also use "Jesus"! In today's climate, the name, Jesus, does not provoke as negative a reaction as it once did. Also, it is preferable to speak of "the Messiah Jesus" rather than "Jesus Christ." Many Jews do not realize that "Christ" means "Messiah" and think that "Christ" was His last name!

Finally, Jewish people enjoy telling Jewish jokes to one another, but a non-Jew should not do so. Many Jewish people will not know how to respond and will think you are ridiculing them. Similarly, do not criticize leadership of the Jewish community. Though no person in this world is above reproach in all things, let any justified criticisms come from Jewish people rather than from you.

Above all, however, **remember that the Gospel can be inherently offensive!** If someone takes exception to you

witness, it may well be because they are taking exception to God.

Don't succumb to the fallacy of only showing love. Some Christians never voice the Gospel to Jewish friends because they fear a negative response. So they reason that they will "show love" to their friends and be a witness that way. Of course, Christians should always show love to people. It is wrong, however, to imagine that you will bring someone into "the Kingdom." Jewish people are already morally upstanding by general community standards. Most are "nice" people; many give to charitable causes. Simply living a life of love will not convey the saving Gospel. Rather, one must verbalize the Gospel, which can be done in the following way.

Some Things to Do in Witnessing Situations

WITNESS TO FRIENDS WHO ARE JEWISH

It is a good idea to witness primarily to Jewish people with whom you've established a friendship. You can ascertain if a friend is Jewish by the holidays he or she observes, or perhaps by whether he or she wears a Star of David around his or her neck as jewelry, and often by the surname. Then, it is important that you let the person know that you know he or she is Jewish. This is best done not by directly telling them, but in relationship-building ways such as sending Jewish holiday greeting cards at the appropriate time (see the chart on the Jewish holidays). Doing this not only clears the ground by letting the person know you recognize that they are Jewish, but it is also a good way to continue to cultivate a friendship with someone Jewish.

MOVE TO SPIRITUAL TOPICS

Generally, we can be bolder in witnessing to a friend than to a stranger.

Often a holiday season is an excellent time to initiate a witnessing conversation. You might ask your Jewish friend to tell you something about what his or her Passover was like, or about *Hanukkah*.

Then you might try to initiate a conversation. This should be done in a way that is natural for you. One way that works for some is by saying something surprising yet direct and then following it up with a question: "As a Christian, I'm discovering that our faith is basically Jewish. I guess you could say that I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Why do you suppose it's mostly Gentiles who believe in Him even though Christianity is basically Jewish?" him or her respond and lead into a conversation.

Jewish people frequently employ humor in discussing spiritual matters, so you could say something like, "We just celebrate Easter which celebrates the resurrection of Jesus. Since we believe He rose from the dead and is still living, do you suppose we can say that He is the oldest Jewish person alive?"

If the chemistry of your relationship with a Jewish person is right, you can offer a challenge: "Let me ask you something. I believe in Jesus and you don't. And as Christians, we think we should be telling everyone about God and about Jesus. If you were me, how would you talk to (a basically non-religious person like yourself, an Orthodox Jewish man like yourself, an atheist like yourself) about the Bible and Jesus?"

These are not persuasive statements, but remarks and questions designed to be an invitation. The person might respond by saying, "It would be impossible for me to believe in Jesus," or "I don't want to talk about that." Accept answer, and if they are not willing to hear more, don't proceed. (If asked, however, it is appropriate to explain why that Christians consider it important to tell others about God.) On the other hand, you may encounter curiosity or a desire to hear more.

USE A JEWISH FRAME OF REFERENCE

If you receive a positive response, you can continue to talk about the Gospel in a Jewish frame of reference. For example, you can tell a Jewish friend how, when Jesus *observed*—a more Jewish expression than "celebrated"—the Last Supper, it was really a Passover *seder*. Although the ceremony has been expanded since the time of Jesus' disciples and Jesus observed what was at that time the full order of service for Passover night ([Luke 22:7-20](#)).

One of the parts that was added after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 has to do with the three unleavened wafers (*matzo*) (see Rosen, *Christ in the Passover*). The three wafers are placed in a silk container called a *mat tash*, which has three compartments, one for each wafer. Or, they are stacked on a plate with napkins separating them and covered with a cloth. The three wafers symbolize unity.

During the course of the ceremony, the host removes the middle wafer from the silk bag, breaks it in half, and puts one of the halves back in the *matzo tash*. He then wraps the other half in a napkin, puts it in another white silk bag, and hides it. This hidden wafer is called *aphikomen* ("after dish" or "that which comes last").¹ After the meal, the children make a game of looking for the *aphikomen* while the parents guide them. When found, the host breaks the wafer and distributes the pieces to the others, who eat the wafer with an attitude of reverence.

Ask your Jewish friend why the middle wafer is removed and not one of the others. Why is it broken? Also, why is it hidden and then brought back into the ceremony later?

Could it be that this ceremony is more than what the contemporary *seder* depicts it to be, more than a game? Perhaps it conveys something that most Jewish people do not see. Remarkably, it graphically illustrates the Messiah who would have to die (breaking the wafer; Ps. 22; Isa. 53; Dan. 9), be buried (hiding the wafer), and rise from the dead (bringing the wafer back; [Job 19:25](#); [Ps. 16:10](#); Rosen, 1978, 92).

While the Last Supper was indeed an observation of the Passover *seder*, Jesus was also implementing something new. Luke reports that Jesus "took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me'" ([Luke 22:19](#), emphasis added). God had initially instituted the Passover *seder* to serve as an annual reminder of how He had redeemed the people of Israel from their bitter slavery in Egypt. Jesus was now saying, though, that they should break the bread "in remembrance of me!" Jesus was indicating that, while the Passover was intended to celebrate how God had won Israel's redemption from slavery in Egypt, so it was now to also signify the redemption from our slavery to sin that was about to be accomplished through His substitutionary death.

Or, as another way to put things in a Jewish frame of reference, when you speak about sin, you may find a more positive reception during the time of the High Holy Days (see chart of holidays, page five), when most Jewish people, even non-religious ones, attend the synagogue and recite the prayers asking God for forgiveness. Although a Jew

person may try to brush off the idea of sin at other times of the year, most Jews are willing to give it a bit more thought at *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, when Jewish people ask God for forgiveness of any sins committed during the previous year.

BE CLEAR ON FOUNDATIONAL DOCTRINES

The Gospel is based on the understanding that we are sinners in need of salvation from a savior. These three concepts—sin, salvation, and savior—are foreign to most Jewish people, however, and need to be properly conveyed (see also the "Three Branches" chart).

Sin:

Jewish people think of sin in terms of individual deeds, not as a deep-seated characteristic of humankind. The label "sinner" is thought to apply only to notoriously decadent and evil people. You need to point out that all people sin ([1 Kings 8:46](#)), using the various biblical analogies. Even the great King David confessed his sin (see Psalm 51). Sin is falling short of the goal, like someone knowing they should be showing love to their children but are never quite able to do it, or someone who aims to succeed in business but doesn't quite get there. Sin is the spiritual equivalent of not meeting the goals God has set for us in relating to Him or others (see [Romans 3:23](#)). Sin is also like a disease that we need healing from. It is spiritual cancer or AIDS. It is also spiritual pollution that destroys us like smog destroys the ozone layer. Ultimately, sin is going our own way in defiance of God. Sin separates us from knowing and serving God.

Salvation:

Salvation is another foreign term to most Jewish people. A common objection is, "Jews don't believe in salvation." What is meant is that, "You Christians think we need to be saved from hell in the afterlife, but we Jews are concerned about how to live right here and now." A helpful entrée is to talk about "redemption" instead of "salvation." This term is familiar to many from the Passover *seder*. You can explain that as God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt so he wants to free us from the slavery to sin in our own lives ([Matt. 20:28](#); [Tit. 2:14](#)).

Savior:

This is the third term not understood by Jewish people. It can be helpful to speak of a "redeemer" instead of Savior and certainly to use the term "Messiah."

Putting it together:

So rather than stating that "Jesus came to shed His blood to save us from our sins and be our Savior," you can convey that "Jesus came to be our Messiah and Redeemer. His death was an atonement for our sins."

Selected Messianic Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus

Prophecy

The Messiah will be from the seed of Abraham ([Gen. 18:18](#)); Isaac (21:12); Jacob ([Num. 24:17, 19](#)); Judah

Fulfillment

"Jesus...the son of David, the son of Jesse,...the son of Judah, the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of

([Gen. 49:10](#)); Jesse ([Isa. 11:1-2,10](#)); David ([Jer. 23:5-6](#)).

"He was despised and rejected by men" ([Isa. 53:3](#)).

"a man of sorrows" ([Isa. 53:3](#)).

"familiar with suffering" ([Isa. 53:3](#)).

"Be strong, do not fear; your God will come... Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy" ([Isa. 35:4-6](#)); "the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" ([Isa. 61:1](#)).

"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows" ([Isa. :4](#)).

"They must not...break any of [the Passover lamb's] bones" ([Num. 9:12](#)); "he was pierced" ([Isa. 53:5](#)); "they have pierced my hands and feet" ([Ps. 22:16](#); also [Zech. 12:10](#)).

"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities...the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" ([Isa. 53:5,6](#)).

"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth..., as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" ([Isa. 53:7](#)).

"They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing" ([Ps. 22:18](#)).

"he had done no violence nor was any deceit in his mouth" ([Isa. 53:9](#)).

He "was numbered with the transgressors" ([Isa. 53:12](#)).

"He was assigned a grave...with the rich in his death" ([Isa. 53:9](#)).

Abraham" ([Luke 3:31-33](#)).

"Those who passed by [the cross] hurled insults at him..." ([Matt. 27:39-44](#)).

"Then [Jesus] said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death'" ([Matt. 26:38](#)).

"He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things" ([Mark 8:31](#); also [Luke 24:26](#)).

"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor" ([Matt. 11:4-5](#); also [Luke 4:18](#)).

"[Jesus] drove out the spirits with a word and healed the sick" ([Matt. 8:16-17](#)).

"But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, or the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear" ([John 19:33-37](#)).

"the Son of Man [came] to give his life as a ransom for many" ([Matt. 20:28](#)); "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" ([2 Cor. 5:21](#); also [John 11:49-51](#); [1 Cor. 15:3](#)).

"But Jesus remained silent" ([Matt. 26:63](#)); "When he accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave answer" ([Matt. 27:12](#)).

"[Jesus'] garment was seamless, woven in one piece... 'Let's decide by lot who will get it'" ([John 19:23-24](#)).

Judas: "I have sinned for I have betrayed innocent blood" ([Matt. 27:4](#); also [Luke 23:41](#); [2 Cor. 5:21](#)).

"Two robbers were crucified with him" ([Matt. 27:38](#); also [Luke 22:36-37](#)).

"there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph... Joseph took the body... and placed it in his

new tomb" ([Matt. 27:57-60](#)).

"For he made intercession for the transgressors" ([Isa. 53:12](#)).

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they doing" ([Luke 23:34](#)).

"you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay" ([Ps. 16:10](#)); "though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days..." ([Isa.:10-11](#)).

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He not here; he has risen!" ([Luke 24:5-6](#); also [Acts 2:31](#)

How to Convey Spiritual Truths by Using the Bible

Even though not many Jewish people accept the truth of the Old Testament, they do accord it respect. It is good open the Bible with a Jewish friend and illustrate the Gospel not merely by your statements and stories, but directed by the Word of God.

If you are in your friend's home, use his or her Bible if he or she has one. It is not that common, though, for the Bible to be a household possession.

Like initiating a conversation, using the Bible should be done only when your friend has indicated a willingness for you to be his or her "teacher" in this regard and for him or her to be your "student." Otherwise there is the sense you are speaking from an "invisible pulpit" (Rosen, 1976, 55).

The Bible should be used to raise an issue or to speak to an issue. An example of the first approach is going to the Bible to initiate a discussion of what sin is (Isaiah 53—the suffering servant who takes on the sins of his people; Psalm 51—King David's confession of sin; 1 Kings 8—King Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple). An example of the second approach is going to the Bible in order to answer an objection.

In either case, it is good to begin with the Old Testament portion of the Bible, pointing to certain Messianic prophecies and then to their fulfillment in the New Testament (see the chart of "Selected Messianic Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus").

Jesus often talked about how His life was the fulfillment of such prophecies ([Matt. 5:17](#); [26:56](#); [Luke 24:27,44](#); [John 5:37-40](#)); and the apostles came to see it that way as well ([John 2:45](#); [Acts 3:18](#); [Rom. 16:25-26](#); Heb. 1; [1 Pet. 1:10-12](#)).

Notice in particular the number of prophecies that come from Isaiah 53 (in bold print in the chart). Then, also consider what God says through Isaiah:

“

Therefore I told you these things [previous prophecies] long ago; before they happened I announced them to you so that you could not say, 'My idols did them; my wooden image and metal god ordained them.'

From now on I will tell you of new things, of hidden things unknown to you.

[Isaiah 48:5-6](#)

Do not be afraid of using the New Testament for more than just fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. You can also use the New Testament to show...

the Jewishness of the Gospel. For example, [Luke 2:21](#) talks about Jesus' *brit milah* (ceremony accompanying circumcision); Matthew 26 and Luke 22 show Jesus having a *seder*; [John 10:22](#) shows Jesus in Jerusalem *Hanukkah*, called here by its Greek name of "Dedication."

the concord of spiritual teaching between Old and New Testaments. For example, on the matter of sin you can point to a passage such as Psalm 51 (and compare it with [Romans 3:23](#) in the New Testament). On the idea of a New Covenant prophesied by God, show [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#) (and compare Jesus' words in [Luke 21:20](#)).

use images from the Old Testament that point to Christ, such as the blood of the Passover lamb being put on the sides and top of the doorframe—a foreshadowing of the cross ([Ex. 12:7](#)); the rock that provided water in the wilderness—a foreshadowing of Jesus talking about Him giving "living water" so that those who drink of it will never thirst again ([Ex. 17:6](#); [John 4:10-14](#); [7:37-39](#); cf., [1 Cor. 10:4](#)); the people of Israel being healed when placing their gaze on the bronze snake at the top of the staff—a foreshadowing of how we are saved by placing our faith in the Messiah who was raised on the cross ([Num. 21:8-9](#); [John 3:14](#)); God asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his "only son"—a foreshadowing of how God sacrificed His only Son ([Gen. 22:1-18](#); [John 3:16](#)); Jonah being swallowed by a large fish—a foreshadowing of Jesus' death and resurrection ([Jonah 1:17](#); [Matt. 12:4](#); [Luke 11:30](#)). A helpful hint: Few Jewish people study the Old Testament very much. There is a good chance you know the Old Testament better than your Jewish friend. And in the event that a question comes up for which you don't know the answer, you can always say that you don't know but will look it up. Don't worry about losing credibility because you don't have the answers to everything.

Responding to Objections

Undoubtedly the time will come when a Jewish friend will put up objections to the Gospel. In many cases, objections are not thought-out. Raising objections can therefore be a reflex action. They may also represent an "official line" rather than a personally held viewpoint.

"CHRISTIANS BELIEVE IN THREE GODS BUT JEWS BELIEVE IN ONE GOD."

Even an atheist can raise this objection! What is meant may be no more than, "Our religion teaches one God. So even though I do not believe in God, if I did, that is the kind of God I would believe in." Jewish people understand the Trinity to somehow imply multiple gods. You can simply affirm that you believe that God is One, and point out that Jesus Himself quoted the *Sh'ma* (the statement of God's oneness in [Deut. 6:4](#), quoted in [Mark 12:29](#)). If your friend pursues the topic by saying, "I just don't see how God could be three in one—it doesn't make any sense,"

light response will often answer the question better than an extended theological discourse. For example, you can try saying, "God is bigger than you and me and we'll never fully understand Him." This will deflect the conversation from becoming a fruitless discussion of an objection that is being raised more as a smokescreen than out of any real conviction.

"THERE'S NO PROOF THAT JESUS WAS THE MESSIAH."

This is typically a stereotyped response; the person may never have investigated any of the reasons for faith. Rather than initiate a long argument complete with all kinds of evidence, you might start by asking, "What kind of proof would convince you?" That will raise more specific questions and objections in their mind.

"IF JESUS IS THE MESSIAH, WHY ISN'T THERE PEACE ON EARTH?"

One answer is that we need to have peace in our hearts before there can be peace on earth. Suppose God suddenly declared all wars to cease but that people remained the same. In a short time, we would have the world back again to the way it is now. Put the burden on your friend by replying: "If you seek peace in your own heart through Jesus, then you can do your part to help make the world a better place."

"HOW CAN YOU BELIEVE IN GOD AFTER ALL THE PERSECUTION WE'VE BEEN THROUGH, NOT TO MENTION HOLOCAUST? AND IT WAS CHRISTIANS WHO DID IT!"

People can misuse anything, even the Gospel. Tyrants misuse freedom and justice. That doesn't make freedom and justice any less important to seek after. As for persecution, that goes all the way back to Pharaoh in Egypt, obviously was not a Christian. There was persecution even then, and still the Jewish people believed in God.

"THE NEW TESTAMENT IS ANTI-SEMITIC."

Ask which parts and which passages. Often a person will not be able to point to anything specific. Sometimes a Jewish person will have in mind certain harsh-sounding passages in the Gospel of John and other places, such as [John 8:44](#) or [1 Thessalonians 2:14-16](#). You can point out that this was the manner of speaking of the prophets in Israel. Isaiah 1 furnishes a good example. Then you should point out that Jesus was not being anti-Semitic but saddened at the sins of people (referring to all, not just to Jewish people). You can cite the passage at which Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, [Matthew 23:37-39](#). Point out that you feel similarly about Gentiles who do not turn to God. All have sinned, and God's response to sin is the same for all people.

"JEWS DON'T PROSELYTIZE."

This objection usually means, "I don't think people should push their beliefs on others. We Jews don't, and you Christians shouldn't either." You can point out that Isaiah said Israel was to be a light to the nations ([Isaiah 42:6-7](#)).² Moreover, you can say that you don't believe in forcing religion on anyone either, but you have always found that discussion and persuasion are part of any friendship.

"I'M HAPPY WITH MY OWN RELIGION."

You can appropriately respond, "It's OK if you don't want to talk about spiritual things, but just remember that the goal of life is not to be happy but to know God. Sometimes what I believe makes me sad because it asks things

me that others might not do. We shouldn't believe in anything because it makes us happy, but because it's true. Ultimately, though, knowing the truth about God will bring us complete and lasting happiness and joy."

"IF JESUS WAS THE MESSIAH, WHY DON'T THE RABBIS BELIEVE IN HIM?"

The answer is, because he wouldn't be allowed to be a rabbi much longer! With the kind of community responsibility and weight that a rabbi has, not many rabbis will allow themselves the freedom to ask if Jesus might be the Messiah.

Conclusion

Above all, be encouraged that many Jewish believers in Jesus have come to faith through the loving witness of a Gentile Christian. God can and will use you as you seek to become more familiar with Jewish things and to open the Gospel to your Jewish friends. The following resources can be a great help.

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Endnotes

1. Jewish law professor David Daube thinks the word means "The Coming One" and that the ceremony origin had a messianic implication with a view to the coming Messiah. This may well be the case rather than the traditional meaning of "after dish." See Daube, *He That Cometh* (London: Council for Christian-Jewish Understanding, 1966).
2. The "servant" here appears to apply first to Israel, and then to shade off into the Messiah. This issue does not need to be raised in conversation, as one traditional Jewish understanding applies the passages to the nation of Israel. However, the idea of the entire world being blessed through Israel is found as far back as [Genesis 1](#).

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COMMENTS

Patrick 2006-03-14 13:14

Hi I think the problem lies in the fact that we tend to mistake the Israelite or Hebrew which is to do with the faith which is Judaism=jewishness. Otherwise how can most people who claim to be Jew do not really know what's that mean? Have ever meet an African or European who do not know what it means to be African or Caucasian who don't know what caucasian means? Or have you ever heard of a caucasian converting into Africanoid ?

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Penny 2005-10-04 07:28

Thanks for your informative article. I especially liked what you wrote about living a life of love will not convey the saving Gospel. In regards to your response to the Holocaust question, from a book from the Holocaust Museum in DC, I discovered that humans are very complex and that it was discovered that there was a diversity in those who saved the Jewish people - not all were Christian. However, I would also mention that man is created in God's image and isn't killing man really about persecuting God. In response to why don't rabbi's believe: Yes ! even some pharisees believed- Paul, Gamaliel, Nicodemus. In response to Jews don't proselytize, I might change the word persuasion to respect or honor. Persuasion seems like a mission to convert. Recently, I have been looking for a response to Rambam textual requirements for the Messiah - h they were fulfilled in Jesus. Is this something you have addressed ? Penny Pedersen Kendezejeski

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