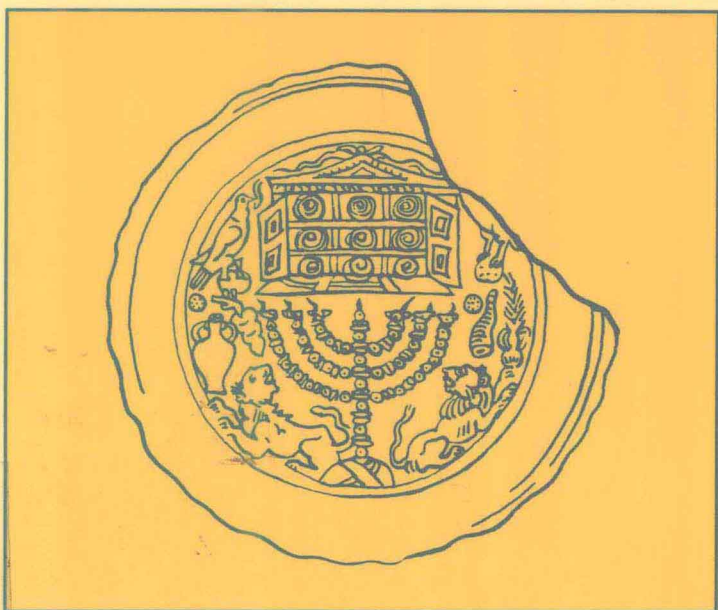


# The Jewish Faith



Dan Cohn-Sherbok

# *The Jewish Faith*

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DAN COHN-SHERBOK

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*For Lavinia, Herod and Dido*

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## Preface

For more than fifteen years I have taught courses in Jewish studies to both Jewish and non-Jewish students at the University of Kent at Canterbury, England. During this time I frequently directed students to such multi-volume encyclopedias as the *Jewish Encyclopedia* and the *Encyclopedia Judaica*. These vast repositories of material provide a wealth of information about all aspects of Jewish life. Nonetheless, students often find these works overwhelming, as well as difficult to gain access to if they are much in demand in the library.

Aware of these difficulties, I also suggested they look at more specific studies dealing with Jewish history, belief, and practice. Yet very few of these works deal in detail with both Jewish theology and the Jewish way of life. Increasingly I came to see that what was needed was a relatively succinct presentation which would serve as an introduction to the Jewish religion. This present volume, *The Jewish Faith*, is thus designed to provide students as well as general readers with a handy and accessible guide to the Jewish faith.

Beginning with a short overview of Jewish history, the book is divided into two main parts. In the first, dealing with Jewish belief, I outline the central principles of the Jewish religion through the centuries. The second part focuses on the major aspects of Jewish practice. Here the concentration is on traditional procedures, but I have also added some information about religious practice in the non-Orthodox branches of Judaism. The book concludes with a glossary and a list of further reading consisting of general studies as well as more specialised works arranged chronologically according to period.



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The second difficulty concerns the decision taken in 1983 by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (the central body of American Reform rabbis) that a child of either a Jewish mother or a Jewish father should be regarded as Jewish. By expanding the determination of Jewishness to include children of both matrilineal and patrilineal descent, the Reform movement defined as Jews individuals whom the other branches of Judaism regard as Gentiles; this means that neither these persons nor their descendants can be accepted as Jews by non-Reform religious establishment.

In addition to the legal (*halakhic*) ruling about biological descent, Judaism also permits Gentiles to become Jews by undergoing conversion. According to traditional Judaism, conversion is a ritual process involving immersion in a ritual bath (*mikveh*), and circumcision for males. The conversion is to take place in the presence of three rabbis who compose a court of law (*bet din*). This procedure has remained constant through the ages; however, within the Neo-Orthodox branches of Judaism, there have been various modifications to this process. Conservative Judaism generally follows the traditional procedure, but it does not always follow the precise legal requirements. For this reason, most Orthodox rabbis do not recognize Conservative conversions as valid. Similarly, since Reform Judaism has largely abandoned ritual immersion and does not conduct circumcision in the required form, its converts are not accepted by the Orthodox community. Thus Reform and Conservative converts and their offspring are deemed to be non-Jews by the Orthodox establishment, and in consequence there is considerable confusion in the Jewish world as to who should be regarded as legitimately Jewish.

A further complication about Jewish status concerns the remarriage of female Jews who, though divorced in civil law, have failed to obtain a Jewish bill of divorce (*get*). Orthodoxy does not recognize their divorces as valid, and any subsequent liaison, even when accompanied by a non-Orthodox Jewish marriage ceremony or civil marriage, is regarded as adulterous. Further, the children of such unions are stigmatized as illegitimate (*mamzerim*) and barred from marrying other Jews unless they are also *mamzerim*. These problems, produced by deviations from traditional Jewish practice, present contemporary Jewry with enormous perplexities, and highlight the fissures

separating the various Jewish religious groupings. As is evident, in the modern world Jews themselves cannot reach universal agreement about who is a legitimate Jew.

Such a perplexity is due to the fragmentation of Jewish life which has taken place over the last two centuries. In the past, Judaism was essentially a unified structure embracing different interpretations of the same tradition. This was the case, for example, in Hellenistic times when the Jewish community was divided into three main parties: Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. Again in the early modern period the Hasidim and traditional rabbis (*Mitnagdim*) vied with one another for supremacy. But the modern period has witnessed an unprecedented fragmentation of the Jewish people into a wide variety of sub-groups with markedly different orientations. This development in Jewish life has been largely the result of the Enlightenment which began at the end of the eighteenth century. No longer were Jews insulated from non-Jewish currents of culture and thought, and this change led many Jews to seek a modernization of Jewish worship. The earliest reformers engaged in liturgical revision, but quickly the spirit of reform spread to other areas of Jewish existence. Eventually modernists convened a succession of rabbinical conferences in order to formulate a common policy. Such a radical approach to the Jewish tradition evoked a hostile response from a number of leading Orthodox rabbis, and stimulated the creation of Neo-Orthodoxy. Such opposition, however, did not stem the tide; the development of the scientific study of Judaism continued to inspire many reformers who were sympathetic to modern culture and learning. As a result of these events Judaism has ceased to be a monolithic structure; instead today it is divided into a variety of sects with profoundly different orientations.

Surveying these divisions within the Jewish community, the most conservative approach to the Jewish heritage is represented by traditional Orthodoxy which itself is composed of a number of diverse sub-groups. In the nineteenth century European Jews who refused to adopt radical changes to Jewish ritual and belief either continued to live in accordance with Jewish law or attempted to combine modernity with the Jewish way of life. The first approach led to extreme conservatism as espoused by Rabbi Moseh Sofer of Pressburg, who launched a ferocious attack on reformers. Another expression of such

Orthodoxy was formulated by the Hasidic leader Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liady who supported the Tsar against Napoleon; according to Schneur Zalman, the Napoleonic policy of Jewish emancipation constituted a threat to Jewish existence. Both of these figures rejected secular culture and were anxious to steer the Jewish community away from reform. An alternative approach to emancipation, however, was propounded by the Neo-Orthodox thinker, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch of Frankfurt. While affirming the validity of the *halakhah*, Hirsch embraced European culture and advocated secular education combined with traditional religious instruction. For Hirsch, the slogan of modern Jewish life was '*Torah im derekh erez*' ('Torah with the way of the land'): by this he wished to emphasize that Judaism must be combined with modern culture and knowledge.

These two reactions to contemporary Jewish life have determined the nature of current Orthodoxy. A minority of Orthodox Jews, including the various Hasidic sects, reject modern culture and secular education. Although they have accepted a wide range of technological developments (such as electricity, cars, and aeroplanes), they have separated themselves from the rest of the community. They have as little contact with the outside world as possible, and categorically reject Gentile culture. The majority of Orthodox Jews, however, are followers of the Hirschian approach. For these individuals there is no objection to wearing Western clothes, attending secular schools and universities, and embracing many of the cultural values of the Gentile world. Although modern Orthodoxy is committed to the *halakhah*, it is flexible in its interpretation as well as implementation of the law. In addition, modern Orthodox rabbis have usually undergone university training, and preach sermons in the vernacular. Although women pray separately from men, the women's gallery is not usually curtained off, and frequently women play an active role in communal life. None the less, there are many lapsed Orthodox Jews, who while observing a wide range of Jewish practices, have substantially rejected the vast corpus of Orthodox law. Although they define themselves as Orthodox, they have readily parted from traditional belief and practice.

A middle position on the Jewish spectrum is occupied by Conservative Judaism. Initially this movement emerged from

the ranks of Reform Judaism, but adherents of Conservatism opposed the radical alterations of the tradition advanced by reformers in the nineteenth century. In 1845 the leading figure of this approach, Zacharias Frankel, walked out of a Frankfurt Reform rabbinical conference in protest and founded the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau, which combined a traditional Jewish curriculum with historical scholarship. Later in the century a number of American rabbis adopted the approach of Frankel in their revision of Jewish liturgy and observance. Prominent among these moderates was Isaac Lesser who published the journal *Occident*, which espoused a revised form of traditionalism. Together with such immigrant scholars as Sabbato Morais, Marcus Jastrow and Alexander Kohut, Lesser strove to preserve Hebrew in the liturgy, maintain Sabbath observance, and observe the dietary laws. In addition, these thinkers stressed the importance of the messianic hope, Jewish national identity, and Zionism. In 1887 Morais founded the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York which continued the tradition of Frankel's Seminary in Breslau. In 1902 Solomon Schechter became the head of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and in 1913 founded a body of affiliated synagogues, the United Synagogue of America. Today Conservative Judaism continues to uphold the traditionalist position despite subscribing to a critical approach to the Bible. In contrast to Orthodoxy, Conservative synagogues have introduced mixed seating, abolished various restrictions, (such as that concerning levirate marriage), discontinued the use of the ritual bath (*mikveh*), and recently countenanced the ordination of women. Although most Conservative scholars reject the belief that the Five Books of Moses were revealed by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, they still regard the *Torah* as of divine origin. An offshoot of Conservative Judaism is the Reconstructionist movement founded by Mordecai Kaplan. According to Kaplan, Judaism should be understood as an evolving religious civilization rather than a supernaturally revealed religion. Currently Reconstructionists have their own rabbinical seminary and network of synagogues.

The third modern development of contemporary Judaism is the Reform movement, which emerged in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1810 Israel Jacobson introduced reforms into the synagogue liturgy in Westphalia,

including a sermon and hymns in the vernacular, the use of an organ, a mixed choir, the shortening of prayers, and the institution of confirmation. Accompanying such liturgical revision, other reformers introduced ideological reforms in their conception of Judaism; no longer, they believed, should Jews long to return to Zion, rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, or reinstitute sacrifice. As a result of such a revolution in attitudes, a new prayer book was produced for the Hamburg Temple in 1819, and in 1841 an even more radical revision was introduced, which reinterpreted the concept of the Messiah. Initially reformers defended their approach on the basis of the *halakhah*, but in time they argued the case for reform on ideological grounds.

The division between the early moderate reformers such as Abraham Geiger, and radical reformers such as Samuel Holdheim, has continued to the present. In Britain the first Reform congregation was founded in 1840 by a dissident group which had broken away from Orthodox synagogues. In general they were traditional in orientation despite their rejection of Orthodoxy. Other British reformers, however, advocated a more radical position and founded the Liberal movement. A similar division occurred in the United States. In the latter half of the nineteenth century Isaac Mayer Wise founded the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and was an instigator of the Cleveland Platform of Reform Judaism which recognized the divine nature of the Bible and the validity of the rabbinic tradition. More radical reformers however, such as David Einhorn and Kaufman Kohler, opposed Wise's moderate stance and advanced a more radical programme of reform. In 1885 the Pittsburg Platform was formulated under the leadership of Kohler. This Platform viewed the Bible as containing outmoded religious ideas; only the moral code of Judaism, these reformers argued, is binding, together with any rituals which are spiritually significant for the modern age. Reform Judaism, they continued, should abandon dietary laws, national aspirations, and such doctrines as the resurrection of the dead and reward and punishment in the hereafter. Throughout this century Reform Judaism has continued to espouse a fundamentally different lifestyle from Orthodox Judaism, although there has been a gradual return to tradition and a general acceptance of Zionism. Nonetheless, some Reform congrega-

tions, following the lead of radical reformers of the past, have continued to press for fundamental change to Jewish belief and practice.

Given these religious divisions within contemporary Judaism, it is not possible to isolate a core of beliefs and practices which are currently accepted by the Jewish community as a whole. Nonetheless, despite the variances of religious convictions and observances within the modern Jewish community, there remains a bedrock of inherited tradition – even the most radical reformers would acknowledge the pivotal importance of biblical and rabbinic teaching. The purpose of this book is thus to provide a framework for understanding the development of Jewish religious thought through the centuries, as well as the observances that have served as the foundation for Jewish existence. *The Jewish Faith* is hence a handbook of basic Jewish beliefs and practices as they have evolved throughout history. In the chapters which follow, readers are introduced to the theological reflections of many of the most important thinkers of the past as well as the essential elements of the Jewish faith. While I have also given some indications of current deviations from traditional Judaism within Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform movements, the aim of the book is to present mainstream Judaism as it has been understood and practised for nearly 4000 years.

It should be noted, however, that Judaism should not be viewed as a religion like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism. Unlike many other traditions, there is no dichotomy between the religious and secular aspects of the Jewish faith. Historical awareness, cultural consciousness, and Jewish identity are all bound together within a unified religious framework. Thus the *Torah* and its attendant patterns of behaviour are inextricably bound up with the Jewish way of life. For Jewry the Covenant embraces God's dealing with his chosen people as well as a divinely prescribed path of living. In this light belief and practice are inseparable: the Jewish tradition teaches basic beliefs about God, revelation and humanity and also expresses these doctrines in ceremonies, rituals and laws which have given rise to various institutions and distinctive styles of Jewish culture. Being devoutly Jewish, therefore, involves correct belief as well as participation in the religious life of the community.



For this reason, I have divided this volume into two parts, each of which deals with the central dimension of the Jewish faith. Part I begins with an examination of the primary religious doctrines of Judaism from ancient times to the modern age: each chapter highlights biblical teaching and traces its development from rabbinic times to the present. Beginning with a survey of Jewish belief about God's unity, the book goes on to examine the traditional Jewish doctrines about God's nature, including such doctrines as divine transcendence, eternal existence, omniscience, and omnipotence. Turning to a consideration of God's action in the world, the subsequent chapters focus on creation, providence, divine goodness, and revelation. There then follows an examination of doctrines specifically connected with God's relation to Israel: *Torah*, *mitzvah*, sin and repentance, the chosen people, the promised land, prayer, and the love and fear of God. Part I concludes with an exploration of Jewish eschatology and the relationship between Judaism and the world's religions.

Part Two – dealing with Jewish practice – commences with a depiction of the Jewish community, its literature, and the process of education as it has emerged over the centuries. This is followed by an outline of the Jewish calendar, and Jewish worship embracing such institutions as the Sanctuary, Temple and Synagogue as well as the major festivals in the yearly cycle: Sabbath, Pilgrim festivals, New Year, Day of Atonement, Days of Joy, and Fast Days. The next chapters discuss major events in the Jewish life cycle including marriage, divorce, death and mourning. In the following chapter some of the central characteristics of Jewish morality are highlighted, and the book concludes with a depiction of the conversion procedure. Here then is an in depth introduction to the Jewish way as it has been lived through the centuries.