

Judaism Is Not a Religion

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Whenever I teach Confirmation or an Introduction to Judaism class, I often begin with an exercise where I write three words on the board and ask the students to guess how old each term is. The words are: Israel. Jew. Judaism. After collecting a series of guesses, I explain that the word “Israel” is at least 3,000 years old. The earliest biblical texts with “Israel” in them date to somewhere between 1300-1200 BCE. The first appearance of the name “Israel” outside the Bible is on an Egyptian victory monument set up by a Pharaoh named Merneptah in 1209 BCE. After boasting of his military victories, the inscription concludes with the triumphant claim, “Israel is laid waste; his seed is not.” Merneptah intended to commemorate the destruction of Israel. Instead, he preserved the oldest known extra-biblical reference to the very people he claimed to have wiped out. And wouldn’t you know? We’re here, and he and his empire are not.

The word “Jew,” *Yehudi*, as an identity marker, is also around 3,000 years old. Originally it referred to a member of the tribe or kingdom of Judah, but over time it came to describe members of all of the tribes of Israel. The Book of Esther, for example, describes Mordechai as both a member of the tribe of Benjamin and a Jew.

These names are not only ancient; they carry deep and purposeful meanings. “Israel,” יִשְׂרָאֵל, means “to struggle with God.” The name was given to our ancestor Jacob, after he wrestled with a mysterious divine being and prevailed. “Jew,” *Yehudi*, means “gratitude.” When Leah bestows a name on her fourth son, she calls him Judah, יְהוּדָה, and declares, “This time I will thank the ETERNAL One, אֱלֹהֵי אֶתִי.” Both names describe a relationship: we are the people who struggle with God and remain grateful to God.

Lastly, we come to the word “Judaism.” What I reveal surprises everyone. Compared to the other two, “Judaism” is relatively recent as a Jewish self-description, only a few hundred years old. The English word derives from the ancient Greek *Ioudaismos*, which originally meant “the things the Jews do.” But only in modern Europe did Jews increasingly adopt “Judaism” as their primary self-description and define it as a religion comparable to Christianity. The word is not native to Hebrew. It is a term that somebody else coined to talk about us in their language that we then adopted.

Our ancestors did not understand themselves as “practicing Judaism.” They were not adherents to a religion. They were, and we are, *Yehudim*, Jews, who belong to *Am Yisrael*, the People of Israel. To be even more provocative, we should say that Judaism is not a religion. The misunderstanding of what Judaism is and is not, among both Jews and non-Jews alike, gets to the heart of many of the issues that we are facing today.

This difference is best illustrated by two statements from two different men at almost the exact same point in history. In 1790, George Washington, in his famous letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, addressed the Jews by calling them “the

Children of the Stock of Abraham.” His letter made explicit that equal citizenship did not require ethnic minorities to erase their sense of collective identity or core commitments. One year earlier in France, Count Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre, a French military officer and prominent politician during the French Revolution, argued passionately for granting Jews equal rights, but on one very important condition. He said, “We must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and accord everything to Jews as individuals... They must be citizens individually... It is repugnant to have in the state... a nation within the nation.” Jews could enjoy equality only if they abandoned their national Jewish identity. Looking back on these statements, Washington understood something that the Count de Clermont-Tonnerre did not: we can be both fully part of the Jewish People and citizens of the country in which we live. Our identities encompass both, without being in opposition.

Even so, the Frenchman’s perspective would win the day in Europe. Jews became Frenchmen of the Jewish faith, on par with the Catholics in that country, or the Protestants in Germany, or the Anglicans in England. Jews were viewed as devotees of a religion, with a system of beliefs, practices, moral commitments, rituals, and communal traditions, similar to Christians. And, to fit in, those Jews adapted their own self-understanding to view themselves as adherents of a religion. Jews, as individuals, were now free from the communal strictures of the ghetto and could participate in the political, intellectual, and social life of the countries in which they lived. A new Jewish dimension developed that viewed Jewish ritual and practice as “religious,” which focused on doctrine and beliefs and created a diversity of thought, resulting in what we now call the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox movements.

This trend continued in America. Even as Jews were an ethnic minority, along with the Irish, Italians, Germans, and Chinese, American Jews transformed and rebranded themselves as a religion, which gained them a seat at the table in a country that has no established state religion.

Even the word “Jew” sometimes seemed too conspicuous. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jewish organizations frequently chose words like “Israelite” or “Hebrew” instead: the Board of Delegates of American Israelites, B’nai B’rith, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, *The American Israelite*, *The Hebrew Messenger*, and the Young Men’s Hebrew Association. These names reflected pride, but they also reflected the desire to make Jewish identity sound more religious, biblical, and, in their own eyes, socially acceptable and less foreign.

The post-World War II era became the perfect time to fully enact this rebranding. It was a time of religious revival, when America was facing off against the godless communists of the Soviet Union. This was also a time when the phrase “under God” was placed in the Pledge of Allegiance. Rabbis were publishing articles in major magazines about Judaism being a faith, and the phrase “Judeo-Christian values” entered into the American lexicon. It was the era of the Civil Rights Movement, which was led by Black Christian ministers, whom Jewish rabbis could stand next to as equal co-religionists.

All of these efforts were radical revisions of the earlier and long-standing self-conception of what it meant to be a Jew. We recreated ourselves in the mold of Protestants, becoming a religion of beliefs and thought, rather than belonging. It was certainly the correct

move at the time, and I don't begrudge prior generations for doing what they needed to do to become part of the conversation of a free society. But it raises the question: at what cost?

Perhaps "just passing," staying under the radar, minimizing the distinctiveness of Jewish identity, and presenting ourselves as just another religious denomination, was not the best solution. It may once have opened doors that were previously shut, but changing how we described ourselves did not deter those who wished to harm us.

In recent years, Jews have been targeted because we belong to a people who feel connected to all Jews, all over the world, whether we live in America, Europe, Australia, or Israel. Being Jewish is not merely a matter of religion, belief, or thought. It is a deep, visceral sense of belonging that connects us through time and space.

Many contemporary problems have developed as a result of understanding religion as the primary definition of Jewish identity. If Judaism is a religion, then non-practicing Jews feel less Jewish. I can't tell you how many times someone has confessed to me that they are a "bad Jew," because they don't keep kosher or go to synagogue regularly. These people are moral individuals who do good in the community, raise their children to be proud Jews, feel connected to the Jewish People, and care about the well-being of the state of Israel, but they incorrectly measure themselves by standards imported from other religious traditions.

If Judaism is a religion, then the distinctions between the modern movements become major lines of division instead of just different expressions of Jewish practice. The development of Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaism, and their different intellectual and theological ideas, were a significant departure from previous eras. Before the modern period, Jewish communities certainly differed in practice and theology, but Jews did not organize themselves into denominations defined primarily by competing intellectual understandings of God and the authority of Torah.

If Judaism is a religion, then continuity becomes much less important. One of our primary impulses as Jews is to ensure that our children learn to be Jewish and make our collective story their own by living a Jewish life. We are constantly striving to safeguard the Jewish future. An oft-quoted contemporary Jewish maxim says, "The measure of being Jewish is not whether you had Jewish grandparents, but whether you have Jewish grandchildren."

If Judaism is a religion, then our connection to Israel becomes difficult to understand and articulate. The State of Israel was not founded by like-minded believers. The founding of Israel was the return of the Jewish People to sovereignty in our ancient homeland, and its thriving has uplifted Jews all over the world.

In 1955, sociologist Will Herberg famously wrote a book entitled *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. Avraham Infeld, President Emeritus of Hillel International, in response to that grouping, has quipped, "to say 'Protestant-Catholic-Jew' is like saying 'Brown-Green-Yellow-Fat.'" It is a category error. Dara Horn has recently provided a new definition of what being Jewish is. She says that it is, "a joinable tribal group with a shared history, homeland, and culture." In her new book, *The Final Solution to the Jewish Question*, an intentionally provocative title, and in many recent podcasts, Horn has pointed out that, what English needs an entire sentence to describe, Hebrew captures in a concise two-letter word – **עם**. Until we, and others, understand this definition, the core of being Jewish does not make sense.

Nearly a century ago, at a time similar to ours: full of uncertainty, growing affinity for leftist socialism and rightist nativism, and surging Antisemitism, Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan attempted to thread the needle of the complicated nature of being Jewish in America. Kaplan published what would become his most famous book, *Judaism as a Civilization*. He taught that belonging precedes believing, and that we do not first arrive at a series of doctrines and then join the Jewish People. We are formed within a civilization, and our beliefs grow out of participation in that civilization.

Religion and belief are singular and private. Jewish practice is communal, almost always with a sense of togetherness. Religions ask: what do you believe? Jews ask: are you one of us?

Think about why we are here tonight. Are you here because you believe God will forgive your misdeeds because of the words that we will say over the course of this day? Or are you here because this is what Jews do on Yom Kippur? We stand together in solidarity, reciting prayers and confessions in the plural, as our ancestors have done for nearly 3,000 years on the Day of Atonement.

One of the most difficult questions that I am asked in multi-faith settings is: what do Jews believe? To be honest with you, I don't know! I struggle with giving a good answer, and I'm supposed to be an expert in these things!

The 19th century Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch succinctly said, "the catechism of the Jew is the calendar." So perhaps the best response to this question is that I can't really say what Jews believe, but I sure can tell you what Jews do, which includes the prayers we say, the rituals we perform, the holidays we observe, the daily habits we practice, the way we eat, and our ethical responsibilities. What we do has always been our focus over what we believe.

The problem of Judaism as a religion is illustrated by a famous incident from the Middle Ages. In 1168, Maimonides, the greatest Jewish thinker of all time, published his thirteen principles of faith, concretizing Jewish belief into a brief manifesto. The rabbinic reaction was fierce. His contemporaries were not happy about this list and they let him know.

It's not that Jewish communities and their leaders did not affirm things like God's existence, God as Creator and Revealer of Torah, or the greatness of Moses as a leader and prophet. Rather, it was that they refused to accept the richness of Jewish living reduced to a list of required beliefs. These rabbis basically said to Maimonides: how can you tell us what to believe?

It became a great irony that, while Maimonides intended his thirteen principles to determine the boundaries of Jewish belief, they inaugurated centuries of debate over whether Judaism should have a creed at all. A further irony is that these principles of faith again became boundary markers in modern Orthodoxy over the last 150 years, in an effort to distinguish itself from the more liberal movements of Reform and Conservative Judaism.

A recent example of the Jewish misunderstanding of our own identity occurred in 2019, when an Executive Order applied the Civil Rights Act's Title VI protections to antisemitic discrimination based on Jews' shared ancestry or ethnicity. Jews were already protected as a religious group under Title VII. But Title VI does not cover religion. The order therefore recognized what many Jews had forgotten, and what the wider world had not yet fully understood: Jewish identity is more than a religious affiliation.

Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League welcomed this as an additional tool to help identify and fight Antisemitism. However, the Jewish Antizionist group IfNotNow responded by saying that the order, “is not about keeping Jews safe. It’s just more antisemitism.... The order defines Judaism as a ‘nationality,’ promoting the classically bigoted idea that American Jews are not...American.” IfNotNow’s statement echoed the Count de Clermont-Tonnerre from over two centuries earlier, but this time, it came from Jews. It implicitly rejected Jewish Peoplehood, and, in fact, the status of all hyphenated Americans to preserve their national identity while still remaining fully American, which Washington spoke of in his letter to the Jews of Newport.

Ultimately, Antizionism is a denial of Jewish Peoplehood. It is not criticizing the Israeli government. Anyone who wants to do that is welcomed to get in line with the rest of us.

Antizionism was an interesting hypothetical debate a century ago, when the State of Israel did not yet exist. Jews could and did argue about whether sovereignty was necessary, desirable, or even possible. But that is no longer the question. Israel exists. It is home to half of the Jewish People. Today, dismantling the world’s only Jewish state is not an abstract intellectual proposition. It would be an existential and mortal threat.

One of the tactics of Antizionism is to reduce Jewish identity to its modern definition of a religion in order to dilute it and empty it of every collective trait. It tries to get away with passing itself off as socially acceptable critique, using amorphous terms like “settler-colonialism” and intentionally changing the definition of genocide so that the charge can be directed at the State of Israel.

When Antizionists use the word “occupation,” they are not referring to the necessary and difficult conversation about the final status of Judea-Samaria/the West Bank. They mean that Jews are illegitimately occupying all lands between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, including everything from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, and from the Golan Heights to Eilat. The goal is the erasure of the Jewish State. In reality, the language of Antizionism consists only of dog-whistles and blood libels.

Reducing Judaism to a religion allows for the nonsensical proclamation: “I’m not Antisemitic; I’m just Antizionist.” In fact, Antizionism is a unique movement that attacks the essence of what it means to be a Jew, which is, as Dara Horn taught us, to be part of “a joinable tribal group with a shared history, homeland, and culture.”

The attempt to draw a distinction between Antizionism and Antisemitism is pointless. Both stem from the same anti-Jewish ideology, rooted in lies, conspiracy theories, and a politics that blames the Jews or the Jewish State for all of the ills of society.

Jewish Antizionists have bought into these lies, disregarding their sense of Peoplehood and family in order to advocate for a cause that is detrimental to their own people.

Jewish Antizionism comes from a position of almost unfathomable privilege. It is easy to contemplate dismantling the world’s only Jewish state from the safety of an American college campus or at fancy dinner parties, where luxury beliefs allow Israel’s continued existence to be treated as merely a topic of conversation.

I wonder if these Jews really understand the consequences of their advocacy: the disappearance of the Jewish state, and half of the Jewish People becoming homeless, stateless,

or overwhelmed by those who constantly boast of their desire to harm or eliminate them. I wonder if that thought crossed their minds, if it would give them pause, and whether the satisfaction that comes from feeling so righteous is worth that risk.

And yet, when we look at the big picture, Antizionist Jews only make up the tiniest fraction of the Jewish People. They seem to have an outsized voice because they are tokenized and overrepresented on social media. In addition, not only have they rejected Jewish peoplehood, they are also overwhelmingly secular, which means that they have severed their connection to both the ethnic and the religious aspects of Judaism. This is not a new phenomenon. One hundred years ago, Kaplan wrote about American Jews with this orientation, and there were similar Jewish groups like the Association of German National Jews in pre-war Germany, and Yevsekstiya in the Soviet Union. With little to tie them to Jewish life, they will not leave a lasting legacy.

We must continue to embrace our heritage and nationhood. The fact remains that peoplehood, connection to community, and care for our brothers and sisters in Israel are still high priorities among Jews, as they always have been and will continue to be, as long as we have the language to accurately describe who we are.

The divisions and movements within Judaism that emerged in the modern period were based on religious ideas: the nature of God, the revelation of Torah, and the authority of Jewish Law. But those divisions are from another era. We are living in a new paradigm where there is only one line of division: Do you belong to the Jewish People, or not?

This framing is elastic enough, this umbrella is big enough to include those on either side of the Left-Right political divide or the observant-secular religious divide. I have seen Jews who disagree about almost everything politically stand shoulder to shoulder because they love the Jewish People and the State of Israel. I have also seen Jews who agree on almost every theological issue discover that they no longer share the same understanding of what it means to belong. Institutions and affiliations still matter, but their deepest commitments and greatest distinctions are from a bygone era. We must stand with anyone: Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, Orthodox, Secular, and everyone in between, who shares that love for the Jewish People.

Our tradition teaches that Jewish peoplehood is a covenant across time and space, linking generations to one another. We are an extended family that has its own cultural norms, and its own boundaries. We must root ourselves in our sense of peoplehood, so that when we experience hurt from outside, we will have a thick enough skin to weather that pain. Commitment to peoplehood is its own reward, because Jewish self-confidence derives from the sense that there are others in our family who have our back and love us.

Throughout the war that followed October 7, signs appeared everywhere across Israel bearing the words **בְּיחד נִנְצָח**, “Together, we will prevail.” Some of those signs are still there. That **יחד**, that togetherness, includes us. It does not stop at Israel’s borders. When we stand together, united with our brothers and sisters in Israel and with Jews throughout the world, we become more resilient than any of us can be alone.

Jewish tradition adapted Maimonides' principles of faith into the liturgy known as *Ani Ma'amin*. Each declaration begins with the phrase "I believe with complete faith...", a personal statement of private conviction. But this is not how Jewish liturgy works.

As we encounter the words of the Mahzor through these High Holy Days, we find that its defining prayers, confessions, and statements appear in the plural. Yom Kippur is not simply about individual repentance. It is the annual reaffirmation that we belong to one another.

The origins of this collective identity are found in the Torah, at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, when Moses gathers a generation ready to enter the Land of Promise together. He says to them (Deut. 29:9-11), אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם בְּלִפְנֵי, "You stand this day, all of you, before the ETERNAL your God: your tribal heads, your elders, and your officials—the entire body of Israel— your children, your women, even the stranger within your camp, from the one who chops wood to the one who draws water, to enter into the covenant of the ETERNAL your God, which the ETERNAL your God is making with you this day..."

We stand before God, not as isolated individuals, but as כָּלל יִשְׂרָאֵל, the collective People of Israel, bound by covenant and responsible for one another. We, Israel, confess as a covenantal people, because we stand together across generations.

Judaism is not a religion. A religion can be practiced privately. A covenant cannot. A religion asks, "What do I believe?" Judaism asks, "To whom do I belong?" Once we answer that question correctly, Israel, our people, our history, our responsibilities, and our future, all begin to make sense. This year, may Yom Kippur be about returning to our sense of peoplehood, as much as it may be about our own individual atonement.

הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ יי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְנִשְׁוּבָה, חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ בְּקֶדֶם,

"May we return to You and ourselves, ETERNAL ONE. Renew our days, so that we may go forward." (Lam. 5:21)