



Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians

Script 1: Jewish Identity 101

Contemporary Jewish identity is a complex mixture of theology, religious beliefs, laws, customs, rituals, and cultures and communities. Underlying the adage “two Jews, three opinions” is the reality that diversity has been the hallmark of Jewish life since biblical times. There is a seemingly endless variety of individual and communal Jewish expressions in the United States, Israel, and across the globe.

Christians may encounter a wide range of theological and practical differences among their Jewish neighbors. Some follow Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law faithfully by carefully observing the Sabbath and holy days, following Jewish dietary restrictions, praying and studying classical Jewish texts each day, and maintaining rules of modesty, gender-based roles, ethical conduct, and additional laws that govern daily living. Other Jews observe Jewish law in ways that reflect societal changes such as egalitarian roles for men and women, greater LGBTQ inclusion, and other contemporary norms. Many Jews shed Jewish practices that they believe have lost relevance in the modern world but retain or modify customs and rituals that remain meaningful on a personal or communal level. Still others shun overtly religious expressions of their Jewish identity but proudly call themselves Jews and carry on cultural and ethnic traditions of their heritage.

For Jews who affirm their religious identity, affiliation with a synagogue community is a common practice. The institution of the synagogue developed after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE.¹ Synagogues have been foundations of Jewish religious life since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 of the Common Era.² They serve as houses of prayer, learning, and communal gathering for Jewish people.

Within a given synagogue, there are a wide variety of customs and rituals observed by congregants, and even more so in the Jewish community at large. There is no centralized authority in the modern Jewish world, as there is in many Christian denominations. Jews often choose to become members of a particular synagogue based less on ideology and more on other factors, including geographic proximity, the availability of daycare and nursery school programs, educational opportunities for

¹ Jews and many Christians use BCE, Before the Common Era, instead of BC.

² Jews and many Christians use the nomenclature CE, Common Era, rather than AD.

children and adults, and friendships with rabbis, cantors, staff members, and congregants of a given synagogue. Jews are free to choose which synagogue, if any, to affiliate with, and they may change congregational membership several times in larger communities with multiple synagogue options. Such is the nature of contemporary Jewish religious life, a fascinating puzzle with thousands of pieces that comprise the whole.

How, then, do we define Jewish identity today? Is Judaism a religion? An ethnicity? A culture? Peoplehood is arguably the most critical feature of Jewish life and thought. Judaism can be an ethnic category, but individuals who formally embrace the Jewish faith through conversion are fully Jewish and recognized as such by Jewish tradition and the Jewish community. Judaism is most assuredly a religion, but Jews who are “not religious” consider themselves Jewish and are accepted as such by their fellow Jews.

This may well be confusing and even troubling for Christians for whom faith is the decisive factor that makes them Christian. Not so with Jews. Jewish identity is rooted in lineage, religion, culture, ethnicity, community, nationality, or a combination of these characteristics. Jews who pray three times daily and observe the dietary laws and Sabbath regulations are Jewish. Jews who attend synagogue services twice a year on the High Holidays of *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* are Jewish, as are those who light *Hanukkah* candles and hold a Passover *seder* at home but do not observe other Jewish holidays in public or private. So too are Jews who are atheist or agnostic, eat traditional “Jewish foods” each week, and count themselves as Jewish by virtue of a parent’s Jewish status. As are Jews who are not religious but care deeply about the survival of Jewish communities in the Diaspora and are vocal defenders of the State of Israel or critics of Israeli policies. This diversity is the colorful tapestry of Jewish life in the world today.

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With thanks to...

Dr. Ora Horn Prouser, CEO and Academic Dean

Cantor Michael Kasper, Dean of Cantorial Studies and Director of Student Life

Rabbi Dr. Matthew Goldstone, Assistant Academic Dean

Rabbi Mark S. Diamond, Project Coordinator

AJR Faculty Contributors:

Rabbi Cantor Sam Levine

Rabbi David Evan Markus

Dr. C. Tova Markenson

AJR Alumni Writers:

Rabbi Bruce Alpert

Rabbi Doug Alpert

Rabbi Dr. Jo David

Rabbi Dorit Edut

AJR Student & Alumni Narrators:

Cantor Howard Glantz

Cantor Meredith Greenberg

Rabbi Cantor Sam Levine

Cantorial Student Molly May

Cantorial Student Turia Stark

Guest Script Editor:

Rev. Dr. Daniel Aleshire

Director of Photography, Video & Sound Editor:
Beth Styles | L'Dor Vador Films

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