



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

Script 2: Jewish Identity 201

Diversity in Jewish thought and practice has been a hallmark of Jewish life since ancient times. This diversity is reflected throughout Jewish history in multiple expressions of religious and cultural identity. Jewish movements and denominations may be said to date from the Second Temple period, 515 BCE¹ to 70 CE.² During this era in Jewish history, sects multiplied among the Jews as they responded to successive waves of Persian, Greek, and Roman control of the Land of Israel. Pro-Hellenist and anti-Hellenist forces fought bitter battles for control of Jewish life under Greco-Syrian rule. In Roman times, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, zealots, and other factions offered contrasting views of Jewish autonomy and accommodation to foreign influences. Eventually, all these groups disappeared from history, to be replaced by other expressions of Judaism, most notably rabbinic Judaism.

All modern Jewish movements have their roots in the tumultuous milieu of the first century of the Common Era. New and unprecedented forms of worship and religious hierarchy emerged out of the ashes of the Second Temple. Kings and priests were stripped of their respective political and religious functions passed down from father to son. Rabbis assumed leadership roles in Jewish religious life based on scholarship and wisdom rather than lineage. No longer was there a central temple where the people worshiped God through animal sacrifices. Daily prayers and intensive study of scriptural texts became the norms of Jewish religious life. Synagogues, which began to develop after the destruction of the First Temple, became the locus of Jewish communal life, serving as centers of prayer, learning, and assembly. The Jewish people settled into centuries of life in Diaspora communities, though they yearned for a return to their homeland, the Land of Israel.

The multiple varieties of Jewish life and thought today reflect diverse responses to and adaptations of this post-Biblical tradition, known as rabbinic Judaism. One form is Hasidic Judaism, a branch of *haredi* Judaism. The Hebrew word *haredi* literally means “one who trembles” at the word of God, and is a term used today to refer to ultra-Orthodox Jews and their traditional beliefs and practices. Hasidic Judaism originated in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth

¹ Before the Common Era, nomenclature used by Jews and many Christians instead of BC

² The Common Era, nomenclature used by Jews and many Christians instead of AD

century with the teachings and tales of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, known as the *Baal Shem Tov*, the “Master of the Good Name.” He was a roving preacher, teacher, mystic, and healer who drew upon the beliefs of medieval Jewish mysticism and taught his followers to draw closer to God and redeem the divine holy sparks in everyone and everything around them. The *Baal Shem Tov* attracted masses of Jews to his simple, pious expressions of Jewish worship and ritual life that stressed joyous prayer, song, and dance.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, many rabbis and their followers were bitter opponents of the early *Hasidim*, and they became known as *mitnagdim* or *misnagdim*, literally “opponents.” The two groups waged fierce rhetorical battles for the hearts and minds of Europe’s Jews. With the passage of time, the split between *Hasidim* and *mitnagdim* diminished. This was due in no small measure to what they perceived to be a common enemy--the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment, that was attracting large numbers of Jews to new forms and expressions of Jewish identity.

Chief among them was Reform Judaism, which first developed in Germany in the nineteenth century and was led by rabbis who sought to harmonize Jewish beliefs and practices on the one hand, and Enlightenment thought on the other. The German Reformers introduced prayers and sermons in the vernacular, mixed seating of men and women, and organs and choirs into Jewish worship services. They eased or eliminated traditional dietary restrictions and laws regulating Sabbath observance for the newly emancipated Jews who chose to attend universities and embark on new careers. They were met with strident opposition by three branches of Orthodox Jews. The first two were *Hasidim* and *mitnagdim*, who condemned secular education and shunned Enlightenment thought. The third group was a new one known as “neo-Orthodox” Jews, who championed the efficacy of both secular and traditional Jewish education and affirmed a new, modern Orthodox Jewish lifestyle in a post-Enlightenment world.

Despite the steadfast opposition of traditionalists, Reform congregations thrived in Germany and throughout Western and Central Europe. With the founding in 1875 of Cincinnati’s Hebrew Union College, the first Jewish seminary in America, Reform Judaism rapidly took hold in Jewish communities throughout the United States. Today, Reform Judaism is the largest of the Jewish movements or denominations in North America, though it has shed some of its classical principles and embraced a renewal of traditional Jewish practices such as Hebrew prayer and *Shabbat* rituals.

Like its Reform counterpart, Conservative Judaism first developed in Germany as a response to the Enlightenment and flourished once it reached American shores. Early Conservative Jewish leaders felt that the Reformers had gone too far in shedding Jewish traditions, especially the use of Hebrew in prayer services. New York’s Jewish Theological Seminary was established in 1886 as the educational center of Conservative Judaism and an alternative to the Hebrew Union College and the Orthodox community’s Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, chartered in 1897 and now part of New York’s Yeshiva University. When the founders of Conservative Judaism selected a name for their new movement, they intended the word “conservative” to convey their desire to conserve traditional Jewish thought and practice, not a political ideology in opposition to liberal or progressive thinking.

Yet another Jewish movement, formerly called Reconstructionist Judaism, but now known as Reconstructing Judaism, owes its origin to the writings of Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary. In his magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization*, Kaplan called for a radical rethinking of Jewish communal life and religious thought. Kaplan conceived of Reconstructionist Judaism as a more progressive stream within the Conservative Jewish movement. His disciples broke ranks with Conservative Judaism and launched their own movement in 1955 and their own rabbinical college in Philadelphia in 1967.

Many Jews self-identify with Jewish movements or denominations, and they are typically members of synagogues³ that are affiliated with these movements. Conservative, Hasidic, Orthodox, Reconstructing Judaism, Reform, *haredi*, and “just Jewish” are only a few of the adjectives Christians may hear Jewish people use to describe their own beliefs and practices and those of their congregations.

In recent years, an increasing number of Jews find their spiritual homes in multi-denominational or trans-denominational congregations and institutions. The Academy for Jewish Religion (AJR) in New York is a multi-denominational seminary whose administrators, faculty, and students promote a more holistic and pluralistic approach to Jewish life and thought. Founded in 1956, AJR has been at the forefront of pluralistic Jewish clergy training, anticipating current trends in a rapidly growing non-denominational, or “just Jewish,” population.

As we survey other Jewish movements in North America, we can offer the following guidelines about their approaches to Jewish tradition: Reform, Reconstructing Judaism, and Renewal congregations are the most progressive in terms of Jewish thought and practice. Their religious services on Shabbat and holy days include selected traditional prayers, Hebrew and English songs, instrumental music, and contemporary readings.

Congregations in the Conservative movement are more traditional in conserving Jewish practices but also support equal religious roles for women and men like their progressive counterparts. Their worship services stress traditional Hebrew prayers, often with additions to reflect egalitarian values. Conservative prayer services include some readings in English and the use of instrumental music on Shabbat and holy days in many (but not all) Conservative synagogues. Orthodox congregations are still more traditional in their observance of traditional norms of Jewish law, or *halachah*. Ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic congregations are the strictest in their adherence to the norms of Jewish law. Orthodox and *haredi* religious services include a full array of traditional prayers in Hebrew. Instrumental music is not permitted in these synagogues on Shabbat and Jewish holy days. Men and women sit in separate sections of the prayer space and traditional honors such as reciting Torah blessings and leading portions of the service are reserved for male worshippers.

The contemporary Jewish religious landscape is thus made up of Conservative, Hasidic, humanistic, Jewish Renewal, Orthodox, pluralistic, Reconstructing, Reform, and ultra-Orthodox Jews with their respective synagogues and associations of rabbis, cantors, and congregations. All of these groups are integral parts of the colorful tapestry of Jewish religious life today.

³ Synagogues are often called “temples” in non-Orthodox settings.

Academy for Jewish Religion
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With thanks to...

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With appreciation to...

- Lilly Endowment, Inc. for their generous funding of “Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic”
- The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) for their continued guidance and support of this project.

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