



Reform Judaism

By Steve Cohen

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A Diversity of Belief Systems

One cannot understand Jewish people today by studying only the Old Testament. Jewish people identify with different religious groups, writings, teaching and theology from a multitude of sources. The Jewish religious calendar and festivals, attitudes toward Jesus, traditions, concepts of family, and varying concerns comprise a multi-faceted Jewish milieu.

What Jewish people believe can cover an encyclopedia's worth of information. We will present a basic overview of the highlights to help Christians better understand Jewish beliefs.

The divisions, or denominations, that Jewish people tend to be found in today are:

- Orthodox
- Reform
- Conservative
- Reconstructionist

Some minor offshoots are the Hassidic movement (the ultra-orthodox) and the Zionistic movement (a political movement). Some Jewish people are atheistic or agnostic. And of course there are the Jewish Christians, also known as "Messianic Jews."

Current North American Jewish Demographics

Surveys taken to determine how Jewish people identify themselves have yielded different results. More than six million Jewish people live in North America today. Nearly a third identify themselves as members of the Reform movement, about one quarter identify themselves with the Conservative movement, and less than a fifth describe themselves as Orthodox.

Orthodoxy today seems to be on the upswing, as many modern Jewish people are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives through Judaism. Many Jewish people do not have religious affiliations, other than to attend services such as the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur. Some even claim to be atheistic in their background, others agnostic, while still others claim to be Zionistic.

Zionism is sometimes mistaken to be a religious movement. But basically, Zionism is a political movement. It concerns itself with the return and restoration of the land of Israel to the Jews, rather than the maintenance of a religious theology.

Jewish people identify with different branches of Judaism, because there is no unifying theology of Judaism today. Different rabbis hold differing opinions; in fact, Judaism could probably best be typified as "unity with diversity." Jewish people feel a unity of purpose, but they hold a diversity of opinions as to how they should be leading their lives.



American Reform Movement

Unfortunately, the Reformed movement today, emphasizing higher criticism and a movement toward liberal treatment of the Word of God, created an ethical and moral community of Jewish people who have de-emphasized traditional liturgical settings in order to be modern and acceptable to Western culture.

In America, Isaac M. Wise championed a moderate Reform movement and David Einhorn led radical reform movements. By 1885 the radical position had become dominant in American Reform Judaism, which was expressed in the “Pittsburgh Platform”:

- “We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization...
- “We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state...
- “Their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation...
- “We recognize, in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching of the realization of Israel’s great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men. We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state...
- “We reassert the doctrine of Judaism that the soul is immortal, founding this belief on the divine nature of the human spirit, which forever finds bliss in righteousness and misery in wickedness. We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism, the beliefs both in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden... as abodes for everlasting punishment and reward.



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