THE CHRISTIAN DIFFERENCE

AN EXPLANATION & COMPARISON
OF WORLD RELIGIONS

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CONTENTS

Introduction to the Volume ........................................... xvii
A Guide to This Volume .................................................... xxi
Religious Symbols on the Cover ........................................... xxiii
Writers ................................................................. xxvii

CHAPTER 1. JUDAISM ...................................................... 1

Introduction ............................................................... 1
Background and Origin .................................................. 2
Key Teachings ............................................................. 7
  Monotheism ............................................................ 7
  Messiah ................................................................. 7
  Tikkun Olam ............................................................ 10
  Halakah ................................................................. 12
  Study of Torah ........................................................ 13
  The Tribe ............................................................... 14
  The Hebrew Language ............................................... 17
  Eretz Yisrael ........................................................ 18

Creeds/Tenets ............................................................. 21
  The Shema ............................................................. 21
  Maimonides’s Thirteen Principles of Faith .......................... 23

Sacred Texts ............................................................... 27
  The Written Torah .................................................. 27
  The Tanakh (or Mikra) .............................................. 29
  The Oral Torah (Mishnah) ......................................... 31
  The Talmud ........................................................... 32
  The Midrash .......................................................... 32
  The Responsa ........................................................ 32
  The Septuagint ........................................................ 32
  The Zohar ("Splendor," "Radiance") ................................. 33

God ................................................................. 33

Humanity .............................................................. 37

Law and Ethics .......................................................... 37

Sin ................................................................. 41

Salvation .............................................................. 44

Afterlife ............................................................ 45

Prayer/Worship ........................................................ 47
Kaddish .................................................. 47
Amidah/Shemoneh Esrei (“Eighteen” Benedictions) ......... 48
Aleinu (“It Is Our Duty”) ................................ 49
Avinu Malkeinu (“Our Father, Our King!”) ............... 51
Kol Nidre (“All Vows”) .................................. 52
Ein Keloheinu (“There Is None Like Our God”) .......... 53
Ne’ila (“Closing, “Locking”) ............................. 54
Rituals/Feasts ........................................... 54
Shabbat ..................................................... 55
Rosh Hashanah .......................................... 57
Yom Kippur ............................................... 59
Feast of Tabernacles/Sukkoth .............................. 60
Hanukkah ................................................. 61
Purim ....................................................... 62
Pesach/Passover ......................................... 64
Shavuot (“Weeks”) /The Feast of Weeks .............. 66
Symbols ................................................... 68
Candle Lights ............................................. 68
Challah ..................................................... 69
Kiddush Cup ............................................... 69
The Brachas (“Blessings”) ................................ 69
Havdalah (“Separation”) .................................. 69
Ark ............................................................ 70
Tablets ....................................................... 70
Star of David .............................................. 70
Menorah .................................................... 70
Depictions of the Twelve Tribes of Israel ............. 71
Lulav .......................................................... 71
Tefillin ....................................................... 71
Mezuzah (“Doorpost”) ................................... 72
Tzitzit (“Tassels”) ......................................... 72
Yarmulke .................................................... 73
Payess (“Sidelocks”) ..................................... 73
Chai ........................................................... 73
Hamsa ........................................................ 74
Denominations ............................................ 74
Reform Judaism ........................................... 74
Chapter 3. Mormonism ........................................ 151

Introduction .................................................... 152

History of Mormonism ........................................ 153

Independence, Missouri, as the New Jerusalem .......... 154
Mormons Forced to Leave Jackson County ............. 155
Far West, Missouri—Mormonism's New Headquarters .. 156
The Missouri Mormon War .................................... 157
Mormons Regroup in Nauvoo, Illinois .................... 159

Smith's Personal Traits and the Growth of Mormonism .. 160

Joseph Smith's Organizing Talents ....................... 160
Joseph Smith's Charisma .................................. 165
Joseph Smith's Narcissism ................................ 167

The Impact of Smith's Death ............................... 171

It Ended His Candidacy for President of the United States ........ 171
It Produced a Power Struggle .............................. 173
It Resulted in the Repeal of the Nauvoo Charter .......... 174
It Resulted in Organizational Schisms .................... 174
It Resulted in a Mass Exodus to Utah ................... 176

Brigham Young's Imprints on Mormonism ............... 177

Young as Territorial Governor ............................ 177
Polygyny Introduced and Institutionalized ............... 177
Legacy of Plural Wives ................................... 178

Organization of the LDS .................................... 180
Key Teachings of Mormonism .............................. 181
Mormonism's Sacred Texts ................................ 183
CHAPTER 5. SCIENTOLOGY ........................................... 241

Introduction ........................................... 241
Key Teachings of Scientology. ......................... 242
Scientology’s Creed and Theological Beliefs .......... 246
The Founder: L. Ron Hubbard .......................... 247
Current Leader: David Miscavige ..................... 252
The Sea Org ........................................... 254
Scripture ............................................... 255
Creation and the Natural World ......................... 260
Humanity and Sin ....................................... 262
Scientology’s Law and Ethics .......................... 264
How Scientology Deals with Rule Breakers .......... 267
Authoritarianism in Scientology ....................... 270
  Unwavering Loyalty to a System of Right and Wrong .... 270
  Admiration for Those Who Submit to a Recognized Authority .... 271
  Aggression against Individuals Who See the World Differently ... 271
  A Pessimistic View of Humanity as a Whole ................ 271
  A Desire for Powerful Leaders Who Demonstrate Unwavering Strength ................................. 271
  A Commitment to Simple Answers and Simplistic Verbal Attacks on Opponents ............. 271
  A Lack of Nuance and/or Thinking .................... 272
  A Tendency to Project Feelings of Insufficiency, Anger, and Anxiety onto a Scapegoat ........ 272
  An Obsession with Violence and Sex .................. 272
Salvation and the Goal of Scientology ................. 274
Scientologists’ Afterlife ................................ 278
Prayer, Worship, Ceremonies, and Holidays .......... 280
Scientology Symbols .................................... 282
Heresies .................................................. 285
Community Service and Outreach Programs ............ 286
Conclusion ............................................... 288
  Touch Points between Christians and Scientologists ... 292
  What Can I or My Congregation Do? ................. 292
Glossary of Scientology Terms .......................... 294

Chapter 6. The Skeptics: Atheists, Agnostics, and the Spiritual but Not Religious ................. 297
Introduction .......................................... 298
Skepticism ............................................ 299
Meet the Skeptics .................................... 300
  Statistical Data .................................... 300
  Types of Nonbelief .................................. 301
    Aggressive Nonbelievers ....................... 302
      Intellectual Atheist/Agnostic (IAA) .......... 302
      activist Atheist/Agnostic (AAA) .......... 303
      Antitheist (AT) ............................... 303
    Passive Nonbelievers .......................... 304
      Seeker-Agnostic (SA) ....................... 304
      Nontheist (NT) ............................... 304
      Ritual Atheist/Agnostic (RAA) .......... 304
  Other Terms ........................................ 305
    Secular Humanists ............................... 305
    Freethinkers .................................... 306
    New Atheists .................................... 306
    Apostates ....................................... 306
    Apatheists ...................................... 307
    Misotheists ...................................... 308
  Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR) .................. 309
A Skeptical History: Significant Characters and Movements . 311
  The Ancient World ................................ 311
  Renaissance and the Reformation .................... 313
  The Enlightenment ................................ 315
  The Rise of Modernism ................................ 317
  Skeptical Movements and Figures in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries ............. 326
Commonly Held Atheistic/Agnostic Beliefs ............... 328
Chapter 8. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism

Introduction

Buddhism

Origin and Development
Scriptures
Teaching

Confucianism

Origin and Development
Scriptures
Teaching

Shintoism

Origin and Development
Teaching

Christianity and Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism

Brilliance of the Eastern Religions
Doctrinal Considerations

Christian Witness to Buddhists, Confucianists, and Shintoists

Excursus: Missionary Work in Asia
Conclusion ........................................................................... 486
Glossary of Buddhist and Shinto Terms. ............................... 487

**CHAPTER 9. SIKHISM** ............................................................ 489
Background and History of Sikhism ........................................ 489
Context for Sikhism’s Birth: Hinduism in the Sixteenth Century .. 493
Gurus .................................................................................. 496

**Key Teachings—What Does Sikhism Proclaim?** ............... 504

*There Is Only One True God* .............................................. 504
*Man Is to Remember God at All Times* ................................. 505
*The Path to Salvation Is the Way of the Guru* ....................... 506
*Through Devotion, God Can Be Reached within the Human Mind* .... 510
*The Way of the Guru Breaks the Cycle of Rebirth* ............... 510

**Creed/Tenets.** ................................................................ 512
*The Sikh Creed* ................................................................. 512
*Truth vs. Illusion* .............................................................. 513

**The Three Pillars of Sikhism** ........................................... 515

*Naam Japo—Contemplation of God’s Name* ....................... 515
*Vand Chhako—Sharing with Others* ................................... 515
*Kirat Karo—Earning an Honest Living* ............................... 515

*The Five Evils.* ................................................................. 516

*Actions Count* ................................................................. 516

*The “Means of Grace”* ..................................................... 517
*The Equality of All People* ............................................... 518
*Living in Family and Community* ...................................... 518
*Blind Rituals Are to Be Replaced by True Religion* ........... 518

**Sacred Texts** ................................................................. 521
*The Nature of the Sikh Scriptures* ...................................... 521
*Use of the Granth* ............................................................ 522

**God** .............................................................................. 522
*God Is One* ................................................................. 523

**Humanity** ..................................................................... 526
*The Brotherhood of Mankind* ........................................... 526
*Accountable to God* ......................................................... 527
*Man Has Weaknesses That Must Be Overcome* ............... 527
Ethics .......................................................... 527
  The Five Evils. .......................................... 528
  Antidotes for Evil ....................................... 528
  Prohibited Actions ..................................... 529
  Prescribed Actions .................................... 529
Sin and Judgment ........................................ 530
  Powerful Damning Forces ............................ 531
  The Antidotes .......................................... 532
  Other Antidotes ....................................... 533
  The Five Virtues ....................................... 533
  Love for the Divine ................................... 533
  The Five Evils Must Be Overcome .................. 533
  Christians Are Blessed to Know the Reality of Sin and Its Solution .................. 534
Salvation .................................................. 535
  Essentials for Salvation .............................. 536
  Good Deeds Replaced by Other Good Deeds ....... 536
  Good Works Times Two ................................ 538
  Dying and Rising to New Life ....................... 539
  The Monkey Wrench of Reincarnation ............... 540
  Salvation in Terms of Samsara ..................... 541
  The Need for the Guru ................................ 541
  Forgiveness Comes as the Result of Effort ........ 542
  The Need for God’s Grace ............................ 542
  The Five Spiritual Planes to Pass Through ........ 543
  No Assurance of Salvation .......................... 543
  Who Can Find Their Way through This Spiritual Labyrinth? ....................... 544
Afterlife ................................................... 544
  Facing Death without Assurance .................... 545
Worship .................................................... 546
  The Central Place of Worship for Salvation ...... 549
  Attaining a State of Ecstasy through Meditation ... 550
  Maintaining a Balance ............................... 551
Rituals ..................................................... 552
Symbols .................................................... 552
  Name as Symbol ...................................... 553
Chapter 10. Christianity

Introduction to Christianity as a Religion
The Origins of Christianity
Key Teachings of Christianity
Creeds
Sacred Texts
God versus Idols
Humanity

1. Before His Fall into Sin (Prelapsarian)
2. After His Fall into Sin (Postlapsarian)
3. After Conversion, When He Comes to Faith in Christ (Regeneration)
4. After Temporal Death, When the Body Is Separated from the Soul until Christ's Return
5. After the Resurrection of the Body

Law and Ethics

Sin
Original Sin
Actual Sin
The Consequences or Wages of Sin

Salvation
Afterlife
Worship, Prayer, and Rituals
Symbols
Denominations
The Lutheran Reformation
Radical Protestantism
The Anabaptists
Calvinists
Holiness Movements

Heresies
Conclusion
Art Credits
Today, more than ever, the majority of the world’s population, regardless of personal religious orientation, finds itself in a confluence of the world’s religions.¹ Most religious people are confounded by wonder, awe, and mystery as they grapple with the God question. For them, God is the Wholly Other, the Transcendent, and the Unapproachable Mystery. In their view, God is far removed from the reality of the daily struggle to make life’s ends meet, remaining the object of the philosopher’s speculation and the theologian’s interpretation.

Then there are those who attempt to domesticate God by either denying or disallowing His transcendence, trying to befriend Him in purely anthropomorphic terms.² Pluralism is a lived reality of our time. Confessional theology aside, the words pluralism and inclusivism are signifiers pointing to another reality of our time that draws

¹ See David Noel Freedman and Michael J. McClymond, eds., The Rivers of Paradise (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). As intriguing as the book’s title is, it summarizes in capsule form the religions of Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Islam. The book proposes that these are “rivers of paradise” that “came from Eden, which is also where the[r] journey will end” (9).

our attention to the coexistence of peoples of varieties of religious experience, operating perhaps on the “those who are not against us are for us” principle.

The historic Christian church’s steeple, the mosque’s minaret, and the pagoda of the Buddhist temple together mark the skyline of the average town in the United States today. Furthermore, students of comparative religions together read and mark the text and context of an assortment of the world’s religions and find in them more similarities than differences for mutual enrichment and edification.  

Religions travel with the people who embrace and practice them. Those who leave their homeland and migrate to other countries bring with them the religion in which they grew up and find for it a home away from home in their new neighborhood. A vast majority of the historically old world religions have in recent years become missionary and found their new home in these United States and elsewhere.

Doubtless, the roots of these religions have penetrated deeply into the spirituality and culture of this nation. Initially, these may have entered the American psyche by way of the academy, through the intellectual and scholarly dialectics of the world’s religions. At the popular level, these religions have infiltrated Western culture and aided in its spiritual explorations through literature, art, and the more modern electronic media. Modernity, postmodernism, and their attendant sophistication aside, in spiritual and religious matters, the human mind succumbs to strange and hitherto unfamiliar things and almost blindly embraces them as fresh, novel, and innovative explorations.

Over the years, numerous new religions have emerged from within the US and, in the form of spiritualities and worldviews, have captivated not a few of the astute and intellectually elite. These mushrooming movements continue to draw a following and effect changes in the value system of the culture and politics of this country. A renewed interest in the respect for nature, concern for the


environment, disdain toward the familiar, and antagonism toward a historic faith are a few cases in point.

Ordinarily, discussions on transcendent realities do not loom large in conversations among those obsessed with materialism and pragmatism. Nevertheless, religion and spirituality take center stage in humanity’s quest for the ultimate, no matter what side of the globe. Science, technology, and critical thinking may have helped humans dig deeper and reach higher in their own individual and independent pursuits; the demise of religion, however, as the prophets of the enlightenment predicted, continues to be far-fetched and is far from becoming a reality. We notice today that even atheists and agnostics identify themselves as religious people.

While rationalism prevailed in philosopher Georg Hegel’s definition of religion, there was room in it for the divine (the lofiest and absolute object), for the absolute (eternal truth and virtue), for reason (riddles and contradictions), and for hope (resolution of sorrows and the attaining of peace).

In the almost two hundred years since Hegel, numerous new perspectives have been added to and/or subtracted from his definition. Among scholars of comparative religion, there seems to have been a consensus that religion is fundamentally the encounter between the human and the divine. Thus, according to Ward Fellows, broadly speaking, religion is uniquely human, dealing with the connection between earthborn humans and the spirit world above.5

The postmodern academic franchise has placed religion and culture as two disciplines that complement each other. A careful reader of either discipline cannot ignore the other and still do justice to the discipline of his specialty. Perhaps bearing in mind this dimension of the studies in religion today, Thomas Tweed remarked that religions are places where cultures converge to increase joy and unravel the mystery of suffering through human and superhuman means.6

Various contributors to this volume address the fundamental questions of religion and answer them the Christian way. They do

so with the clear inscription in Scripture that in Jesus Christ all things hold together (Colossians 1:15–20), and that Jesus Christ came to the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Scripture and the Confessions joyfully proclaim Christ and Him crucified and risen for all, if only they believe in Him as Lord and Savior. Even if a pluralism of religions prevails in today’s religious marketplace, ultimately the Gospel of Jesus Christ reaches out meaningfully to all who are hurting, suffering, and oppressed, giving them endurance and confidence to live in the present and hope for the future. All because Jesus Christ is different. That is the Christian difference.
A GUIDE TO THIS VOLUME


Each chapter in this book was written by a different author with a deep interest and/or experience with the chapter’s specific religion. If you have a neighbor, co-worker, or friend who follows one of these religions, that specific chapter will provide you with some background to begin discussing their faith, exploring the particulars of their personal belief, and perceiving where there may be common ground for you to share your faith in Jesus Christ.

Although each chapter stands on its own, there is a rationale behind its placement within the other religions in this book. We begin with two of the world’s three so-called monotheistic religions—Judaism and Islam (Christianity being the third). These are followed by the Western religions of Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Scientology. A special chapter on Skeptics (Atheists, Agnostics, and Spiritual but Not Religious) closes out the Western religions.
The next chapters present the Eastern religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Shintoism, and Sikhism. We close out the book with a special chapter on Christianity, which presents the basics of Christianity while treating such topics as the multitude of denominations within Christianity.

_The Christian Difference_ stands as a powerful resource to help us explore the faith of our neighbors, family members, and co-workers and find touchstones where we can more efficiently share the hope that Jesus Christ has won for us and the Holy Spirit has implanted within us.
RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS ON THE COVER

JUDAISM

In 1897, the First Zionist Congress chose the Star of David to be the central symbol on the Jewish flag. It is known as the Magen David (“Shield of David”). It has been used as a decorative motif in Judaism since ancient times and is believed to have been either King David’s shield or the emblem on his shield.

ISLAM

The star and crescent is only one symbol associated with Islam. The star and crescent was used at various times and places in history.
but came to be connected to the Islamic world through its use on the flag of the Muslim Ottoman Empire. It can also be seen on the flags of many Muslim countries.

MORMONISM

The angel Moroni holding a trumpet to his lips is the unofficial symbol of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, was visited by the angel Moroni, who revealed to him the location of the golden plates, which held the Book of Mormon.

JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES

The Jehovah’s Witnesses use images like a watchtower, a cross, and a crown. We used the Hebrew name of the Lord, that is, Jehovah or Yahweh.

SCIENTOLOGY

The Scientology symbol is an S curving through two triangles. The S stands for Scientology. The top triangle represents the KRC triangle (knowledge, responsibility, and control), while the bottom triangle is the ARC triangle (affinity, reality, and communication).
THE SKEPTICS: ATHEISTS, AGNOSTICS, AND THE SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

The large A is the symbol for Atheism and represents a large group of nonbelievers in religion.

HINDUISM

The Hinduism symbol, Aum or Om, is both a visual and an oral representation of Brahman, the ultimate reality of Hinduism. The letters in the syllable *Aum* represent the three manifestations of the Hindu god—Brahma (A), Vishnu (U), and Shiva (M). The chant-like word *Aum* (sounds like “Om”) is the first word of Hindu prayers.

BUDDHISM

The symbol for Buddhism is the eight-spoked dharma wheel. The eight spokes represent the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism.

CONFUCIANISM

Confucianism is represented by the Chinese character for a scholar, showing the importance Confucius and his followers placed on knowledge and being self-aware.
The symbol of Shintoism is a traditional Japanese gate, which symbolically marks the transition from the mundane to the sacred.

The symbol of Sikhism contains three weapons—a double-edged sword (*khanda*) in the center; two single-edged swords (*kirpan*) crossed at the bottom; and a circular throwing weapon (*chakram*), which is the circle. These are the weapons worn by Sikh warriors.

The symbol of Christianity is the cross, which celebrates the sacrifice of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty for the sins of the world.
Chapter 1: Judaism  Rev. Kevin Parviz was raised in an observant Jewish home. After college, he married a Lutheran girl. Twelve years later, he joined her Lutheran church and eventually became a Lutheran pastor. He is the pastor of Congregation Chai v’Shalom (Life and Peace), a Messianic-Lutheran congregation of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in St. Louis, Missouri, and serves as the executive director for Lutherans in Jewish Evangelism.

Chapter 2: Islam  Rev. Hesham Shehab was born in a Muslim family, recruited into the Muslim Brotherhood when he was thirteen, and began training as a Muslim preacher (Imam) at the age of sixteen. During Hesham’s first semester in college, his brother was killed by Christian militia, prompting Hesham to study by day and attack Christians by night. In a university course in cultural studies, he was brought to faith in Christ when he read Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. He became a Lutheran pastor after attending Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He founded a new ministry to Muslims in Chicago called Salam Christian Fellowship and works as a missionary to Muslims in the Northern Illinois District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Chapter 4: Jehovah’s Witnesses Dr. Jesse Yow is a retired scientist and manager from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory but continues working as a freelance writer for Concordia Publishing House. He serves on The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR). His experience with the Jehovah’s Witness movement came from living in the multicultural San Francisco Bay Area, his time spent at Midwestern and West Coast universities, and his service on the CTCR.

Chapter 5: Scientology Dr. Jeff Mallinson is a professor of theology and philosophy at Concordia University in Irvine, California, and co-host of the Virtue in the Wasteland podcast, a project that explores culture, ethics, and religion in our complex world. Living in Southern California, he has learned the firsthand accounts from current and former adherents of Scientology.

Chapter 6: The Skeptics: Atheists, Agnostics, and the Spiritual but Not Religious Rev. Jonathan Ruehs is professor of theology and director of the Center for Church Leadership at Concordia University in Irvine, California. His academic work has allowed him to rub elbows with people of various faiths and no faith at all. His goal is to help us better understand the varying nature of skepticism so we are equipped to give an answer for the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15).

Chapter 7: Hinduism Rev. Dr. Victor Raj was born and raised in a Lutheran household in India. He taught World Religions at Concordia University Wisconsin and now teaches at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, where he serves as mission professor of exegetical theology and holds the Buehner-Duesenberg Chair in Missions.
Chapter 8: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism

Rev. Dr. Naomichi Masaki was born and raised in Kobe, Japan. He is associate professor of systematic theology, director of the PhD in Theological Studies program, and director of the Master of Sacred Theology (STM) program at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Since he lived in Japan until he was twenty-six, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism were not a theoretical idea but a living context.

Chapter 9: Sikhism

Rev. Dr. Gary Rohwer is the director of missions and education at POBLO (People of the Book Lutheran Outreach) International. He earned his Doctorate in Missiology in Islamic Studies at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He has served among a dozen different ethnic groups, including Arabs, Kurds, Iranians, Sudanese, Indians, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis, training missionaries and congregations how to engage their immigrant communities and share Christ’s love in a culturally relevant way.

Chapter 10: Christianity

Rev. Dr. Jason Lane has been teaching an introductory course to the Christian faith for students who aren’t seeking a theology degree and other courses in dogmatic theology at Concordia University Wisconsin since 2013. This chapter reflects some of the ways he has taught the Christian faith to students who have been raised outside of Christendom or have very little knowledge of the Christian faith.
Chapter 1

JUDAISM

By Rev. Kevin Parviz

INTRODUCTION

I was raised in an observant Jewish home. We went to shul (synagogue), we believed in God, we were raised to be good people who cared about others. We were raised to learn. We never talked about Messiah, and we certainly never talked about Jesus.

We knew we were in a minority and that all around us were “the Gentiles.” Mostly, we believed that they believed in Jesus, which is one of the big reasons why we didn’t talk much to them or talk about Jesus. We joined the Jewish community center so we could be around more of “our” people, where we could talk about politics and social justice or just gossip, without having to talk about Jesus.

Now, that doesn’t mean we didn’t have friends who were not Jewish. Sure we did. But we made it clear that we didn’t want to talk about Jesus. And that seemed to be okay with them too. Everyone knew that Jews do not believe in Jesus. Because that’s really what defines us as a people anymore: we don’t believe in Jesus.

I do not want to pretend in this chapter that my Jewish experience is everyone’s. What you are going to read here are probably generalizations. Generalizations are useful, but they break down when you get to know individuals; this is important to remember
when you share your faith with a Jew (or any other person, for that matter). We have an old saying: “Two Jews, three opinions.” But the one thing we all agreed on is that Jews don’t believe in Jesus ... until I did.

I went to college in the Midwest, an “old family college” to which an aunt of mine had left a lot of money. They built a building there with her husband’s, her brother’s, and her name on it. There weren’t many Jews there, but the first thing I did was start a Jewish Student Union. We couldn’t get a minyan (literally, “reckoning,” ten men required for worship). I think there were seven of us, including some law students. But we tried.

My first girlfriend there had the last name of “Heil.” Not a good start. My mother’s horrified reaction was to ask if she was German Lutheran or German Catholic. It didn’t work out. The next year, I started dating a “Forsyth.” Maybe my mother trusted the Scots more than the Germans, or maybe she was just used to the idea that there were no Jewish girls there for me to date, but she wasn’t nearly as horrified. The irony is that this Forsyth was a Lutheran. However, I made it clear to her that we wouldn’t be talking about Jesus.

But then after college, I married that Forsyth girl. It took a long time for us to finally talk about Jesus, but twelve years later, I joined her Lutheran church, and now I’m a Lutheran pastor. This is a situation I find more and more among the families I talk to when I travel around guest preaching; so many Lutheran girls seem to be dating and marrying Jewish boys. There are numerous issues that arise in an intermarried family, something of which I have firsthand knowledge; so this is an area our ministry (Lutherans in Jewish Evangelism) makes a great effort to address as we serve the families of the many intermarried couples we meet.

**BACKGROUND AND ORIGIN**

I’ve talked about what Jews don’t believe in, but let’s dig in to what they do believe. Judaism, as a religion, didn’t truly get its start until after the destruction of the second temple in AD 70. Most Jews will disagree with this, but once the temple was destroyed, the entire foundation of sacrifices that were necessary for the practice
of their faith was gone. For the Jews to continue as a people, there had to be some sacrifices made, and sacrifice was one of the things that was sacrificed!

But the Jewish people as a people date back to God’s call to Abram. Please note this distinction, because it is very important, especially to Jewish people. One can be Jewish in both a religious and an ethnic sense, or in just a religious or an ethnic sense. In other words, there are some Jews who are Jewish ethnically, but they do not practice the Jewish religion. So, when we talk about the origin and background of Judaism, we have to include both the religious and the ethnic to fully understand our Jewish neighbors. Often, as I engage the church, people ask me questions prefaced by “So, when you used to be Jewish . . .” I always gently insist, “I am still Jewish.” Most people don’t get it, and there is dispute about this among Jews too, but most Jews will agree that being Jewish does not depend on being religious—unless, of course, being religious means you believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

Up until Abram, God interacted with mankind as a whole for the redemption of creation. But man refused to follow God and instead chose to follow the first deception of Satan when he tempted Eve to eat the fruit God had forbidden. “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4–5). The history of man from the garden (Genesis 2:8) to the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9) is one of man striving to achieve his own divinity apart from God. “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4). We know how that worked out! Unfortunately, many today, both Jews and Gentiles, still try to achieve their own divinity apart from God, and ultimately, it won’t work out any better for them than it did for the people in Genesis. That’s why He chose a people to be set apart for Him, to be His witnesses to His plan of salvation.

Abram was born in 2166 BC and, following God’s call, went to Canaan (which today is roughly the modern state of Israel) in 2091 BC. From that point on, God set apart the Jewish people, descendants of Abraham, from whom would come the Redeemer.
of the world. “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2–3). Man had always wanted to make a name for himself, to his own destruction, but God would make this people’s name great and from their seed would come God’s eternal redemption in Jesus Christ, born of a virgin, born a Jew.

So, if Jesus is Jewish, why do Jewish people make so much effort to not talk about Him? This is where we come to the origin of Judaism as a religion. I said that most Jews would disagree with my assertion that Judaism dates to the destruction of the second temple. Many would date it to the covenant God made with us on Mount Sinai after He delivered us from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 19–31). This is the foundation of Halakah, which means “the walk” and is an elaborate code of Jewish laws built on the Torah, rabbinic interpretation, and tradition.

Lutherans love the language of distinctions, so let’s talk about Torah. The word Torah is often translated as “law” or “instruction,” and while that is not a literal translation of the word, it serves the purpose. (More literally, Torah is the “arrow that hits the mark.”) In the narrow sense, Torah is the Five Books of Moses, sometimes called the Pentateuch.

In a wider sense, Torah is the whole of the Tanakh (the Hebrew Scriptures, which are more familiarly known as the Old Testament), plus the oral tradition, referred to as the oral Torah. The oral Torah is what was spoken to Moses along with what was given to Moses to write down. This includes what the Jews consider the 613 mitzvot (“commandments”), written down by Moses in the Torah, along with their interpretation, which tradition says was given to Moses and passed down orally throughout the generations until around AD 200. Then, Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi wrote it down in something called the Mishnah (“to study”). Following that, rabbinic scholars commented on the Mishnah, producing a series of commentaries called the Gemara (“completion”) around AD 500. These two collections together make up the Babylonian Talmud (“instruction”). There
is also a lesser regarded edition of the Talmud called the Jerusalem Talmud, which was finished around AD 400.

Now, this may seem quite odd and contrived to you, but remember, it is just this dedication to the oral transmission of the Scriptures and then the careful writing of them that give us such confidence in the accurate transmission of the Hebrew texts from antiquity. This was shown, and continues to be shown, by the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, first found in 1947, yet written 1,800–2,200 years prior. But even considering this, we also cannot minimize the effect that the destruction of the temple in AD 70 had on the rabbinic scribes and sages as they produced these various writings called Talmud that are today so fundamental in the exercise of Jewish faith. This leads, then, to tradition.

For Jewish people, tradition is considered an important part of the development of Jewish religious thought. And for the most part, these traditions developed as Jews had to adapt to living in different countries, among people of different cultures, in sometimes hostile environments. It all started in Babylon, and we brought that on ourselves.

Even though we were set apart by God as a people, we still sought our own way. God gave us Torah, Moses, and the prophets, yet we still chose might, reason, and man to achieve our goals. No amount of chastisement from God or His prophets would turn our hearts to Him, so He used the nations to discipline His children. In 605 BC, “The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah” into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (Daniel 1:2). In 587 BC, the first temple was destroyed, and Judah was in bondage again—not in Egypt this time, but in Babylon. And in Babylon and other nations in which Jews were forced to live, we had to adapt.

So, in Babylon, the tribe adapted. While holding on to Ezekiel’s assurance of God’s promise to bring them back into their land, they built synagogues for worship, prayer, and study; and when God’s promise was realized, the synagogue system continued. Not all the Jews returned to Judea following Cyrus’s decree, thus continuing the Diaspora. But the synagogues came with those who did return to Jerusalem. It was a tradition by then. The synagogues remained even with the rebuilding of the temple and the resumption of the
sacrificial system. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus often preached in synagogues in Judea, and the Talmud records that at the time of the destruction of the second temple, there were 394 synagogues in Jerusalem alone. The Scriptures also record that during the Diaspora, Paul went to synagogues in Antioch, Iconium, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, and Ephesus.

The synagogues became the local community where Jewish people would gather regularly. There, even before the Talmud was codified, the process of *pilpul* began. Pilpul means “to search” or “to debate.” It is a process of interpreting the Scriptures, and later the Talmud, that can involve a careful and sometimes excessive debate about distinctions, even over one word. (Remember, “two Jews, three opinions.”) Sometimes these debates can get heated and even extremely argumentative.¹

We can see an early example of pilpul as Abraham debates with God over the fate of Sodom (Genesis 18:22–33). We also witness Jesus engaging in this process at the Sermon on the Mount, where He talks about the given law, saying, “You have heard that it was said . . .” (Matthew 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43), and then says, “But I say to you . . .” (Matthew 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). That is pilpul. Jesus engages in this again in Luke 4, where He gives His interpretation of Isaiah (vv. 16–22). Jesus was doing what many rabbis of the time did, but the difference is how He did it and the response He received. Other rabbis would pilpul, but they would rely on what other great rabbis before them had said, referring to those rabbis for their authority. Thus, when the dispute began, it wasn’t personal. But note what the text says in Mark 1:22, “And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.” Jesus did not say, for example, “Hillel says,”² but instead, “I say to you.” So, when the dispute began, it was personal. Jesus intended it to be.

This process of pilpul makes the system of Jewish religious thought especially fluid. After AD 70, Jews had to adapt again to a

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¹ My wife had trouble early on with our congregation’s Bible studies, because we often engaged in pilpul that, from her perspective, degenerated into arguments and what she was afraid were hurt feelings. But generally, we can argue and walk away friends. It’s a tradition.

² Hillel was a famous rabbi who died in AD 10.
changing landscape. There was no temple, there were no sacrifices, and there were no pilgrimage festivals, for there was no place to which to make a pilgrimage. Soon (AD 132–135), the Romans sacked Jerusalem again and exiled all Jewish people, including the Jewish Christians, barring them from ever returning to Judea. The rift between the Jewish people and Jewish Christians was complete, and Judea ceased to be. The Roman emperor Hadrian erased Judea from the map and replaced it with Syria Palaestina, the first time the term Palestine would be used to describe the region. Hadrian sought to excise all Jewish connection to the land, so he reached back to a name of a people who had disappeared over seven hundred years earlier, Philistia, probably expecting that the Jews would disappear as a people too. The Jews had no home, no religion, and the Diaspora was complete. But they would not disappear. Judaism then became a response to these historic events; and rabbis, synagogues, and pilpul helped the tribe survive as a people.

**KEY TEACHINGS**

**Monotheism**

As you can no doubt imagine, there are probably as many “teachings” in Judaism as there are rabbis to teach. But one of the foremost teachings in Judaism is monotheism. There is only one God. Most scholars, when talking about monotheism, include Judaism, Islam, and Christianity as the three primary monotheistic religions. But most Jewish people privately do not believe that Christianity is monotheistic. Misunderstandings of the teaching of the Holy Trinity have led to the conclusion that Christians believe in three gods.

The teaching of the Trinity and the Messiahship of Jesus are such controversial topics in Judaism that it led to a formulation of faith that strictly denies both, and observant Jews profess this creed weekly in the Thirteen Principles of Faith (see below).

**Messiah**

One can spend a great deal of time attempting to show from the Tanakh the triune nature of God. But unfortunately, for a people
who love to argue the minutest of distinctions, the distinctions of the teaching of the triune nature of God seem to be lost on them. A resurgent interest in Orthodox Judaism among Jews has led rabbis to teach against a trinitarian understanding of God by including the phrase “noncompound” as one of the descriptors of the one omniscient, transcendent, and creator God. This, then, becomes the root of a secondary key teaching in Judaism, which is regarding the Messiah; namely, that Jesus is not the Messiah. This is due to the fact that those of us who profess Him to be the Messiah also profess Him to be the second part of a triune God.

Certainly, that was one of the challenges for the Jewish people in Jesus’ time. Today, in an effort to combat Christian attempts at conversion, there is an endeavor by some in the Jewish community to reclaim Jesus as essentially Jewish as they look at His ethical teachings. I have heard many times that Jesus was just a rabbi, and He never claimed to be God. This effort then rests on the vilification of Paul as the one who took Jesus’ words and created this new religion called Christianity. But the Jewish people of Jesus’ time were very clear on Jesus’ claims.

Early in His earthly ministry, Jesus declared Himself to be the Messiah. In John 10:22–38, Jesus is celebrating Hanukkah (“to dedicate”) at the temple, and in the course of His pilpul, He makes this bold statement: “I and the Father are one” (v. 30). The Jews who were there picked up stones to throw at Him because they understood that He was claiming to be God. “You, being a man, make Yourself God” (v. 33). Leviticus 24:14 lays down the penalty for blasphemy, and it is stoning. While the Jews at the temple that day may not have been enacting this penalty properly, they certainly understood that Jesus had claimed to be God, and they considered that blasphemy. Later, at Jesus’ trial before Caiaphas, there was no question in the mind of Caiaphas or the Council that Jesus claimed to be God (Matthew 26:57–68). It was for that claim that He was turned over to Pilate. Despite this, there were still many in Judea who believed Jesus’ claim. Now, one can argue that they didn’t fully understand the implications of what Jesus was claiming, but the notion of a divine Messiah was not unheard of at that time.
Today, however, Jewish notions of Messiah are as many as there are Jews, but most are agreed that if Messiah comes, He will not be divine. What changed? Again, we go back to the cataclysmic events of AD 70 and the sixty-five years that followed. Following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, many followers joined what they called “the Way”—Jewish people who believed that Jesus is the Messiah. They were still integral in the Jewish community, they went to synagogue as well as gathered together on Sunday to worship, and they were generally accepted as one of many different sects of the Jewish people. Yes, there was persecution of these first believers in Jesus, both by the Romans and by the Jewish authorities (witness the stoning of Stephen [Acts 7:1–60] and Saul’s persecution of the Church [Acts 8:1–3]). But generally, these persecutions were isolated and sporadic.

However, during the first revolt of the Jewish people against Rome (AD 66–70), followers of Jesus remembered Jesus’ teaching (recorded in Matthew 24) and took shelter outside the city. Many Jewish people were killed during this revolt, and the tragedies of Masada and the temple mount lived in the memory of the tribe. A rift with those who followed Jesus began, as their leaving Jerusalem was seen as a desertion from the tribe. Following Jesus then became synonymous with leaving the tribe.

This was exacerbated during the second revolt of Judea in AD 132–135, followed, of course, by Hadrian’s exile of all Jews from Judea and the changing of the nation’s name. Now, without Jerusalem, the center of the Church moved to Rome and grew more and more among the Gentiles, thereby losing much of its Jewishness. One can already see this happening as the Jerusalem Council wrestled with this inevitability (Acts 15). But by the end of the second revolt, the rift was complete between followers of Jesus and the remaining Jewish people. They were no longer considered part of the tribe. Therefore, much of what has become Judaism since the second century is a response to Jesus and a repudiation of Him as the Messiah.

These events also led to the important distinction made in Judaism today about the divinity of the Messiah. There have been many “messiahs” in Jewish history. The most recent and prominent around Jesus’ time was Judas Maccabeus, the leader of the Jewish people
during the revolt against Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 164 BC. The writer of the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees writes about Judas in clear messianic terms, even to the point of giving God and Judas the same appellation, the “savior of Israel” (1 Maccabees 4:30; 9:21).

But Judas died and did not return, and Israel was once again under the yoke of a foreign oppressor. This is why John 10:22 is so pivotal. Jesus is at the temple celebrating Hanukkah, the history of which is recorded in 1 Maccabees. There is a messianic expectation at this time of year because of Judas. And while some tried to stone Jesus for His blasphemy, others undoubtedly wondered if Jesus wasn’t Judas returned, the divine Messiah. But Jesus’ death gave them no such assurance, and His resurrection was rejected, because Rome was still on their necks.

So, in AD 132, along comes Simon bar Kokhba, who commanded the second revolt against Rome. A prominent rabbi, Akiva, had declared bar Kokhba as the Messiah, and bar Kokhba accepted the declaration. But of course, we have seen the results of that revolt; thereafter, the Jewish people were much more conservative about the concept of Messiah, to the end that, now, most Jews don’t expect the Messiah to actually come anymore, and if He does, He most certainly will not be divine.

Nevertheless, there have been at least seventeen people who were hailed as Messiah in Jewish history apart from Jesus, the most recent being Menachem Schneerson, the Chabad (an Orthodox Jewish Chasidic movement) leader who died in 1994. So, clearly, depending on the sect of Judaism, beliefs about Messiah are still varied. The Talmud relates that in every generation, one is born of Judah that is fit to be Messiah; it is only for God to determine if He will reveal Him. Thus, every mother who has a firstborn son believes her son to be the Messiah. Certainly, my mother did too. I wonder how long it took for me to disabuse her of that notion!

**TIKKUN OLAM**

A third key teaching of Judaism is *tikkun olam* (“repair of the world”), a phrase that comes from an ancient Hebrew prayer called the *Aleinu* (“it is our duty”) and is referred to in the Mishnah. It means different things to different sects of Judaism. Generally
speaking, though, in Judaism, there is no teaching of original sin, nor is there an understanding of the depravity of man, both of which are central teachings in the Christian understanding of the fall and our need for redemption. Therefore, Jews are often taught that they are obligated to do works to achieve a more perfect world. These works are expressed in terms of fulfilling the mitzvoth (the 613 commandments . . . if not literally, because that’s impossible since the Diaspora, then as they continue to be interpreted), and doing tzedakah (acts of “righteousness”). These have sometimes been defined as charitable acts of compassion, recognizing everyone’s dignity as part of God’s creation, caring for the suffering, pursuing peace and harmony both with our fellow Jews and the Gentiles around us, and seeking truth.

Some point to these tzedakah to explain why Jewish people are so often affiliated with “liberal causes.” On the whole, we who are followers of Jesus should resonate with such good works and recognize these as Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Or perhaps more simply put, they are the Beatitudes restated, which is certainly the heart of God as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures. We Christians have so much in common with our Jewish neighbors, yet history and humanity have conspired together to keep us apart.

The biggest challenge, though, in contemplating tikkun olam is the notion that we can perfect the world. We Christians know it is not our works that will perfect this world, but God Himself according to His purpose. Jesus’ death paid for our sin, and His resurrection gives us the sure hope of everlasting life, and until then, the Holy Spirit leads us in doing good works for His glory. Doing tzedakah is dependent on Jesus’ righteousness, not ours, but that in no way excuses us from doing them.

These three things—one God, differing perspectives on Messiah, and tikkun olam—are the bones on which most Jewish core religious values hang. But depending on whom you talk to and which rabbis they tend to follow, other key religious teachings include Halakah, Torah, the tribe, the importance of the Hebrew language in the communal life of Jews, and the importance of the modern State of Israel.
Halakah

As a reminder, Halakah means “the walk” and literally defines how we daily walk through life guided by a system of ethics and the study of God. Halakah, depending on how they are interpreted and how rigidly or loosely they are followed, determine the rhythm and pace of life and how we interact with those around us and with God. They inform our community and give structure to an otherwise chaotic existence. Halakah, for example, as it pertains to the Sabbath, gives us an opportunity to withdraw from the hectic pace of modern life and revel in the simplicity of home, family, food, and time with one another and with God. Imagine a community of people that spends an entire day every week with family and friends, eating together, studying the Scriptures together, and enjoying one another’s company while they reflect on God’s gift of creation. Now, this may seem unrealistic or idyllic to you, but that is the goal of Halakah, especially as it pertains to the Sabbath. It is true rest from the world. A great image of this kind of Sabbath is Acts 2:42–47:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

One of the hardest things about leaving this kind of community and joining the Christian Church is expecting the same kind of fellowship. Sabbath governed by Halakah can be seen as a forced thing we have to do. When we are forced to live like this, the Law can be a bit in our mouth that can be painful, and we want to bite it. But in the Church, the Holy Spirit leads and guides us to desire and rejoice in fellowship. Yet, it seems that too often we are too
busy to spend much time together. I’ve served in many congregations where I exit the vestry after a service to find that everyone is already gone. Our Jewish Christian congregation has a fellowship meal every Sunday after services where some, not all, stay around and enjoy one another’s company. It is called Oneg Shabbat, meaning “the delight of the Sabbath.” Occasionally, there is a chess or backgammon game played, and at other times, there is just a lot of catching up. We eat, schmooze, and relax, sometimes talking about the service, the readings, or the sermon. It is a delight.

All of Halakha is admirable and reflects the heart of God in its intent. But unfortunately, its practice is diminished because of that same bit. Without the grace of God that frees us from the obligation, we will never discover the joy of keeping God’s Law. Paul wrestles with this very truth in Romans 7:7–25, proclaiming the Law “holy and righteous and good,” yet saying, “When I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. . . . Who will deliver me from this body of death?” This is a wrestling match that Jewish people have as well, and it often leads them to simply abandon Halakha and conclude that they are “not religious.” Unfortunately, they are conditioned by history and tradition to never answer the question as Paul does: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Study of Torah

Along with the pilpul that accompanies Halakha, there is also a core teaching known as midrash, which is a seeking of answers to religious questions by closely studying the meaning and the words of Torah. Midrash falls into two categories, that of law and religious practice (midrash Halakah) and that of ethics or theology (midrash Aggadah). Aggadah means “telling” and is the basis for Haggadah (“the telling”), the primary text and liturgy for the Passover Seder.

How important it is to search the heart of God as He reveals Himself to us in the holy texts! The psalmist gives us this wonderful affirmation:

How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to Your word. With my whole heart I seek You; let me not wander from Your commandments! I have stored up Your word
in my heart, that I might not sin against You. Blessed are You, O LOR; teach me Your statutes! With my lips I declare all the rules of Your mouth. In the way of Your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on Your precepts and fix my eyes on Your ways. I will delight in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word. (Psalm 119:9–16)

Christians have a hard time understanding the Jewish perspective toward the Hebrew Scriptures. We use words to describe the Scriptures that show our high view of them, such as “inerrant,” “inspired,” or “the rule and norm for our faith.” While it is by no means universal, I have, in contrast, heard many Jewish people refer to the Hebrew Scriptures as Bubbe Meises (“grandmother stories”). This belies a relatively low view of the Scriptures. For example, key to the liturgy of the Passover Seder is the crossing of the Red Sea. Many Jewish people, though they may read that story every year at Passover, consider it to be a fanciful story. When helping our Jewish neighbors read the Hebrew texts that are crucial to our witness of faith, we can become dismayed that something so clear to us is not believed, even when it seems clearly shown. Please don’t let that discourage you but remember that God’s Word is a means by which God offers and gives His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation.  

THE TRIBE

The concept of haverim kol Yisrael (“the fellowship of all Israel”), or the tribe, is a statement of Jewish solidarity. This concept is what drives Jewish communities to eschew intermarriage, to struggle against assimilation, and to live together and provide for the needs of the community in the shape of philanthropy that builds Jewish hospitals, Jewish convalescent homes, Jewish homes for the aged, and well-developed social services.

3 Too many times, people take way too much credit for both salvation and rejection. I really resist the language of “I led so-and-so to faith.” The truth is that when someone comes to faith, it is all God’s work and none of ours. That doesn’t mean He doesn’t use us, but we dare not take credit for His work. I have also heard many people take credit (or blame) for someone not coming to faith. “I must have done something wrong.” When we adopt that behavior, we resist sharing so as not to do anymore damage. God uses us, but He will bring the harvest when and where He wills. The Holy Spirit is still working.
The tribe includes all Jewish people, regardless of their religious or cultural experience. Halakah defines Jewish identity either through the mother’s lineage or through a proper conversion, though conversion is largely discouraged except in the case of child adoption. This definition makes no distinction for Jews who cease to be religious or even for those who practice other religions. In fact, Eastern religions are quite popular among Jewish people; I have seen transcendental meditation taught in Jewish community centers. This tolerance of other religious expressions within Judaism, however, is not extended toward Jewish people who believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Practically speaking, though a strict interpretation of Halakah would not support this, Jews who believe in Jesus are no longer a part of the tribe.

Again, this is a response to a couple of things. Followers of Jesus were clearly part of the Jewish community in the one hundred years following Jesus’ resurrection. Certainly, no distinction was made by the Roman governors, so when they exiled all Jews from Judea, and wiped its name off the map, they included all Jewish people, including followers of Jesus. The separation that began with the destruction of the temple was nearly complete with the destruction of Jerusalem and Judea.

Then began not only the Diaspora but also the removal of Jerusalem as the center of the Christian Church. Up to this time, though it wrestled with how Gentiles might be brought into the Church, it still looked quite Jewish. With Jerusalem’s destruction, the Church became centered in Rome and stopped being culturally Jewish. From the perspective of the Jewish people, the Christian Church shifted from “us” to “them” more and more until, once the Talmud was completed, the rift was complete. The Jewish people came to believe that the Christian Church was continuing what Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, and Hadrian had tried to do: make them disappear.

And this is not without warrant. John’s Gospel, written toward the end of the first century and certainly after the destruction of the temple, shows the internal struggles among the Jewish people. This rancor that John shares is understandable as he struggles with his own people who dispute the resurrection and reject the Messiah. But once the Church became largely Gentile, no such understanding was
possible and John’s Gospel was read from outside the tribe as bitter antagonism developed between Christians and the Jews. Early Church writings denounced the Jews as having crucified Jesus, and therefore they were condemned to roam the world as a despised people.

And roam they did, as they settled in lands that were often largely hostile to their presence and became the scapegoats for all variety of malady that occurred. If the tribe did not stick together, it would certainly disappear. They came to view the Church as the adversary and as the destructive force that was trying to destroy them. Mass expulsions from Christian nations of Europe, the Crusades, the Inquisition, and even recent history taught the Jewish people that they dare not be tempted to assimilate into the lands where they were living.

The events of the Holocaust are important to this understanding of the tribe. Especially in Germany during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Jews had begun to assimilate more than in any other time in their history. They began to see themselves as Germans first and Jewish second. Many Jewish people stayed in Germany, even though they could see the antipathy toward the Jews growing, because they just couldn’t believe that anything would happen to them. They had served their country with honor during World War I and were respected members of their community. Needless to say, Adolph Hitler had a final solution for Europe’s Jews, and he did not distinguish between loyal German Jews, Christian Jews, or any other descriptive. Like Hadrian, he sought to eliminate all Jews from Europe, and had he succeeded, he no doubt would have extended that to the world. The Holocaust thus reiterated for the Jewish people that they need to stick together and be Jews first and that they should “never forget” this lesson.

Added to the great tragedy of the Holocaust is the Jewish people’s perspective toward the Church. They see the Holocaust largely as an action of the Church because of certain invective writings of Martin Luther. Holocaust museums often list Luther’s writings as part of the events that led up to the Holocaust, and Kristallnacht, the “night of broken glass” that commenced the wholesale persecution of the Jewish people in Germany, began on the eve of Martin Luther’s birthday. We’ll talk more about this later. But all these events lead
the Jewish people to conclude that it is “us against them.” Jewish people often ask me, “Why does the world hate us so much?” The only answer I can give is that Satan is the ruler of this world (John 12:31), and he was defeated at the resurrection by Jesus, the Son of God and a Jew.

**The Hebrew Language**

This focus on the survival of the tribe leads us to our last two topics that are often key to a Jewish upbringing. These topics are related, and the first is the Hebrew language. Jews are taught to read Hebrew from an early age, primarily so they can read the holy texts as they prepare for their *Bar Mitzvah* (literally, “son of the covenant”). This is a ceremony held when Jewish boys are thirteen years old, signifying that they are allowed to be counted for the minyan and are responsible for keeping the mitzvot. The amount of Hebrew the student must learn depends on how religious he is. Sometimes it is simply enough to read the text from the *bimah* (a raised platform in the synagogue where the readings are read during worship) without stumbling too much. Others memorize their portion and can translate it and give a teaching from it. But for centuries, Hebrew was primarily a ceremonial language.

The Jewish people have lived all over the known world since the Babylonian exile, which occurred around 598–538 BC, and they likely spoke various forms of Hebrew. But during the Hellenization of Judea, Greek became the common language of the people, so many Jews also learned Greek, and as early as the third century BC, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek. Likely, Jewish people were at least bilingual as they spoke both Greek, for the conducting of business and the like, and Aramaic, which is a form of Hebrew.

So, just as in the Diaspora, down through the centuries, the Jewish people learned the languages of the lands in which they lived and Hebrew became primarily a language of liturgy and literature. However, it did not die out as a spoken language completely but became a dialect as it was mixed with indigenous languages. Yiddish, which has elements of German, Slavic, and Hebrew, is one such language that originated in the ninth century AD among the Jewish people living in eastern Europe. Another such dialect is
Ladino, an Old Spanish language that combines many languages with Hebrew, including Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, and Arabic. It was spoken by Jews who lived in central and western Europe and the Mediterranean Basin.

Historically, Yiddish was spoken by Ashkenazi Jews, those who became a distinct community in central and eastern Europe. Ladino was spoken by the Sephardim, those Jewish people who eventually settled on the Iberian Peninsula of Spain and Portugal. Both communities retained Hebrew as a liturgical language but were divided by their spoken language.

Though these various Jewish communities developed language and customs according to the regions in which they lived, their persecution continued. In the middle of the nineteenth century, especially in central and eastern Europe and the Pale of Settlement (an area of western Russia and eastern Europe where Jews were allowed to live but prohibited from living outside of), they began a movement to revive their national homeland in Eretz Yisrael (“the land of Israel”), where Jews would be safe and no one could expel them. Zionism began, and with it the revival of Hebrew as a spoken and written language. The tribe needed to unite again under one language in the pursuit of their national homeland. Today, Hebrew is the spoken language of five million people worldwide. The largest concentration of Hebrew speakers is in Israel, and the second largest is in the United States.

Eretz Yisrael

Finally, the modern state of Israel and Jerusalem is central to much Jewish teaching. Returning to Eretz Yisrael has been part of daily Jewish prayer since the Diaspora. Passover Seders and Yom Kippur services have always concluded with the phrase “Next year in Jerusalem.” On Hanukkah, a game is played with a top reminding its players that “A great miracle happened there.” “There,” of course, is Israel. These daily and yearly prayers serve to remind the Jewish community in the Diaspora that they are living in exile. As always, there are differences between various Jewish communities as to the importance of Israel, but generally, the tribe has a homeland. And,
needless to say, but I’ll say it anyway, the land of Israel is a much debated issue, largely exacerbated by the ongoing Palestinian problem.

Zionism in the nineteenth century was largely a call for Jewish people to emigrate to what was then an area controlled by the Ottoman Empire. These calls were made by various Jewish scholars of the nineteenth century, but Theodor Herzl, a journalist and political activist, is largely credited with being the father of the Modern State of Israel, as he wrote widely about the movement and founded the World Zionist Organization.

There had been a Jewish population in what was called Palestine for many centuries, as Jews made their way back to the area after the Hadrian expulsion. From the seventh century AD, the area that is now Israel was under Muslim rule following the victory of the Arab Muslims over the Byzantine Empire at the Battle of Yarmouk. At that time, there were over thirty Jewish communities in Jerusalem, Hebron, Shechem, Haifa, Ramallah, and Gaza. But these communities were largely decimated during the Crusades.

Curiously, the Jewish people lived relatively peacefully under Muslim rule for centuries, and in fact, they were far more tolerated by their Muslim hosts than they ever were by the Christian nations they lived in. So immigrating to an area controlled by the Ottomans was not a problem. The first wave of Zionist émigrés began in 1882 as they made what is called *aliyah*. (Literally, “ascent”; aliyah is a term used for returning to Jerusalem but also connotes a spiritual ascension to the temple. It is derived from the language of the Scriptures, which always refer to “going up” to Jerusalem, which sits 2,400 feet above sea level.) “Making aliyah” continued through the following years until World War I. These immigrants were introduced to a different Israel than they expected. The land of milk and honey had become a land of sand and weeds. So, they began developing agricultural communities called *kibbutzim* (“gatherings”) to try to revive the land.

Following World War I, the area came under British rule, and the government made a commitment to the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Israel with the issuance of the Balfour Declaration.

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4 Still today, there is a sizable Jewish community in Turkey.

5 In fact, Mark Twain visited Israel in 1867 and described a land of desolation, empty of people.
Immigration to Palestine resumed, but tensions began to increase as World War II loomed. The Arab nations were aligned with the Axis powers, and Hitler’s Germany instigated Arab uprisings from 1936 to 1939. As England prepared for war with Germany, they sought to quiet this corner of their empire by severely limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine. Following the Holocaust, Jewish people began to immigrate to Palestine in defiance of the British law until, in 1947, the United Nations voted to partition Palestine into two new states—one Jewish and the other Arab, with Jerusalem to be internationally administered. The new nation was called the State of Israel and came into existence on May 14, 1948. Unfortunately, as the British mandate ended, neighboring Arab nations attacked Israel. Eretz Yisrael would not necessarily be the safe haven that the Jewish community had envisioned. Ironically, all the political posturing today about a “two-state solution” is the very solution that was rejected by the Arab states and Palestine in 1948.

Throughout the Diaspora, Jewish communities supported Israel as their homeland. In 1950, the government of Israel passed its Law of Return, which guarantees all Jews the right to immigrate to Israel and obtain Israeli citizenship. But a 1970 amendment to the law answered the question “Who is a Jew?” by stating that a Jew who has voluntarily changed his religion is not considered a Jew. Thus, Israeli citizenship is not offered to Jews who believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

As I was growing up, there were many American Jewish initiatives to buy Israel bonds, plant trees in Israel, assist with the reclaiming of the Israeli land by helping in the kibbutzim, and protest governments of Jews who were living in lands that did not allow them to emigrate, such as the Soviet Union. The American Jewish community was instrumental in providing civilians to keep Israel’s economy going in times of war, and trips to Israel became the tradition for teens following their Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah (a ceremony for girls similar to the Bar Mitzvah); it was first celebrated in 1922 and usually in more liberal denominations of Judaism).

This emphasis on supporting Israel was certainly more important for the generations immediately following the Holocaust. Though we still have Holocaust survivors telling their stories, there is great
fear that when that generation is gone, the Jewish community will fall into the same trap that Germany’s Jews did in the 1900s. Most Jews today could never imagine that the kinds of persecutions the Jewish community suffered in past centuries could be perpetrated now, and especially in America. But this comfort that the Jewish community feels in America is an illusion. In 2016, the Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish organization that confronts anti-Semitism, reported that anti-Semitic acts had tripled since 2012. Between January and March 2017, Jewish cemeteries in Philadelphia and St. Louis were desecrated, and there were over one hundred bomb threats against Jewish community centers and synagogues throughout the nation. Even my church’s building, which is clearly Christian, has been targeted twice by anti-Semitic activities. Although these sobering statistics would have at one time united Jews together, many American Jews today, while still participating in certain activities of the tribe, are less supportive of Israel and of the traditional activities of the tribe. Sadly, the only thing that seems to unite Jews today is that they don’t believe in Jesus.

**CREEDS/TENETS**

As you might guess, there is no formal creed, or even a set of beliefs that is common to all Jews. In fact, there is nothing that one must believe in order to be considered a Jew. Some have said that Judaism is a “religion of deed, not creed.” In other words, for Jews, it is more about how you act than what you believe, so there is a great emphasis on “doing the mitzvoth.” But, again, the most common belief among Jewish people is simply that Jews don’t believe in Jesus; it is the only thing that is nearly universal.

**The Shema**

If there is a universal creed at all, it is the Shema. The Shema is the most fundamental expression of Jewish faith, and it introduces many of the symbols of Judaism that we will talk about later. Its name comes from the first word of the prayer in Deuteronomy 6:4, *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad.* “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” This is usually followed by the
response, *Baruch shem k’vod mal’chuto l’olam va’ed.* “Blessed be His name whose glorious kingdom is forever and ever.” This response is not from the Scriptures but dates back to temple worship; whenever the high priest used the divine name, the people would respond with that *bracha* (“blessing”).

The Shema is actually a recitation of three sections of Torah (apart from the initial response above), including Deuteronomy 6:4–9:

Hear, O Israel: The **Lord** our God, the **Lord** is one. You shall love the **Lord** your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 11:13–21 repeats the theme of the first part, and adds rewards and punishments:

And if you will indeed obey My commandments that I command you today, to love the **Lord** your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, He will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And He will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full. Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; then the anger of the **Lord** will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the **Lord** is giving you. You shall therefore lay up these words of Mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and
when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the L ORD swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.

Finally, the full Shema finishes with Numbers 15:37–41, introducing a new symbol and encouraging observant Jews to remember the exodus from Egypt every day.

The L ORD said to Moses, “Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the L ORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all My commandments, and be holy to your God. I am the L ORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the L ORD your God.”

Observant Jews are to say the Shema twice a day, in the evening and in the morning. The twice-daily recitation reinforces the monotheistic view of God that Judaism professes and that we looked at above.

Early on, as part of my ministry training, I interned as a chaplain at a Lutheran nursing facility. Many of those dear saints had psalms or hymns on their lips as they passed. In a Jewish home for the aged, many have the Shema on their lips as they pass. They may have spent their lives not being religious, but often in dying, the Shema finds its way back into the hearts of those who learned it as children. I often pray that in those moments, which are an eternity to God, He is reminding them of everything in their life, the prayers, the Scriptures, and the traditions that pointed them to Messiah Y’shua.

M A I M O N I D E S ’ S T H I R T E E N P R I N C I P L E S O F F A I T H

If there is anything else in Judaism that operates as a creed or tenet, it would be the Thirteen Principles of Faith. These were
compiled by another famous rabbi and scholar named Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, or Maimonides. He is known in Talmudic circles as Rambam, which is simply an acronym for his name.

Born in Spain in 1135, Maimonides was truly a renaissance man before there was a Renaissance. He wrote the *Mishneh Torah* (not to be confused with the Mishnah discussed above) and *The Guide for the Perplexed*, published a commentary on the entire Mishnah, wrote several books on medicine, served as the rabbi for the Jewish community in Cairo, and served as the chief physician to the sultan of Egypt.

Shortly after his birth, a fanatical Muslim ruler came to power in Spain and offered Christians and Jews the opportunity to convert to Islam or be killed. Maimonides’s family fled to Morocco, then Israel, and finally settled in Egypt, where he studied.

The *Mishneh Torah* is a comprehensive code of Jewish law and considered his greatest contribution to the Jewish community; *The Guide for the Perplexed* is considered one of the greatest volumes of Jewish philosophy ever published; and his commentary on the Mishnah is still required study for yeshiva students. (A yeshiva, which means “sitting,” is an academic institution that focuses on the study of Talmud and Torah. Though it is a general term for any Jewish academic institution, including elementary schools, it also refers to a rabbinic seminary.) But it is his thirteen principles of faith that have become as much a creed as anything in Judaism.

Much like Lutheran churches use a hymnal that contains not just a compilation of hymns but also liturgies, prayers, and teachings, synagogues use a prayer book called a *siddur*. The word comes from the same root as the Passover *Seder* and simply means “order.” The siddur, then, is the order of worship.

The thirteen principles of faith are included in every siddur and are sung as a liturgical hymn during the Sabbath service. The tune may sound familiar, as it is the same used in *Lutheran Service Book* for the hymn “The God of Abraham Praise” (*LSB* 798). The tune is called *Yigdal* and is simply marked as “Hebrew,” with a setting dating to 1875. This is a hint as to its writer, namely that we don’t really know. Again, “two Jews, three opinions”—some say that Yigdal was written by Daniel ben Yehuda, a fourteenth-century rabbi
and judge; some say it is autographed in the conclusion by Yechezkel b’Rav Baruch, though nobody knows who that is; and finally, the last contender is Immanuel ben Solomon ben Jekuthiel, who was a thirteenth-century Italian-Jewish scholar and poet. Interestingly, in liturgical hymn circles, the tune is not attributed to any of these, but to Meyer Lyon, who was an eighteenth-century hazan in London. (Hazan is the cantor of a synagogue who leads the public prayers.) It is likely that each of these men had a part in the composition and setting of Yigdal. But, regardless of the composer, Yigdal is a treasured hymn of the Sabbath service.6

The Yigdal for Jews has become synonymous with the musical recitation of Maimonides’s Thirteen Principles of Faith, which are affirmed weekly by observant Jewish people. These thirteen are as follows:

1. I believe by complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is the Creator and Guide for all created beings. He alone made, makes, and will make all that is created.

2. I believe by complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is a Unity, and there is no union in any way like Him. He alone is our God, who was, who is, and who is to be.

3. I believe by complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is not a body, is not affected by physical matter, and nothing whatsoever can compare to Him.

4. I believe by complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is the first and is the last.

5. I believe by complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, to Him alone is it fitting to make prayer and to another prayer shall not be made.

6. I believe by complete faith that all the words of the prophets are true.

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6 We were blessed to have a hymn written for our first anniversary as a congregation by Brooks Anderson, called “The LORD Alone Is God,” which he set to the melody of Yigdal.
7. I believe by complete faith that the prophesy of Moses our teacher, may peace rest upon him, was true and that he was the father of all prophets that preceded him as well as all that came after him.

8. I believe by complete faith that the whole Torah now found in our hands was the exact same one given to Moses, may peace rest upon him.

9. I believe by complete faith that this is the Torah, and it shall not be changed and it shall not be replaced with another from the Creator, blessed be His name.

10. I believe by complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, knows every action done by each human being as well as all their thoughts, as it was said, “It is He that fashions their hearts together and He ponders all their deeds” (Psalm 33:15).

11. I believe by complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, rewards all who keep His commandments and punishes all those who transgress His commands.

12. I believe by complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he tarry in waiting, in spite of that, I will still wait expectantly for him each day that he will come.

13. I believe by complete faith that there will be a resurrection of the dead at the time that will be pleasing before the Creator, blessed be His name, and the remembrance of Him will be exalted forever and for all eternity.

Many of these principles of faith are things that we as Christians can attest to, while others show Maimonides’s rejection of Jesus as the Messiah and of the teaching of the Trinity. However, these principles of faith, if truly believed, give us many opportunities to teach about Jesus, and even principles 2 and 3 can be understood properly in the context of the Creator, who is Avinu, “Our Father,” the First Person of the Trinity.
St. Paul writes,

For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:9–13)

To fully love God’s first children, it is important to remember that we still see things “in a mirror dimly” and wait expectantly to see “the perfect.” It seems that our Jewish people see things in the same mirror, yet even more dimly than we do. Their mirror is obscured by culture and its reaction to persecution and all the traditions that have come as a result. Yet, by God’s grace, we can certainly clear some of that dim mirror, so that they might see what we see, however imperfectly.

**SACRED TEXTS**

Jewish people have referred to themselves as Am haSefer, “People of the Book,” since the destruction of the second temple in AD 70, when, following the end of the sacrificial system, their religious expression became one of study and prayer in the synagogue.

**THE WRITTEN TORAH**

As stated earlier, the Torah is the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. However, you might notice a few confusing differences between the text in your Bible and that of a Jewish friend or relative if you were to do a Bible study together.

As you probably know, the Scriptures did not originally contain chapter headings, titles, breaks, or even verse numbers. The Hebrew Bible in use today is called the Masoretic Text. It is the product of a school of scribes and Torah scholars that operated between the seventh and the eleventh centuries in Israel and Babylonia. They
meticulously copied the texts and added vowels and diacritical marks for chanting the Scriptures, as well as the chapter and verse notations found in today’s Hebrew Bible.

The oldest known copy of the Masoretic Text is the Aleppo Codex, written in the city of Tiberias, Israel, in the tenth century. Maimonides referred to the Aleppo Codex and its accuracy. But during the First Crusade and the siege of Jerusalem in AD 1099, the crusaders held the Aleppo Codex and other holy writings for ransom, along with Jewish survivors. Through a convoluted series of exchanges, the codex ended up in Aleppo, Syria, and was guarded by the Aleppo Jewish community until 1947, when the United Nations voted to partition Palestine into Israel and Palestine. The Arab uprising and ensuing riots in Syria resulted in the burning of the Jewish community’s ancient synagogue and presumably the Aleppo Codex. What was left was taken to Israel, though there is great controversy around this document and what happened to it. Fortunately, we do still have the Leningrad Codex, also written in Tiberias around AD 1008. This codex was corrected against the Aleppo Codex and is the oldest complete codex of the Masoretic Text. This is the text that most of our pastors who studied Hebrew would have read in their Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia.

But here is where your Bible study with your Jewish friend might get a little confusing. The verse numbering prepared by the Masoretes was changed slightly by Robert Estienne when he published the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments, in French in 1553. This numbering became the standard used in the publication of the Geneva Bible in English in 1560. Thus, the Bible you are used to has slight differences in the verse numbers. For example, Genesis 32:2 in your Old Testament (OT) is “And when Jacob saw them he said, ‘This is God’s camp!’ So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.” That same verse in the Masoretic Text (MT) is Genesis 32:3. As you can see, the difference is slight but can be a little confusing. There are four such differences in the written Torah, but it gets worse as you continue through the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures.

As we have said, there is a distinction between the written Torah and the oral Torah. The written Torah is, again, in the narrow sense, the first Five Books of Moses. Much like our churches use the
lectionary, which prescribes certain pericopes or sets of verses for public reading in the church, synagogues have a series of prescribed readings of the Torah broken down into weekly Torah portions, called parashahs. This practice of weekly Torah portions read in the synagogue dates back to the Babylonian captivity and the institution of synagogue services. But the system of weekly readings used today was developed by Maimonides in his Mishneh Torah. He based his division of the Torah on the Masoretic Text of the Aleppo Codex. This division assures the reading of the entire written Torah in the span of a year, beginning and ending on Simchat Torah (“rejoicing of the Torah”) in the autumn.

Each parashah is named for the first major word in the Hebrew text of the portion. So, for example, the first parashah of the year is Genesis 1:1–6:8 and named Bereshit, which simply means “in the beginning.” Generally, the Chumash (a copy of the Torah in book form rather than a scroll) will show these divisions clearly. The Sefer Torah (a Torah handwritten on parchment, hand copied with a quill dipped in ink) is used for the weekly Torah reading during worship.

**The Tanakh (or Mikra)**

The Tanakh is the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures (or Old Testament), including the Torah. Tanakh is not a word, but an acronym: TNK. The acronym stands for Torah (“Law”), Nevi’im (“Prophets”), and Ketuvim (“Writings”). These books were well established as Holy Scripture by the first century BC.

The Old Testament you are familiar with is largely arranged according to emphasis. There is the Torah, seen as a foundation for all the books, in both the Old and New Testaments, that follow. Then there are twelve historical books, organized according to three distinct eras: the Pre-Kingdom Era (Joshua, Judges, and Ruth), Kingdom Era (1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles), and Post-Kingdom Era (Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther). Five poetical books follow (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon). Then the prophetic books are included, chronologically subdivided into Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel) and the twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel,
Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi).

The Tanakh is arranged thematically. We’ve already talked about the Torah. Nevi’im is the second section of the Tanakh and contains two subsections, the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets. The Former Prophets include the narrative books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, while the Latter Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets in the same order as above.

Finally, the third section of the Tanakh is Ketuvim, which is divided into three sections. The first is poetic books, including Psalms, Proverbs, and Job, called Sifrei Emet (another acronym of their three titles). Following that is Chamesh Megillot (“Five Scrolls”), which includes Song of Solomon, the Book of Ruth, the Book of Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and the Book of Esther. These scrolls are read over the course of a year on special holidays. The third section is other books, including Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. The Tanakh is largely written in Hebrew, but this last section includes books with significant portions written in Aramaic, which was the common language of Israel during the time of Jesus.

Interchangeable with the acronym Tanakh is the word Mikra, meaning “that which is read,” because these texts were read publicly following the Babylonian captivity. In Jewish worship, following the Torah parashah, a haftorah (“parting”) is read, which is a section of the Nevi’im. This is what Jesus was doing in Luke 4:16–21:

And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”
So, if you are able to have a Bible study with your Jewish friend and the verses you are looking for seem unfamiliar, simply look up or down a couple of verses. You will find what you are looking for. And if you have trouble finding a particular book, take a look at the table of contents. The books are in a different order, but they are there. Prayerfully, you, too, will be able to show your friend what Jesus was telling the folks in His synagogue that day. Prophecy has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God.

**The Oral Torah (Mishnah)**

Though it is not part of the canon of Hebrew Scripture, the oral Torah is also considered one of the sacred texts of Judaism. It may seem odd to call something oral “a text,” but remember, Jewish tradition says that when God gave Moses the words to write, He also gave him much more, including interpretation of the text that Moses handed down orally from generation to generation. This oral tradition was written down in AD 200 by Rabbi ha-Nasi and is called the Mishnah.

It also may seem unusual that such an oral tradition would become sacred text, but the New Testament gives us a glimpse of something similar. In John 21:25, John writes, “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

Some of those things that John didn’t write were probably written by Paul in his various epistles. But according to John’s testimony, there was just too much to write. One could speculate, though, that many of Jesus’ deeds were told in stories by those who witnessed them, and for a time were handed down. But the Church, as it grew among the nations, did not have such an oral tradition, so the emphasis was on actual written words, like Torah, and John, and Paul’s epistles. Had the Church remained within a Jewish context, and had there not been such a great rift between the Jewish people and the Church, one can only imagine what Rabbi ha-Nasi might have written in the Mishnah!
THE TALMUD

While not considered perhaps as sacred as the Mikra, or Tanakh, the Talmud is still revered and studied as sacred texts. The Talmud contains the Mishnah (the oral Torah) and its interpretation in the Gemara. These together are several volumes (in standard print, they total 6,200 pages) and provide a lot of material for study, discourse, and the fluid interpretation of law that allows the Jewish community to survive in the many lands it has lived.

There are two editions of the Talmud: the Jerusalem Talmud, compiled in the fourth century AD in Galilee, and the Babylonian Talmud, finished around AD 500 and considered the more authoritative.

THE MIDRASH

Other texts important to Jewish life in its various forms are the Midrash, Responsa, Septuagint, and the Zohar. The Midrash, meaning “to seek, study, or inquire,” is a grouping of sermonic material from the first ten centuries. It serves as interpretive material and commentaries on both the written and oral Torah, as well as specific passages of Hebrew Scriptures. The word d’rash comes from this and has come to mean “sermon.”

THE RESPONSA

The Responsa, also known as She’elot u-Teshuvot (“questions and answers”), is important as a book of case law that covers seventeen hundred years and reflects the many changes in Jewish law or Halakah as it has come to evolve following the exile from Jerusalem and the Diaspora. It is also an important text for Jewish people as they seek to explore the cultural changes that have existed over that time period.

THE SEPTUAGINT

The Septuagint is a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures in Koine Greek, the common language of Alexandria, Egypt, and the eastern Mediterranean in the time of Jesus. The New Testament was primarily written in Koine Greek. Also called the Greek Old Testament, this translation is quoted in many New Testament passages, especially in Paul’s epistles. Tradition says that the Septuagint was translated by a group of seventy Jewish scholars, so the name of the volume is
“The Translation of the Seventy” and is often denoted simply by the Roman numeral LXX. An interesting story is related in the Talmud that King Ptolemy once gathered seventy-two elders. He placed them in seventy-two chambers, each of them in a separate one, without revealing to them why they were summoned. He entered each one’s room and said, “Write for me the Torah of Moshe your teacher.” God put it in the heart of each one to translate identically as all the others did.

**The Zohar (“Splendor,” “Radiance”)**

The Zohar is the primary work of Kabbalistic Judaism and is a compendium of Jewish mystical thought. Also a commentary on Torah and other sections of Hebrew Scripture, it focuses on the more mystical interpretations of those texts. It purports to be the work of Shimon bar Yochai, a second-century rabbi, who, legend has it, hid in a cave from the Romans for thirteen years and, while studying Torah, was inspired by the prophet Elijah to write the Zohar.

The Zohar was published in Spain in the thirteenth century by Moses de León, and while he maintains that the Zohar was first written by Shimon bar Yochai, most scholars agree that León was its author. While authorship is disputed, and therefore the Zohar is considered apocryphal (of doubtful authenticity, though widely circulated as true), many Jews see some wisdom in studying the Zohar.

The discipline of Kabbalah (“receiving,” “tradition”) derived from these writings, as did Gematria, the system of numbering the Jewish letters in the *aleph-bet*⁷ to study meanings of words with equal numbers.

**GOD**

Jews are monotheistic and believe in one God. But they have many names for God, and they are very careful about how they use them. Exodus 20:7 says, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.” We recognize this as the Second Commandment.

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⁷ The first two letters in the Greek alphabet are *alpha* and *beta*, from which we form the word *alphabet*. The first two Hebrew letters are *aleph* and *bet*, from which comes the word *aleph-bet*. 
Jewish people take it very seriously, to the end that, during the time of the second temple, the Jewish people had developed a practice of not pronouncing the name of God at all, out of respect and for fear of breaking this commandment.

As I was growing up and learning to read Hebrew, whenever I came across the tetragrammaton (the four Hebrew letters transliterated as YHWH, traditionally pronounced Yahweh, that form the name of God), I was taught to say, “Adonai,” which means “my Lords.” Therefore, later, when I was taking Hebrew as a student at the seminary and had to read aloud in class, I would automatically do the same. My professor, Dr. Bartelt, would stop me and say, “Parviz, read that again.” I read it the same way again, and he would stop me and say, “Parviz, read that again.” By that time, I realized what he was getting at, but it was still hard for me to say, “Yahweh.” Dr. Bartelt would then say, “God gave us His name so that we could know Him and use His name.” So true, but traditions are hard to break.

In English translations of the Scriptures, the tetragrammaton is replaced with the word LORD printed in small caps. Although it is usually pronounced “Yahweh,” sometimes it is pronounced “Jehovah.” However, that is an error in pronunciation, resulting from a Masoretic addition of the vowels of the word Adonai to the consonants of YHWH, probably due to this tradition.

Rabbinic Judaism teaches that there are seven names of God that are so holy that once they have been written, they may never be erased. These are YHWH, El (“God”), Elohim (“Gods”), Eloah (“God”), Elohei (“My God”), El Shaddai (“God Almighty”), and Tzvaot (“of Hosts,” which you would recognize from the liturgy as “Sabaoth”). It has even become tradition to write the English word God as “G-d,” for the sake of respect. Some Jewish translations simply insert the word “HaShem” (which means “the Name”) for YHWH. Jewish people are adapting to the digital culture too, as I have seen disclaimers on Jewish websites that say, “Please note: This page contains the Name of God. If you print it out, please treat it with appropriate respect.”

I have come to understand what Dr. Bartelt tried to beat into my head. Look at the Aaronic Benediction that you probably hear a variant of most Sundays at the end of a church service. In our
congregation, I chant this benediction in Hebrew and then speak it in English. Traditionally, the chanting of this *Birkat Kohanim* (“priestly blessing”) comes with outstretched arms and hands in the shape of the Hebrew letter *shin* (which looks a little like a “W”) to represent one of the names of God, Shaddai (“Almighty”).

Think of the context of this blessing. Moses goes to Mount Sinai and asks to find favor in God’s sight.

And the Lord said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in My sight, and I know you by name.” Moses said, “Please show me Your glory.” And He said, “I will make all My goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you My name ‘The Lord.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” He said, “you cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live.” And the Lord said, “Behold, there is a place by Me where you shall stand on the rock, and while My glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen.”

(Exodus 33:17–23)

Then later, God instructs Moses to tell Aaron that he is supposed to speak this blessing over the people.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put My name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

(Numbers 6:22–27)

What a mixed message! “You cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live.” Yet twice in Aaron’s blessing over the people,

8 Incidentally, it is from this priestly blessing that Leonard Nimoy, who was Jewish, developed the iconic hand gesture that his character Mr. Spock used with his blessing “Live long and prosper” in Star Trek.
God wants us to see His face. It took me a while, but I figured out that the only way we can see God’s face and live is to see Y’shua, Jesus. The incarnation is the fulfillment of this blessing. And as followers of Y’shua, God puts His name on us. We get to use it. No wonder Bartelt was such a pain!

Unfortunately, this is a mystery that eludes the Jewish people. Though they hear this blessing regularly, they cannot understand it. And so they live carefully, for fear of using God’s name in vain, “For the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.” No amount of care with a piece of text will take the place of a personal relationship with our Father, God, who puts His name on us.

It is popular in ecumenism (promoting or tending toward worldwide Christian unity or cooperation) to include Judaism and Islam and to make such statements as, “We all worship the same God.” I have heard this from many who minister to the Muslim community, and I have heard it occasionally as it relates to the Jewish people. One can never make the argument that Muslims worship the same God as Christians. “God” is a generic term that we have come to use to describe YHWH, as long as we capitalize the G. But YHWH is not Allah. We must all agree that God is defined by the characteristics that He reveals to us. He tells us who He is. And certainly, YHWH and Allah are two different gods. But the issue is a little murkier when we talk about the Jewish people. Certainly they worship YHWH, just as we do, don’t they? I have to say that the answer is “No,” and they would agree, especially those who still believe in God.

Two gods of the same name with different characteristics are not the same god. Jewish people do not worship YHWH as He has revealed Himself to us. They are seeing God in that same mirror, but again, more dimly than even we do. The rejection of the Trinity; the rejection of the Father’s fulfillment of Scripture; and the rejection of Jesus because of persecution, culture, or tradition have given our Jewish people spiritual cataracts. Though they may not be blind, they do not see well. Today, cataract surgery is a relatively easy procedure. If only it were that easy to remove the spiritual cataracts from which the Jewish people suffer!
HUMANITY

Traditional Jewish teaching on the nature of man is that man is created by God and in His image. Because God has no physical substance, being made in the image of God means that we have the ability to perceive, understand, and discern. Maimonides equated that to our intellect, which we can use to discern without the use of physical senses.

Man is created with two natures, good and evil. The good is a moral conscience that some argue one does not acquire until after the Bar Mitzvah, when the child becomes responsible for keeping the mitzvoth. The bad is not evil in the usual sense but is a selfish desire to fulfill one’s own needs. The conscience, then, prompts us to balance this selfish desire with appropriate care for others.

Jewish teaching usually does not include a personal Satan, and Satan is often viewed as the personification of our own selfish desires. There is no belief in original sin in Judaism. Though Jewish teaching does concede that we are all descended from Adam, we do not bear any guilt for our ancestor’s choices. Free will is an important part of this perspective; it is taught that God gives us free will, and we do have the ability to choose the good, but we are all responsible for the choices that we make. The concept of tikkun olam (repairing or perfecting the world), then, comes into this discussion of the Jewish perspective on human nature (see above).

LAW AND ETHICS

We’ve touched on this a bit already in our discussion above about Halakah. To fully understand this comprehensive set of laws, you must understand the emphasis placed on the community. Halakah is in place to allow a community of people to live in harmony with one another, as much as any system of laws and justice.

There are rules about every aspect of Jewish life, and such laws serve to keep Jewish people active and part of the community. Halakah comes from three different sources: Torah, the rabbis, and from tradition. Regardless of the source, all Halakah is binding, but in cases of competing laws, where the law comes from determines how the rabbi will divide the law and place its emphasis.
So, the first source, and that which takes precedent, is the laws commanded in the Torah, called mitzvot d’oraita (“laws from the Torah”). These are the 613 commandments previously described. While not everyone is in agreement on the substance of the 613 commandments, all attest to the number, because 613 is the numerical value of the word Torah.

Gematria, the system of numbering the Jewish letters in the alphabet to study meanings of words with equal numbers, is a rabbinic practice in the Talmud that has also become a Kabbalistic practice, using it to search for the mystical meaning behind certain words. Gematria has been used commonly in Jewish life, especially with the word chai, which can mean “life,” “alive,” or “living” and has a numerical equivalent of eighteen. So, then, eighteen has become a “lucky” number for Jewish people, who will often give gifts of money in multiples of eighteen.

Maimonides is responsible for the most accepted list of the 613 commandments; in the Mishneh Torah, he listed all of the mitzvoth and then broke them down into categories.

The mitzvoth are divided into 248 positive commandments (things you are supposed to do) and 365 prohibitions. There are many gematrial observations in the Talmud and subsequent rabbinic teaching around these numbers too, of course. But all of the commandments cannot be kept, because many of them have to do with the temple sacrificial system and the theocratic state of Israel. Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, a renowned rabbi and scholar of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, also known as Chofetz Chaim (“seeker of life”), took that list and broke it down into 77 positive commandments and 194 prohibitions that we can observe today. That still leaves us with 271 commandments to keep in order to observe Halakah. Quite a tall order!

A second source of Halakah is rabbinic, called mitzvot rabbanan (“laws from the rabbis”), and they include laws that are put in place by the rabbis to avoid breaking the mitzvot d’oraita. These are called “fences” around the Torah. An example of these laws would be the commandment to not touch money. That is not a Torah law. But the spending of money on a Sabbath is, so rabbis have added the fence of touching money, because if you can’t touch money, then you can’t
spend it. I suppose that would include the touching of credit and debit cards, too, in this day and age!

A third source is tradition, or customs, called minhag (“to follow”). Sometimes customs come into being that are so entrenched in Judaism they then become a law. An example of this is the breaking of a glass during the wedding ceremony. Apparently, that custom came about among the Jews living in Germany who saw their German neighbors doing this and incorporated it into their own customs. The Germans were doing it to ward off demons, by trying to convince the demons that what was going on was a tragedy and not a celebration, so they would not interfere. The Jews began to do this and added their own interpretation to it, so that, depending on who you ask, it is a reminder of the destruction of the second temple, or a symbolic breaking by the groom of his ties to his singleness and his declaring commitment to his bride.

Halakah is a system of Jewish laws and penalties, but everyone in a Jewish community puts themselves under the laws of the country or society in which they live, and there is no effort to enforce Halakah among the non-Jews that live around the Jewish community. It is understood that the local law of the land is preeminent.

There is no comprehensive list of all the mitzvoth included from all three sources. Part of the challenge is that each Jewish community has a rabbi who is charged with applying the law in cases of dispute. This rabbi is the authority in his community, but only in his community. Beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, rabbis sought to “reform” Judaism and started to reject the rulings of earlier rabbis regarding Halakah. This led to various sects of Judaism and what we might call denominations of Judaism. We’ll talk more about this later.

All this code of law has led to the description of Judaism as “ethical monotheism.” As pertains to ethics, there is clearly, especially in mitzvoth d’oraita, a divine moral law. It is the keeping of this divine moral law that leads to all other laws of the rabbis as well as to tradition. So the system of ethics that has emerged pertains to justice, equality of all before the law, chesed (“loving-kindness”), social welfare, and the ideals of peace and freedom.
When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God. You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by My name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:9–18)

This system of ethics has led to a couple of principal ideals in Judaism. Tzedakah (“justice,” “righteousness”) is usually considered to mean “charity,” which has led to a strong system of homes for the aged, schools, hospitals, and welfare agencies. Tikkun olam, which we have discussed at length above, results in a strong Jewish presence in social justice movements and the protections of rights for other minority groups. This focus on human rights has led Judaism to conclude that no religion has “truth,” but that each is reflective of its own culture and traditions, and each culture has its own path to righteousness and its understanding of God. It is therefore very difficult to discuss any concept of a universal truth with Jewish people, because they are apt to agree with you and will argue that what is true for you is not necessarily true for others.

The Talmud records a discussion with Rabbi Hillel that has been used to summarize the Jewish system of law and ethics. A man once
told him, “Teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.” To that, Hillel responded, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. This is the entire Torah and the rest is commentary. Now go learn.”

**SIN**

All violations of law are considered sins in Judaism, but there are many different kinds of sins, and sins are a part of living. Judaism teaches that people are born with an inclination to do evil called *yetzer hara* (“the evil inclination”). That evil is not necessarily evil as we think of it, but it is a propensity to do selfish acts for one’s own gain.

Though Judaism teaches that God gives men free will, children are not responsible, necessarily, for their sins, because they have not yet been given the *yetzer hatov* (“the good inclination”). Children become responsible for their sins when boys turn thirteen and have a Bar Mitzvah, and girls turn twelve and have a Bat Mitzvah. Once having received the responsibility to keep the mitzvot, then yetzer hatov reveals itself as a moral conscience, and they are able to choose to do good. When they do not, then they sin.

There are different words for different sins as well as different penalties for different sins, as in any system of law and justice. In the American civil system of justice, we use terms like *misdemeanor* and *felony* to describe different levels of sin. We even subdivide murder into manslaughter, second-degree and first-degree murder, and whether it is premeditated or based on circumstances. Much the same can be said for sins as taught in Judaism, which is no wonder, since our American system of jurisprudence was based on the same Scriptures as Jewish law.

There is *avera* (“transgression”), of which there are three levels: intentional abuses of the law, accidents, or unawareness of the law. A person who commits a sin intentionally commits the most serious sin. A person who commits a sin accidentally is still responsible, but his sin is considered less serious. And a person who is unaware of the law is not held accountable. The legal principle “Ignorance of the law excuses no one” comes from Roman law, not Jewish law. However, this principle generally only applies to those who come into Judaism through assimilation or conversion, and, thereafter, it is
each person’s responsibility to study and know the law. The rabbi of the community is there to help, and he is the one who will also teach each community’s understanding of the law and the penalties for sin.

When the temple was in existence, there were clear sacrifices that each person had to make to atone for his sins, and then restitution was ordered. The pilgrimage festivals of Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) were put into place to bring all Jews to the temple annually to offer such sacrifices. After the destruction of the temple, the sacrificial system ceased and rabbinic Judaism began, with its complex system of laws and punishments. The Talmud and the rabbis then became the arbiters of atonement, and repentance became the new sacrifice. We’ll talk more about this later. But overarching all of this became a perspective of God that is ultimately forgiving. The Talmud describes God’s response to sin and repentance in the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, based on Exodus 34:6–7,

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

God spoke these words to Moses following the tragedy of the golden calf in response to Moses’ belief that God could never forgive Israel for their sin. God’s Thirteen Attributes of Mercy according to the Talmud are as follows.

1. The Lord! God is merciful before a person sins! Even though aware that future evil lies dormant within him.
2. The Lord! God is merciful after the sinner has gone astray.
3. God (El) is a name that denotes power as ruler over nature and humankind, yet God’s mercy sometimes surpasses even what His creation expects or deserves.
4. God is compassionate and is filled with loving sympathy for human frailty. He does not put people into situations of extreme temptation and eases the punishment of the guilty.

5. God is gracious and shows mercy even to those who do not deserve it, consoling the afflicted and raising up the oppressed.

6. God is slow to anger and gives the sinner ample time to reflect, improve, and repent.

7. God is abundant in kindness toward those who lack personal merits, providing more gifts and blessings than they deserve; if one’s personal behavior is evenly balanced between virtue and sin, God tips the scales of justice toward the good.

8. God is truth and never reneges on His word to reward those who serve Him.

9. God is the preserver of kindness for thousands of generations and remembers the deeds of the righteous for the benefit of their less virtuous generations of offspring (thus we constantly invoke the merit of the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob).

10. God is the forgiver of iniquity and forgives intentional sin resulting from an evil disposition, as long as the sinner repents.

11. God is the forgiver of willful sin and allows even those who commit a sin with the malicious intent of rebelling against and angering Him the opportunity to repent.

12. God is the forgiver of error and forgives a sin committed out of carelessness, thoughtlessness, or apathy.

13. God is one who cleanses and is merciful, gracious, and forgiving, wiping away the sins of those who truly repent; however, if one does not repent, God does not cleanse.
While we understand that God is a merciful God who forgives, He is also a just God who demands a penalty for sin. When God gave these words to Moses, it was because Moses interceded to Him for the people. Any discussion of sin, repentance, and forgiveness should always be accompanied by the need for intercession, and God Himself, in His mercy and justice, interceded for us in the person of Y’shua, Jesus, who paid that penalty and by His death, God forgives us all our sins.

SALVATION

Salvation is not a word that Jews habitually use or even talk about. We, as Christians, are taught that we are made righteous by Jesus, who kept the Law for us and was sacrificed in our stead. Traditional Jewish teaching says that we make ourselves righteous through repentance. Therefore, yes, we may sin, but Jewish teaching says all we have to do is repent, and God forgives us and makes us righteous. That repentance should be accompanied by good works in an effort to make restitution to those we may have harmed, so that by repentance and good works, we make ourselves righteous. Therefore, according to this teaching, there is no need for an outside force, even God, to save us. We save ourselves.

This concept of salvation has been great fodder for Jewish anti-missionaries. Jewish people find it very difficult to reconcile the Christian belief that “being a good person” does not get you into heaven. As a response to Christian missionary activity among the Jewish people, the Jewish community spends large amounts of money on anti-missionary activities and groups like Jews for Judaism and Aish HaTorah. Both organizations profess that Jews would not convert to Christianity if they simply learned to be better Jews. Aish is primarily educational in nature, while Jews for Judaism can be quite confrontational, especially via the Internet and on the streets where our volunteers and those from other organizations are found.

As you can no doubt guess, Jews for Judaism is a response organization to Jews for Jesus, the largest Christian missionary organization that proclaims the Gospel in a culturally Jewish way. There are many such Christian outreaches that stem from the Reformed tradition.
Lutherans in Jewish Evangelism (also known as Burning Bush Ministries and The Apple of His Eye) brings the Gospel to Jewish people with a culturally Jewish and distinctively Lutheran perspective.

**AFTERLIFE**

As usual, Jews have many different opinions about what happens when we die. Traditional Jewish teaching as reflected by the Talmud indicates the existence of a heaven and hell similar to the Christian tradition, yet also quite different. Today, however, most rabbis teach a very different concept of life after death.

Speculation about an afterlife in Jewish theological history began, as with much of Jewish thought, with the destruction of the second temple. Once the temple was destroyed, the Jewish people stopped having hope in a better life, and the rabbis began to speculate about the afterlife. Rabbis concluded that the temple was allowed to be destroyed because of the sinfulness of the people, yet they struggled to explain why so many good Jewish people were allowed to suffer. So, they began to speculate about *Olam haBa* (“the world to come”).

The Talmud teaches that the world we live in is simply an ante-chamber that leads to Olam haBa. Though the righteous suffer here in this world, they will be rewarded in the world to come. Some have even concluded that the righteous here would be made to suffer more, so that their reward would be even greater.

Olam haBa has been described as a return to the *Gan Eden* (“Garden of Eden”), to which the soul will ascend and wait for a bodily resurrection. So if Gan Eden is the reward for the righteous, what is the fate of the wicked? It would seem that the counterpoint to Olam haBa must be *Sheol*. “If I ascend to heaven, You are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, You are there!” (Psalm 139:8).

Certainly, the Hebrew Scriptures describe Sheol as a place to go down to, but it is a place where all souls go, both the righteous and the wicked. When Jacob thought his son Joseph was dead, he responded to his children’s attempt to comfort him with, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning” (Genesis 37:35).

Thus, the Talmudic teaching began to develop about Sheol as a place where all souls go after death, both the righteous and the wicked.
Now remember, traditional Jewish teaching is that the wicked can make themselves righteous by repentance. So, not many go to Sheol as wicked. Some distinctions are made for the “truly righteous,” who may ascend directly to Gan Eden, or the “truly wicked,” who are sent directly to Gehinnom (“valley of Hinnom”). But for most, all descend to Sheol. The Talmud teaches that there is a period when the soul in Sheol is mourned for a year and Kaddish (from the root that means “holy”) is said for a person’s deceased loved ones daily for eleven months and then annually on the anniversary of their death.

Following the twelve-month period in Sheol, God then releases the soul to Gan Eden. There, all souls await the bodily resurrection and the messianic age of a perfected world. However, those who remain unrepentant are sent to Gehinnom, where they are utterly destroyed and cease to exist, or, as Maimonides taught in Mishneh Torah, they experience eternal damnation.

There is no consensus among Jewish people about any of these speculations. Growing up in an observant community, I never heard anything about there being a literal heaven or hell, Olam haBa or Gehinnom. That was reserved for the Ultra-Orthodox or the Kabbalists. Interestingly, in their philosophy, ceasing to exist was the worst thing that could happen to you following your time in Sheol, yet mainstream Judaism today (if there is such a thing) professes the belief that after death, you simply cease to exist. The emphasis is placed on what you do while you are alive and not on what (hypothetically!) might happen to you when you die. Eternal life becomes how the community remembers you after you have gone. The Kaddish prayer for the deceased continues in the annual remembrance of your loved one, and as long as that is done, then their life and memory continue. This, then, is the significance of the Yahrzeit (Yiddish for “time of year”).

The Yahrzeit is the annual remembering of a loved one by reciting the Mourner’s Kaddish and lighting and burning a Yahrzeit candle for twenty-four hours. When the departed are remembered in the midst of the community, then their eternal life is continued.

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9 Gehinnom is the Hebrew name for Gehenna, a cursed valley outside of Jerusalem where children were sacrificed. It therefore became the name for the destination of the wicked after death.

10 This concept of descending into Sheol came into Christianity as the Roman doctrine of purgatory.
This remembrance is also displayed as little piles of stones on the headstone of loved ones. This is a public reminder that they are being remembered.

PRAYER/WORSHIP

KADDISH

Kaddish, and especially the Mourners’ Kaddish, is an integral prayer sequence in the life and rhythm of the Jewish community. And there are many such prayers.

Observant Jewish people come together for worship daily. They pray three times a day using three different liturgies that can be found in the siddur. This dates back to the Babylonian captivity when Jewish people, exiled from the temple, began to gather together for the daily prayers to remember the daily sacrifices that were offered. The Talmud teaches that the prayer cycle was given by our patriarchs; Abraham introduced the morning prayer, Isaac the afternoon prayer, and Jacob the evening prayer.

Much like the Lutheran liturgical services of Matins, Vespers, and Compline, observant Jews have Shacharit (“morning light”), Mincha (“present,” named for the meal offering at the temple), and Ma’ariv (“bringing on night”). Additional to these daily prayer services are Musaf (“additional”) on the Sabbath and other holy days and Ne’ila (“closing”) on Yom Kippur.

The Jewish day begins at sundown, based especially on the account of creation and the biblical formula of “There was evening and there was morning, the first day.” So the first service of the Jewish day is Ma’ariv, then Shacharit, then Musaf (on the Sabbath and other holidays), and then Mincha. The evening and afternoon services include the prayers and are a little shorter than the morning service, which I remember being almost four hours long. As a child, I would sit in the back with my mother behind the mechitzah (“partition” or “division”), which is a screen that separates the men from the women. I have been told that the reason men and women are separated is so that the men will not be distracted by the women during the prayers.

My mother used to tell me, “Women are born with the knowledge...
of God; men have to learn it.” Needless to say, when I was invited up to the bimah for the first time to read, I was pretty excited (and not a little nervous!).

**Amidah/Shemoneh Esrei (“Eighteen” Benedictions)**

Within the structure of these daily, weekly, and annual prayer services are the prayers themselves, which are known as *Amidah* (“standing prayer”) and also called the *Shemoneh Esrei* (the “eighteen” benedictions). These are recited three times a day, along with the Shema (see above in Creeds), and the Aleinu. Of course, there are other prayers, readings from the Torah, and the haftorah as well.

The eighteen benedictions are prayed three times daily and actually contain nineteen benedictions, divided into three parts. The first section is “praise” and contains three blessings praising God as the God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; praising God’s power to heal and raise the dead; and praising God’s name as holy.

The middle thirteen blessings contain petitions for wisdom and understanding, repentance, forgiveness of sins, redemption, healing, provision, a regathering of the Jewish people back to their land, justice, support for the righteous, the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the restoration of the kingdom, the coming of the Messiah, and God’s mercy and compassion.

The final three benedictions are prayers of thanksgiving for the opportunity to serve God (along with a petition to restore the temple services); thanksgiving for our lives and God’s evident miracles; and thanksgiving for peace, goodness, blessings, kindness, and compassion.

Even though these are called “the eighteen,” they actually number nineteen because a later benediction, called the *Birkat haMinim*, was added to the middle section: “For slanderers may there be no hope. May all wickedness perish in an instant. May all your enemies be swiftly cut off. Uproot, smash, overthrow, and humble swiftly in our days the arrogant kingdom. Blessed are you, O Lord, who breaks the enemies and humbles the arrogant.” This benediction is attributed to a legendary Council of Jamnia, which is said to have been held in Israel around AD 90, following the destruction of the temple. It is said that it was here that Rabbinic Judaism began, the Hebrew canon was established, and this benediction was added to
the Shemoneh Esrei to pray a curse on the Jewish Christians of that time. While there is no extant evidence for the existence of this council, the Talmud alludes to its history, and, of course, the rulings that are said to have come from this council still stand in the practice of traditional Judaism.

**Aleinu (“It Is Our Duty”)**

The Aleinu is the closing prayer of every daily service. It is a short prayer with a controversial history, but it is very important for the Jewish community. It is said to have been written by Joshua after his conquest of Jericho, because the first letters of the first four verses spell Joshua’s name in reverse, as determined by gematria. While that may seem a little convoluted and contrived, it is an early pre-Christian prayer; but it has been criticized by Christian communities through time as a prayer against them. The prayer reads as follows.

It is our duty to praise the Master of all, to ascribe greatness to the Author of creation, who has not made us like the nations of the lands nor placed us like the families of the earth; who has not made our portion like theirs, nor our destiny like all their multitudes.

*Some congregations omit:* For they worship vanity and emptiness, and pray to a god who cannot save.

But we bow in worship and thank the Supreme King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, who extends the heavens and establishes the earth, whose throne of glory is in the heavens above, and whose power’s Presence is in the highest of heights. He is our God; there is no other. Truly He is our King, there is none else, as it is written in His Torah: “You shall know and take to heart this day that the Lord is God, in the heavens above and on earth below. There is no other.”

As you may have noted, the prayer has a line that “some congregations omit.” In the fourteenth century, a controversy arose, and the Christian authorities, performing their own feats of gematria,

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11 So important, in fact, that my daughter, who received a Master’s degree from Washington University in ethnomusicology, wrote her master’s thesis on it.
began to believe that this line was written against them and against Jesus. As a result, they required Jewish people to exclude the line when praying the Aleinu.

This led to a curious custom of omitting the line yet spitting at that point during the prayer, because the Hebrew word for “emptiness” is close to the Hebrew word for “spittle.” Synagogues would even provide spittoons for this part of the prayer. However, in 1703, the Prussian government enacted a law stating that the verse should be omitted, but that spitting should be disallowed; and they provided government inspectors to sit in the synagogue to make sure that this occurred. This is just one more example of the strained relationship between the Jewish people and the Church! Today, few still spit. And most prayers of the Aleinu omit that line, just in case it should start another Christian persecution. Some who still spit justify doing so by saying that the spit is to cleanse the mouth after mentioning idol worship. The Hebrew Scriptures are full of references to false gods and their dubious power. God, calling out the false gods of Babylon, says,

Listen to Me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by Me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am He, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save. To whom will you liken Me and make Me equal, and compare Me, that we may be alike? Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales, hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship! They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble. (Isaiah 46:3–7)

We should agree with the Jewish community that many of the nations “worship vanity and emptiness, and pray to a god who cannot save.” Today, especially in the West, people tend to make themselves that god—the vanity of secular humanism that elevates humans to the pinnacle of worship, while at the same time relieving them of any responsibility by virtue of evolution. Sadly, many Jewish people
have exchanged a God who can save for a god who cannot. But even more sadly, those who still worship a God who can save will not receive His gift of salvation, in part because Christian persecution has given Jesus Christ a bad name among them.

**Avinu Malkeinu (“Our Father, Our King!”)**

The *Avinu Malkeinu* is another common prayer of the Jewish community. This prayer is only used during the high holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Yet it is highly recognizable to most Jews. Perhaps part of the reason for this is the tradition for even “not religious” Jews to attend services during these days. (This is similar, I suppose, to those in the Christian community who only attend church on Christmas and Easter!)

The prayer has its origins in the second century AD. According to the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva (remember him?) said the first Avinu Malkeinu during a drought.

It is related of Rabbi Eliezer that he once stepped before the ark and recited the twenty-four benedictions, and his prayer was not answered. Rabbi Akiva stepped before the ark after him and exclaimed: “Our Father, our King! We have no king but You! Our Father, our King! For Your sake, have compassion on us!” And rain fell. (Talmud, Ta’anit 25b)

The Avinu Malkeinu is a litany of petitions, all beginning with “Our Father, our King!” As in all things, Jewish people cannot agree on the number of petitions. There are many variations. The Ashkenazic rite has forty-four petitions, while some Reform prayer books offer only seven. The prayer is often sung and has been recorded by many performers, including Barbra Streisand. Shimon Peres, former President of Israel, asked for the Avinu Malkeinu to be sung at his funeral, and he specifically asked for Israeli vocal star David D’or to sing it. If you are interested, you can listen to Streisand’s version as well as that sung at Peres’s funeral online at YouTube.com. The text for the prayer is
Our Father, our King, hear our prayer.

Our Father, our King, we have sinned before Thee.

Our Father, our King, have compassion upon us and also on our children.

Our Father, our King, bring an end to pestilence, war, and famine around us.

Our Father, our King, bring an end to all trouble and oppression around us.

Our Father, our King, inscribe us in the book of life.

Our Father, our King, renew upon us, renew upon us a good year.

Our Father, our King, hear our prayer.

**Kol Nidre (“All Vows”)**

Just as the Avinu Malkeinu is so central to Jewish thought, so is Kol Nidre, another prayer specific to the high holy days, and particularly on the eve of Yom Kippur.

Kol Nidre dates to the sixth century AD and was apparently a response to rashly made vows against the admonition of Torah.

If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth. (Deuteronomy 23:21–23)

Kol Nidre began as an Aramaic prayer of confession, seeking especially on the eve of Yom Kippur to be released from vows made to God that cannot be or are not upheld. During the Spanish Inquisition, *conversos* (Jews who had converted to Catholicism in Spain and Portugal to avoid being exiled or killed) would secretly
observe Yom Kippur and say the Kol Nidre to seek forgiveness from God for converting.

All vows, bonds, devotions, promises, penalties, and oaths which we have vowed, sworn, devoted, and bound ourselves with, from the Day of Atonement until the next Day of Atonement, may it be to us for good. All these we repent of. They shall all be absolved, released, annulled, made void, and of no effect; they shall not be binding nor shall they have any power. Our vows shall not be vows; our bonds shall not be bonds, and our oaths shall not be oaths.

As a prayer, some have referred to it as “pedestrian,” lacking the beautiful poetry of most of Jewish liturgy. Some say it’s not a prayer at all but a legal revocation of these oaths. For this reason, it is chanted on the eve of Yom Kippur, but before sunset, since no business is allowed to be transacted on Yom Kippur. But all agree that it is a powerful and beautiful prayer, so much so that the evening service is often referred to as the Kol Nidre service. The reason for this is its melody. The melody of the Kol Nidre is a wonderful and stirring one. The tune originated among the Jews of southern Germany sometime between the middle of the fifteenth century and the middle of the sixteenth century. Many performers have recorded Kol Nidre, including Johnny Mathis and Perry Como, although neither is Jewish. You can find recordings of these on YouTube.com as well.

**Ein Keloheinu (“There Is None Like Our God”)**

Ein Keloheinu is a prayer that is usually sung toward the end of the Musaf service during the Sabbath, blessing God and His holy name. The prayer originated in the ninth century AD and was added to the service to fulfill a Talmudic admonition that each Jewish person should say one hundred blessings daily. The daily services, with the whole of the Shemoneh Esrei, provide that one hundred, but on the Sabbath, the Amidah is a bit shorter, so the Ein Keloheinu provides the twenty blessings needed to fulfill the mitzvot.

There is none like our God, There is none like our Lord,

There is none like our King, There is none like our Savior.
THE CHRISTIAN DIFFERENCE

Who is like our God? Who is like our Lord?
Who is like our King? Who is like our Savior?
Let us thank our God, Let us thank our Lord,
Let us thank our King, Let us thank our Savior.
Blessed be our God, Blessed be our Lord,
Blessed be our King, Blessed be our Savior.
You are our God, You are our Lord,
You are our King,
You are our Savior.

Ne’ila (“Closing,” “Locking”)

The Ne’ila is the last prayer of Yom Kippur. It is a final prayer of repentance and supplication to God for forgiveness, before He closes and locks the gates to heaven. The shofar (ram’s horn) is blown, and we pray that next year we will be in Jerusalem.

RITUALS/FEASTS

The Jewish people observe eight primary feasts throughout the year. These observances lead them to read and study many of the biblical texts every year and help them remember their history from the beginning of the world right up to 167 BC, two hundred years before Jesus’ death and resurrection. Every year, through these observances, the Jewish people tell the story of creation and of their creation as a people set apart by God, their redemption from slavery

12 Several years ago, I wrote a Lenten devotional for Lutheran Hour Ministries called Ponder the Path, which was based on the primary Bible feasts of the Jewish people. As an accompaniment, I wrote a series of Lenten sermons about these feasts called “Walking in the Footsteps of Y’shua” that were published by Concordia Publishing House in Concordia Pulpit Resources. This led also to a LifeLight Bible Study called Bible Feasts. These resources are a relatively full treatment of the annual cycle of religious feasts that the Bible commands and that the Jewish people observe. If you want more information about these resources, some of them are still available, either through Concordia Publishing House (cph.org), or through our ministry’s website (lije.org). Our website also makes available a book written in 1994 by Rev. Dave Born titled Bible Studies on the Feasts of Israel that we published with LCMS World Mission.
in Egypt, and God’s giving them the Law. Other feasts help them examine and remember the Babylonian captivity, the return from Babylon and the building of the second temple, the time of the Syrian conquest of Judah and the desecration of that same temple, along with the war to regain Judah and rededicate the temple.

Before we begin, we should probably look at the calendar. The Hebrew calendar in use today was determined largely through a process that was finally set by Maimonides in Mishneh Torah. Until then, the calendar was dated in relation to the destruction of the temple, but it is now dated according to what the rabbis determined to be the creation of the world. So, this year, 2018, is 5778 AM (Anno Mundi—Latin for “in the year of the world”).

The calendar is called a lunisolar calendar, because it is based on the phases of the moon as well as corrected for the solar year. Many of the feasts of Israel are designed around sacrifices of grain or livestock among a largely agrarian people. It is important to keep feasts within the seasons in which they fall, so there is a fairly complex system of corrections that can be hard to keep up with. Easter and Passover present their own challenges, which we’ll talk about when we get there.

Leviticus 23 is the most concise listing of these feasts of Israel, and God gave them to Moses as part of Torah. “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, These are the appointed feasts of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are My appointed feasts’” (Leviticus 23:1–2).

Shabbat

“Shabbat” (“Sabbath”) is first in this cycle. Sabbath is from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday and is the end of a long week. “Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work. It is a Sabbath to the Lord in all your dwelling places” (Leviticus 23:3). The “You shall do no work” is the foundation for many of the mitzvoth, such as the prohibition of spending money on the Sabbath, which we looked at earlier. The Sabbath is intended as a day of rest to remember that God created the world in six days and on the seventh, He rested.
Ironically, many Jewish people who still observe the Sabbath do not believe in creation but have meandered into the humanist philosophy of evolution. However, be that as it may, those who still observe the Sabbath do so with all of the restrictions that Sabbath brings, but also with all the benefits that it brings. Sabbath “restrictions” cause the community to live in close proximity to one another, to worship together, to study Torah and Talmud together, to eat together, even to schmooze a little. The Sabbath truly keeps the community together and is probably the one “feast” that is most responsible for the survival of the Jewish people as a people throughout the generations of expulsions and wandering.

While I have great respect for the Sabbath as some Jewish communities observe it, I know that often the restrictions of the Sabbath are perceived as hardship, which is unfortunate. There is a quality of the Law that becomes burdensome, and it should. God gave us such a burden to show us what His expectation of perfection is, and to show us our inability to justify ourselves according to the law. That should draw us more to rely on God and His promises, leading us ultimately to knowledge of His grace in Messiah. Instead, the rabbis reinterpret it freely to give Jewish people the illusion that they are able to keep the law and thereby save themselves by doing good works. But most Jewish people in the Western world don’t even believe in God anymore (according to most polls). The cultural and historical interaction with Christianity has obscured their view of Messiah, so faith in God, creation, and anything else simply falls away.

This hardship often leads Jews to fall away from observance rather than seek its blessings, but it is the same for us. Freed from the oppression of the Law by our Lord Jesus who kept it for us, we fail to seek its blessings and simply fall away. God gives us His Holy Spirit to move us to study the Law and rejoice and keep it, benefitting from its many blessings. God’s desire for His children, just as ours is for our children, is to live lives of relationship with one another and with Him.

Sadly, many see the falling away of some in the Church and decide that the solution is to bring themselves back under the Law’s burden. There is a movement among some Christians to keep Torah. They understand that to mean keeping all the mitzvot, worshiping
only on the Sabbath, and so on. They might be called “Hebrew Christians,” “Ephraimites,” or something else, but sadly they have become very legalistic and very critical of the Church (whose biggest “sin” is worshiping on Sunday). We must always remember that the greatest blessing of Sabbath is to remember God, His love for us, His creation, and His redemptive power. How much better to do that than to remember the resurrection of His Son, our Messiah, Jesus! The Early Church, still Jewish in its context, gathered together on the first day of the week to celebrate the resurrection. Surely that is the purpose of the Law, to point us to Messiah.

**Rosh Hashanah**

Every feast of Israel points those who will see to Messiah. Rather than looking at these feasts in the order as they are presented in Torah, I’d like to look at the annual feasts in the context of the Anno Mundi. So, next in this cycle is the first feast of the Jewish civil year, Rosh Hashanah, which falls in the autumn in the Northern Hemisphere. (I have often wondered what it must be like to observe these feasts in the south, where the seasons are reversed. Oy!) This feast is during the month of Tishri, which is the seventh month of the Jewish year. (Huh?)

Most people who think of the Jewish New Year consider it to be in the fall at the Feast of Trumpets. Most Jewish calendars that you can buy are sixteen-month calendars that begin in September, and the Anno Mundi year changes. But actually, the Jewish calendar begins in the spring during the month of Nisan. This is actually the order in which the months are presented in Torah. This is already getting a little confusing!

The Bible gives us four new years, each with its own purpose. The civil new year is in the autumn. Passover marks the sacred new year in the spring. Then there is a new year for trees and one for cattle. All these different new years have different purposes, but this shouldn’t surprise us, as we also celebrate many different new years during the year in our Gregorian calendar. January 1 is the civil new year. But new school years begin in August or September. Many businesses have a fiscal new year that is different from either
of these, and the Church new year begins in the winter at Advent. It is much the same concept.

So, the new year in the autumn is called Rosh Hashanah, which means “head of the year.” It is the Feasts of Trumpets and is the first of three pilgrimage festivals in the autumn. Though, since the destruction of the temple, there are no longer pilgrimages made, Jews are reminded that when there was a temple, they all were called to go there during these days.

Rosh Hashanah begins with the blowing of the shofar and, as is traditionally taught, the opening of three books: a book of life, a book of death, and an intermediate book. Do you remember our afterlife discussion and the distinction we mentioned that the rabbis made of the “truly righteous” and the “truly wicked?” Well, on Rosh Hashanah, it is taught that those who are “truly righteous” are immediately written into the book of life. The “truly wicked” are immediately written into the book of death, and the rest of us, most of us, are written into the intermediate book. It is a picture of Sheol, where we wait to be redeemed by repentance, one way or the other.

One of the readings of Rosh Hashanah is Genesis 22 and the “binding of Isaac,” which reminds us of the faithfulness of Abraham and the provision by God of a substitutionary sacrifice in the ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. Abraham showed his faithfulness, not simply by being willing to sacrifice Isaac as God commanded, but by trusting that God would keep His promise and that from his seed would come a great nation. “On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you’” (Genesis 22:4–5).

Abraham had full assurance that even if God should require his son from him, God was certainly able to keep His promise and bring his son back. While God did not require Isaac as a sacrifice, He did not withhold His own Son. There was no ram as a substitute, but a lamb, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Tradition holds that the very mountain where God provided the ram is the same mountain where God provided the Lamb, Jesus, to be sacrificed so that we might live and have our names written into the Lamb’s Book of Life.
So what about these books that were opened when the shofar was blown? How do we get out of the intermediate book? Since the destruction of the temple, where the sacrifice was brought to atone for the people’s sins, we have to make our own atonement. Therefore, the rabbis teach that the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the “Days of Awe.” During these ten days, Jewish people—by prayer, fasting, repentance, and good deeds—make their atonement before God. Then, on Yom Kippur (literally, “day of covering”), God writes the names of everyone who is in the intermediate book into one of the other two. The book of life or the book of death. But how do you know?

Some Jewish people, if you ask them which book their names were written in, might respond, “If I live to hear the shofar blown next year, my name was in the book of life.” Though, during the Ne’ila service, Jewish people plead with God to hear their prayers before He closes and locks the gates to heaven, they have no such assurance that He does so. But we Christians are blessed to know. He tells us in His Scriptures and every time the pastor gives you absolution. Do not take that for granted. Many people walk away from confession never being told that Jesus paid the price for sin and that because of Him, we are forgiven.

Jews close the day of Yom Kippur with the hope that next year they will be in Jerusalem, reflecting the hope of the temple being restored, and remembering God’s command to make the pilgrimage to the temple. We have the sure hope of the temple that comes to us and draws us to Jerusalem anew.

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable
or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life. (Revelation 21:22–27, emphasis added)

Feast of Tabernacles/Sukkoth

The Feast of Tabernacles, also called Sukkoth, is the third of three pilgrimage festivals in the autumn. It is a reminder from God “that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 23:43). Sukkoth (“tabernacle”) is a feast that assures us of God’s great provision. He provided for all our needs as we wandered through the desert for the forty years after He delivered us from slavery in Egypt. Jewish people will build little temporary houses, called sukkahs in their backyards, and while they may not live in them for the eight days of the festival, they will often eat meals and tell stories in them.

Some of the stories told are the remembrance of the return from Babylon and the building of the second temple as related by the writings in Nehemiah and Ezra, when upon their rediscovery of the Law, “All the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing” (Nehemiah 8:17).

It was during Sukkoth that Jesus told us about God’s ultimate provision of the Holy Spirit.

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this He said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37–39)
Hanukkah

Not one of the biblical feasts of Leviticus 23, Hanukkah has nevertheless become a traditional celebration of the Jewish people. It takes place in winter and commemorates the rededication of the temple after its desecration by the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 167 BC. The events of Hanukkah are recorded in 1 and 2 Maccabees in the Apocrypha.¹³

The recorded history of the time shows another attempt at destroying Jerusalem and exterminating the Jewish people, this time at the hands of the Syrians. The miracle of Hanukkah is that God preserved His people again and kept His promise of a Messiah from the seed of Abraham and the house of David. As we’ve discussed, the messianic expectation was high in Israel following the miraculous victories of the Maccabees against the superior forces of the Syrians. Two hundred years after these events, Jesus was celebrating Hanukkah and, in response to this messianic expectation, was asked, “How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly” (John 10:24). His answer led many to believe in Him there. John 10:22–42 is the only place in Scripture where Hanukkah is mentioned, but it is a telling observance that Jesus is there, celebrating this feast, declaring Himself to be the Messiah of Israel.

Hanukkah is called the Festival of Lights because of a miracle of oil that was said to have occurred. According to tradition, as recorded in the Talmud, when the temple was recovered and rededicated, there was only a little bit of oil left that could be used to light the temple menorah (lampstand)—only enough for one day. It would take another week to prepare enough oil for the menorah, but miraculously, that little bit of oil burned for eight days, long enough for the needed preparation. So at Hanukkah, the most remembered miracle is this miracle of oil. The traditional seven-branched menorah became a nine-branched menorah called a hanukkiah, and one candle is lit for each night of Hanukkah.

I am a little dubious about this miracle; surely if such a miracle had happened, it would have been recorded in 1 and 2 Maccabees.

¹³ These are the writings written in the intertestamental period between Malachi and Matthew that are not part of the canon of Scripture. Concordia Publishing House published an excellent edition of the Apocrypha in 2012 with study notes and bible studies.
which are otherwise fairly meticulous. So much of the Talmud is written as a reaction to Jesus that I wonder if the Jewish people didn’t start this story to take the focus of Hanukkah off the Messiah. But even that tradition has given us a Gospel bridge to Messiah Jesus: The traditional menorah is seven-branched with no raised candle. The hanukkiah, instead of just having an additional eighth candle, has two added candles, an eighth for the eight days of the “miracle” and a ninth called the *shamash* (“helper”). The shamash stands a little taller than the rest of the candles and is used to light them all in succession, one more being added each evening (for a total of forty-four candles). This shamash brings light to the rest of the hanukkiah. Interestingly, when Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit, He refers to the Spirit as a shamash. “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:25–26). And when the Holy Spirit is given to the disciples, He appears as “tongues as of fire” (Acts 2:3). Even if this contrived miracle is an attempt to sidestep Messiah, God does not leave us defenseless!

**Purim**

The second feast in the winter is Purim. It would seem that winter is a time to reflect on anti-Semitism and God’s promise of protection, for, like the events of Hanukkah, Purim is a reflection on another attempt to destroy the Jewish people, this time by the Persians.

Also not a feast recorded in Leviticus 23, Purim is commanded to be observed in the Book of Esther.

Therefore they called these days Purim, after the term Pur. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written and at the time appointed every year, that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that
these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants. (Esther 9:26–28)

This command does not come from God directly but from Mordecai during the time after the return from Babylon, when Jews lived in Persia, which is modern-day Iran. However, the Jewish people still regard the celebration of Purim as mitzvot. There are four observances associated with the feast: the reading of the megillah (“scroll”), a lavish meal, the sending of gifts of food to one another, and giving to the needy.

The reading of the megillah is the reading of the entire Book of Esther and usually takes the form of a Purim spiel (“play”) or a melodramatic reading, complete with heroes, villains, and accompanying cheers and boos. Children dress up as characters in the book and the point of the reading becomes to blot out the name of Haman, the one who sought to exterminate the Jews. All participants write an H on the bottom of their shoe and stomp when his name is mentioned. Little three-cornered poppy-seed (or other jams and fruits) filled cookies, called hamentaschens, are consumed, symbolizing gobbling up Haman in some fashion, either his ear, his pocket, or his hat (remember, “two Jews, three opinions”). Rabbis have tried to give some significance to this cherished tradition, so they liken it to the Hebrew Haman tash (“Haman was weakened”), probably a contrivance, but fun nevertheless.

Our tradition is to have a potluck and take an offering for a local food bank during the Purim party. Everything about Purim is fun, even though the topic is so dark. This is another reason why the Jewish people have managed to survive; even in the darkest of times, we can find a reason to laugh. There is even a Talmudic tradition (though not one we generally partake of), among adults, to drink so much at Purim that eventually you can’t discern between Haman and Mordecai.

But of course, the heroine of Purim is Esther, and Mordecai gives her one of my favorite promises of Messiah. The Book of Esther is notorious for being the only book of the Bible that does not contain the name of God, but His fingerprints are everywhere. Mordecai
expresses his faith to Esther, who is afraid to intervene with her husband the king against Haman’s wicked plot for fear of her own life. Mordecai adjures her,

Do not think to yourself that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? (Esther 9:13–14)

Of course, she responds and saves the people. And Mordecai’s faith in God’s promise was also realized in Messiah, Y’shua.

**Pesach/Passover**

The first of three pilgrimage festivals in the spring, Pesach, or Passover, celebrates the Feast of Unleavened Bread and God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. This story is told through the eating of ceremonial foods and the reading of texts from Torah and Talmud, especially as relates to the family and passing these stories on to the next generation. This was seen as necessity in an oral historical culture, but even though these stories are written down now, there is always, as in all of the Jewish festivals, a focus on “never forgetting.”

The Passover Seder is an elaborate meal full of symbolism about redemption and messianic hope. It is said that Elijah will come at Passover to announce the coming of Messiah. And it ends with the same traditional hope with which Yom Kippur ends, “Next year in Jerusalem.”

The Seder plate is central to the order of the Seder. The Seder plate and the Haggadah tell the story of the Passover. Each element of the plate tells part of the story. These elements include the z’roah (“arm”—a roasted shank bone of a lamb), beitzah (“egg”) or hagigah (“festival offering”—a hard-boiled egg), maror (“herb”—bitter herbs, usually freshly grated horseradish), charoset (a mixture of finely

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14 If you’d like a more complete picture, there is a Passover Haggadah that I have compiled on our website (lije.org).
chopped apples, nuts, and cinnamon mixed with a little wine), and karpas (usually parsley).

Other elements on the Passover table include three matzos (unleavened bread, symbolic of the haste with which the Israelites had to leave Egypt) placed in a Matzah Tosh (“pocket,” like Haman’s above) or wrapped separately in napkins, wine (four cups are usually consumed during the meal), salt water, a pillow or cushion on the left arm of each person at the table, and the cup of Elijah.

Red wine is used for the four cups and is symbolic of the lamb’s blood that was poured out and painted on the doorposts and lintels of Jewish homes in Egypt, the night the angel of death moved through Egypt and passed over the homes that had this sign of faith. Each of the four cups of wine is named for one of four promises that God gave to Moses as He prepared Moses for confronting Pharaoh:

Say therefore to the people of Israel, “I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.” (Exodus 6:6–7)

Thus there is the cup of blessing, the cup of praises and plagues, the cup of redemption, and the cup of sanctification. These, along with all the ceremonial foods, give a complete picture of God’s redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt and God’s redemption of man from slavery to sin. It was during this meal that Jesus instituted the Sacrament of Holy Communion, using the Passover bread and the third cup of wine, called the cup of redemption.

In a tradition that dates to the intertestamental period, during the Passover Seder, a matzo is broken, wrapped in a napkin, and hidden. This becomes something called afikomen (from the Greek, meaning “that which comes after”). During the lavish meal in the midst of the Seder, the children all go in search of the afikomen and, when they find it, barter with the head of the Seder, who purchases it back. Then he breaks it into pieces and shares a piece with each
person at the Seder table. It is likely this tradition that Jesus used, as St. Paul relates, “The Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, “This is My body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of Me’” (1 Corinthians 11:23–24). The afikomen is eaten with the third cup of wine. These two together become a picture of God’s promise of redemption as He declares, “I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment” (Exodus 6:6). St. Paul refers to this cup, saying, “In the same way also He took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me’” (1 Corinthians 11:25).

When your pastor says to you, “The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen and preserve you in body and soul to life everlasting,” properly understood, he is saying, “Next Year in Jerusalem.” For, that is our hope too, that the life-giving body and blood of our Messiah Y’shua will keep us until He gathers us and all the saints to Jerusalem anew.

One of the really confusing things is to try to understand why Easter falls on two different dates within the Christian Church each year, and some years Passover falls in Easter and Holy Week, but in other years it does not. The problem is we are dealing with three calendars. Passover is determined by the Jewish calendar. The Orthodox Christian Church celebrates Easter according to the Julian calendar, while the Western Church celebrates Easter according to the Gregorian calendar.

The Gregorian calendar was established in the sixteenth century as an effort to bring the calendar into alignment with the vernal equinox, so that in the Western Church, Easter would be on the first full moon following the vernal equinox. That makes Easter earlier than the Orthodox Church’s celebration, which is calculated according to the Julian calendar. The Orthodox Church adheres to the early practices of the Christian Church, which, at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, required Easter to take place during the Jewish Passover.

**Shavuot (“Weeks”)/The Feast of Weeks**

Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks, is the last of the major biblical feasts of Israel.
If you are reading along with Leviticus 23, there is also the Feast of Firstfruits, which, in the Jewish festival calendar, is called *Lag B’Omer* and falls into the period between Pesach and Shavuot. When the temple was destroyed and Israel was dispersed, the agricultural nature of the nation was forever changed. The Jewish people were forced to be on the move from nation to nation. There was no temple to take their firstfruits offering to, so this became a period of counting the omer, which is a unit of measure. From the second day of Passover until the night of Shavuot, a blessing is said, stating the count of the omer in days and weeks.

Shavuot, then, became the Festival of Firstfruits and the Feast of Weeks and is counted to be fifty days after the second day of Passover. Tradition, as recorded in the Talmud, says that it took fifty days for the children of Israel to travel from Egypt to Mount Sinai where they were given the Law. So Shavuot is a celebration of receiving the Torah, and Jewish communities renew their acceptance of Torah. Some Jewish communities have their confirmation services at this time, the confirmands being the “firstfruits of the Law.”

In these communities, generally among the Reform Jewish communities (see below), this is distinct from the Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah, and is usually for older children as they continue past their Bar Mitzvah in their studies.

Having been a pilgrimage agricultural festival, Shavuot was chosen by the Lord as the time to pour out the Holy Spirit on those who were in attendance. In the Church, we call that Pentecost, which is simply Greek for “fifty days.” (The Acts 2 reading on Pentecost is dreaded by most lectors—all those unpronounceable regions from which Jews had come for these pilgrimage festivals.) The pouring out of God’s Holy Spirit on the disciples and the three thousand who were baptized that day was the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy that we sometimes read on Holy Thursday.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,
declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31–34)

There are other minor holy days in the Jewish calendar, and several that have been created since the establishment of the State of Israel. As always, with all things Jewish, there’s no such thing as being finished; the Jewish experience is ongoing. But Shavuot is the culmination of the festivals from the institution of the Lord’s Supper to the giving of the Holy Spirit. It is a joy to share this fulfillment with Jewish people who are observing these same days, some with hope, others without, but all who need to hear of the coming of Messiah Jesus!

**SYMBOLS**

We already have seen a number of symbols that are meaningful to Jewish people as we’ve looked at some of their feasts and rituals, but the following, though not an exhaustive list, will explore some additional Jewish symbols.

**Candle Lights**

Typically, two silver candlesticks usher in the Sabbath, with the woman of the home lighting the candles, waving her hands over them, and covering her eyes to say the blessing. No electricity is allowed to be used on the Sabbath, nor can you light a fire, so before the Sabbath, the candles are lit, the blessings are said, and you can see for the evening. But the purpose of the candles is not only illumination; it is also to honor the Sabbath and to create *shalom bayit* (“domestic peace”). There truly is a sense of peace when you sit in the darkness around candlelight.
Challah

Challah is a braided egg bread traditionally made for Shabbat. It sometimes has twelve strands to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, but more usually it has three strands braided together. Challah represents the manna that was given by God to the Israelites in the desert and the bread of the Presence in the temple. It is usually accompanied by a cloth to cover it.

Kiddush Cup

The Kiddush cup, usually ornate and sterling silver, holds the wine. After the blessing of the wine, it is passed around the table or poured out into small cups for the other people at the table. This tradition is often reflected in our Christian Communion practice, and we can see how Kiddush might have been done at Jesus’ last Passover.

The Brachas (“Blessings”)

These blessings are said over bread and wine and are the same blessings said during Passover. The blessing over the wine is “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine.” And the blessing over the bread is “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.” Whenever I pray this blessing, I marvel at God’s hand even in the smallest things. I am reminded that Jesus was born in Bet Lechem (Bethlehem), which means “House of Bread”; Jesus refers to Himself as “the living bread that came down from heaven” (John 6:51); and though He would be in the tomb for three days, God did bring forth bread from the earth. Alleluia!

Havdalah (“Separation”)

Havdalah is the ceremony that ends the Sabbath. The Havdalah ceremony involves all the senses—the taste of wine, the smell of spices, the sight of the flame of the Havdalah candle, the feeling of the heat from the candle, and the sound of the blessings that end the Sabbath. The Havdalah candle is a braided candle with several wicks and a spice box.
Synagogue worship gives us other symbols, some of which we have talked about, such as the Yahrzeit candle, the shofar, and the Torah scrolls. Additional to these is the ark, tablets, the Star of David, the menorah, and depictions of the twelve tribes of Israel.

**Ark**

The ark is where the Torah scrolls are kept, and is the holiest place in the synagogue. It is usually placed on the eastern wall of the synagogue so that when you face the ark, you are facing Jerusalem. It can be a particularly ornate cabinet or a rather plain cabinet, but either way, it is the most important part of synagogue worship.

**Tablets**

Much the same as in our churches, symbols of the Ten Commandments are prevalent in synagogue art. According to rabbinic tradition, they were two rectangles with sharp corners, with each rectangle having five of the Ten Commandments, though others argue that all ten are on both rectangles.

**Star of David**

Though it is not a traditional symbol of the Jewish people, the Star of David, also called Solomon’s Seal, has become the symbol of Israel since the nineteenth century, when it began to be used widely in the Pale of Settlement as communities looked for a symbol like the cross. It grew in prominence as it became the symbol of Zionism and was incorporated into the flag of Israel.

**Menorah**

The menorah has been a more universal symbol of Judaism since ancient times. It is a representation of the seven-branched candelabra in the temple. The menorah is the emblem on the coat of arms of the modern State of
Israel, as well as outside the Knesset (Israel’s Parliament) and on their shekel coins.

**Depictions of the Twelve Tribes of Israel**

Much like you might see symbolic representations of the four Gospel writers in our churches, the twelve tribes of Israel are often depicted in symbol in the Jewish synagogue, the most enduring and popular symbol being the Lion of Judah.

**Lulav**

The lulav is a tightly closed palm frond that is waved together with a branch of *aravah* (“willow”), a branch of *hadass* (“myrtle”), and an *etrog* (“citron”) during the festival of Sukkoth; but sometimes all four of these species together are called lulav. Leviticus 23:40 says, “You shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.”

Many symbols come to us directly from the Shema. If you look back at the Shema in our earlier discussion, you will see the root of symbols such as tefillin, mezuzahs, and tzitzit.

**Tefillin**

The tefillin, also called phylacteries, are a set of small black leather boxes, containing handwritten parchment scrolls with verses of the Shema from the Torah, attached to long leather thongs. One of these boxes is tied to the bicep of the weaker of your arms, depending on whether you are right-handed or left, and the other is tied just above your forehead. If you are ever on a flight to Tel Aviv and wonder what some of the Jewish men are doing on that flight, they are probably tying tefillin. This comes from the scriptural command in the Shema to “bind them as a sign on your hand, and
they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.” This is a very literal understanding of the command in the Shema.

**Mezuzah ("Doorpost")**

That same section of the Shema also says, “You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” The mezuzah is the literal understanding of this command in the Shema. The mezuzah is a small box with the same handwritten parchment scroll as the tefillin, but it is for the doorposts and gates of your home. It is often quite decorative, but sometimes very plain; however, it is nearly always decorated with the Hebrew letter shin, standing for Shaddai. In this way, then, they follow the command “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Leviticus 6:7). Often, you will see Jewish people reach up and touch the mezuzah as they come or go from a room and then touch their fingers to their lips. And many Jewish people wear a mezuzah as a pendant so that the Shema is always with them.

**Tzitzit ("Tassels")**

The Shema also directs Jewish people to wear tassels on the corners of their clothing. This is demonstrated by the tallit (prayer shawl) in worship, and some Jewish men also wear little tassels hanging outside of their shirts. Numbers 15:38 commands that blue cord be used in the tassels, but the dye to make the blue cord was unavailable for about fourteen hundred years, so people had all-white tassels. During this time, other blue dyes were used in the decoration of the prayer shawls, and it became traditional to have prayer shawls with blue and white stripes. Thus the Israeli flag is meant to evoke the prayer shawl with its blue stripes on the white background. Recently, the shellfish was rediscovered from which comes
the blue dye for the tassel, so now you may see actual blue cords in the tassels of prayer shawls, though many still continue to use white tassels.

**Yarmulke**

Perhaps the most recognizable symbol of Judaism is the *yar-mulke* (skullcap), also called a *kipah*. This is not a biblical symbol. Maimonides declared that Jewish law required men to cover their heads during prayer, but not at other times. However, by the seventeenth century, the wearing of the kippah became Halakah as an act of piety or to distinguish Jewish people from others. An anecdotal story is that during the seventeenth century, Jewish men were by law allowed to be harassed by the Cossacks of that time. To distinguish them from others, the law required Jewish men to wear this particular head covering, and the rabbis adopted the kippah as a sign of piety rather than a sign of persecution. Some Jewish men in more Orthodox communities will wear distinctive hats as well as the kippah, influenced both by the “fence” of care, so as not to be uncovered, and the particular part of the world they may have come from.

**Payess (“Sidelocks”)**

The *payess* is worn by some men and boys in the Orthodox community. It is based on an interpretation of Leviticus 19:27, “You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard.” So you may see some Jewish men and boys with long side curls, sometimes tucked back behind their ears. This is also why so many Jewish men wear long beards, especially in the Chasidic community.

**Chai**

There are also a few symbols that show up in the jewelry that people wear. These include mezuzas and the Star of David, discussed above, as well as the chai and the hamsa.
The *chai* has become an enduring symbol in jewelry. Chai literally means “living,” “alive,” or “life,” thus this symbol is commonly worn as a (sort of) good-luck charm. The symbol is two Hebrew letters, *chet* and *yod*. According to gematria, these two letters add up to the number 18, so, as we discussed earlier, this number also represents good luck.

**Hamsa**

The *hamsa* is truly a good-luck charm. Originating among the Jews of Middle Eastern descent, called Mizrahi, the hamsa was initially rejected by mainstream Ashkenazi Jews, because the Mizrahi used it as a talisman to ward off the evil eye, described as a malicious stare that can cause bad luck, illness, or even death. The hamsa is a hand or a representation of one, often with an eye symbol as part of it. Though originally rejected, it has since become widely popular, especially in Israel, and increasingly in the Jewish communities in the United States.

**DENOMINATIONS**

As you can no doubt guess, there are many divisions, subdivisions, and sects in Judaism that might be considered denominations. Ethnically, there are primarily Ashkenazim and Sephardim, which we’ve talked about. Religiously, the primary three are Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox, but there are innumerable distinctions among all of these. What follows are just thumbnail sketches, and the differences are often manifold but subtle.

**Reform Judaism**

Beginning in central Europe during the late eighteenth century, Reform Judaism is the liberal expression of Jewish faith. It does not subscribe to any set of religious values but sees Judaism as evolving over time. It has less ritual, and regards Halakah as nonbinding.

Within this group might be included such expressions of Judaism as Secular Judaism, Humanistic Judaism, the Jewish Renewal movement, and Jewish Science.
Secular Judaism

Secular Judaism is the resting place of most Jews who say they are “not religious.” Ethnically and culturally Jewish, they might find worth in belonging to the Jewish community center, or other such institutions, but find no value in the religious expression of their faith.

Humanistic Judaism

Humanistic Judaism began in 1963 in Birmingham, Michigan, where we have a branch of our ministry. It is a growing denomination emphasizing the identification with culture and history, but also the humanistic approach to the power of the human potential independent of any supernatural authority.

Jewish Renewal

Jewish Renewal began in the 1960s as a countercultural expression of Judaism that seeks to reinvigorate modern Judaism with mysticism and ecstatic prayer, Kabbalah, and spiritualism. Its proponents claim that they have influenced Judaism across the spectrum of denominations.

Jewish Science

Jewish Science began in the early 1900s and was a response to the growing influence of Christian Scientism and other New Age expressions of self-help, right thinking, and healing.

Conservative Judaism

Originating in Germany in the nineteenth century, Conservative Judaism sought to be a compromise between Orthodox Judaism and Reform Judaism. It seeks to conserve Jewish tradition and sees Halakha as binding but is flexible in the interpretation of Halakha. Another expression of the Conservative movement was found in Reconstructionist Judaism.

Reconstructionist Judaism

Founded in the United States in 1955, Reconstructionists see Judaism as evolving, view Halakha as nonbinding but valuable and to be upheld unless there is a reason not to, and value traditional Jewish expressions of faith.
ORTHODOX JUDAISM

Orthodox Jews see themselves as the norm for Judaism. They subscribe to the interpretation and practice of Halakah as handed down through the Talmud, and they see themselves as the heirs to ancient and historical Judaism, both in the second temple period, and in the rabbinic expression of Judaism. Much of the discussion of Judaism in this chapter is an expression of Orthodox Judaism. Within the spectrum of Orthodox Judaism is Modern Orthodox Judaism, Haredi Judaism, and Chasidic Judaism.

Modern Orthodox Judaism

This denomination attempts to reconcile the practice of Orthodoxy with the values of the secular, modern world. Drawing on many different philosophies, Modern Orthodox Judaism takes on many forms but is an expression of Orthodoxy as it reconciles itself especially to Science.

Haredi Judaism

Haredi Judaism is the opposite of Modern Orthodox Judaism; Haredi Jews practice Orthodoxy while distancing themselves from the popular secular culture. Considered the “ultra-Orthodox,” they are typified by segregating themselves from modern society. In doing so, they attempt to maintain a strict adherence to Jewish law. They are a growing movement, attracting Jewish people who have been largely nonreligious and who are “rediscovering their Jewish faith.”

Chasidic Judaism

Chasidic Judaism is an expression of Haredi Judaism, flavored by an emphasis on traditional Kabbalah as delivered in the Zohar. Kabbalah gained popularity among persecuted Jewish communities from the time of the Zohar’s writing on, especially during the eighteenth century among the Jews in the Pale of Settlement. The Jews there led a very dreary life, so focusing on the spiritual disciplines of Kabbalah provided a kind of hope that helped them to survive. Chasidic Judaism emerged from this time as the most devoted to traditional Kabbalah.
Recently, Kabbalah has also become popular among some celebrities, who have gravitated toward the Kabbalah Centre in Los Angeles, founded by a retired rabbi. What I call “pop Kabbalah” has been likened to the New Age Movement; it has separated itself from its Jewish context and attempts to associate itself not with any religion but with a “universal wisdom.” This new expression of Kabbalah should not be equated with traditional Jewish thought, other than the reality, as I stated earlier, that you can believe anything and continue to be Jewish, except if you believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

HERESIES

Heresies within Judaism are few because there is no overarching doctrine of faith that determines who or what a Jew is. Of course, the Orthodox don’t agree with the Reform, and there are divisions and disagreements. However, since the rabbi of the community is the final arbiter of the interpretation of the Law, it is difficult to identify something that today the Jews would call a heresy.

The word for heretics in Hebrew is “minim.” Maimonides identifies the minim as those who deny the existence of God or deny that God is the ruler of the world; those who say there are two or more rulers of the world; those who accept that God is ruler of the world but maintain that He has a body or form; those who deny that God is the sole First Being and Creator of all existence; and finally, those who serve entities that serve as an intermediary between them and God, such as stars, constellations, or any other entity. By a strict halakic definition of heresy, almost anyone who is Jewish today is a heretic.

But this is not applied today as it might have been in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. With the growth of Reform Judaism, and all its variants, rabbis are loathe to apply this label to so many fellow Jews.

However, there is a group of Jewish people that rabbis are willing to call minim. Remember the nineteenth benediction? The Birkat haMinim, which is actually the twelfth benediction, was added after the destruction of the temple and is a condemnation of the Jewish person who becomes a Christian. Jews who believe in Jesus are minim to the Jewish people. However, only Jewish Christians
are considered heretics. Gentile Christians are not. Assuming you are not ethnically Jewish, your Jewish friend likely respects you and respects your faith. That is why it is so important for those in the Church to gently and respectfully witness to the Jewish people.

WITNESSING TO JEWS

Is It Even Worth Trying?

Probably as you read this chapter, you wonder to yourself whether it is even worth the effort to share Jesus with people who so stubbornly refuse to consider Him as the Messiah. And yes, they do have a long history of stubbornly refusing to consider Jesus as Messiah. But more Jewish people have come to faith in Messiah in the last one hundred years than in the history of the Church since the resurrection. And 80 percent of those Jewish people have come to faith because of a gentle Gentile witness. I may be a lousy missionary to the Jewish people, but I can teach you to be a good one! First there are a few perspectives in the Church that we need to work on.

I have talked with numerous people in the twenty-six years I’ve been reaching out to Jewish people about Jesus. And I have run across a few misperceptions about Jewish people that need to be sorted. There is ethnic anti-Semitism among people in the Church, but I don’t believe that is the primary problem.

Misperception #1:

“We don’t need to witness to Jewish people because they are God’s chosen people and have their own way to the Father.” Believe it or not, I have heard that one from many Lutherans who have been influenced by the modern evangelical perspective. I call this the two-covenant approach: Jesus is the Messiah for the Gentiles, and the Jews have Abraham. Modern evangelicals are often the best friends of Israel, but sometimes only because supporting Israel advances their understanding of bringing about the end times. Jewish people know this; they are not stupid. They accept and encourage this kind of friendship, because, as I’ve heard them say, “Israel needs all the help it can get.” But some of these same prominent evangelical
friends of Israel have also espoused this two-covenant theology, supporting Israel with their travel and their dollars, while at the same withholding the Gospel, because they don’t believe the Jewish people need it. This may be hard to hear, but this is the worst kind of theological anti-Semitism. It originated with a German Jewish philosopher named Franz Rosenzweig and, believe it or not, is accepted by some in the Church today. Jesus Himself tells us there is no other way to the Father except through Him. Even for Jewish people. Jesus is speaking to Thomas, a Jewish man, when He says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6).

MISPERCEPTION #2:

“The Jews had their chance and they rejected Jesus, now salvation is for the Church.” This kind of statement is rarer to hear but is reflected by a pervasive theology that says the Church has replaced Israel in God’s plan. So, since the Jews have already rejected the Gospel, there is no need to witness to Jewish people. This brand of theological anti-Semitism is based often on a statement recorded by Matthew.

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.” And all the people answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!” Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered Him to be crucified. (Matthew 27:24–26)

First of all, I never gave that crowd my proxy! I don’t think we can say that a riotous crowd of Jews in the first century speak for all the Jews to come. Second, whose word stood in God’s judgment? Their vow taking responsibility for shedding Jesus’ blood, or Jesus’ prayer, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34)? If Jesus forgives their rash words, who are we to hold those words against them? Third, the fact that Jewish people continue to come to believe in Jesus belies this very understanding. And finally, I think we need to give St. Paul a chance to weigh in on this.
The Book of Romans is a letter that bares Paul’s heart about Israel more than any other. His thesis statement is “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16). This is the theme verse for our ministry. There are all kinds of opinions about what Paul means by “to the Jew first,” and most opinions come down on the side of “the Gospel went first to the Jew, they rejected it, and then it went also to the Greek” (or in some translations, the “Gentiles”). This temporal approach to the text, sort of cause and effect, often results in the verse being truncated by the Church by simply leaving off the part that follows the comma. But I think it would be fair to see how Paul interpreted his own words. Though he was an “apostle to the Gentiles,” everywhere he went, he first went to the synagogue to preach to the Jews. He finishes that thought with “I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them” (Romans 11:13–14).

The challenge of this problem is that Paul uses the word Israel in three distinct ways that are not interchangeable and need to be understood within the context of Paul’s letter. Romans 9–11 are critical for understanding the relationship between Israel the Church (what some call the “new Israel,” which is not a biblical term), Israel the nation, and Israel the ethnic people.

The Church, also not a biblical term, is not new. The Church is a church word for Israel. Israel, in this context, has always been, and always will be. Paul defines Israel as those who have trusted in the promises of God for their salvation.

Israel stands on a hinge in history. That hinge is the cross of Calvary and the empty tomb. On one side of the hinge is Israel looking forward to the promise of God that is the fulfillment of the substitution God provided on that mountain for Isaac, in Abraham’s time. This Israel is primarily, though not exclusively, populated with ethnic Israel. On the other side of the hinge is Israel looking at the death and resurrection of Jesus and receiving it as the assurance of the promise of salvation that God has now effected. On this side, Israel is all people, regardless of ethnic background, who trust in Christ for salvation.
Paul puts it together as a metaphor of an olive tree, cultivated by God (ethnic Israel, but those who trust God), fed by the root of Abraham. Then He takes a bunch of wild olive branches, the Gentiles, and by some miracle of the Holy Spirit, they, too, come to faith in the God of Israel and are grafted into that same tree. The tree has not changed; it just has a bunch of new branches that are bearing fruit because of faith in Jesus. The tragedy of this olive tree, fed still by the root of Abraham, is that many of ethnic Israel have been cut off and lie withering and drying out on the ground at the foot of the tree. I was one such branch. But, as Paul says, “For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree” (Romans 11:24). By God’s grace, I was picked up and grafted back into that tree and also by His grace, prayerfully bear fruit.

One last word on this misperception: The Book of Romans was written many years after that Good Friday crowd uttered those famous words. Yet, even with those shouts perhaps ringing in his ears, Paul laments over his fellow Jews, “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved” (Romans 10:1). If that is Paul’s heart’s desire, then I have to believe it is also God’s.

Misperception #3:

“Well, why bother witnessing to Jewish people if Paul assures us in Romans 11 that ‘all Israel will be saved’?”

I heard this from a Lutheran pastor early in my ministry. The problem is, even if we interpret “all Israel” to include ethnic Israel, this sort of interpretation of the text leaves all Jews, up until that “ingathering,” to languish in unbelief. Martin Luther believed in that ingathering, but he didn’t wait for it to happen before he witnessed to Jewish people. Unfortunately, I think Martin Luther is the reason many Lutherans use Paul’s words to “dodge the bullet” of Jewish missions. I don’t think this misperception stems from theological anti-Semitism but rather from a certain sensitive issue between Jews and Lutherans.

The sensitivity that we feel is often because of Martin Luther’s treatise On the Jews and Their Lies, written in 1543. In this treatise, he
argues that Jewish synagogues, schools, and prayer books should be burned; rabbis should be forbidden to preach; and homes, property, and money should be confiscated. He also recommends that Jews be forced into labor or expelled from the German lands. He does not even draw the line at killing them. Thus, it becomes easier to rely on Paul’s promise of the “ingathering,” if it means we don’t have to tangle with Jewish people over Luther and the Holocaust.

Rough reading, I know, especially right after the 2017 emphasis on the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. How could I possibly come to faith and become a Lutheran pastor with this kind of legacy in the Church? I have to deal with that question all the time; it is the stumbling block that all Lutherans have to deal with. And of course, every Jewish person knows the connection between Luther and the Holocaust. Luther figures prominently in Holocaust Museum displays of the events leading up to the Holocaust. Kristallnacht, the beginning of the “Final Solution,” was orchestrated to coincide with Luther’s birthday.

Once while having a conversation with an older woman in a church where I was preaching, she told me a story of her grandson, a faithful Lutheran, who went to college and had a roommate who was Jewish. Up until then, he had not heard of the horrible things Luther wrote. But as he tried to share his faith with his roommate, the roommate let him know just what he thought about Lutherans and Luther. It so shook his faith that he began to question everything. We do our children a disservice by not preparing them for this.

A lot of ink has been spilled trying to break the connection between Luther and the Holocaust. I’ve spilled some too. We can say that Luther was a typical man of the Middle Ages, who used crude and vulgar language because that was how they spoke in that day and age. He did not spare the Turk or the pope either. Some have said that Luther was simply expressing a tradition of Medieval Christian anti-Semitism, which perhaps having laid the groundwork for modern anti-Semitism, had nothing to do with the pseudo-science notions of race that the Nazis used to imprison and kill even Christian Jews.

Luther’s issue in 1543 was a religious dispute; believe it or not, Luther was not habitually anti-Semitic. Earlier in his ministry, in 1523, he wrote a treatise entitled "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew."
In it, Luther wrote of the Jews as an honorable people who are the lineage of Christ, advising a gentle approach for them and speaking against the very things he wrote in 1543. But by 1543, Luther had been having some success at witnessing to Jewish people in and around Wittenberg, to the end that he came under attack by local Jewish anti-missionaries who called Luther a false teacher, Christ a false Messiah, and Christianity a false religion. These are the lies that Luther was responding to in 1543, albeit not well.

An almost greater tragedy is that Luther never fully apologized for his 1543 treatise. We all have a hard time admitting when we are wrong, and Luther was no different. But his final sermon, given three days before he died, returned him to the perspective he had in 1523. It would be intellectually dishonest to conclude that Luther was anti-Semitic, but there is no question that he, as do all of us at one time or another, suffered prejudice, which unfortunately was written down and preserved for the future. The bottom line is we are grateful for Luther and the Lutheran reformers for recovering and preserving the pure Gospel, but they were all human and subject to sin.

Our ministry dealt with this issue, among others, at the 1983 convention of the LCMS with Convention Resolution 3-09, “To Clarify Position on Anti Semitism.” The full text of this resolution can be found in *Witnessing to Jewish People*, by Rev. Bruce J. Lieske, the founder of Lutherans in Jewish Evangelism. The convention resolution was adopted and included the following resolutions (among others).

**Resolved, that we reaffirm that the basis of our doctrine and practice are the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions and not Luther as such; and be it further**

**Resolved, that while, on the one hand, we are deeply indebted to Luther for his rediscovery and enunciation of the Gospel, on the other hand, we deplore and disassociate ourselves from Luther’s negative statements about the Jewish people, and, by the same token, we deplore the use today of such sentiments by Luther to incite anti-Christian and/or anti-Lutheran sentiment . . .** 

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This text is also available at lije.org under the “Resources” tab.
and be it finally Resolved, that in that light, we personally and individually adopt Luther’s final attitude toward the Jewish people, as evidenced in his last sermon: “We want to treat them with Christian love and to pray for them, so that they might become converted and would receive the Lord” (Weimar edition 51:195).  

Witnessing to Jewish people is challenging and thought provoking. I have come to terms with being a minim. The usual term, traitor, also applies to me. But I understand why. There is a cultural and historic hardening of the Jewish people because of actions of the visible church over the centuries. And there is a partial spiritual hardening of their hearts by God “until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (Romans 11:25). But all those hard hearts can be softened by the name of Jesus; and Jewish people do come to faith in Jesus. God has given me the privilege of baptizing several Jewish people.

I often say that if you can learn to share your faith with someone who is Jewish, then you can share your faith with anyone. I am blessed to have had the opportunity to preach in over three hundred churches and to help train over two hundred seminarians. And I am always reminded of St. Peter’s counsel at the end of his life:

Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God. (1 Peter 3:14–18)
GLOSSARY OF JEWISH TERMS

afikomen. Greek, meaning “that which comes after.” The matzo of the Passover Seder that is broken in two and hidden until the end of the meal, when it is shared with each person.

Aggadah. Hebrew, meaning “telling.” Refers to a midrash of ethics or theology. It is the basis for Haggadah.

aliyah. Hebrew, meaning “ascent.” A term used for returning to Jerusalem, and the basis for Israel’s 1950 Law of Return.

Am haSefer. Hebrew, meaning “People of the Book.” Refers to Jewish religious life following the destruction of the second temple in AD 70.

Amidah. Hebrew, meaning “standing prayer.” Also called the “eighteen benedictions,” part of the daily prayers of the synagogue.

Ashkenazi. Hebrew, derived from a term used by medieval Jews to describe the geographical area centered on the Rhineland. Jews who became a distinct community in central and eastern Europe.

Bar Mitzvah. Hebrew, meaning “son of the covenant.” A ceremony held for Jewish boys at age 13; signifies that they are allowed to be counted for the minyan. More liberal denominations of Judaism also include girls in a ceremony called Bat Mitzvah, “daughter of the covenant.”

bimah. Hebrew, meaning “platform.” A raised platform in the synagogue where the readings are read during worship.

Bubbe Meises. Yiddish, meaning “grandmother stories.” Often used to describe the Scriptures, inferring a low view of Scripture.


d’rash. From the Hebrew word midrash, sermon.

Eretz Yisrael. Hebrew, meaning “the land of Israel.”

Gan Eden. Hebrew, meaning “Garden of Eden.” A description of the Olam haBa to which the soul will ascend after death.

Gehinnom. Hebrew, meaning “valley of Hinnom.” Named for a cursed valley outside of Jerusalem where children were sacrificed; became the name for the destination of the wicked after death, sometimes referred to as Gehenna.

Gemara. Hebrew, meaning “completion.” A series of commentaries on the Mishnah, completed around AD 500.

gematria. A system of numbering the letters of the Hebrew aleph-bet, assigning numerical values to study words of equal value.

haftorah. A section of the Nevi’im, publicly read during Jewish worship.
Haggadah. Hebrew, meaning “the telling.” The primary text and liturgy for the Passover Seder.

Halakah. Hebrew, meaning “the walk.” An elaborate code of Jewish laws built on the Torah, rabbinic interpretation, and tradition.


hanukkiah. The nine-branched menorah, used to remember the “miracle of oil” at Hanukkah.

hazan. The cantor of a synagogue who leads the public prayers.


Kaddish. Hebrew, from the root that means “holy.” A prayer recited at various places during the worship service. There is a Kaddish reserved for those in mourning that is said daily for the eleven months following the death of a loved one and then annually on the anniversary of that person’s death.

Ketuvim. Hebrew, meaning “writings.” The third section of the Tanakh.

kibbutzim. Hebrew, meaning “gatherings.” The communal agricultural communities of Israel.

Kol Nidre. Aramaic, meaning “all vows.” A central prayer chanted on the eve of Yom Kippur, releasing one from any rash vows made to God that cannot be or are not upheld.

Ladino. An old Spanish language combining many languages with Hebrew, including Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, and Arabic, spoken by the Sephardim—Jews who lived in central and western Europe and the Mediterranean Basin.

Maimonides. Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, also known by an acronym of his name, Rambam.

matzo. The unleavened bread of the Passover Seder, symbolizing the haste with which the Israelites left Egypt.

mechitzah. Hebrew, meaning “partition or division.” A screen or balcony that separates men and women during worship, usually only in more Orthodox settings.

megillah. Yiddish, meaning “scroll.” Most associated with the Festival of Purim, but has come to mean a tediously detailed or embroidered account, the whole megillah.

menorah. A seven-branched candelabra representative of the lampstand in the temple.
midrash. Hebrew, meaning “to seek, study, inquire.” Seeking answers to religious questions by closely studying the meaning and the words of Torah.

Mikra. Hebrew, meaning “that which is read.” Refers to the Hebrew Scriptures that are read publicly in Jewish worship, used interchangeably with Tanakh.

minhag. A third source of Halakah, binding laws that have been developed through tradition.

minim. Hebrew, meaning “heretic.”

minyan. Hebrew, meaning “reckoning.” A quorum of ten men over the age of 13 required for public worship.


mitzvoth. Commandments, Halakah including d’oraita (Aramaic, meaning “from the Torah”) and d’rabbanan (Aramaic, meaning “from the rabbis”). See above for minhag.

Nevi’im. Hebrew, meaning “Prophets.” The second section of the Tanakh.

Olam haBa. Hebrew, meaning “the world to come.” A Talmudic speculation posed as a theological construct to explain why good Jewish people suffer and die along with the wicked.

Oneg Shabbat. “Oneg,” Hebrew, meaning “enjoyment, pleasure, or delight.” Isaiah 58:13 encourages us to call the Sabbath an “oneg,” a delight, and in doing so, we will find our joy in the Lord. Oneg Shabbat is the Sabbath fellowship, which often includes food, drink, and discussion.

Pale of Settlement. An area of western Russia and eastern Europe where Jews were allowed to live and prohibited from living outside of from 1791 to 1917.

parashah. Weekly Torah portions used in Jewish liturgy.

pilpul. Hebrew, meaning “to search” or “debate.” A process of interpreting the Scriptures and Talmud that can involve a careful and sometimes excessive debate about distinctions.

schmooze. Yiddish, meaning “to chat intimately.”

Seder. Hebrew, meaning “order.” The order of worship for Passover, expressed through the order of the eating of certain ceremonial foods to tell the story of the exodus from Egypt.

Sefer Torah. A Torah handwritten on parchment, hand-copied with a quill dipped in ink, used in the public reading of the weekly parashah.

Sephardim. The Jewish people who eventually settled on the Iberian Peninsula of Spain and Portugal.
Shaddai. Hebrew, meaning “Almighty.” One of the names of God, expressed in worship by imitating the Hebrew letter “shin” with the hands, often depicted on mezuzahs.

Shema. Hebrew, meaning “hear.” The most fundamental expression of Jewish faith.

shofar. A ram’s horn.

shul. Yiddish for “synagogue.”

siddur. Hebrew, meaning “order.” The Jewish prayer book, which includes the hymns, prayers, and order of worship in synagogues, akin to a hymnal.

Simchat Torah. Hebrew, meaning “rejoicing of the Torah.” A Jewish holiday that celebrates the beginning and ending of the annual Torah cycle of parshahs in the fall, following the festival of Sukkot.

spiel. Yiddish, meaning “play.” Especially pertains to Purim, but has come to mean a long and extravagant speech or argument intended to persuade, to give the whole spiel.

Talmud. Hebrew, meaning “instruction.” Contains the Mishnah and the Gemara.

Tanakh. The Hebrew Scriptures. It is actually the acronym TNK, for Torah, Nevi’im (Prophets), Ketuvim (Writings). The Tanakh is arranged thematically, with the first section being the Torah, or the first Five Books of Moses; the Nevi’im, which is all the prophets together; and then the Ketuvim, the rest of the writings. Also called Mikra.

Torah. Hebrew for the “arrow that hits the mark.” In the narrow sense, Torah is the Five Books of Moses, sometimes called the Pentateuch. In the wide sense, Torah is the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures plus the oral Torah, which Jewish teaching says is what was spoken to Moses along with what was given to Moses to write down.

tribe. Haverim kol Yisrael, Hebrew, meaning “the fellowship of all Israel,” a statement of Jewish solidarity.

tzedakah. Hebrew, meaning “righteousness.” Acts of righteousness include charitable acts of compassion, recognizing everyone’s dignity as part of God’s creation, caring for the suffering, pursuing peace and harmony both with our fellow Jews and the Gentiles around us, and seeking truth.

Yahrzeit. Yiddish, meaning “time of year.” The annual remembrance of a loved one with the reciting of the Mourner’s Kaddish and the lighting and burning of a Yahrzeit candle for twenty-four hours.

yeshiva. Hebrew, meaning “sitting.” An academic institution that focuses on the study of Talmud and Torah.
yetzer hara. Hebrew, meaning “the bad inclination.” The evil that all men are born with.

yetzer hatov. Hebrew, meaning “the good inclination.” The moral conscience given to Jewish children when they become responsible for doing mitzvot.

Yiddish. One such language that originated in the ninth century AD among the Jewish people living in eastern Europe, the Ashkenazi, which has elements of German, Slavic, and Hebrew.

Zohar. Hebrew, meaning “splendor” or “radiance.” A thirteenth-century Spanish writing by Moses de León, exploring Jewish mystical thought.