

Our Jewish Roots
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Part 1 of 5

(Deuteronomy 6:4–9 NRSV) Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. {5} You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. {6} Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. {7} Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. {8} Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, {9} and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

During the month of January we are going to be looking at our religious heritage. A couple of years ago, during WWE (our Wednesday evening program) we invited, Rabbi Stevens, an Imam, as well as a representative from the Hindu faith community to come and share with us about their beliefs.

Without a doubt, it was the best received of any programs that we have done as a part of WWE. But what struck me, was that while we are all fascinated in understanding our Jewish, Muslim and Hindu brothers and sisters → most of us, know very little about our fellow Christian sisters and brothers.

So for the rest of this month, Nathan and I are going to look at some of the various traditions that make up the Christian family. And on Wednesday nights we will dig deeper into the various traditions.

Before we begin, I want to let you know that this is not going to be about bashing other Christian traditions → I believe that every tradition has helped mold us and brings some powerful witnesses to the Christian faith to the table that we could, and should learn from.

If we are going to look at what makes us Christian, and our various ways of celebrating and sharing that faith, we need to go back a little farther to the very root of our Christian family tree and we realize quickly that those roots are Jewish.

Our roots are Jewish because Jesus was a Jew.

- He was born to Jewish parents
 Raised in the synagogue, and practiced temple worship
- He was called a Rabbi → which is a teacher of the Jewish faith

- And he went around the countryside of the Galilee preaching and teaching the Torah

All of the early followers of Jesus were Jewish

The Bible that we use has 66 books in it

39 of those books are known as the Old Testament → but more accurately as the Hebrew Bible, since that is the Bible that the Jewish faith follows. It contains the revelations of God that the Jewish people experienced.

The remaining 27 books are what we call the New Testament – the revelations about Jesus

Without a doubt → the heart of Judaism can be found in what is known in Jewish circles as the “Shema”. “Shema” means hear, which are the first words of this passage.

(Deuteronomy 6:4–9 NRSV) Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. {5} You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. {6} Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. {7} Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. {8} Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, {9} and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Jesus quotes this same passage when he is asked what is the most important commandment.

(Mark 12:28–31 NRSV) One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" {29} Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; {30} you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' {31} The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Jesus sites two commandments as being the most important

1. The Shema → “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the LORD alone.”
2. The second passage is also from the Hebrew Bible, from the book of Leviticus 19:18.

The roots of a tree are vital to its growth and survival.

A tree needs strong roots which provide it with nutrients from the soil which continue to give life to the tree.

The roots of a tree also provide stability so the tree doesn't blow over during windstorms.
Roots are vital.

In a similar way our Jewish tradition provides us with the basic roots of our faith and gives us life and stability.

Jesus was born to a Jewish mother, raised in a devout Jewish home, attended Sabbath services every week, learned the Hebrew Scriptures, quoted them often, and was called Rabbi a Hebrew word which simply means teacher.

It is amazing to me, how many Christians are anti-Semitic.
I don't understand how that can be, since Jesus, our teacher,
Jesus our Lord,
Jesus our Messiah was a Jew!

The commandment that God gave to Moses defined the Jewish people: HEAR, O ISRAEL, THE LORD OUR GOD, THE LORD IS ONE.

You see, at the time of the Hebrews, every culture in the ancient world believed that that there were many gods.

Whether we are talking about Egypt
Canaan
Babylon
or even Rome

Each culture had different names for the various gods.
They believed that there were gods of fertility,
gods of the sun and moon,
different gods of different tribes;
different gods for different purposes.

But to this small group of wandering Hebrew people without a nation of their own, God gave the revelation that God is one.

The amazing revelation that came to the Hebrew people and through the Hebrew people to us is that there is one God who is the source and creator the whole universe, all living things, and who created all human beings in God's own image.

In the history of world religions the idea that there is one God, one source of all being, one creator of everything --- was a unique revelation.

Moses wants us to remember that our response to this one God who loved us into being is to love God in return with our whole heart, soul, might – with our whole being.

Moses is clear that just as a child loves devoted parents with their heart, soul, mind and strength, so we, as children of God, love the one God who created us, sustains us, forgives us, blesses us, and walks with us through the good times and the difficult times of our lives.

Moses wants people to remember this commandment always so he says that we should write these words on our hearts:

we should always remember that our basic role in this world is to remember that there is one creator God,

to love God with our whole being, trust God with our whole lives, surrender ourselves into the hands of God, to put God first in our lives, and to seek God's will for our lives above our own will.

Moses gets even more specific.

He tells us to teach this commandment to our children. He tells us to teach our children to love God when we are at home and when we are away from home, when we lie down to go to sleep at night and when we get up in the morning.

You see, Moses doesn't say that we should take our children to a minister, priest, or Rabbi for them to teach our children to love God.

No, the implication is that each one of us as parents will teach our children to love God when they go to bed at night and when they get up in the morning, when they go off to school and when they return from school.

Moses wants us to remember this so well that we will "write these words on your hand and on your forehead so that you will never forget them and write them on your doorposts and on you're the gate of your house".

You see, this commandment that God is one and that we are to love God with our whole being is so important that it should be everywhere so we don't forget it.

It is like telling us to put a note saying, "LOVE GOD" on your refrigerator door or your bathroom mirror so we are constantly reminded that our major task in life is to love God.

If you have ever been to a Jewish home, you have seen this commandment in practice. When you come up to the door at their house you find a little rectangular box, that is called a MEZUZAH on the right side of the door. And inside that box is to be written the SHEMA.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Every time that they go in or out of their house, they either touch or kiss the Mezuzah to remind them to love God with their whole being.

Also, if you ever see a Jewish person wearing the Tefalim, they are also following this commandment by putting these words inside a leather box that they place on their arms and forehead.

You see, the heart of the Jewish tradition is that God is one and all of us, whether we are Jewish or Christian are called to love God with our whole being, trust God with our lives, and seek God's will for our lives. This commandment to love God is the primary root of both the Jewish and the Christian faith.

One of the key things that bind Jews and Christians together is that we are all called to a common commitment in the Hebrew Scriptures to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

While we are united in our common commitment to love God and to love others, there are also differences between our faith traditions.

I want to just highlight a few. And I hope that you will take some time to find out more about the Jewish faith.

From a Jewish perspective, the biggest difference has to do with how we understand God. We as Christians do not see this as an issue, but when I have gotten into discussions with Jewish friends, this is always one of the major divides in their minds.

For Jews → as we have stated, GOD IS ONE.

When they look at the Christian concept of the Trinity, they don't understand how we can suggest that God is not one, but three.

I don't want to get into a big examination of this, but from a Jewish perspective, Christians really aren't mono-theists.

The first four of the 13 Principles of Faith by Maimonides (RAMBAM) codify Judaism's concept of God:

1. God exists
2. God is one and unique
3. God is incorporeal
4. God is eternal

A second place that we differ is on our understanding of sin and forgiveness.

According to Judaism, mankind enters the world with "ORIGINAL PURITY", free of sin and with a pure soul – everyone starts with a "clean slate". Human beings are endowed with two impulses from birth, the good inclination (*yetzer ha'tov*) and the evil inclination (*yetzer ha'ra*). According to the Hebrew Bible, it is only in a person's youth, when he or she has learned the rudiments of right and wrong and the basics of good and evil, that the evil inclination starts to "act up" and, at times, overpowers the good inclination.

Recognizing that all people sin, Judaism specifies a process for the atonement of sins that is rooted in the Hebrew Bible. According to the Hebrew Bible, sins are lifted and forgiven through prayer, contrite repentance, and good deeds.

Among these components the atonement process, acts of kindness (charity) are deemed the most important, since Judaism is a religion based on deeds, with particular emphasis on charity.

Although one may petition to be forgiven for sins at any time, as devout Jews do in their daily prayers, the annual Holy Day of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) is the time designated in the Hebrew Bible for atonement.

Yom Kippur is intended to be a vehicle that enables a person to contritely repent for his or her transgressions.

It is important to recognize, however, that Yom Kippur atones only for sins between a person and God, and not for sins committed against another person.

To atone for the latter, one must first seek reconciliation with the person who was wronged, righting the wrongs of the damaging effect of the sinful acts committed.

Christians, on the other hand, believe in the concept of ORIGINAL SIN, which holds that human beings are born inherently sinful, i.e., people are born in a state of sin.

According to the Christian interpretation of the Adam and Eve story, by eating from the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden, they had disobeyed God, thereby committing the first sin by mankind and introducing into the world death, the wages of sin.

The Christian belief that the sin of Adam and Eve was transferred to all future descendants is reflected in some of the teachings of the New Testament. This means that mankind is condemned to death from the instant of conception.

How can people extricate themselves from this sentence of death?

The answer is, according to Christianity, through the blood of Jesus. It is only by accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior that God's "grace" returns to mankind – a belief in Jesus "saves" a person and provides salvation.

Which leads to the major difference between Judaism and Christianity, our understanding of Jesus and Messiah.

The Jews do not believe Jesus was the Messiah, put quite simply; he did not fit the bill. And they still await the coming of the anointed one of God who will fulfill the Messianic Agenda.

In doing research for this sermon, I came across a quote attributed to Jim Brule, in the "readers page" of the Syracuse, New York, *The Post-Standard* newspaper.

He wrote:

Scholars tell us that Christianity could be reduced to "faith in God," and Judaism to "wrestling with God." As Jews, we are obliged to question, struggle with and even, in extreme cases, take God to a holy court for the injustices of the world – where do you find this in Christianity?

The Christianity of many of our parents would fit with that quote – one did not question or wrestle with God. But the Christianity of 2010 requires that we, too, join the holy struggle to understand God.

And the best way to do that is by first examining the roots of our family tree.

Let me end with some words from Fiddler on The Roof, it is from a song called Sabbath Prayer.

May God bless you and grant you long lives.
May the Lord protect and defend you.
May the Lord preserve you from pain.
Favor them, Oh Lord, with happiness and peace.
Oh, hear our Sabbath prayer. Amen.