

Surviving Millennia:

Ritual, Tradition and Community Among the Jews

“The Talmud attributes to God a declaration which is probably unique among religious writings: ‘Better that they [the Jews] abandon Me, but follow My laws’ (for, the Talmud adds, by practicing Judaism’s laws, the Jews will return to God, *Jerusalem Talmud Haggigah* 1:7). . . . Judaism can be appreciated and practiced independently of one’s present level of belief in God.”

--Dennis Prager and Rabbi Joseph Telushkin (18, 19)

Judaism and the Jewish people has survived millennia of change and persecution whether by the sacrificial cults that were around in its beginning to the fascist Nazis who took out a third of the global Jewish population, or the more modern Golden Dawn party in Greece expressing extremely anti-Semitic views and wishes. What set apart this group, and allowed them to survive? Following the *mitzvot*, or commandments, and ritual ceremonies and traditions within Judaism are what have kept this group alive both religiously and culturally throughout time.

From the ancient to the modern, many rituals have survived intact. However, as time marches on, individuals in every age have seen a need to reinterpret Torah and the place of those rituals for their time. In each age, through each conflict, the people of the book have taken Torah and applied it to the times. Changes happened intentionally and unintentionally, other times out of necessity as after the final destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, “House of the Sanctified”¹ or the Great Temple, in 70 CE, when such things as the ritual animal and granary sacrifice went by the wayside. (Armstrong 71)

Let’s define religion, Judaism, and Torah here. Religion, as defined by Webster’s New World College Dictionary, is:

1. a) belief in a divine or superhuman power or powers to be obeyed and worshiped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe
- b) expression of such a belief in conduct and ritual
2. any specific system of belief and worship, often involving a code of ethics and a philosophy.

Judaism is:

1. the Jewish religion, a monotheistic religion based on the laws and teachings of the Holy Scripture and the Talmud
2. the Jewish way of life; observance of Jewish morality, traditions, ceremonies, etc.
3. Jews collectively; Jewry (Webster’s)

Isaac Klein says: “Classical Judaism has no word for ‘religion.’ The closest counterpart in classical Jewish vocabulary, and, hence, *in the Jewish mind*, is Torah. Torah, however, includes far more than what we moderns understand by ‘religion.’ Torah encompasses and seeks to regulate every moment of life, including even its termination in death. Nothing human is beyond the scope of its concern and, accordingly, of its scale of judgment and its program of prescription.” (xix)

From the first *brit milah*, or covenant of circumcision, the one G-d told Avram S(he) would make a great nation of his children if he and all future generations kept this for all time (Genesis 17). The Hebrews’ one G-d made a covenant that day under the promise of this particular ceremonial practice, this ritual of circumcision, being carried out to the end of days. To this day, this brit, this covenant is kept by the majority of Jews, in addition to other *mitzvot*, or commandments (singular, *mitzvah*),

rituals and traditions being carried out today. Other examples include the keeping of Shabbat, the hanging of a mezuzah [a piece of parchment, often contained in a decorative case, inscribed with the Hebrew verses Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21 which comprise the *Shema*, considered the Jewish declaration of faith] on

doorposts (see Figure 1),



Fig. 1 The mezuzah scroll



Fig. 2 The hanging of a mezuzah, encased in a decorative, protective cover on the doorpost

“Just as Shabbat has kept the Jews throughout the generations, Shabbat has also kept us.”
- Yosef Meir Rabin⁵

Fig. 3

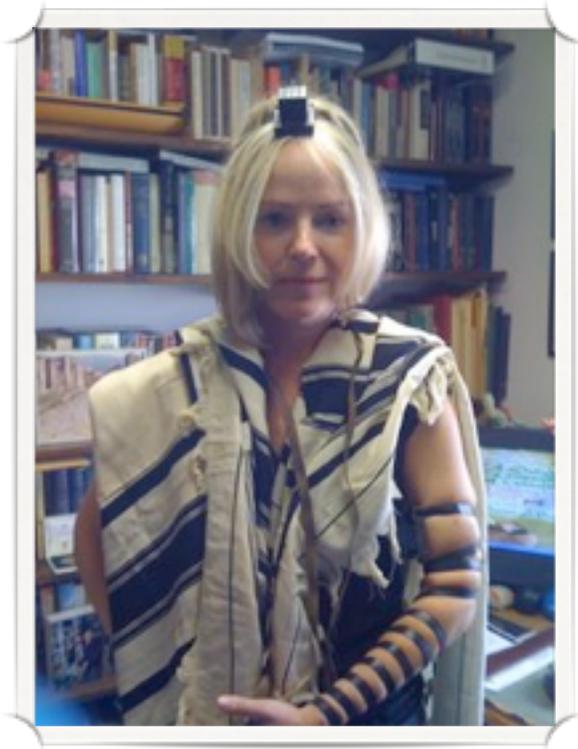


Fig. 4 (Top Right) A set of tefillin, the left piece going on the arm, the right piece being wrapped around the head.

Fig. 5 (Left) Dani Shapiro in wrapped in her father's tallit and tefillin

the wrapping of *tefillin*, or phylacteries² (see Figure 4) [a set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah (also containing the Shema),

which are worn by observant Jews during weekday morning prayers], are still wrapped the world over by those including traditional religious men and even these days some women (see Figure 5). The rituals of this religion, as well as the community of people, have kept each other alive.

An estimated one-third of the global Jewish population was systematically tortured and murdered during the Holocaust. Everything, since, “seems to have been altered by [it] and the inestimable horror that it symbolizes to the survivors--and every Jew in the concreteness of his own life knows himself to be a ‘survivor.’” (Katz 142) The irony of post-Holocaust contemporary Jewish existence is that not only is every Jew a ‘survivor’ or heir of Treblinka and Auschwitz, “are also the heirs of the fighters of the Warsaw ghetto and the actual builders of Zion.” “To understand ourselves required ineluctably that we come to some grasp of these events and our relation to them, however fragmentary, limited, or personal this understanding may be.

“Those who would enquire what it means to be a Jew today must ask not only, or even primarily, vague and unformed questions about Jewish identity and the relation of Judaism and modernity and Judaism and secularity, but must rather articulate the much more precise and focused question through which all the other dimensions of our post-Holocaust identity are refracted and defined: ‘What does it mean to be a Jew after Auschwitz?’ Auschwitz has become an inescapable *datum* for all Jewish accounts of the meaning and nature of covenantal relation and God’s

relation to man. Likewise, all substantial answers also need to be open and responsive to the subtleties of the dialectical alternation of the contemporary Jewish situation: that is, they must also give due weight to the ‘miracle’ which is the state of Israel. They must thoughtfully and sensitively enquire whether God is speaking to the ‘survivors’ through it, and if so, how. This means that while awed by the very reality of its existence, they must interrogate the state’s philosophical, theological, and some would even add ‘messianic,’ implications. Alternatively, dialectically, they must also consider in all



Fig. 6 Newspaper from 14 May, 1948

seriousness the stark, frightening possibility that despite the human and even religious meaning of the return and rebuilding of Israel, any attempt at theodicy in the face of the full horror of the *Churban* (the Holocaust) is impermissible; even more, it is blasphemy!” (142-3)

One rabbi and theologian, Eliezer Berkovits, summarized another Jewish theologian, Franz Rosenzweig, thusly “God withdrew the Jewish people from the dimension of history in which the nations live by giving [the people] Israel His law, which like a bridge arches over the flow of time ‘that rushes underneath in all eternity.’” (111) Out of the ashes of Auschwitz, one take on this is the assertion, nay the command, Jews survive! (144)

Prior to the Holocaust, some scholars such as Hermann Cohen believed that “all the commandments and all festive celebrations are a sign of ‘remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt,’” and thus, the entire Torah is a remembrance of that liberation which is not deplored “but celebrated in gratitude.” He goes on to say that remembering is the psychological function of faithfulness. God remembers the covenant made with the Israelites’ ancestors, and so the

Jewish people must remember the benefits, the gifts God has bestowed upon it. Through remembering being a slave in the land of Egypt, “the memory changes into the social virtue of loving the stranger . . .” (106)

It is said that the “purpose of the laws of the Torah is to promote compassion, loving-kindness and peace in the world” (Maimonides)³, and Telushkin says “for thousands of years, Jews have daily recited their mission, ‘to perfect the world under the rule of God.’ ... The purpose of Jewish existence is ... to fight evil and to reduce suffering in the world.” (16) It is important to remember that you can doubt God’s existence, and still be a good Jew, so long as you act in accordance with Jewish law. However, “the converse does not hold true, for a Jew who believes in God but acts contrary to Jewish law cannot be considered a good Jew.” (Prager and Telushkin 19)

While the Jewish people, the people Israel, are named for wrestling with God, so too do they wrestle with the nature and meaning of internal and external influences, from the nature of internal evil and working to right wrongs one has done on a yearly basis, to external evil, and trying to cope with the many reactions the individual or community can or has had to events such as the Holocaust. One may ask how a people committed to perfecting the world, fighting evil, and reducing suffering has wound up at the mercy of evil experiencing so much suffering? These traditions have kept hope alive whether in the Pale of Settlement, or the death camps, in the modern day long enough to allow the asking if God is still relevant. Regardless of God’s relevance, or existence, the mitzvot have allowed a higher law and a new ethic to breach the mindset of a world that had little concept of many of the ideas Judaism brought into it. The culture of this people that has come out of binding covenants and laws that have created ritual ceremonies and other traditions has brought the Jews out of the land of darkness and servitude to survive throughout the aeons, regardless of geography, or what their oppressors have done to them, short of complete extermination.

¹ This is my own translation of the Hebrew.

² For more information about tefillin, please check out <http://tiferesjudaica.com/tefillin.php>.

³ As quoted in *The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*. (Prager and Telushkin)

Works Cited

1. Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1993.
2. Katz, Steven T. *Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought*. New York: New York University Press, 1983. Print.
3. Klein, Isaac. *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America; [distributed by Ktav Pub. House], 1979.
4. Prager, Dennis and Joseph Telushkin. *The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981.
5. "Judaism." *Webster's New World College Dictionary*. 3rd Ed. 1996. Print.
6. "Religion." ---

Author's Note

My thesis, and content, has changed from a focus on talking about the ritual, to talking about what has sustained this community of people over the many generations. There is so much more I could talk about here, from the actual rituals and traditions themselves, to the peoples and their history, yet the space does not allow for this. The stack of books I have researched instead is a long one, and while some of them may seem unrelated, I will include them after this note to show the depth of research and complexity this particular issue holds, survival through tradition and community. When it comes right down to it, regardless of belief, it is these traditions and this community that has remained intact throughout millennia of persecution and attack. What other group, ethnic, religious, or otherwise can say this? I am most curious to study it, as well. I had intended to write more on women's roles in Judaism, both traditionally and today, and perhaps one day I will. I feel I have written something much tighter, and better put-together than I have before. Instead of attempting the master's thesis, I have attempted to keep my ideas and content flowing and fitting together within this concise amount of text given. I hope I have accomplished it. I want to know what ideas I communicated, to find out whether what I wrote is what I intended. I want to know if my writing is easily understood, or if it rambles. I know I use many quotes, but there are so many good ones, and I often don't know how to write something when someone else has, I feel, done it so much better already. I'd like feedback on that. Are my transitions good? Does each section make sense in the context of those previous and what comes after? Did I make it interesting, or were there things that seemed boring? Was my writing suited to my audience? I never know, when writing or talking about Judaism, what to explain, and what to expect my readers to know. I am in such a strange place that I don't know what to expect of my audience, and that is historically a problem for me. I get questions about some things that seem very simple to me, and others are apparently boring. Please give comments on that. Overall, I feel I have done very well on this, and I have worked hard on it. I have so many drafts of it that my head spins. I feel my argument becoming clearer. I hope you feel the same. Thank you.

Anneke Moffitt

Works Cited and Additional References:

- Katz, Steven T. *Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought*. New York: New York University Press, 1983. Print.
- Nisan, Mordechai. *Identity and Civilization: Essays on Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999. Print.
- Klein, Isaac. *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America; [distributed by Ktav Pub. House], 1979.
- Donin, Rabbi Hayim Halevy. *To Be a Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life. Selected and Compiled from the Shulhan Arukh and Responsa Literature, and Providing a Rationale for the Laws and the Traditions*. New York: Basic Books, 1972.
- Kaufman, Michael. *The Woman in Jewish Law and Tradition*. Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1993.
- Prager, Dennis and Joseph Telushkin. *The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981.
- The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus*.
- Weisfogel, Bella K. *The Use of the Structured Jewish Mourning Rituals in Aiding the Bereaved*. Diss. University of Massachusetts, 1988. Ann Arbor: UMI, 2000. Print.
- The Many Faces of Judaism*.
- Many Peoples Many Faiths*.
- Understanding Judaism*.
- From the Secular to the Sacred*.
- The Book of Jewish Belief*.
- Why Be Different? A Look into Judaism*.
- Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Relating to the Old Testament*.
- A Temple Treasury*.
- How to be a Jewish Teacher*.
- This Is My God*.
- Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem*.
- Guide for the Jewish Homemaker*.
- Gates of the Seasons: A Guide to the Jewish Year*.
- Women and Judaism*.
- Code of Jewish Law*.
- Celebrating the New Moon*.
- A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance: The Expression of Grief and Joy in Israelite Religion*.
- Religious Objects as Psychological Structures*.
- The Woman in Jewish Law and Tradition*.
- Choosing a Jewish Life: A Handbook for People Converting to Judaism and Their Family and Friends*.
- Choosing Judaism*.
- The Jewish Book of Why*.
- The Second Jewish Book of Why*.
- Faith after the Holocaust*.
- Between Muslim and Jew*.
- Judaism and Islam*.
- Jews, Muslims and Mass Media*.
- Judaism and Islam in Practice*.
- Intertwined Worlds*.

Islam and Peacemaking in the Middle East.

Militant Islamists.

Everyday Jibad.

Arguing the Just War in Islam.

My Life is A Weapon.

Understanding and Addressing Suicide Attacks.

“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an.

The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual.