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**Coffee with the Cantor  
2014-15 (5775)**

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Thursdays, 11:00-12:30  
Temple Beth Shalom**

**This Year's Topic:  
Jewish Influence in the Secular World**

Last year we focused our discussion on Jewish rituals and how they are viewed by the Jewish and non-Jewish world. This year, we turn the tables and ask the question, how has Judaism affected the non-Jewish world? Although some of the discussion will look at historical influences, much of the time will be spent on current interactions.

While I believe that most of the influence is positive, some of it may be negative.

We will look at Jewish influence in:

- Politics
- Law
- Labor
- Science and Technology
- Medicine and Healthcare
- Journalism and Media
- Finance
- Art and Music
- Literature
- Foreign Relations
- Religion

The first question will be: what do we mean by "Jewish influence"? Is it simply the fact that a Jewish person was involved, or is it the clear application of Jewish principles and beliefs? Must it be a conscious, purposeful influence or can it be "by accident"? What if the person involved was Jewish but rejected Jewish belief and observance? Is it possible for the Jewish influence to be negative or to reflect negatively on Judaism? What constitutes significant influence?



To start us off, we will look at how Judaism changed religion in general:

## **Jewish Influence on Religion**

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How did Judaism differ from the prevailing (pagan) religions?

### 1) Concept of God

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- a) God not capricious
  - b) **Single God more powerful than** other gods
  - c) Beyond physical incarnation
  - d) Orderly creation
  - e) Able to alter decisions
  - f) Acts with words
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### 2) Communication with God

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- a) No human sacrifice
  - b) Direct individual connection to God
  - c) God hears and answers
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### 3) Later Developments

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- a) Decentralization of God access
  - b) Essential commitment to written word
  - c) **Elimination of animal sacrifice**
  - d) **Elimination of cult**
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## ***From joyofsects.com:***

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The tradition of Judaism links the ancient and modern worlds in the West in much the same way that the Hindu tradition does in the East. It forms part of the triad of Abrahamic religions, along with Christianity and Islam, that have defined Western monotheism. For if any single concept characterizes religion in the West, it would have to be the belief in one God, omnipotent and omnipresent. "The Lord is one," says a part of the Hebrew Bible that reaches back over 3,000 years. And nearly 1700 years later, the Islamic Quran declared, "There is no god but God."

Monotheism had made other appearances before Moses codified it, most notably in Egypt, where Moses was born, but the Jewish tradition is the one responsible for establishing the concept firmly and irrevocably in Western culture. It's clear from the Hebrew Bible that monotheism developed slowly, from a belief that the tribal God of the Hebrews named Yahweh was simply the most important and powerful of many gods. The many early references to God in the plural make that obvious. Still, the God of Israel is a personal God, and an ethically demanding one, and this combination of characteristics was unique for its time. Unlike most other deities of comparable antiquity, the God of Judaism is never described or given any visual image, nor, in the strict sense, is God's name even to be spoken aloud. Yet this God interacts directly and decisively with humanity.

The Hebrew God is a sky god meant to supplant the many manifestations of the more ancient Goddess in the Mediterranean region. This male identity was passed on to Christianity and Islam, separating these three traditions from the rest of the world's conception of the Absolute in a significant way. The idolatry that the monotheistic traditions so violently opposed was in large part the much older, female-centered worship of the Goddess.

The Jewish people themselves have wandered the earth for nearly 2000 years, from the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in the year 70 until the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. Their numbers are relatively small today -- only about 15 million -- but the Hebrew conception of God is at the core of Christianity and Islam, indelibly coloring these two religions that between them account for nearly half the earth's population.

Judaism may have evolved significantly from the early era of animal sacrifices, but there are ways in which it hasn't changed from its very earliest roots. Every week in synagogues around the world, observant Jews still proclaim one of the oldest passages in the Bible, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." (Deuteronomy 6:4)

## **The God of History**

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The outstanding feature of the Hebrew Bible is the role of God as directly intervening in history to guide the Israelites out of bondage and into their role as a nation of priests and a "holy people." The Hebrews may have conceived God as absolute, omnipotent, and omnipresent, but He was also extremely personal, capable of forming a direct relationship with selected individuals to change the course of history.

The earliest passages of the creation scenario in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, make clear that God approved of the physical or material world. After each act of creation beginning with the separation of the waters and the dry land into Earth and Seas on the third of the six days of creation, the passage appears: "And God saw that it was good." Unlike Eastern concepts of Maya, which view the phenomenal world as a manifestation that veils Absolute Reality, the Hebrews accepted the essential goodness of material things, and saw a holy life as indivisible from a life of enjoyment of God's bounty, as long as certain inviolable moral laws were obeyed. But unlike the Goddess-and-nature-worshiping cultures of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian lands surrounding them, the Israelites believed that God exists *apart from the material world*, and has the power to affect and change it through His interactions with humanity. The Israelite sense of enjoying the world was predicated on following God's explicit law, rather than appeasing arbitrary gods connected with unpredictable forces of nature.

The Jewish religion is, then, closely tied to history. Abraham, the patriarch of the Jewish people, who migrated to the Holy Land from the Mesopotamian city of Ur, can be placed near the beginning of the second millennium before the Christian era. The Pharaoh from whom the Jews escaped under the leadership of Moses can almost certainly be identified as Rameses II (1304-1237 BCE). Comparisons of the king-lists in the early books of the Bible with non-Biblical Egyptian and Assyrian lists even make it possible to date within a few years the deaths of the



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earliest kings of the Israelites, including Saul, David, and Solomon, near the beginning of the first millennium BCE. The fall of Jerusalem can be placed exactly at March 16, 597 BCE, its destruction in 586.

## The Covenant

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The creation account in the opening chapter of Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible, is familiar throughout the entire Western world. It has even been said that this scenario, in which God brings forth the earth and everything on it in a burst of creation, fits in with modern scientific theories about the origin of the universe, specifically the Big Bang. Scholars have shown conclusively that Genesis reflects earlier accounts from Sumerian and Babylonian literature, and that it is the product of several authors and editors, none of whom is likely to have been Moses, to whom the first five books, also known as the Torah, are traditionally attributed. The uneven narrative even incorporates two distinctly different stories of creation, and has God speaking in the plural, as if to confirm the impression that for the earliest Hebrews, Yahweh was understood as the most powerful god among many. On the sixth day of creation, God says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (1:26). And in the famous account of the temptation by the serpent, who "beguiled" Eve into eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (no mention of an "apple," by the way), which she passed on to Adam. God then observes, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil."

Confusing matters further is the fact that Judaism has sternly forbidden the creation of physical images of God, while Genesis again states that God created man in His image and likeness. But the notion of humanity mirroring God helps to underline a crucial contribution of Judaic theology -- the belief that human life itself is sacred because it is modeled after the Supreme Being.

## *From Nova: The Rise of Judaism*

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When did Judaism as we know it today—devoted to one God and the teachings of the Torah—really take root? How did the religious practices of the earliest Israelites differ from monotheistic Judaism? In the following interview, Shaye Cohen, the Littauer Professor of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy at Harvard University and author of *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, addresses these and other questions.

## THE FOREFATHER OF THE JEWS

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### NOVA: Was Abraham the first Jew?

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**Shaye Cohen:** The biblical narrative gets going with Abraham in Genesis chapter 12. Abraham in turn Isaac, in turn Jacob, in turn Joseph and the twelve tribes, this brings us directly to the people of Israel and the covenant at Sinai. So Abraham is thought of as the first Jew, the archetype.

Historically speaking, of course, this doesn't make much sense. It's hard to talk about Jews living around the year 1800 B.C.E. or anytime near that. We don't have any of the institutions, beliefs, social structures in place that will later characterize Jews and Jewishness. So in a mythic kind of way we can say that Abraham recognizes God and that Abraham launches the process—biological and social and cultural—that will culminate in the people of Israel, who in turn will become Jews and the purveyors of Judaism. But to call Abraham Jewish simplifies things very dramatically.

### In terms of things that characterize being Jewish today, where does Abraham stand?

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In modern terms, the Jewishness of Abraham fundamentally consists of belief. He communicates with God, and God communicates with him. Now, the rabbis of old imagined that Abraham observed the whole Torah, that Abraham observed all the commandments: He observed the Sabbath, he observed the festivals, he observed the laws of culture and food. He observed everything, not just circumcision, which is attributed to him explicitly in Genesis, but everything else as well. Because how can you imagine our forefather Abraham, the founder of Judaism, not observing the Jewish rules, not observing the Jewish laws? This is a wonderful anachronism, a charming conceit. But historically speaking, how could it be?



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## Does Abraham discover monotheism?

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Is Abraham the founder of monotheism? The texts in Genesis simply have Abraham talking to God and God talking to Abraham, that's it. Later Jews could not imagine such events without explaining more fully how it was that Abraham came to recognize God and why it was that God chose Abraham. And one of the most famous of these stories recounts how Abraham, the philosopher, sits and contemplates the natural order and realizes that there must be a first cause, that everything has a purpose. And behind the world that we can perceive, there must be some force that we cannot perceive but whose existence we can infer. That's how Abraham came to believe in God. And he went home to his father, Terah, who in the story is an idol maker, and Abraham then smashed all of his father's idols. And numerous Jewish children are convinced to this day that the story is found in the book of Genesis and are always shocked and amazed to discover that it isn't.

So is Abraham the founder of monotheism? Ancient Jewish storytellers thought the answer was yes, and following them Christian storytellers thought the same. However, reading historically, we realize monotheism is a very difficult and elusive concept to define. Again, it's far too simple to say that Abraham discovers monotheism.

## Does the Abraham account in Genesis have a central message, a central purpose?

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It teaches sacred values, sacred ideas—how to relate to God, to have faith in God. It's also simply a story about our founders. We humans are always curious to know about where we come from. All cultures have stories about their founders or great figures of the past. So here, too, we have stories about our great founder figure, Abraham, who sets the process going that makes us who we are, we meaning the people of Israel, the covenantal people.

## THE COVENANT

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### Let's talk about the idea of the covenant. Tell us more about its importance.

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One of the main ideas of the Hebrew Scriptures is that the people of Israel relate to God through a covenant. Now, this is a very remarkable idea, and as far as I know, it's unparalleled anywhere else in the ancient world. This covenant establishes what we might call an invented relationship as opposed to a natural relationship. The Greeks have a natural relationship with their gods. The Babylonians have a natural relationship with their gods. The Egyptians, too. Not so ancient Israel. God enters into a contractual relationship with the people of Israel, they accept this relationship, and in turn they receive a land from God. This is really a remarkable idea.

### One sign of the covenant is circumcision, right? Where does this idea come from? As you mentioned, the Bible says that Abraham is circumcised.

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Yes. Genesis 17 is the chapter that spells out, repeatedly, that circumcision is the sign of the covenant. Circumcision is the mark of the covenant between God and Israel embodied on the male Jew. The key question is, where does this idea in Genesis 17 come from?

Modern scholars, of course, are not sure. For the believer, the answer is simple: God commanded Abraham, and ever since circumcision has been the mark of the covenant. For the academic historian, the answer is more complicated, because we are not sure that God gave this command to Abraham. We historians imagine this may have been a later development that was projected back onto Abraham as a founding figure of the people of Israel. But we don't know precisely when this development took place.

### Does it relate somehow to the Babylonian Exile [586-539 B.C.E.], after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple?

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Many modern scholars have argued that circumcision takes on its role as a marker of Israeliteness or a marker of Jewishness only in the time of the Babylonian Exile. Here, without a temple, far from their homeland, Israelites would have been looking for symbols of difference.

Circumcision is something that Israelites may have been doing for centuries. It was a common ancient practice among many peoples in the Near East. But the Babylonians are not circumcised. The Israelites may realize that circumcision is something that will set them apart from their neighbors in Babylon, something that will help them retain their distinctiveness even in diaspora, in exile, far from their home, and far from their institutions and the way of life that they had known previously.

In this context, circumcision and perhaps other ritual practices will take on meaning as markers of identity, clear ways of indicating who is in and who is out, who is a member of the covenantal people. This is a very attractive scholarly view. The only problem with it is that it isn't possible to prove.

## THE EMERGENCE OF JUDAISM

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### Is there consensus among biblical scholars that the Exile was a critical time in the formation of Jewish identity?

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The Exile from Judah to Babylon was a major moment in the emergence of the Jewish religion. On this point, there can be no doubt. There is a great deal of discussion about the details, but the larger point stands beyond any doubt.

The remarkable thing is that the Judeans return from the Exile. Not all of them. Most of them, in fact, didn't return. But some of them did. They rebuild their Temple. They try to recreate life as it had been before. We don't know of any other exiled people from this period who returned from exile to reestablish traditional institutions and modes of worship. But the Judeans did. So somehow, for 70 years or more, they managed to retain their identity, retain their religion and their values strongly enough to motivate them to return and try to start over.

### So was this the period when Judaism as we know it was established?

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We see the emergence of something we might begin to call Judaism. How so? We have the creation of diaspora Jewish communities, communities living outside the land of Israel with a clear Jewish identity. We have not seen that before. We have the emergence of the Torah and the idea that all Israelites are united by a single public book that all Israelites are to study and whose commandments all Israelites are to observe. We find the emergence of the ideology that we Israelites are to remain distinct from our non-Israelite neighbors. We may not intermarry with them. Many scholars argue that we have the beginnings of public prayer during this period, the earliest versions of the synagogue. I'm not convinced that this is so, but if it is so, it's yet another sign that we have the beginnings of Judaism.

The experience of the Babylonian Exile is the mother of Judaism. It is during this period that the Judeans realize that they can be loyal to God even far away from their homeland. Without a temple, without the priesthood, without kings, without all the institutional trappings they had enjoyed in the old days—without any of that—they are still able to worship God, be loyal to God and to follow God's commandments. This is the foundation of Judaism.

### You say that the Torah is a product of the Exile, but was it entirely written in this period?

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No. Most modern scholars agree that the Torah more or less attained shape in the Exilic Period and the period of the return. We do not mean that the Torah was written from scratch at that point. It was obviously not. Clearly in earlier centuries there were stories, laws, genealogies that were circulating, perhaps in written form. But it is this period, the 5th century B.C.E., when these diverse strands were woven together to create a single book, or in this case, a five-part book, the Torah.



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## GUIDED BY SCRIPTURE, DEVOTED TO ONE GOD

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### What are the main differences between Israelite religion and Judaism?

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How do we contrast Israelite religion with Judaism? We can do it in a number of different ways. We can begin institutionally: Israelite religion has a temple; Judaism has a synagogue. Israelite religion has priests; Judaism has sages or rabbis. Israelite religion has animal sacrifice; Judaism has prayer. Israelite religion is located primarily in the homeland of Israel; Judaism is found in any land. Israelite religion has prophets; in Judaism, prophecy has ceased.

Israelite religion has sacred interpreters, but it's only Judaism that has sacred interpreters, sages, studying a sacred text. And the sacred text is meant to be the property of the entire community. This is a sign of Judaism, not a sign of Israelite religion. Israelite religion, theologically speaking, believes that God rewards and punishes in this world. Judaism develops theories of reward and punishment in the hereafter.

These are some of the contrasts between Israelite religion and Judaism, and the transition from one to another is not an event; it's a process that will take centuries, and the Babylonian Exile and the restoration in the 5th century B.C.E. are important moments in that process.

### Is it also in this period, the Exile, when the Israelites come to understand their god as the one God, the universal God?

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The Israelites had long debated among themselves how to understand God's place in the world. Is God the only god? Is God the chief god of gods? Is God simply our god, and other people have their gods? Some Israelites thought, it's perfectly fine to worship the God of Israel and worship some other gods too, especially gods of neighboring peoples. Other Israelites argued vociferously that this is completely forbidden. Some Israelites thought it was fine to use images, other Israelites thought it wasn't.

The view that triumphs, of course, is that there is only one God. The gods of other nations, if they exist, are entirely subordinate to this one God. This one God is God of the entire world, the entire universe—the creator of everything that we see and all that is within it. This view clearly has roots back in ancient Israelite times, but it comes to the fore in the time of the Exile.