Judaism and Orthodox Judaism

Loren Marks
Trevan Hatch
Brigham Young University - Provo, trevan_hatch@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub

Part of the Other Religion Commons

Original Publication Citation
COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted materials. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of fair use that user may be liable for copyright infringement.
Judaism and Orthodox Judaism

The term Jew, which began as a tribal name and later became a national title, today refers to many things: an ethnic group, a philosophy, a religion (Judaism), a tradition, or a way of life. Although Jews have comprised a relatively small portion of the world population (currently a mere 14 million people), over the last 3,000 years the sacred texts (Hebrew Bible) and monotheistic tradition of the Jewish people have been foundational in Western civilization. The Jews, while suffering some of the greatest persecutions of any group in recorded history, have nevertheless managed to produce some of the most influential intellectual figures to date, including Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Jesus of Nazareth. Of the 826 Nobel Prize winners to date, 187 (22 percent) have been Jewish.

Jews are often viewed by historians and social scientists—including scholars of American culture, family, and religion—as a fascinating group to study for several reasons: (1) Judaica—referring to Jewish history, religion, and tradition—dates back more than 3,000 years and contains one of the most complex histories, legal and religious systems, and philosophical traditions of any ethnic or religious group; (2) Jews, because of their nature, are ideal for researching an array of important social issues, including assimilation, ethnicity, identity formation, and oppression; (3) the Jewish population is significantly more educated than the general population—as of 1990, 50 percent of Jewish males and 48 percent of Jewish females had completed at least one college degree, more than double and triple the national averages, respectively; and (4) traditional Jewish groups have exceptionally high rates of within-faith marriage and fertility, while more liberal and secular Jews have low rates of marriage and fertility, as well as high rates of intermarriage, providing a study in contrasts.

Foundations of Judaism

According to the Hebrew Bible, a nomadic tribe originally from Mesopotamia eventually settled in Egypt in the early 2nd millennium B.C.E. This period in Jewish history is occasionally referred to as the Patriarchal Period because this nomadic tribe was led by four generations of noble patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Israel (also called Jacob), and Joseph. The Hebrews, also called Israelites after the grandson of Abraham, eventually escaped Egypt and settled in what is today Israel and Palestine.

Although the Israelites had become, by choice, geographically divided into 12 territories—one for the descendants of each of the 12 sons of Israel—they were unified by both a temple and legal system that the God of Israel revealed to them through Moses. The Israelites offered animal sacrifices and other offerings at the temple in Jerusalem to the God of Israel. The temple worship of ancient Israelite religion is the foundation of what would later be called Judaism. The ancient Israelites were led politically by kings (the most famous of them being David and Solomon), ritually by high priests who oversaw affairs of the temple, and religiously by prophets. Many Israelites began calling themselves Jews (yehudim in Hebrew) after Judah, the name of one of Israel’s sons and a dominant tribe in Israel, as early as the 8th century B.C.E. Within a few hundred years, by the time the Babylonians had destroyed the temple in 586 B.C.E., members of all 12 tribes of Israel were calling themselves Jews.

Rabbis, the Synagogue, and Jewish Law

Although ancient Israelite law and religion is the foundation of Judaism, the religion as practiced today by traditional Jews was largely developed by the rabbis (masters or teachers) in late antiquity. Thus, this traditional Judaism is also called Rabbinic Judaism. After the Jews rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem in 516 B.C.E., they were no longer led religiously by prophets but rather by scholars and rabbis who interpreted both the written law (Hebrew Bible) and the oral law (traditions). By the 1st century C.E., localized centers of worship had become common. In addition to the temple in Jerusalem, these smaller centers, proseuché (place of prayer) or sunagogé (place of assembly) in Greek, were places where Jews could gather and worship. After the Romans sacked the temple in 70 C.E., these synagogues became the central places of worship in each community, and the rabbis assumed an ever more important role in the survival of Judaism as a religion. The rabbis in the first six centuries of the Common Era produced one of the most complex and extensive codes of religious law ever written, totaling more than 60 tractates in more than
30 volumes. This code, the Talmud, contains rabbinic discussions on Jewish law (halakha) and ethics (based largely on the Hebrew Bible), including issues of business, diet, education, family life, war, and worship.

The Struggle to Define Judaism

Throughout the Middle Ages, Jews continued to orient themselves by the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, but they also looked to contemporary Jewish intelligentsia to interpret these sources for direction on Jewish legal and religious matters. Sa'adia Gaon (d. 942), for example, codified the first Jewish prayer book for synagogue worship (siddur), after which today's prayer books are structured. Maimonides (d. 1204) formulated 13 principles of faith and wrote a code of law (Mishnah Torah) meant to be more accessible to the Jewish masses than the Talmud. The Mishnah Torah (retelling of the law or second law) is widely consulted and studied by some Jewish groups today.

In the early Modern period, after they were expelled from Spain in 1492, Jews began raising questions about how they—as a cultural, religious, and social minority—could better live and survive (both religiously and temporally) in the dominant society. Two major positions dominated the dialogue. One position (particularism) argued that Jews must largely remain insular and accept only Jewish ways of thinking (Hebrew thought) because all other forms of thinking (e.g., Greek philosophy) were either inimical or superfluous to the Jewish way of life. Accepting other ways of thinking, it was argued, would eventually lead to mass assimilation. The other position (accommodationism) maintained that Jews must accommodate to the dominant culture and accept “truth” wherever it exists (not only through Hebrew thought), including through Greek philosophy. These two philosophies clashed intensely for the next few centuries and by the early to mid-19th century, Judaism had produced three major separate movements: Conservative Judaism, Orthodox Judaism, and Reform Judaism.

Denominationalism and American Jewry

Reform Judaism was the first movement to emerge in the early 19th century. A segment of the Jewish population in Western Europe, particularly in Germany, adopted an accommodationist approach and argued that much of Jewish belief and practice was antiquated, superstitious, or unnecessary. Proposals from within the Jewish community to adjust, reinterpret, and modernize both the belief system and the religious legal system were rejected by the particularists. Reform Judaism spread across Western Europe. By the early 1820s, a Reform Synagogue was established in Charleston, South Carolina. Currently in the United States, Reform Jews comprise roughly 35 percent of the adult Jewish population.

Orthodox Judaism as a systematic movement that emerged as a response to Reform Judaism. Jews who rejected proposals for change argued that Judaism cannot be reformed because, as God's creation, Judaism transcends space and time; therefore, any attempt to reform Judaism was anathema to traditional Jews. According to many traditional Jews, called “Orthodox” today, Reform Judaism is not considered Judaism. Orthodox Jews constitute roughly 26 percent of the adult Jewish population in the United States.

Jews who are called Conservative in North America (“Masorti” outside North America), comprising roughly 27 percent of the adult Jewish population in the United States, offered a moderate alternative to the Orthodox and Reform positions. Conservative Jewish synagogues range on the spectrum from more liberal to more traditional but typically fall somewhere in between Orthodox and Reform.

The intense philosophical debates that started centuries ago in Europe continue to the present between the three major branches of Judaism. These debates influence the Jewish way of life and Jewish families in America. Perhaps the best example is the classic question “Who is a Jew?” Traditional Jewish law (observed by Orthodox and some Conservative congregations) considers a person to be a Jew under two circumstances: (1) a person whose mother is Jewish (regardless of the status of the father), and (2) a person who has converted to Judaism by “proper” authority and appropriate procedures. More liberal Jewish groups (e.g., Reform) define a Jew as (1) a person whose mother is Jewish, (2) a person whose father is Jewish (assuming the mother is a Gentile) and who was raised Jewish, and (3) a person who converts to Judaism through “proper” authority and appropriate procedures. As a result of differing positions on such important
issues as who should be considered a Jew, many people who thought they were Jewish their entire lives have had their Jewish status delegitimized by other Jewish groups, or by the State of Israel upon relocating there. This reality affects various aspects of Jewish family life, including dating and mate selection.

The Jewish American Family
Jewish family structures and family roles in the United States are as diverse as those of the general population. Some Jews are highly religious and family centered, while others are nonreligious and do not anxiously pursue a family-centered life. Many Jewish leaders in North America are optimistic about the future of American Jewry. Recent studies reveal that Jews (even secular Jews), by and large, remain involved in the Jewish community through attending synagogue services, enrolling their kids in Hebrew school or Jewish summer camps, participating in Jewish holiday activities, or taking local adult classes in Hebrew or Jewish studies. At the same time, however, some Jewish leaders and social scientists are not optimistic about the future of American Jewry. Research reveals that Jewish families in the United States are facing challenges including low marriage rates, high intermarriage rates, low birthrates, and low fertility rates.

Marriage and Intermarriage
Rabbinic Judaism teaches that marriage is a commandment of God: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner... Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife” (Genesis 2:18, 24). As a result of a strong emphasis on marriage in Jewish law, the Orthodox Jewish community experiences a high (and largely within-faith) marriage rate, as well as a lower divorce rate than most religious and ethnic groups in the United States. However, the national Jewish population experiences a different reality because more than half of American Jews are nonreligious (approximately 55 percent) and do not follow Jewish law. Research shows that the age at first marriage for Jewish men and women is higher than the national average (28 for men and 26 for women). At age 35, 52 percent of Jewish men and 36 percent of Jewish women are not married, which is also higher than the U.S. general population (41 percent for men and 30 percent for women).

Perhaps the most difficult challenge facing the Jewish family and Jewish ethnic identity in the United States is the issue of intermarriage. Before 1970, the intermarriage rate among Jews was only 13 percent. Today, that number has nearly quadrupled to 47 percent. In addition, 52 percent of Jewish young adults were born to an intermarried couple, and the current trend is that roughly 75 percent of those born in intermarried families are choosing to marry non-Jews, compared to 28 percent of those born in families with two Jewish parents. Research has also revealed that while 98 percent of children with two Jewish parents are raised Jewish, only 39 percent of children in intermarried families are raised Jewish.

Birthrate and Fertility Rate
According to the most recent (2000–01) National Jewish Population Survey, the American Orthodox Jewish population doubled in size from the early 1980s to 2000, which is expected since the Orthodox Jewish community experiences not only relatively high marriage rates and lower divorce rates but also averages more children per family than any other Jewish group. Many traditional Jews take seriously the biblical commandment to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the Earth” (Genesis 1:28). The rabbinic sages, as far back as the 1st century C.E., determined that the commandment to “be fruitful and multiply” is fulfilled when a couple has had at least two children (to replace themselves). Research reveals that a majority of married Orthodox Jewish women have four children or more.

In contrast, the national Jewish population experiences a net loss every decade (despite the growth of the Orthodox community). Since 1950, American Jewish couples at the end of their childbearing years have averaged 1.57 children. Since 2000, the number has grown slightly with an average of 1.8 children per couple. This means that among more liberal and secular Jews in the United States, who make up a large majority of the Jewish population, the birthrate is lower than the national average (2.1 children per family). A few factors contribute to the low birthrate among American Jews: (1) economic prosperity among Jews is not as high as in previous generations and, therefore, couples are having fewer children; and (2) Jewish women are postponing marriage due to career or educational pursuits, which is shortening the time frame for childbearing. For these and other reasons, Judaism and Jewish
families continue to provide an anomalous attraction to social scientists and scholars of the family.

See Also: Bar Mitzvahs and Bat Mitzvahs; Hanukkah; Passover.

Further Readings