



STATEMENT DJ-431

## **UNDERSTANDING JUDAISM: How to Share the Gospel with Your Jewish Friends**

**by Richard Robinson**

### **Summary**

Christians can effectively witness to Jewish people. It is helpful to have an understanding of the three branches of Judaism and the Jewish holidays and life-cycle. The greatest obstacle to Jewish people hearing the gospel is the Jewish presupposition that believing in Jesus is not a Jewish thing to do. In addition, many Jewish people fear the social consequences of coming to faith in Jesus. But Christians can learn to share the gospel through a Jewish frame of reference and respond to objections. The Old Testament can be used to present messianic prophecy and the agreement of teaching between the Old and New Testaments.

Most Christians know that Jesus and the apostles were Jewish. Indeed, the gospel began from the Jewish people and went on to embrace the world. Yet today, less than one percent of Jewish people are followers of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah.

Remarkably, though, in the past 25 years the movement of Jewish followers of Jesus has been growing in a way not seen since the days of the apostles. Many Jewish people have come to know Jesus through the witness of a non-Jewish friend or co-worker. This article will help you learn how you might sensitively and effectively share the gospel with your Jewish friends. As you make yourself available, you will find that God will give you opportunities to share the gospel. And if you don't have a Jewish friend, ask God to give you one!

### **JUDAISM AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE**

There is a distinction between the Jewish people and the religion of Judaism. Of the 12.8 million Jewish people in the world, not all consider themselves to be religious or practice Judaism. Many profess to be atheists, agnostics, or secular. Still others have embraced New Age or Eastern philosophies. Moreover, one of the distinguishing features of modern Judaism is the existence of three main movements or "branches," each of which is profiled in the following chart.

In using this chart, it is important to understand that Judaism is a religion of deed, not creed. It is possible to be an atheist and yet an Orthodox Jew because one happens to attend an Orthodox congregation. What an individual believes about God or the afterlife is not nearly as important as how one lives, as defined by the branch to which one belongs. Therefore, do not assume in advance that your friend believes a certain way because he or she belongs to a particular branch.

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	<b>Orthodox Judaism</b>	<b>Reform Judaism</b>	<b>Conservative Judaism</b>
<b>HISTORY AND CHARACTERISTICS</b>	Orthodox Judaism dates back to the days of the Talmud (second to fifth centuries A.D.). It is characterized by an emphasis on tradition and strict observance of the Law of Moses as interpreted by the rabbis.	Reform Judaism emerged following Jewish emancipation from ghetto life in late 18th century Germany. It sought to modernize Judaism and thus stem the tide of assimilation threatening German Jewry. Reform Judaism emphasizes ethics and the precepts of the prophets.	Conservative Judaism is an American movement with roots in 19th century Germany. It arose as a middle-ground reaction to what some viewed as the extreme assimilationist tendencies of Reform Judaism
<b>OTHER NAMES</b>	Traditional or Torah Judaism	Liberal or Progressive Judaism	Historical Judaism
<b>U.S. MEMBERSHIP (Source: 1992 American Jewish Yearbook)</b>	6 percent of all American Jews	38 percent of all American Jews	35 percent of all American Jews
<b>VIEW OF SCRIPTURE</b>	Torah, meaning essentially the teaching of the Five Books of Moses, is truth. They assert that a true Jew believes in revelation and the divine origin of the oral and written Torah. "Oral Torah" refers to various interpretations of the written Torah believed to have been given to Moses along with the written Torah. The Torah is accorded a higher place than the rest of the Hebrew Bible.	The Bible is a human document preserving the history, culture, legends, and hopes of a people. It is valuable for deriving moral and ethical insights. Revelation is an ongoing process.	The Bible, both the Torah and the other books of the Hebrew Bible, is the word of God and man. It is not inspired in the traditional sense but is rather dynamically inspired. Revelation is an ongoing process.
<b>VIEW OF GOD</b>	God is spirit rather than form. He is a personal God, who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, and compassionate.	Reform Judaism allows a varied interpretation of the "God concept" with wide latitude for naturalists, mystics, supernaturalists, or religious humanists. It holds, "The truth is that we do not know the truth."	The concept of God is nondogmatic and flexible. There is less atheism in Conservative Judaism than in Reform, but most often God is considered impersonal and ineffable.

<b>VIEW OF HUMANKIND</b>	Humanity is morally neutral with a good and an evil inclination. A person can overcome his or her evil bent and be perfected by his or her own efforts in observance of the Law.	Humanity's nature is basically good. Through education, encouragement, and evolution a person can actualize the potential already existing within him or her.	This group tends toward the Reform view, though it is not as likely to espouse humanism. Perfectibility can come through enlightenment. Humanity is "in partnership" with God.
<b>VIEW OF THE LAW</b>	The Law is the basis of Judaism. It is authoritative and gives structure and meaning to life. The life of total dedication to Halakhah (body of Jewish law) leads to a nearness to God.	The law is an evolving, ever-dynamic religious code that adapts to every age. It is maintained that if religious observances clash with the just demands of civilized society, they must be dropped.	Adaptation to contemporary situations is inevitable. The demands of morality are absolute; the specific laws are relative.
<b>VIEW OF SIN</b>	Orthodox Jews do not believe in "original sin." Instead, one commits sin by breaking the commandments of the Law.	Reform Jews do not believe in "original sin." Sin is interpreted as the ills of society. Humanity is sometimes held to have a "divine spark" within.	Conservative Jews do not believe in "original sin." The individual can sin by committing immoral or antisocial acts.
<b>VIEW OF SALVATION</b>	Repentance (belief in God's mercy), prayer, and obedience to the Law are necessary for a proper relationship with God. "Salvation" is not considered a Jewish concept, since Jewish people presume a favored standing with God; that is, they do not need salvation.	"Salvation" is obtained through the betterment of self and society. It is social improvement.	Conservative Jews tend toward the Reform view, but include the necessity of maintaining Jewish identity.
<b>VIEW OF THE MESSIAH</b>	The Messiah is a human being who is not divine. He will restore the Jewish kingdom and extend his righteous rule over the earth. He will execute judgment and right all wrongs.	Instead of belief in the Messiah as a person or divine being, Reform Jews favor the concept of a Utopian age toward which humankind is progressing, sometimes called the "Messianic Age."	Conservative Jews hold much the same view as the Reform.
<b>VIEW OF LIFE AFTER DEATH</b>	There will be a physical resurrection. The righteous will exist forever with God in the "World to Come." The unrighteous will suffer, but disagreement exists over their ultimate destiny.	Generally, Reform Judaism has no concept of personal life after death. It is said that a person lives on in his or her accomplishments or in the minds of others. Some are influenced by varieties of Eastern mystical thought where souls merge into one great impersonal life force.	Conservative Jews tend toward the Reform view, but are less influenced by nontraditional ideas such as Eastern mysticism.

<p><b>DISTINCTIVES IN SYNAGOGUE WORSHIP</b></p>	<p>The synagogue is a house of prayer as well as study; social aspects are incidental. All prayers are recited in Hebrew. Men and women sit separately. The officiants face the same direction as the congregation.</p>	<p>The synagogue is known as a "Temple." The service has been modernized and abbreviated. English, as well as Hebrew, is used. Men and women sit together. Reform temples use choirs and organs in their worship services.</p>	<p>The synagogue is viewed as the basic institution of Jewish life. Alterations listed under Reform are found to a lesser degree in Conservative worship.</p>
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Notice that there is no Jewish equivalent to evangelical Christianity, which emphasizes a personal relationship with God. Orthodox Judaism is sometimes mistaken for this, but it is more concerned with living according to the traditional understandings of the law of Moses than with a personal relationship with God.

### **JEWISH SCRIPTURES AND PRACTICES**

**Scriptures.** The Old Testament portion of the Bible, often called the "Hebrew Bible" by Jewish people, is the Scripture of Judaism. Even though many Jewish people do not consider the Old Testament to be the Word of God and inspired, it is generally accorded respect as part of Jewish tradition and history.

Orthodox Jews consider other books, such as the Talmud, to possess divine authority. Meanwhile, most Jewish people consider the Talmud and other rabbinic interpretations to be useful for ethics and instructive for life but not binding as divine authority.

**The Annual Holiday Cycle.** Almost all Jewish people, regardless of the branch to which they belong, observe at least some of the Jewish holidays. The chief holidays are the following:

The *High Holy Days*, observed in September or October, are the most solemn days on the calendar, centering on atonement from sin. They consist of *Rosh ha-Shanah* (the Jewish New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement). *Rosh ha-Shanah* is marked by the blowing of a ram's horn, the *shofar*. *Yom Kippur*, 10 days later, is characterized by fasting and praying to God for the forgiveness of sins. After five more days comes *Sukkot* (Tabernacles), a joyful holiday marked by the construction of a *sukkah* (booth) decorated with festive fruit and plants. *Yom Kippur* and *Sukkot* go back to the Old Testament, the latter as a reminder that the people lived in tents as they journeyed to the Promised Land.

In November or December falls *Hanukkah*, a holiday that commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over the pagan desecrators of the Temple in the year 165 B.C. The New Testament mentions this holiday in John 10:22. During the week of Hanukkah, the *menorah* (candelabrum) is lit each night and potato pancakes are eaten.

In February or March, a carnival-like holiday called *Purim* is observed, recounting the events of the Book of Esther.

*Passover*, the most popular of all the Jewish holidays, falls in March or April and commemorates the Israelites' deliverance from slavery in Egypt as narrated in the Book of Exodus. This holiday is characterized by the eating of *matzoh* (unleavened bread) during the entire week and the observance of the *Seder*, or Passover meal, at the beginning of the week. The Last Supper of Jesus and the disciples was a Passover meal.

Finally, the holiday of *Shavuot* (Weeks) falls in May or June, with themes of springtime and harvest. Traditionally, this holiday was the day when God gave the Law to Israel at Mount Sinai.

**The Life Cycle.** Besides the annual holidays, there are various distinctive lifestyle events that characterize the lives of most Jewish people. Three of these are

- Circumcision of sons on the eighth day after birth. This ceremony is called the *bris*.
- *Bar mitzvah* (for boys) and *bat mitzvah* (for girls — not traditional). This is the coming of age ceremony at age 13, consisting of a synagogue service followed by a reception.

- Jewish weddings take place under a *chuppah* (canopy). One high point is the smashing of a glass wrapped in a cloth to symbolize the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

**Daily Lifestyle.** Many Jewish people observe the Sabbath, the weekly day of rest. Some affix to their doorposts a *mezuzah*, a small box containing various Scripture portions. Some also keep *kosher*, meaning that they observe the various dietary laws. Not as many Jewish people observe these practices as in previous generations, and some are choosing to observe them not for religious reasons but as a means of connecting with their heritage.

## WITNESSING TO JEWISH PEOPLE

**How Jewish People View the Gospel.** There is one underlying, unspoken objection that almost all Jewish people have to placing their faith in Jesus: it is not a Jewish thing to do. They believe that they will cease to be Jewish if they believe in Jesus — that becoming a Christian means turning one's back on one's people, history, and heritage. In addition, many Jewish people fear the social consequences that they would experience should they come to faith in, or even consider, Christ.

Most other objections are rooted in the same unspoken objection:

*Christianity is for the Gentiles.* This is an objection based on identity. Jewish people believe they neither need to nor should consider Christ. If a Jewish person is considering any religion, it should be Judaism.

*Jewishness Is a Way of Life.* This is an objection based on culture. There are Jewish ways of thinking and doing that differ from Gentile ways. To a Jewish person, Gentiles can seem puritanical in dress and behavior, subdued in interpersonal communication, and overly conservative in politics and lifestyle. Furthermore, church services differ considerably from synagogue services.

*Jewish People Presume a Standing with God.* This is an objection based on religion. Jewish people do not speak of "salvation," for there is nothing to be saved from. If there is a God, then Jewish people already have a relationship with Him. Jesus is superfluous for Jewish people.

Despite such objections, Jewish people are coming to the Lord in record numbers. The following sections can help you more effectively witness, both by showing what you might avoid and pointing to positive things you can do.

**Some Things to Avoid in Witnessing.** Avoid certain offensive words. The gospel will always offend because of the message of the cross, since none of us like being told we are sinful. Yet there are other points at which Jewish people can take offense or exception.

First, *avoid Christian jargon in general.* Some Christians speak in a language that carries little meaning for the unchurched, whether Jewish or not.

Second, *avoid certain terms and utilize others.* "The Jews" or "you Jews" sounds anti-Semitic on the lips of a non-Jew; it is better to say "the Jewish people" or "a Jewish man." "Jewish" is an adjective that should be used to describe only people, land, religion, or language. If you refer to "Jewish money" or "Jewish control of the media," you may well be harboring anti-Semitic attitudes.

"Convert" implies leaving behind one's Jewishness. It is better to speak about "becoming a believer (or follower) of Jesus." But it is appropriate to explain that biblical conversion was spoken of by the prophets as meaning "turning back to God" rather than "changing one's religion" (see Isa. 44:22; Jer. 4:1; 24:7; Joel 2:12).

Some suggest replacing the name "Jesus" with the Hebrew equivalent of "Y'shua." While it is good to refer to "Y'shua" — and explain that such is His Hebrew name — people will not realize that you are referring to the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, unless you also use "Jesus"!

Finally, Jewish people enjoy telling Jewish jokes to one another, but a non-Jew should not do so. Similarly, in conversations with your Jewish friends, do not criticize leaders in the Jewish community. Though no person in this world is above reproach in all things, let any justified criticisms come from Jewish people rather than from you.

Above all, remember that the gospel can be inherently offensive. If someone takes exception to your witness, it may well be because he or she is taking exception to God.

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*Don't succumb to the fallacy of showing only love.* Of course, Christians should always show love to people. It is wrong, however, to imagine that you will "love someone into the Kingdom." Jewish people are already morally upstanding by general community standards. Simply living a life of love will not convey the saving gospel. Rather, one must verbalize the gospel. This can be done in the following ways.

**Some Things to Do in Witnessing.** *Witness to friends who are Jewish.* It is a good idea to witness primarily to Jewish people with whom you've established a friendship. Build the relationship by sending Jewish holiday greeting cards. Doing this not only clears the ground by letting them know you recognize they are Jewish, but it is also a good way to continue to cultivate a friendship.

*Move to Spiritual Topics.* Often a holiday season is an excellent time to initiate a witnessing conversation. You might ask your Jewish friend to tell you something about what their Passover was like, or about Hanukkah.

Then you might try to initiate a conversation that can lead to the gospel in a way that is natural for you. Depending on the chemistry of the relationship, some will get right to the issue of Jesus by asking a question or offering a challenge. Others might want to express concern for a problem and help their friend see how faith in Jesus addresses that problem.

Initiating a conversation does not always mean making persuasive statements. You might simply offer remarks and questions designed to be an invitation to further conversation. If the person declines additional interaction, accept that and don't proceed. On the other hand, you may encounter curiosity and a desire to hear more.

*Use a Jewish frame of reference.* If you receive a positive response, you can continue to talk about the gospel in a Jewish frame of reference. For example, you can tell a Jewish friend how, when Jesus observed the Last Supper, it was really a Passover seder (Luke 22:7-20). (For further details, consult the book *Christ in the Passover*, listed in the bibliography.) Or when you speak about sin, you may find a more positive reception during the time of the High Holy Days. Although a Jewish person may try to brush off the idea of sin at other times of the year, most Jewish people are willing to give it a bit more thought at Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when Jewish people ask God for forgiveness of any sins committed during the previous year.

*Be clear on foundational doctrines.* The gospel is based on the understanding that we are sinners in need of salvation by a savior. Though rooted in the Old Testament, these three concepts — sin, salvation, and savior — are foreign to most Jewish people and need to be properly conveyed.

- Sin: Jewish people think of sin in terms of individual deeds, not as a deep-seated characteristic of humankind. The label "sinner" is thought to apply only to notoriously decadent and evil people. You need to point out that all people sin, using the various biblical analogies. Even the great King David confessed his sin (see Ps. 51).
- Salvation: This is another foreign term to most Jewish people. They are more concerned about how to live right here and now than about being saved from hell in the afterlife. A helpful entree is to talk about "redemption" instead of "salvation." This is a term familiar to many because of the Passover Seder. You can explain that as God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, so He wants to free us from the slavery to sin in our lives.
- Savior: This is the third term not understood by Jewish people. It can be helpful to speak of a "redeemer" instead and certainly helpful to use the term "Messiah."

**Using the Bible.** Even though not many Jewish people accept the truth of the Old Testament, they do accord it respect. It is good to open the Bible with a Jewish friend and illustrate the gospel not merely by your statements and stories, but also directly by the Word of God. If you are in your friend's home, use his or her Bible if he or she has one.

Like initiating a conversation, using the Bible should be done only when your friend has indicated a willingness for you to be the "teacher" in this regard and for him or her to be your "student." Otherwise there is the sense that you are speaking from an "invisible pulpit."

The Bible should be used either to raise an issue or to speak to an issue. An example of the first approach is going to the Bible to initiate a discussion of what sin is (Isa. 53 — the suffering servant who takes on the sins of His people; Ps. 51 — King David's confession of sin; 1 Kings 8:22-61 — King Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple). An example of the second approach is going to the Bible in order to answer an objection, such as an objection to the claim that all people sin (Eccl. 7:20).

In either case, it is good to begin with the Old Testament portion of the Bible, pointing to certain messianic prophecies and then to their fulfillment in the New Testament. Jesus often talked about how His life was the fulfillment of such prophecies (e.g., Matt. 5:17; 26:56; Luke 24:27,44; John 5:37-40). Isaiah 53 is one such prophecy. Contrary to what some Jewish people are taught, this passage was seen as a messianic prophecy by many rabbis and sages throughout Jewish history, and makes an excellent entree into the gospel. (See the bibliography for further resources.)

Do not be afraid to use the New Testament for more than just fulfillment of messianic prophecy. You can use the New Testament to show the Jewishness of the gospel. For example, Matthew 26 and Luke 22 show Jesus having a Seder. You can use the New Testament to show the concord of spiritual teaching between Old and New Testaments. On the matter of sin, for instance, you can point to a passage such as Psalm 51 and compare it with Romans 3:23 in the New Testament. On the idea of a New Covenant prophesied by God, show Jeremiah 31:31-34 and compare Jesus' words in Luke 22:20. You can use the New Testament to show how images from the Old Testament point to Christ, such as the blood of the Passover lamb being put on the sides and top of the doorframe — a foreshadowing of Jesus' redemptive death (Exod. 12:7, 13; cf. Rom. 3:25). Referring to Old Testament passages and incidents shows a Jewish person that you are familiar with and value the Old Testament Scriptures.

A helpful hint: few Jewish people study the Old Testament very much. There is a good chance that you know the Old Testament better than your Jewish friend. In addition, if you don't know the answer to his or her question, say you don't know the answer but will look it up.

## RESPONDING TO OBJECTIONS

Undoubtedly the time will come when a Jewish friend will put up objections to the gospel. Raising objections such as the following might be a reflex action or represent an "official line" rather than a personally held viewpoint.

*"Christians believe in three gods but Jews believe in one God."* What is meant may be no more than, "Our religion teaches one God. So even though I do not believe in God, if I did, that is the kind of God I would believe in." Jewish people think the Trinity somehow implies multiple gods. You can simply affirm that you believe that God is One and point out that Jesus Himself quoted the *Sh'ma* (the statement of God's oneness in Deut. 6:4, quoted in Mark 12:29). You may also wish to point out that even the Old Testament teaches a plurality within the being of the one God, as when God says, "Let us make man in our image" (Gen. 1:26).

*"There's no proof that Jesus was the Messiah."* This is typically a stereotyped response; the person may never have investigated any of the reasons for faith. You might start by asking, "What kind of proof would convince you?"

*"If Jesus is the Messiah, why isn't there peace on earth?"* One answer is that we first need to have peace with God before there can be peace on earth. Jesus' first coming accomplished the former and, in proper order, His second coming will establish the latter.

*"How can you expect me to believe in God after all the persecution we've been through, not to mention the Holocaust? And it was Christians who did it!"* People can misuse any good thing. For example, tyrants misuse freedom and justice. Yet that doesn't make freedom and justice any less important to seek after. Likewise, people like Hitler have misused the gospel to oppress the Jewish people. They were certainly not Christians.

*"The New Testament is anti-Semitic."* Ask which parts and which passages. Often a person will not be able to point to anything specific. Sometimes a Jewish person will have in mind certain harsh-sounding passages in the Gospel of John and other places, such as John 8:44 or 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16. You can point out that this was the manner of speaking of the prophets of Israel. Isaiah 1 furnishes a good example. Isaiah was a Jew grieved by the sins of his people, and so was Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus is saddened at the sins of all people, not just Jewish people. Point out that you feel similarly about Gentiles who do not turn to God. All have sinned, and God's response to sin is the same for all people.

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"*Jews don't proselytize.*" This objection usually means, "I don't think people should push their beliefs on others." You can point out that Isaiah said Israel was to be a light to the nations (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). Moreover, you can say that you don't believe in forcing religion on anyone either, but you have always found that discussion and persuasion are part of any friendship. You might point out that the gospel is your greatest treasure and you naturally want to share it, especially with people you care deeply about.

"*I'm happy with my own religion.*" You can appropriately respond, "It's OK if you don't want to talk about spiritual things, but just remember that the goal of life is not to be happy but to know God. Ultimately, knowing the truth about God is what brings complete and lasting happiness and joy."

"*If Jesus was the Messiah, why don't the rabbis believe in him?*" The answer is, because they wouldn't be allowed to be rabbis much longer! With the kind of community responsibility and weight that a rabbi has, not many rabbis will allow themselves the freedom to ask if Jesus might be the Messiah.

Be encouraged that many Jewish people have come to faith in Jesus through the loving witness of a Gentile Christian. Ask God for an opportunity to share your faith with a Jewish person. If you are willing to make yourself available, don't be surprised when God answers that prayer!

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## RESOURCES

- For a longer version of this article (as well as similar chapters dealing with other religious groups) see the *Compact Guide to World Religions*, ed. Dean C. Halverson (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996). (Used by permission.)
- For further witnessing helps, testimonies, and apologetics material, visit the Jews for Jesus web site at <http://www.jews-for-jesus.org>. Or write for a free resource catalog listing many additional books and witnessing helps: Jews for Jesus, 60 Haight Street, San Francisco, CA 94102

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