

**An Outline Review**  
**of**  
Huston Smith's  
**The World's Religions**  
(Our Great Wisdom Traditions)  
**Chapter VII. Judaism**

**Part One: Their Passion for Meaning**

One-third of our Western civilization bears the mark of its Jewish ancestry. What lifted the Jews from obscurity to permanent religious greatness was their passion for meaning.

A. Meaning in God.

From a very early date, possibly from the very beginning of the biblical record, the Jews were monotheists.

The supreme achievement of Jewish thought was not in its monotheism as such, but in the character it ascribed to the God it intuited as One. God is a God of righteousness, whose loving-kindness is from everlasting to everlasting and whose tender mercies are in all his works.

B. Meaning in Creation.

Judaism affirms the world's goodness, arriving at that conclusion through its assumption that God created it. "In the

beginning God created the heavens and the earth" and pronounced it to be good.

To affirm that existence is God-created is to affirm its unimpeachable worth.

The Semantically originated religions emerge as exceptional in insisting that human beings are ineradicably body as well as spirit and that this coupling is not a liability.

### C. Meaning in Human Existence.

The striking feature of the Jewish view of human nature is that without blinking at its frailty, it went on to affirm its unspeakable grandeur. We are a blend of dust and divinity.

Human beings, once created, make or break themselves, forging their own destinies through their decisions.

People are God's beloved children.

The ingredients of the most creatively meaningful image of human existence that the mind can conceive - grandeur, sin, freedom, divine parentage; it is difficult to find a flaw in this assessment.

### D Meaning in History.

1. For the Bible, history is neither Hinduism *maya*, illusion or a Greek circular process of nature; it is the arena of God's purposive activity.

2. Second, if contexts are crucial for life, so is collective action; social action.

3. Third, nothing in history happens accidentally; God shapes

each sequence as a teaching experience for his people.

4. Finally, all events are important but not equally important. Each opportunity is unique, but some are decisive. For India, human destiny lies outside history altogether. Judaism, by contrast laid the groundwork for social protest. It is in the lands influenced by the Jewish historical perspective that the chief thrusts for social betterment have occurred.

#### E. Meaning in Morality.

Without moral constraints, human relations would become as snarled as traffic in the Chicago loop if everyone drove at will. The Jewish formulation of "those wise restraints that make men free" is contained in her Law. The Hebrew Bible contains no less than 613 commandments that regulate human behavior. Four of these will suffice for our purposes: the four ethical precepts of the Ten Commandments, for it is through these that Hebraic morality has had its greatest impact.

Appropriated by Christianity and Islam, four of the Ten Commandments constitute the moral foundation of most of the Western world. There are four danger zones in human life that can cause unlimited trouble if they get out of hand:

1. Force - You can bicker and fight, but killing within the in-group will not be permitted, for it instigates blood feuds that shred community. Therefore *thou shalt not murder*.

2. Wealth - As for possessions, you may make your pile as large as you please and be shrewd and cunning in enterprise. One thing, though, you may not do, and that is pilfer directly off someone else's pile, for this outrages the sense of fair play and builds animosities that become ungovernable. Therefore *thou shalt not steal*.

3. Sex - You can be a rounder, flirtatious, even promiscuous, and though we do not comment such behavior, we will not get the law after you. But at one point we draw the line: Sexual indulgence of married persons outside the nuptial bond will not be allowed, for it rouses passions the community cannot tolerate. Therefore *thou shalt not commit adultery*.

4. Speech - You may dissemble and equivocate, but there is one time when we require that you tell the truth, and nothing but the truth. If a dispute reaches such proportions as to be brought before a tribunal, on such occasions the judges must know what happened. If you lie then, while under oath to tell the truth, the penalty will be severe. *Thou shalt not bear false witness*.

#### F. Meaning in Justice.

It is to a remarkable group of men we call the prophets more than to any others that Western civilization owes its convictions (1) that the future of any people depends in large part on the justice of its social order, and (2) that individuals are responsible for the social structures of their society as well as for their direct personal dealings.

Whereas the Pre-Writing Prophets Such as Elijah and Elisha challenged individuals the Writing Prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah challenged corruptions in the social order and oppressive institutions.

Thanks to the Prophets, what other nations would have interpreted as simply a power squeeze, the Jews saw as God's warning to clean up their national life: establish justice throughout the land, or be destroyed.

Stated abstractly, the Prophetic Principle can be put as

follows: The prerequisite of political stability is social justice, for it is in the nature of things that injustice will not endure.

Stated theologically the point reads: God has high standards. God will not put up forever with exploitation, corruption, and mediocrity.

One thing is common to all the Jewish prophets: the conviction that every human being, simply by virtue of his or her humanity, is a child of God and therefore in possession of rights that even kings must respect. Wealth and splendor count for nothing compared with purity, justice, and mercy.

#### G. Meaning in Suffering.

From the eighth to the sixth centuries B. C., during which Israel and Judah tottered before the aggressive power of Syria, Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon, the prophets found meaning in their predicament by seeing it as God's way of underscoring the demand for righteousness.

God was using Israel's enemies against her. The experience of defeat and exile was teaching the Jews the true worth of freedom.

Another lesson was that those who remain faithful in adversity will be vindicated.

Stated abstractly, the deepest meaning the Jews found in their Exile was the meaning of vicarious suffering: meaning that enters lives that are willing to endure pain that others might be spared it. "*the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*"

#### H. Meaning in Messianism.

## **Part Two: The Hallowing of Life. - Jewish ceremonies and observances**

The West, influenced by the Greek partiality for abstract reason, emphasizes theology and creed, the East has approached religion through ritual and narrative.

Ritual plays a part in life that nothing else can fill. In Judaism it aims to hallow life - ideally, all life.

The name for the right approach to life and the world is piety. The secret of piety consists in seeing the entire world as belonging to God and reflecting God's glory.

The Jews preserve this sense of the sanctity of all things through tradition. Judaism the most historically minded of all religions finds holiness and history inseparable.

The basic manual for the hallowing of life is the Law, the first five books of the Bible.

## **Part Three: Revelation.**

The Jews in their interpretation of the major areas of human experience arrived at a more profound grasp of meaning than any of their Mediterranean neighbors; a grasp that in its essentials has not been surpassed.

The Jew's say they did not reach these insight on their own. They were revealed to them.

For the Jews God revealed himself first and foremost in actions - not words but deeds. It was through miracles, divine intervention.

God took the imitative.

The God that the Exodus disclosed was powerful and a God of goodness and love. A God who was intensely concerned with human affairs. It followed that God would want people to be good as well.

Finally, suffering must carry significance because it was unthinkable that a God who had miraculously saved his people would ever abandon them completely. All this took shape for the Jews around the idea of the covenant.

Yahweh would continue to bless the Israelites if they, for their part, would honor the laws they had been given.

#### **Part Four :The Chosen People.**

The idea that a universal god decided that the divine nature should be uniquely and incomparably disclosed to a single people is among the most difficult notions to take seriously in the entire study of religion.

The Jews did not see themselves as singled out for privileges. They were chosen to serve, and to suffer the trials that service would often exact.

Isaiah's doctrine of vicarious suffering meant that the Jews were elected to shoulder a suffering that would otherwise have been distributed more widely.

It is the doctrine that God's doings can focus like a burning glass on particular times, places, and peoples - in the interest, to be sure, of intentions that embrace human beings universally.

#### **Part Five: Israel.**

Judaism cannot be reduced to its biblical period. In 70 A.D. the

Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and the focus of Judaism shifted to Rabbinic Judaism - from the sacrificial rite of the Temple to the study of the Torah and its accompanying Oral Tradition in academies and synagogues around the world.

Today, almost two thousand years later, there are four great sectors of Judaism that still constitute its spiritual anatomy - faith, observance, culture, and nation.

The reasons for the establishment of the modern of Israel in 1948 present complex problems. Without presuming to answer these problems, we can appreciate the burdens they place on the conscience of this exceptionally conscientious people.

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