

# "What It Means To Be a Jew"

What does it mean to be a Jew? How do you define a Jew? Is a Jew anyone who holds to the religious teaching of our faith, accepts Torah, G-d, and that the Jewish people have a covenantal relationship with G-d? In other words, do we define being Jewish as a *religious* experience? Using that standard, we would eliminate from our roles of just under 14 million, millions of secular Jews, including hundreds of thousands of Israelis who claim allegiance to our people and history but are completely irreligious, many even anti-religious.

So is a Jew anyone of Jewish parentage, anyone who is ethnically Jewish? Do we define being Jewish as an *ethnic* experience? Well, then we've written off tens of thousands of people who convert to our faith each year.

They have no ethnic connection but they believe in this tradition and this heritage.

Ah, so merge them both! Say a Jew is one who is either ethnically Jewish (a person of Jewish “pedigree”) or religiously Jewish (one who affirms the teachings of our heritage and becomes Jewish through a conversion process).

Sounds like a good definition, but it doesn’t work anymore.

As we have been discussing in our Wednesday discussion class, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and many within Orthodoxy have for some time now destroyed that definition. What they have also done is force me to rethink how I believe we should define what is a Jew today.

Recently, a young man from the Former Soviet Union arrived in Israel and began studying under a segment of

the Chassidic Orthodox movement known as Lubavitch. A charismatic rabbi by the name of Menachem Schneerson, of blessed memory, led Lubavitch Chassidim until his death in 1994. Many of his disciples believed that he was such a holy man that he was the Messiah promised to our people. Now, fourteen years after his death, there are many in Lubavitch who still believe he is, that he will arise from his grave and that the world will soon acknowledge him as the one true Messiah.

When this young man, whose is a fully observant Jew, approached the Israeli court for the purpose of conversion, they were impressed with his piety and strength of practice. However, just as he was about to be accepted, one of the rabbis on the beit din (court) asked him: “Do you believe the Rebbe ( Rabbi Schneerson) is the Messiah?” The young man replied: “Yes, that is what I

have been taught”. His conversion was put on hold.

Apparently, being born Jewish *or* being properly converted by Jewish law is not enough; you must also hold correct theological *thoughts*.

But this is not one isolated instance. For years now, Jews who have converted to our faith through the modern expressions of Judaism have been routinely rejected by the State of Israel and by their more Orthodox colleagues in America, even when the conversion process was properly performed. As of July, even conversions conducted by most American Orthodox rabbis are no longer accepted. Today, Orthodox Judaism and the Chief Rabbinate in Israel will no longer accept *any* conversions unless a “centralized conversion court”, staffed by a handful of approved rabbis, conducts them. If you did not convert in front of one of these “central courts” or before

one of the 50 or so acceptable rabbis (some of whom are deceased!) you are not Jewish.

Oh, and in case you are wondering, there is no grandfather clause!

What that means is that *every* conversion that has ever taken place in Charleston under either Rabbi Samuel Cooper of blessed memory, Rabbi Chaim Landau or myself are no longer valid. This means you cannot be married in Israel, you will not be called to the Torah in an Orthodox shul in New York, and your children and grandchildren will not be considered Jewish.

Don't believe me? Consider the case of a young man who converted to Judaism in our community. He moved away, ironically, to be in a more Orthodox community and synagogue. At first, they welcomed him with open arms; seeing his sincerity, seriousness and knowledge, they

called him up to the Torah, asked if he'd like to lead services, etc. When it was discovered he was a convert and that his conversion took place in Charleston, West Virginia, the honors ceased and he was no longer asked to participate, not unless he converted properly. And this is not the first time I have heard of such an occurrence.

What *really* defines a Jew and *who* should determine it? There is a group of 100,000 people, mainly in Azerbaijan who are called "Juhuros" (Mountain Jews). They have lived in the same area since 722 B.C.E. and consider themselves Jews. Their most notable individual was Yekutiel Adam, a major general in the Israel Defense Force and the highest ranking soldier to be killed in combat for the Jewish State. Are they Jewish?

What about an ethnic group from South Africa, the Lemba, who number 70,000 and also consider themselves

Jewish? They circumcise their children, do not eat pork nor mix milk and meat and they celebrate the Jewish Sabbath. Recent DNA tests have confirmed that they are strongly linked to fellow Jews. Are they Jewish?

What does it really mean to be a Jew?

When I think of any of my students or Rabbi Cooper's or Rabbi Landau's who are now rejected in Israel and at Orthodox shuls in America, when I think of that student from the Former Soviet Union whose conversion is on hold because he believes his deceased rabbi is the Messiah, when I think of the countless sincere Reform and Conservative converts to our faith, I think we are making a tragic mistake in how we define being Jewish.

I think our definition on what it is to be Jewish today is too narrow for this very fluid and mobile society. And while I can appreciate the need for some standardized rituals for

prospective members, that cannot and should not be our only way of defining ourselves, not in today's world.

You know what I think it means to be Jewish today? In the broadest sense, I think to be a Jew is about wanting to be a part of a historical narrative – a Jewish narrative. To be a Jew is the willingness to want to be a part of an experience – a Jewish experience. What is a Jew? A Jew is simply a person who wants to be a part of our special and glorious people and share in our destiny.

Almost everyone has heard that, according to Jewish tradition, a prospective Jew is to be turned away. That comes from the Talmud. Yet, most don't know the entire passage. Here is the actual passage:

**“If a proselyte comes to convert, we say to him:  
‘What did you see that prompted you to come to  
convert? Do you not know that nowadays the Jewish**

**people are afflicted, oppressed, and harassed and that hardships are always upon us?’ If he responds: ‘I know, and I am not worthy of joining you’, we accept him *immediately!*” (Yevamot 47a)**

What is a Jew? A Jew is a person that aches to be a part of our historical experience. And when a person wants to make our history, his history, and our destiny, his destiny, we welcome him immediately.

To be a Jew is to be part of a historical family among the families of man, a family that shares an idea, a history, a legacy and a great inheritance. Why are we making it so hard for people to join us? We lose nothing by embracing anyone who wants to be with us. Nothing. Unlike a monetary one, this inheritance is never diminished when others are given a chance to share in it.

We have created so many obstacles, all to protect and preserve the integrity of our religion and look where it has taken us. We are rejecting a young observant Chasidic Jew who keeps the Torah; we are shunning Reform Jewish converts who lights the Sabbath candles, celebrates the Sabbath every week and are bringing up new Jewish families; we are telling people who converted properly (with a ritual bath and circumcision) that they are not part of us.

To be a Jew should be more than sharing the same D.N.A. or the same rabbinical court. To be a Jew is to embrace the Jewish experience and declare that you want to share in our destiny. When a person declares, "I am not worthy but I yearn to be part of the hopes, dreams and destinies of this remarkable people", he or she should be

immediately embraced with open arms. That yearning is what it means to be a Jew.

AMEN