

Christianity and World Religions: Judaism

Today we travel into familiar territory to learn about the religion that we have a close kinship to--Judaism. In the Jewish faith, God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God appeared to the people in the form of a burning bush. God led the people of Israel out of slavery under the leadership of Moses, and God led them through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. (Exodus 13:21). And that story is a part of the story of Christianity. But we are also going to venture into some territory that may be unfamiliar as we talk not just about our own roots in Judaism, but as we learn a bit about the Jewish faith as it is practiced today. We come to learn about the Jewish people and where the path of their faith diverged from ours. And then we also come to hear about some really horrifying examples of how we Christians have failed to love our neighbors of the Jewish faith over the centuries. And I will challenge you to then go from here and learn about both the past and Anti-Semitism that is alive and well today, and I will ask you to be part of resisting this hatred and all hatred in today's world.

Let's talk about the basics first. There are about 15 million Jewish people in the world with about half living in the United States and about half living in Israel. We share scripture with the Jewish faith -- our Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible is simply the Bible in the Jewish Faith.

Basic Terms of Judaism

Major writings:

1. **Tanakh** _____ - another word for the Hebrew Bible, an acronym that combines the three letters of the documents it includes (TNK).

Torah _____ - means law or teachings associated with Moses; the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)

Nevi'im _____ - means prophets; includes Joshua, Judges, First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc.

Ketuvim __ (ket too vim) _____ - means writings; includes Israel's wisdom literature and poetry, for example Psalms, Proverbs and Job

2. **Talmud** - a writing that consists of these two works:

Mishnah _____ - vast body of oral law that interprets the Torah, written down around 200 years after the birth of Christ. (place to find laws about kosher and ritual cleansing laws)

Gemara _____ - extensive commentaries and sermons about the above

Branches of Judaism

Orthodox ___ 10% of American Jews - the most conservative stream within the Jewish religion; believe both Torah and Mishnah represent the will of God; adhere strictly to Jewish laws (dietary laws, rituals)

Conservative ___ 18% ___ - moderate in their beliefs; believe in conserving traditions while at the same time being open to reform

Reform 35% _____ -most progressive/liberal form of Judaism; traditions regarding pursuing justice and loving kindness are retained but observance of laws such as keeping kosher are not required.

Beliefs

Shema _____ “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deut. 6:4-5) The central creed of Judaism; recited every morning and every night.

Golden Rule _____ “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.”

Tikkun olam tee-KOON oh-LAM _____ the work of God in healing the brokenness in the world.

Word bank

Reform Torah Mishnah Tikkun Olam Shema Torah Gemara
Nevi'im Orthodox Ketuvim Conservative

Bonus question:

Which three books of the Hebrew Bible does Jesus quote from most regularly?
Psalms (writings), Deuteronomy (law), Isaiah (prophets)\

There are many similarities between Judaism and Christianity. We are kinfolk after all, aren't we? We share forefathers and foremothers. We share much of our scripture and beliefs. After all, when Jesus is asked what the greatest command is, he recites the Shema and then adds the second command “Love your neighbor as yourself.” We also believe and practice the golden rule. We believe in the power of God to heal the world, and we believe that we then are meant to join God in sharing that healing power with people we meet along our life's journeys.

But we also have some differences that clearly separate us - the biggest being the nature of God -- we differ regarding who God is and what God is like. In his book *Christianity and World Religions*, Adam Hamilton asked a Rabbi friend the question: What is God like? And here is what the Rabbi said: “That is the \$64,000 question. None of us know. We know that God is present in our life, just as we know that air exists because we are able to breath. But I have never seen God. No one has ever seen God. So all we can do is believe.” (Hamilton, 92). And while we can agree with parts of that statement, we as Christians believe that we **have** seen God -----in the form of Jesus. It is in and through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus that we can come to know God. When we learn about the way Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, freed the oppressed, forgave sinners and ate with the despised, we learned something about the character of God--we can learn something about the grace and outstanding love of God for all of us. We learn about the desire of God to heal the world and bring peace through what we know about Jesus.

So one of the major points of departure between the two faiths is how the Jewish people see God. For one thing, the Jewish people do not believe in the Trinity. They do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah; they recognize that Jesus was a rabbi and reformer, but they do not believe he was the incarnation of God on earth, and they still await the appearance of the Messiah.

Now in my mind, one of the most important learnings for this particular religions is this.....there are many similarities in the two faiths. But at times across history our focus on the differences have resulted in horrific consequences. Part of what I learned this week is that violent anti-Semitism has occurred over and over again in Christian Europe.

In Spain, Jews were treated so oppressively by their Christian rulers that they **welcomed** the Muslim invaders from North Africa in the 8th century. In 1290, King Edward I issued a royal edict expelling Jews from England. When the Black Plague swept across Europe in the 1300s, Jews were often blamed for the plague, and many were killed. In 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella ordered all Jews in the land to convert to Christianity, leave, or face death. In the late 1800s, waves of Russian and Polish Jews emigrated to North and South America to escape the pogroms (puh gramz) of the Russian tsars, whose secret police spread a myth that Jews murdered Christian children and drank their blood at Passover. (Hamilton, 75-76).

One of the most important purposes for this sermon series is to avoid these horrific consequences and to remember that we are called to live out what Jesus described as the greatest commandment.

“The most important one is Israel, listen! Our God is the one Lord, 30 and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength.[a] 31 The second is this, You will love your neighbor as yourself.[b] No other commandment is greater than these.”

The way that we love God with all that we are and the way that we love our neighbor is unique in each of our lives. It is unique in every time and every place. But I want to warn you that at some point in your life, you will likely be called to love your neighbor in a way that is uncomfortable,
against popular opinion,
and maybe even dangerous.

Today we are specifically talking about our Jewish neighbors -- and this deserves some special attention. And one of the vitally important things to keep always in mind about Judaism is the nature of abuse that the Jewish people have suffered over the ages and which continues regularly today in the form of anti-semitism. We regularly hear stories of anti-semitism. You surely remember the murder of 11 people at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh by a white supremacist last October. The Anti Defamation League reports that the U.S. Jewish community experienced near-historic levels of anti-Semitism in 2018.

<https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/anti-semitic-incidents-remained-at-near-historic-levels-in-2018-assaults>

However, the most horrific example of hate crimes against the Jewish people remains the murder of around 6 million during the Holocaust. Listen to the way the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum describes the Holocaust:

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jewish men, women and children by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were "racially superior" and they wanted to create a “racially pure” state. Jews, deemed "inferior," were considered an alien threat to the so-called German racial community.

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution>

As a reminder of how important it is to love our neighbors, I want to share a story with you about the failure of Americans and those in other countries to stand up for the Jewish people during the Holocaust. Listen to how Erin Blakemore of the History Channel describes the fate of several hundred Jewish refugees who tried to escape to our country in 1939. A time just after the Great Depression. A time where anti-immigration sentiments were running high.

As the M.S. *St. Louis* cruised off the coast of Miami in June 1939, its passengers could see the lights of the city glimmering. But the United States hadn't been on the ship's original itinerary, and its passengers didn't have permission to disembark in Florida. As the more than 900 Jewish passengers looked longingly at the twinkling lights, they hoped against hope that they could land.

Those hopes would soon be dashed by immigration authorities, sending the ship back to Europe. And then, nearly a third of the passengers on the *St. Louis* were murdered.

Most of the ship's 937 passengers were Jews trying to escape **Nazi Germany**. Though World War II had not yet begun, the groundwork for the **Holocaust** was already being laid in Germany, where Jewish people faced harassment, discrimination and political persecution. But though the danger faced by the passengers was clear, they were turned down by immigration authorities, first by Cuba, then the United States and then Canada. For many on the *St. Louis*, that rejection was a death sentence. An attempt to land in Miami was rejected by immigration authorities, and a desperate cable to President Franklin D. Roosevelt by some passengers was ignored. Though a U.S. diplomat had tried to negotiate with Cuba to admit the refugees, the U.S. itself was unwilling to open its doors. The passengers would have to abide by an existing quota system that **allowed** only about 27,000 people from Germany and Austria into the United States.

A State Department official **telegraphed** the passengers, telling them that they "must await their turns on the waiting list and qualify for and obtain immigration visas before they may be admissible into the United States." Though Roosevelt had **considered** a concerted push to rescue Jewish refugees the year before the *St. Louis* sailed, he eventually dropped the idea, both because he knew it would be politically unpopular and because of his increasing focus on the looming world war.

On June 6, twenty-four days after the *St. Louis* left Europe, it turned around to return. It was accompanied by a U.S. Coast Guard vessel, on the lookout for desperate passengers who might jump off the ship. "It is useless now to discuss what might have been done," **wrote** an unnamed editorial writer in the *New York Times*. "There seems to be no help for them now. The *St. Louis* will soon be home with her cargo of despair." The refugees also applied to land in Canada, but its prime minister refused to entertain the idea. "If these Jews were to find a home [in Canada]," **said** immigration minister Frederick Blair, "they would be followed by other shiploads...the line must be drawn somewhere."



After the refugees were denied entry in Havana, Cuban soldiers stayed at the port to assure that the refugees return to the ship. Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone/Getty Images



Refugees aboard the M.S. St. Louis. Here, they are seen arriving in Antwerp, Belgium after over a month at sea, during which they were denied entry to Cuba.

Three Lions/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Back in Europe, some countries did offer to take some immigrants. The Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which had assisted with the Cuban negotiations, promised a cash guarantee for every refugee in exchange for 181 slots in Holland, 224 in France, 228 in Great Britain, and 214 in Belgium. But not all refugees were taken in, and the majority of European countries were occupied by Nazi Germany during World War II. Some passengers managed to get other visas eventually, but many were forced back home.

The world's refusal of the *St. Louis*' desperate refugees was a death sentence for 254 refugees—approximately half of the number who had returned to the European continent in 1939. Many who did not die were interned in concentration camps, like Max Korman, who built on lessons learned on the ship to help organize inmates of the Westerbork concentration camp in the Netherlands.

After the Holocaust, the *St. Louis*' survivors pushed for the remembrance of their ordeal. The United States changed its policy toward refugees in the wake of World War II, and began accepting more refugees than any other country in the world.

In 2012, the United States Department of State formally apologized to the survivors of the ship, and in 2018, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau followed suit. But the memory of those who died is still a painful reminder of what a refusal to adjust immigration policies in light of persecution and migration crises can mean. “We were not wanted,” *St. Louis* survivor Susan Schleger told a *Miami Herald* reporter in 1989. “Abandoned by the world.”

<https://www.history.com/news/wwii-jewish-refugee-ship-st-louis-1939>

Friends, the challenge I offer you today is to learn more about the story of the *St. Louis*. Learn more about the Holocaust. Learn more about anti semitism as it exists right now. In my studies this week, I've found some websites full of shocking information. Check out the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's website, the History Channel and the Anti-Defamation League's websites. There are some stunning stories and videos that tell this part of the story of Judaism. I challenge you to know the history, so that we might be brave to speak up as history continues to repeat itself. May God give us the eyes to see our neighbor who is being abused. May God give us the courage to stand up in our corner of the world and say, “No! This can't happen. This person is my neighbor. This person is my brother or my sister.” May God help us to love our neighbor as we would our own families. May we be a part of *Tikkun Olam* (tee-KOON oh-LAM) God's work in healing our broken world. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.