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Who is a Jew?

Who is a Jew? What is a Jew? What does it mean to be a part of a Jewish community?

It's an age-old question. People have been asking and answering it since there have been Jews. And yet it's still being asked. Who is a Jew? When I was in Israel, I read a newspaper article in which the writer was complaining about Jews always asking this question. Why, he asked, aren't Italians asking who is Italian? Or Muslims asking who is a Muslim? Only Jews are asking, always asking. He went on to suggest a novel answer to the question: A Jew is… someone who asks who is a Jew.

There have been so many answers. The earliest was based on descent. Jews are a clan, or in the technically incorrect but more commonly used term we hear today, a tribe.[1] A Jew is someone who is descended from a Jew, someone who traces their ancestry back to Abraham and Sarah. We see this in the Torah, where Abraham and then Isaac after him looks for a wife for his son from within his own clan, from that native place they left back in Ur. The patriarchs marry their cousins, as many traditional peoples do even today, reinforcing the clan identity and keeping resources inside the group. But understanding Jews as a descent group runs into trouble even in the Torah. Joseph marries an Egyptian. Moses marries a Midianite, the daughter of a priest, no less. What is the identity of their children? At the very least, the issue of descent becomes complicated. In the Biblical era, it seems, Jewish identity was passed down through the father, while in the post-Biblical world, the ancient rabbis switched and decreed that it was passed through the mother; we don't really know why.[2] Later, scholars like Maimonides suggested that Jewish identity was actually passed down through a form of what anthropologists would call "fictive kinship." Although not all Jews may be literally descended from Abraham and Sarah, Jews are the ones who claim Abraham and Sarah as their ancestors – we are all, in this fictive sense, Abraham and Sarah's children. Of course, other people – most notably Christians and Muslims – also claim Abraham and Sarah as their fictive ancestors. The fact that fictive kinship is even an option suggests that there is something else going on in Jewish identity other than descent.

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[1] As an anthropologist, I feel obligated to point out the error in using the word "tribe" in this context. A clan is a descent group united by kinship, descended from a common ancestor. A tribe is a larger group, usually made up of many different clans, that operates as a political, social, and economic unit. When we are talking about Jews as a descent group, we are saying that Jews are a clan, not a tribe.

[2] For an excellent discussion of this question, see Shaye Cohen's The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

From the middle ages into the modern era, Jews were often identified by others as an ethnicity or race. This answer to who is a Jew is similar to the answer of descent, but it adds a quasi-scientific element connected to the classificatory scheme of humankind. Just as under the regime of slavery African-Americans were once identified by the percentage of black blood flowing through their veins, Jewish identity was seen by some to be a matter of blood and of physical features that were easy to identify and to caricature. Jews were often discriminated against on the basis of these features and the percentage of Jewish blood they carried. Most famously in the Holocaust, a single Jewish grandparent – 25% "Jewish blood" – was enough to classify someone as Jewish and to condemn them to treatment as a sub-human, subject to experimentation and mass murder. Later, this standard was adopted by the government of the State of Israel as the amount of Jewish descent required to make Aliyah under the Law of Return, and it is still in force.

However, the pseudo-science of eugenics that drove both a certain strand of American racism and the Nazi regime has been thoroughly debunked. We know now that genetic variation within so-called racial and ethnic groups is actually greater than the genetic variation between those groups. Ethnicity and race are significant social constructs, but their scientific basis is nil. There is also the little matter of the extreme range of physical variation that we find in Jews throughout the world. Because of an historical accident of migration patterns, the overwhelming majority of the Jews in the United States are from Europe, but in Israel we get a truer picture of the fabric of world Jewry, and it is a coat of many colors. Jews come from Africa, Asia, and South America, and they are black, brown, olive, white, and every other color in the crayon box. The idea of a Jewish race or ethnicity seems hard to maintain in the face of that amazing variety.

In the modern era, others have suggested that Jews are united by a culture – a world-view and a set of foods, music, art, and drama that sets us apart from other groups. Like seeing Jews as an ethnicity, this idea is much easier to maintain in the U.S. than in other parts of the Jewish world. We may think of bagels and lox, Yiddish and klezmer, Chagall and apple cake, as the very essence of Jewish culture, but millions of Jews around the world would disagree, and they would find those very familiar parts of our experience very foreign. They might instead think of jachnun and schug, Arabic literature and the maqams, or a thousand other markers of the variety of Jewish cultures in other places and times. Culture may unite Jews in a particular area and era, but it is not a good universal answer to the question of who is a Jew. As the great Lenny Bruce taught:

> If you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic; if you live in New York, you're Jewish. If you live in Butte,

> Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish… [Blacks] are all Jews. Italians are all Jews. Irishmen who have rejected their religion are Jews.

These are all comedic riffs on the idea of Jews as a cultural group. But if we want to be serious, it seems like still, something else must be going on to answer the question who is a Jew.

The ancient rabbis suggested that that something else was choice. Although they agreed that those descended from Jews were automatically Jews, they argued that choosing to live a life of mitzvot in Jewish community was the true marker of who is a Jew. The centrality of choice also explained their position that non-Jews could choose to become Jews through conversion; if Judaism were a race or ethnicity, that would seem hard to understand. So the rabbis developed standards and ceremonies for conversion, and the halachah that came out of those standards is the ritual law that we abide by in this community to this day. It's hard to believe that there were many conversion candidates in that period or in the centuries to follow, in which Jews faced heavy discrimination and oppression. Amazingly, though, converts continued to join the Jewish people despite all of the difficulties involved, which perhaps explains the teachings of the rabbis that converts are to be honored beyond born Jews for making that, at times, very hard choice.

It is true that in the ancient world, living under the Romans or under the Persians or others, those were born Jews really did NOT have much choice in the matter. The outside world considered them to be Jews whether they liked it or not. And that is pretty much how things stayed through the middle ages and into the modern era. But then something amazing happened. Jews became emancipated. Barriers started to fall. Anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism started to decrease. And for the first time in history, at least in some parts of the world and in some circles, those who were born Jews were able to make a choice about whether they would identify as Jews or not. I meet people all the time who have made the latter choice. They'll say to me, "Oh yeah, my <u>parents</u> were Jewish." This is what people mean when they say that today, all Jews are Jews by choice. If you were born Jewish, you can drop that identity if you want to. If you were not born Jewish, you can join the Jewish people if you want to. Or you can be part of a Jewish community, like this one, without officially converting. Being a Jew is a matter of choice in a way that it hasn't been at any other time in Jewish history.

But I don't think that choice alone is enough to answer the question of who is a Jew. My teacher, Rabbi Richard Hirsch, used to ask his classes this question: If a Jew makes Kiddush over clam juice on a Tuesday night, does that make it Shabbat? (No, the answer is NOT, "It depends on which rabbi you ask.") The answer is, it makes it Shabbat if a community of Jews says, "Amen." Community is a crucial part of Jewish experience. Without it, almost nothing about Jewish texts, rituals, or practices makes sense. We

can't celebrate Shabbat, give tz'dakah, pursue justice, or do almost any Jewish thing without a community of like-minded folks to do it with. So in addition to someone choosing to be a Jew, or choosing to be part of a Jewish community while maintaining their identity as a non-Jew, there needs to be a community that accepts that person into it and understands them as part of "us." Some have argued that there should be no boundaries around Jewish communities at all, no sense of who is in and who is out, who is "them" and who is "us." Although I understand the pain that people can sometimes feel when they run up against boundaries, I don't agree that those boundaries could or should disappear. Boundaries allow a community to contain something, to mean something, and to encourage connections that wouldn't exist without them. We have to be careful and we have to be kind about how we draw and maintain those boundaries, but they are part of the fabric of who we are, and we would lose much without them. Still, community alone doesn't necessarily define who is a Jew. Aren't there Jews who, despite it all, live more or less separated from community or manage their lives between communities without ever truly becoming a part of one? Of course there are. What defines them?

This brings us to faith. Nothing makes me more uncomfortable as a rabbi than when I am described as a "faith leader" or this synagogue is described as a "faith community" filled with "people of faith." Really? Me? A "faith leader?" And all of you? All "people of faith?" Please. This definition of religious community comes from Christianity, and Christianity and Islam are appropriately described as communities of faith, but it is foreign to Judaism. A few years ago, the GJC Confirmation class participated in a program through the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia called "Walking the Walk." Our GJC teens came together with teens from a Muslim school based in a North Philadelphia mosque and a Catholic school in the suburbs to learn about and work with each other. One meeting was called, yes, "Talking to Faith Leaders," and I was invited, along with the imam of the mosque and a nun from the Catholic school, to answer the teens' questions. The very first question was, "Can you be a good Catholic or Jew or Muslim if you don't believe in God?" The nun answered: Absolutely not; faith is the bedrock of Catholic life. The imam answered: Although faith is central to Islam, one should not condemn someone who struggles with faith but rather support and comfort them. Who knows? Allah may help them to have faith. *InshAllah* (May this be the will of Allah). My answer? Of course you can be a good Jew without believing in God! Relating to God is one part of Jewish life, but it is by no means the whole ball of wax. There are so many other ways to be a Jew! Faith is not the be-all and end-all, and doubt is a constant companion for Jews. The Jewish kids' faces filled with relief. You could just hear them thinking, "Thank God!" The Catholic and Muslim kids' faces, by contrast, were masks of confusion. How could this be? How could you call yourself a religious person and be committed to your religion if you lacked faith? I tried to explain. I'm not sure if they got it or not. But you know and I know that one can be a Jew without faith.

So now I can hear you saying to yourself, "Well, what is it, Rabbi? Who is a Jew? What is a Jew? If you don't think it is descent or ethnicity or race or culture or choice or community or faith, what is it???" But you know, you just know, that as a rabbi, I'm not going to give you the ultimate answer. That's not what we do. But don't worry, I am going to share with you my idea and set it out for your consideration. So please, hold your fire. There will be time to debate and discuss later, I promise. After all, don't you all have my cell phone number? So here it goes.

As you may have guessed already, I spent a lot of time thinking about this during my sabbatical in Israel. Israel is full of an incredible variety of Jews living an equally incredible variety of Jewish lives. Art, music, ritual, theater, social action, dance, lecture, sport, literature, protest – these are just some of the ways that Jews in Israel are expressing their Jewishness in a wonderful outpouring of creative activity. Sadly, though, the people doing all of these amazing things rarely identify themselves as doing anything Jewish. They don't normally think of the way they live their lives as legitimate expressions of who they are as Jews. Instead, they cede Judaism – יהדות – and Jewish identity to the narrow slice of orthodoxy that controls public religious life in Israel, and they see themselves, mostly, as illegitimate, non-religious חילונים whose connection to Judaism is tenuous at best.

It could be otherwise. I was privileged to attend the very first Limmud Haifa, a night of Jewish learning outside the context of a synagogue, which is almost unheard of in most of Israel. Perhaps it will not surprise you to learn that there was a GJC connection: Limmud Haifa was organized mainly by Israeli Reform Rabbi Golan Ben-Horin – Rabbi Charry's grandson. One of the people who spoke was a religious Member of K'nesset who was also a career military man. He talked about how Israeli society could honor the different ways that Israeli Jews observe, for example, Shabbat. He explained:

> On Friday night, I go to the synagogue and then return home to have dinner with my family. On Saturday morning, I go to synagogue again, then spend the rest of the day learning, playing with my children, and reconnecting with my wife. My neighbor doesn't go to synagogue on Friday night, but he does have dinner with his family. Then on Saturday morning, he takes all of his kids and his parents for a טיול – a hike in the countryside, maybe followed by an afternoon at the beach. Who am I to say that my way of observing Shabbat is better than his? Different, yes, but better? Go ask God.

Unfortunately, this attitude is pretty rare in Israel. The divide between the self-appointed "religious" and the self-identified "secular" is wide. Even though there are many, many people who straddle that divide and who don't fit easily into either

category, the popular perception is that there is one and only one way to be Jewish, and most of the Jews in Israel feel that they don't qualify. Imagine that.

I, of course, have a more expansive view. Who is a Jew? What is a Jew? What does it mean to be part of a Jewish community? Here's my answer: Judaism is a toolkit designed to help us perfect ourselves and perfect the world. And a Jew is someone who is, in whatever way, taking up those tools to work on that project. It doesn't matter if you were born a Jew or found Judaism on your own. It doesn't matter if you have converted or are still finding your way or never intend to convert. And it doesn't matter what color your skin is, what part of the world your ancestors came from, or whether you like bagels or would prefer injera.[3] It doesn't matter if you know Hebrew or Yiddish or Arabic or Ladino or none of the above. It doesn't matter if you have studied for years in a yeshiva or if you are just dipping your toe in the sea of Jewish knowledge. This project, this task, this mission is open to everyone, and the tools that we have inherited from the past are available to all. Everyone – and I do mean everyone – is included.

Now if we're talking about perfecting ourselves and perfecting the world, we know it's a pretty tall order. And we also know that each of us is different, and that the world has a lot of very different kinds of things wrong with it. So we have to make sure that we match the tools to the task. If you are someone who is overwhelmed by work and is feeling hopeless and helpless in the face of all the things that seemingly must be done right now, then the mitzvot of Shabbat might be great tools for you. Following even some of the prohibitions of Shabbat – not writing, for example, or not thinking about work – could be transformative. On the other hand, if you are someone who feels angered by injustice in the world and frustrated by the direction it is taking, then the mitzvah to pursue justice might be a great tool for you. Feeling the push from something outside of yourself to get involved, to advocate for change, could channel your anger and frustration into a productive direction.

Maybe you're starting to get the idea of what I'm suggesting. The ancient rabbis taught that we have a blessing for every occasion; I'm thinking that we actually have a mitzvah, a commandment, a Jewish practice, for every part of ourselves that needs fixing and for every part of the world that calls out for change. That is exactly what the mitzvot are for! They are not ritual prescriptions from the past that we maintain out of a sense of loyalty or fidelity to tradition. They are tools to transform ourselves and the world! Even the most ritualistic mitzvot – say, the laws of keeping kosher – have transformation as their goal. Keeping kosher can help us to rethink how we eat, motivate us to enquire about the welfare of animals, and stir us to remember the

[3] Injera is a white, leavened crepe made from teff flour, and it is the staple food of Ethiopian cuisine. Tastes great!

hunger of others. Each one of the mitzvot is a tool, and we need to use each one for the right purpose.

So if Judaism is a toolkit for perfecting ourselves and the world, and mitzvot are our tools, what is the role of us, your rabbis? Are we the experts who will grade your efforts? Are we the judges who will brand you a "legitimate Jew" or an "illegitimate Jew," a "good" member of our community or a "bad" one? As one religious leader recently said, "Who am I to judge?" Please, don't see us as judges. Instead, I want you to see me and Rabbi Lewis as your coaches. We happen to know a lot about the tools in the Jewish toolbox – not because we were born with that knowledge or endowed with it by God, but because we studied for years to acquire it. We can help guide you to the tools that might work best for you right now. We're not going to criticize you for using this tool instead of that tool, this practice instead of that one. You need the right tool for the job. You can't use a screwdriver to pound nails. Or rather, you can, but it won't work very well. Ask us. We can help. That's what we're here for. Just like other kinds of coaches, we are here to push and motivate you, to counsel and comfort you, to sympathize with your weaknesses and encourage you to use your strengths. You can get better at this without a coach, but it's a lot easier with one by your side. We're here. Call us!

Now I want to say something about the relationship between these two tasks: perfecting ourselves and perfecting the world. It's easy, too easy, to concentrate on one to the exclusion of the other. The dual mission is sometimes hard to balance. Yet balancing our commitment to perfecting what is inside us with our commitment to perfecting what is outside is exactly what we are called upon to do, every day. The Torah teaches, ואהבת לריעך כמוך – "You shall love your fellow person as yourself."[4] It doesn't say, "Love yourself more than other people," and it doesn't say "Love other people more than yourself." The ideal is to pour out your love and your effort – to apply your tools – to both self and other equally. As the ancients would remind us, the two are deeply connected. We can't perfect one without the other, and our work on one part of the mission encourages our work on the other. "Rabbi Tarfon taught: It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to neglect it."[5] Seeking perfection for the world and for ourselves is the task of being alive; it is what we are here for.

This is a challenging mission. It is not about making us feel comfortable – and maybe it's not designed to be. If we are already very involved in doing mitzvot and living out Jewish practice, we have to think: Are we keeping in mind the point of these mitzvot and the goal of these practices all the time? Are we performing the mitzvot and

[4] Leviticus 19:18.
[5] Pirkei Avot 2:16.

practices that we're comfortable with but ignoring those that feel more challenging for us? Again, everyone is different. For some, the ritual mitzvot may be the most challenging; for others, the mitzvot that require us to go out and engage with injustice in the world are most difficult. For some, it is hard to honor parents, teachers, and other authority figures; for others, it is even harder to honor and love ourselves. We have to push ourselves out of our comfort zones in order to really change ourselves and to change the world outside of us.

The dual mission of perfecting ourselves and perfecting the world is also challenging to those who are NOT using the tools and NOT taking up the task. We may identify as Jews or as part of a Jewish community, but if we are not moving the Jewish project forward, if we and the world are not being pushed toward good because of our actions on this planet, what is the point? Saying we are Jews or joining ourselves to a Jewish group is not enough. The Jewish project requires action. If you are descended from great rabbis, and have generations of tradition behind you, but do nothing, then the Jewish project stops with you. Conversely, you can be as non-Jewish as a ham and cheese sandwich, but if you step up to this project, then everything is open to you. Now is Kol Nidrei, the beginning of Yom Kippur. This is the time to step up. Don't look around. I'm talking to you! Don't look to others. If not you, who? And if not now, when? Remember what Mordechai to Esther:

> Don't imagine to yourself that you alone will be safe when disaster comes. For if you are silent and inactive at a time like this, salvation may or may not come from somewhere else, but you and your family will be lost. And who knows? Couldn't it have been for precisely a time like this that you were born and have some power to act??[6]

So now I'm going to speak to you as your coach. Think about what's holding you back from taking on the double project of perfecting yourself and perfecting the world. Is it guilt for all the times when you did not do this in the past? That is what this night is all about: freeing us from guilt so that we can try again. In the words of the Kol Nidrei prayer that we recited earlier this evening, we acknowledge that we have tried and failed in the past. Or maybe we haven't really tried at all. And we admit that we may try in the coming year and not succeed. Yet despite all of that, we ask God and this community to give us another chance, to renew us with energy for trying again, for risking failure. Is despair or cynicism holding you back? We have all been there. Tonight, we are all here to support each other in regaining our hope that change is possible. Because I have news for you: you don't have to do it alone. In fact, to use most of the Jewish toolbox, you <u>can't</u> do it alone! We are a team here, and we need you! We need the effort of everyone sitting here if we are to have a prayer of making

[6] Esther 4:13-14, somewhat adapted.

the Jewish mission succeed. So are you with me? I said, are you with me? The world's problems are not going to go away on their own. And our faults are not going to fix themselves. Maybe we won't be perfect this year. And maybe the world won't be perfect. But if we keep working, then maybe, just maybe, someday, they both will be. Or at least they will be closer than they are today. And people will ask us, "How did you make that happen? And how did you even have the courage to try?" And we will be able to answer, "That's what Judaism is for. And that's who a Jew is."

L'shanah tovah!