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Jewish People: An Overview

Who are the Jewish People?

The existence of Jewish people is a miracle. Left to normal historical trends and evaluation, there would be no Jewish people. No other people on earth survived after two thousand years of being exiled from their homeland, without a common conversational language, and with constant oppression, extortion and persecution. Today there are no Hittites, Jebusites, Spartans, or ancient Mesopotamians. There are, however, thirteen million Jewish people. Eleven million of them live in the US and Israel, 490,000 in France, and the rest are spread out around the world in countries like Argentina, Australia, Canada, England, and Hungary.

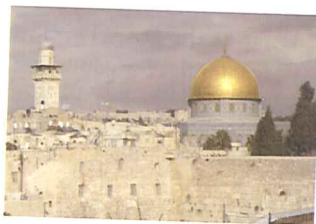
Around 1650 AD, King Louis XIV of France asked Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician, to give him proof of the supernatural. Pascal answered: "The

Jews, your Majesty—the Jews" (*Pensees*, para. 620). Pascal said that the fact that the Jewish people survived to the time period when he was living was nothing short of a supernatural phenomenon. And Pascal was right.

The famous line written by British journalist William Norman Ewer is "How odd of God to choose the Jews." Historically the Jewish people (from the word "Judah") descended from Abraham ("the Hebrew," Gen. 14:13), Isaac, and Jacob (later "Israel"). Today the terms Israelite, Jew, and Hebrew are all used interchangeably.

What do Jewish people believe?

The standard line is "Two Jews; three opinions." This means a question of "What do Jews believe about . . . ?" is very hard to answer. Since there is no supreme authority in the Jewish reli-



Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May those who love you be secure." (Ps. 122:6)

gion (Judaism), and argument is held in high regard, it is hard to make a rigid statement of what Jewish people believe.

That being said, some things are standard teachings. These include the existence and sovereignty of One God and the plan of the Almighty to bring the world into full restoration. Thus every Jew has the responsibility to repair the world ("Tikkun olam") and make it a better place.

Torah (the first five books of the Bible) is held in highest level. There are 613 commandments found in Torah, not only the Ten Commandments. Hedging the Law, so as not to break a law, means setting a boundary around a commandment. Thus, beating is allowed only thirty-nine times, in case you miscount to the maximum of forty. *God* is written out as *G-d*, lest we

take the name of the Lord in vain (if you don't take the name of the Lord, you can't take it in vain).

Social topics today include Israel and the Holocaust and assimilation into the general secular society. There are conflicting views about all these across the Jewish communities globally.

Concerning the Gospel of Jesus, most Jewish people don't even know the name Y'shua or what Christians mean when they talk about being "born again." Although Jesus was definitively Jewish, He is "out-culture" to most Jewish people today, like Buddha or Mohammed are for most Christian people.

Is Judaism the same as Christianity?

Not at all. Although the history of Christianity began in Israel, among Jewish people, within one hundred years the



two religions became significantly separate. At times they have been hostile to each other.

At its core, Judaism is a religion of works-righteousness. Although the people of Judaism are chosen, they have to earn their continued connection with the Almighty. This is reflected in their compliance with biblical commandments and through being a good person in the world around them. Christianity is God's grace extended to us. It is not about what I do; it is what God did in Jesus.

Should we witness to Jewish people?

God wants all people to know Him personally. This is eternal life (John 17:2). And He wants us who love Him to share our faith with people whom we encounter in our daily situations of life. No one should be left out.

There are some Christians who don't believe Jewish people need the Gospel. They think that since Jews are the Chosen People (Deut. 7:7), they are automatically saved. That is not true. The Bible says no one is righteous (Eccles. 7:20; Rom. 3:10), and that includes Jewish people. And "no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law . . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:20, 23). Jewish people need the Savior as well.

Still other Christians think Jews are not special and do not need a particular witness. They had their chance in the days of Jesus. But the Apostle Paul says they are still worth his own being

cursed, if he could trade (Rom. 9:1-5), and also, "As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs" (Rom. 11:28).

Thus Paul concludes addressing the need for Jewish people to hear the Gospel, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Rom. 10:14-15).

How can we pray for Jewish people?

Pray for...

- 1) their eyes to be opened by God (Luke 24:16, 31, 45)
- 2) spiritual hunger that nothing else will satisfy (Neh. 9:15; Ps. 107:9; Matt. 5:6)
- 3) dissatisfaction in their lives with their current condition (Job 27:14; Prov. 14:14)
- 4) the peace of Jerusalem (Ps. 122:6)
- 5) missionaries in the field of Jewish evangelism (Col. 4:3)

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and courtesy of Bob Mendelsohn*

Bob Mendelsohn, Director of Jews for Jesus in Sydney Australia (www.jewsforjesus.org.au), was born into an Orthodox Jewish home in the USA. He came to faith in Jesus as a nineteen-year-old university dropout in 1971 in the midst of the hippie movement. He founded a church in Lawrence, Kansas in 1972 and joined Jews for Jesus in 1979. He holds degrees from the University of Kansas (Mathematics, Education) and Fuller Seminary (MA in Jewish studies). He led the works of Jews for Jesus in Washington, DC and New York City before he moved to Sydney in 1998. He is married and has three adult children.