



Who We Are [as Jews]

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One of twelve essays of the book, *Travels on the Private Zodiac*, that try to explain Judaism and Jewish life in contemporary Christian society.

Who We Are

by Martin Samuel Cohen

I do a lot of speaking in non-Jewish settings—churches and schools and multicultural societies and venues like that. I usually give my standard "Judaism in Twenty-Three Minutes" speech and then take questions. And I always get the same questions, always the same requests to define Judaism in terms of other people's religions: why don't the Jews observe Christmas, why don't the Jews recognize Jesus as their messiah (usually phrased "Why did the Jews reject Jesus?"), why don't Jews feel the way Anglicans do about divorce or the way Catholics feel about abortion or the way Mormons feel about polygamy or the way the Muslims feel about the Quran or the way anybody in the entire world feels about anything at all that the questioner can think of.

They're all legitimate questions, I suppose, but there's also something annoying about them, something vaguely condescending and unmistakably flip about questions that presume that the only way to define Judaism is to identify all the different ways the Jews have failed to adopt the tenets of other people's faiths.

I think I'll seize the bull by the horns next time and start off my remarks by telling my audience how Jews wish to see themselves. How Jewish history is more than an endless list of things other people did to us. How Judaism itself is more than simply the amalgam of what's left over when the Jews finally got finished rejecting everybody *else's* saviours, prophets and sages. I'll tell them how we wish them to see us. How we see ourselves.

First of all, I'll tell them that we are a community of faith. The point of Judaism isn't the obsessive perpetuation of Jewish rituals, but establishment of a relationship of deep, ongoing spiritual communion between the God of Israel and each individual Jew. Not eating bagels or dancing the hora or planting trees in Israel, but knowing God and worshipping God and loving God. Not even following the dietary laws or keeping the Sabbath or lighting Hanukkah candles, but using those rituals as means to an end and not as superstitious gestures intended to make us *appear* pious in the eyes of others or to ward off some disaster we're convinced will immediately follow the ingestion of a piece of bacon. Not building synagogues or schools or Jewish community centres, but using the fellowship and knowledge those institutions can provide as a method of developing the *context* in which one can come, slowly, to believe in God and then, even more slowly, to know God and finally, as the crowning achievement of a Jewish life well lived, to love God with passion and fire.

Next, I'll tell them that we are a community of Scripture. Not fundamentalists and not know-nothing literalists, but simply a people of and by the Book, a people whose Torah lives in it as much as it lives inside of its Torah. The Book is not the point or the goal of worship and neither is its study the equivalent of worship. But, for us at least, text is context and the perimeters of Sacred Writ constitute the playing field on which we compete with our own baser instincts to win the prize that

is faith in God and a life in God. I am quite aware (but thanks for pointing it out) that the Bible is filled with all the most ghastly stories of bigamy, treachery and slavery played out against an antique backdrop of animal sacrifice and ritual purity. I know all that and I see why it must seem like an unlikely vineyard for me to spend my spiritual life toiling in. But the book is a book about the relationship between a perfect God and an imperfect set of people and it has all sorts of fissures and warts and discrepancies in it. It is flawed in countless ways because it is the record of thousands of years of flawed people struggling to find some sort of avenue towards communion with God. And, for better or worse, it's my spiritual history in that book and I can't just put it down because some ideas in it don't suit some other ideas the world has developed in the meantime.

If anyone is still listening after all that, I'll tell them that we are a messianic community as well. If it's a Christian group I'm addressing that will get a rise out of them—the same people who spend so much time insisting that the Jews are almost by definition the people who *rejected the* messiah will, I expect, find it interesting to know that we haven't rejected the messiah at all. Or at least not the idea of a redeemer who will end history as we know it and usher in the age of peace of which the prophets spoke. The problem isn't really one of believing in the messiah, it's one of identifying him. So what's wrong with Jesus? Nothing, I guess. But he didn't actually manage to bring about any of the things the Bible says will come to pass in the wake of the messianic advent—no lions lying down with lambs, no dead rising from their graves, no knowledge of God sloshing up over the land like the waters cover the sea, none of that stuff—so, at least for the moment, we'll pass. Mind you, it's nothing personal. There have been dozens, maybe scores of people over the centuries who have proclaimed their messianic pretensions, not just Jesus of Nazareth. We give each the chance to back up (easy) words with (substantially harder) deeds and, at least so far, everybody has come up a bit short. So we keep waiting, but that doesn't mean we've given up on the basic idea or that we deserve to be crammed into ghettos or concentration camps as a result of our perceived intransigence. On the contrary, we're waiting precisely because we *haven't* given up, haven't relegated the *idea* of a personal redeemer to the steamer trunk in the attic of Jewish theology where our other antiquated, rejected dogmas get put. Anyway, as far as the messianic wait-it-out goes, we're in. Jews who say their prayers seriously pray for the arrival of the messiah three times every weekday and then again as many times as they say the Grace after Meals on any given day. It's a constant with us, a regular piece of the way we think about our destiny and about the destiny of the world. So don't swallow that nonsense about those loony Jews for Jesus being the "real" messianic Jews. All Jews are messianic Jews—for better or for worse, it's part of who we are and a big part at that.

So far, so good. Then, for my big finish, I'll end up by telling them that we Jews are the products of our own past. We *hate* it when people tell us that we are the people who rejected Jesus—as though all there were to Jewishness was the fact of not being some other -ness. The French aren't Albanians and the Mayans weren't Aztecs, but nobody seems to find that surprising or unreasonable. Only the Jews, it seems to me, get chastised over and over for not being somebody else. Well, take it or leave it, but we are who we are and not merely the people who aren't what you are. It's worse than just semantics, though—this idea, that the Jews are somehow doing something perverse by not adhering to somebody else's faith, is at the very core of the anti-Semite's uncanny ability to justify his own bigotry. Anyway, the point is that we are a people that exists by being who we are and not merely by not being who we aren't. Deal with it.

There are other things I could mention about the way Jews wish to be perceived by others, but I'd probably stop right there. If I make it to the front door without being attacked by people who are offended by any minority group asserting its right to self-definition, I'll consider my afternoon a success. Or maybe I should go back to taking questions about why Jews wear those little beanies when they pray ...

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In his Preface the author says that "[T]he essays contained in this book are all parts of a larger attempt to explain the attraction Judaism holds for me and I offer them to the reading public in the hope that they will demonstrate the plausibility of understanding Judaism in a way that is traditional without being fundamentalist, liberal without being naive, intellectual without being pedantic and spiritual without being mercenary, self-serving or vacuous".