

# On Being a Jew

Lane Casteix  
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## Introduction

As evangelical Christians, we often form our understanding of the Jewish faith and what Jews are like based on New Testament interpretations of Old Testament writings. These understandings are generally accurate, depending on the source, but often they lack a genuine sense of what Judaism truly is. Frankly, some of our perceptions of Jewish life can lean toward racism and even antisemitism. More than once, I have heard born-again believers in Christ make statements that bordered on antisemitism. Although I am sure that was not their intention, it came across that way.

I grew up in a small town where several Jewish families were our friends. I knew they were Jews, but that was as deep as it went. They were just like all my other friends and acquaintances. As far as I knew, they were never treated any differently from the Italians, Germans, or those of French descent in my little world. Although we were friends, I never really understood their private lives or faith. Outwardly, they seemed just like me. Were they practicing Jews? Were they Reformed, Orthodox, liberal, or part of some other group? Honestly, I don't know, and at the time, it didn't matter to me.

Later in life, as a believer, I had a pastor/teacher who instilled in me respect for the Jewish nation, its citizens, and their contributions to my Christian faith—and to the world in general. In my studies, we spent much time in the Old Testament, and I developed a deep respect for God's relationship with the Jewish nation as His chosen people. I came to understand that God is not finished with the Jews, and the Church has not replaced Israel in God's plan, nor will it. That is one fact you should have learned from our recent study on the Kingdom/Millennium. God will return to dealing with and through Israel again, and what we call the Church Age, or Age of Grace, is only an interlude in His dealings with Israel. One day, the Church will be gone, and God will resume dealing with Israel.

Recently, my wife and I were having a quiet conversation in my office. I was facing my bookshelf, and during the course of the conversation, my

eye was drawn to a book on the shelf. The title was *To Be a Jew, A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life* by Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin. I do not remember buying this book or receiving it as a gift. I have no idea where it came from or how I acquired it. Upon a brief examination, I immediately realized that in its pages, I would find details of what being a Jew is like from the perspective of a Jew, and a rabbi no less.

I was in the process of concluding our Zoom study on *Worship in the Kingdom Age*. During that study, I came to understand how God would continue to deal with and through Israel as His focus during the Kingdom Age. The Church will have been resurrected and living in the Heavenly Jerusalem, while God dwells with His creation on Earth through redeemed Israel and the reign of King Jesus. I concluded that gaining a better understanding of what it is like to be an observant Jew might be a good follow-up study. So, here we are.

The study we are about to undertake will mainly be based on Rabbi Donin's book. It won't be a full book report, as I won't cover every topic he discussed, but it will give a clearer picture of what Jewish life is like. We won't focus on the horrors of Jewish history like the Holocaust, but instead concentrate on daily life.

As I read the book, one thing that stood out to me was how God arranged the Jewish experience to so clearly point to Him. We understand that the Church Age believer has an advantage in living the spiritual life God called us to live, because we have the universal indwelling Holy Spirit to empower us to meet the required standard. With a few exceptions, the Jew in the previous Age of Israel did not have that advantage. They were called to meet the standard of the Mosaic Covenant through human ability alone. That is a staggering disadvantage compared to the Church and the Holy Spirit. But that was precisely what the Law was meant to teach them; they (we) need God to meet the perfect standard He demands.

That said, the first thing I noticed as I read the book is how almost everything in a Jew's life was designed to remind them of their need for and duty to God. Essentially, their lives under the Mosaic Covenant were marked by constant reminders of God and His call to holiness. The Jews may not have had the indwelling Holy Spirit, but they did have the Law, which served as a continual reminder of their obligations to God.

# The Nation and the People

As Rabbi Donin points out at the beginning of his book, the terms Hebrew, Israelite, and Jew have historically been used interchangeably. The father of the nation, Abram (later Abraham), was called by God from the land of the Caldees near the Euphrates River. He was an Ibri (Hebrew), which means “from the other side.” His grandson, Jacob, was renamed Israel by God, becoming the source of the nation’s name. The name Jew is derived from Judah, the son of Israel and father of one of the twelve tribes.

The nation of Israel began as a single family rooted in Abraham and a covenant made with God.

**Genesis 12:1** Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. **2** And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. **3** I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

This covenant was founded on Abraham’s obedience to follow where God would lead him. It promised great blessings not only for Abraham’s descendants but also for the rest of the world. It should be noted that it is an unconditional covenant in which God obligated only Himself to bring all this to pass.

Because of this family origin, Jews everywhere see themselves as part of a shared Semitic family. This has given them a strong sense of kinship. Even those who have abandoned their faith still maintain this kinship.

Jews are not just a religious faith, nor are they simply a nation. Rabbi Donin believes the best way to define them might be through the term “people” rather than “faith” or “nation.” This label is part of what makes them unique. The nation of Israel was “officially” established with the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai in 1446 BC.

# The Land

As part of its founding, the land we now call Israel was given to the people God called out, who are known today as Israelites, Hebrews, or Jews. It became known as *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel.

**Genesis 17:7** And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.  
**8** And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

Note verse 8 says the gift of this land was “for an everlasting possession.” There were times when the Jews were temporarily expelled from the land because of idolatry and general apostasy, but ultimately, the land would be theirs forever. Though often disciplined by God for their failures, they were ultimately restored to the land and given another chance at obedience. Even though the land was reoccupied by Jews in 1948, many Jews are still scattered in the Diaspora because they rejected their offered King Jesus 2000 years ago. This is not yet the fulfillment of the true and full regathering as promised in Jeremiah, but it is probably the beginning of that.

**Jeremiah 23:3** Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. **4** I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD.

That full regathering into the land will occur at the end of the Tribulation. During the subsequent Kingdom Age (Millennium), the Jews will be fully gathered and will live in the land, never to be removed again. Only with ownership and control of the land of Israel can all the covenants be fulfilled, and the full realization of the Jewish people's heritage be achieved. This is exactly what is expected during the Kingdom Age.

Israel today is a democracy, which is uncommon in their part of the world where kings and other unelected rulers still govern countries. Israel is a tiny—very tiny—island in a sea of hostility to its very existence. Aligned with Western nations, especially the United States, it is a key ally in that region. Like all other nations, even Western democracies and republics, Israel is governed by fallen people, and their decisions reflect not only self-interests crucial to their survival but also the flawed nature of those in power.

The return of Jews to the Holy Land continues as they stream back to fulfill their cultural and religious identities as Jews. Many are also returning to prevent losing their cultural identity through assimilation into other nations. With the current rise of antisemitism worldwide, many countries are becoming even more hostile than usual toward the presence of Jews among them.

Israel is the only country in the world that welcomes them with open arms and even helps them settle in. You might be wondering, what about the United States? Open acceptance may have been more common in the past, but the undeniable rise of antisemitism, especially among American “progressives,” makes life here potentially dangerous for Jews, particularly practicing Jews. Given this fact, what surprises me is how many of my Jewish friends are extremely liberal.

## **Messiah**

The name comes from the Hebrew *mashiach*, which means “anointed.” Though we Christians see the Messiah as the son of God and thus divine, the Jews see the Messiah as merely human, but “anointed” by God and possessing a charismatic personality. He will bring about a political and spiritual redemption of the Jews and glorification of Israel with a period of rule that is universal. The world under the Messiah will be free of war, fear, hatred, and intolerance, which we Christians know will be true under the rulership of King Jesus during the Kingdom Age. And this is the persona the Antichrist will assume during the Tribulation as he attempts to portray himself as the Messiah.

During the time of Christ, one of the expectations of the Messiah was that he would end the Roman occupation of Israel. When Jesus did not raise

an army to accomplish this, they started to reject Him as the Messiah. As a result, they called for His death, labeling Him a “false” Messiah.

There have been claimants to the title of Messiah before and after Jesus. The key question asked about any Messiah claimant is whether he accomplishes any of the things the Messiah is supposed to accomplish. The 1948 reestablishment of the Jewish state and the later restoration of Jerusalem as its capital have encouraged many Jews to hope that the Messiah's coming is near. The Jew today is still looking for the coming of the Messiah along with the promised Kingdom.

## Israel's God

**Deuteronomy 6:4** “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

The Jews use this passage to argue that, unlike Christians, they worship only one God, the creator of the universe. They claim that it is clear from this passage and others that God is only **one** person, and Christians are guilty of idolatry because we worship “three Gods, Father, Son, Holy Spirit.” Some Christian commentators suggest that since God is a triune being, “one” in the Deuteronomy passage above should be translated as “unique,” meaning one like no other.

One could say that this “religion” began in the Garden because Adam had direct fellowship with God. It continued through Enoch, Job, and Noah, who “walked with God.” Then, we come to Abram, who was called by God and instructed to go to a place God would show him. With such minimal instructions, Abram obeyed, and it was credited to him for righteousness (Romans 4:3). Why would someone undertake a dangerous cross-desert journey of many months to an unknown place, guided only by a voice? That is the true beginning of this faith. It is beyond reason, but it contains the makings of true faith. The theological premise of the Jewish faith is that God exists, He created the world by His will, and He revealed that will to mankind at Mt. Sinai.

The Jewish concept of God is that He is a moral being who requires moral, ethical living and justice for all humanity. He is universal and supreme over the entire world. The term “the God of Israel” does not suggest any

limitations on God's sovereignty or that there might be other Gods. It only refers to the covenant God made with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), which was reaffirmed with his descendants through Moses.

Israel's view of their God does not permit the idea that He could become a finite mortal; therefore, they reject the concept of Jesus as deity.

**Exodus 20:3** "You shall have no other gods before me.

**4** "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. **5** You shall not bow down to them or serve them...

They interpret the first and second commandments, especially verse 5, as warnings to anyone contemplating offering worship to a mortal claiming to be God.

For Israel, their God is the creator of everything. He is righteous and holy, and must be shown the highest respect. They do see Him as "Father," but only in the sense that they are His children.

## Halakha

Halakha (or Halacha) is the collective body of Jewish religious law, derived from the written and Oral Torah, guiding Jewish life, practice, and ethics. It is often translated as "the way to walk" or "the path" from the Hebrew root *halakh*, meaning "to go." The written Torah comprises the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The Oral Torah (*Torah she-be'al peh*) is the body of Jewish law, traditions, and interpretations not written in the Five Books of Moses (the Written Torah). It is considered sacred by the Jews as passed down orally from God to Moses and then through generations, explaining and elaborating on the written text. Its core is codified in the Mishnah, which functions like a commentary, and it is expanded upon in the Talmud and the Gemara, which is the extensive rabbinic commentary and analysis of the Mishnah, forming the core of the Talmud.

The Gemara is Judaism's foundational text for Jewish law (Halakah) and ethics, written primarily in Aramaic. It includes discussions, debates, philosophical insights, and narratives that explain, expand upon, and apply the laws outlined in the Mishnah. It is a complex, multi-layered text studied for a deep understanding of Jewish tradition, covering legal, ethical, and theological topics through rigorous debate and storytelling. It provides practical details for Jewish life, such as how to wear *tefillin* (phylacteries), observe dietary laws, and interpretive principles, as well as ceremonial customs and rabbinic rulings, all considered equally authoritative as the written text for Orthodox Judaism.

All of these function as a comprehensive legal system that governs daily behavior and religious obligations, evolving through rabbinic interpretation.

## Key Aspects of Halakha

- **Sources:** It is based on the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) in the Torah, complemented by Talmudic discussions, rabbinic rulings, and established customs.
- **Scope:** Governs both religious rituals (such as prayer) and secular aspects of life (such as business and personal status), since classical Judaism does not separate religious and secular life.
- **Development:** Evolved through distinct historical periods (Tannaim, Amoraim, Geonim, Rishonim, Acharonim) with major legal codes like Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* and Karo's *Shulchan Aruch*.
- **Interpretation:** Different Jewish denominations (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform) hold varying views on its binding nature, ranging from divinely ordained and unchanging to adaptable, human-interpreted guidance.

## History & Application

All this is rooted in the commandments given to Moses, the Torah. Sages interpreted and applied Torah law to everyday life, laying the foundation for later codes such as the Mishnah and the Gemara. Today, it often serves as a voluntary guide for many, though it remains central to family law in Israel

for Jewish citizens. Halakha is the collective body of Jewish religious law, including laws, ordinances, customs, and traditions that guide the daily life and actions of Jewish people.

Halakha serves as a comprehensive "blueprint" for Jewish life, guiding behavior in almost every situation, from mundane activities like eating and dressing to complex matters such as business transactions, marriage, and ethical responsibilities. It addresses personal, social, national, and international relationships. The purpose of Halakha is to provide a way for Jews to live their lives according to God's specific instructions, turning internal religious feelings into concrete actions and thus preserving a connection to the divine in everyday life. Essentially, Halakha provides a framework for a Jewish person's "path" or "way of walking" through life, guided by tradition and law.

Note that the statement: "preserving a connection to the divine in everyday life." This idea is what struck me about the Law and Halakha. It represents a connection, a motivator, and a constant reminder of the relationship the Jew is called to have with God. Keep this in mind as we continue our study.

## Sources and Development

Halakha is traditionally seen as divinely approved and has developed over the centuries through the interpretation and application of rabbinic scholars. Its main sources include:

- **Written Torah:** The first five books of the Hebrew Bible, containing the 613 commandments (mitzvot) that form the most sacred foundation of the law.
- **Oral Tradition:** Teachings and interpretations passed down orally and eventually codified in rabbinic literature, most notably the Mishnah and the Talmud.
- **Rabbinical Law:** Laws instituted by rabbis to prevent the violation of Torah law or to govern extra-biblical holidays and situations.
- **Customs (Minhagim):** Long-held community customs and traditions that have taken on the status of law over time.
- **Responsa (Teshuvot):** Rulings authored by great Torah scholars throughout history in response to inquiries from individuals and communities as new circumstances and situations arise.

These various sources are further refined and consolidated in works like the *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law) and its commentaries, which serve as practical handbooks for daily observance.

We start with the Law as part of the Torah. The Law is somewhat broad when it says, “Do this and don’t do that.” The Oral Traditions, Rabbinical Law, customs, and responsa specify exactly “what to do and what not to do in *specific situations*” in the daily life of the observant Jew.

## The Law

The Law was merely a shadow, not the reality.

**Hebrews 10:1** For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. <sup>2</sup> Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? <sup>3</sup> But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. <sup>4</sup> For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

A shadow is real but incomplete. From a Christian’s viewpoint, the Law foreshadowed Christ’s priesthood, sacrifice, and mediation but could not complete them. This was temporary by design, not due to failure. It was meant to depict the Messiah for the Jewish people so they would recognize Him when He arrived. It succeeded. Many turned to Christ and recognized Him as the Messiah, but when He showed no signs of raising an army to overthrow the occupying Romans or of establishing the expected Kingdom, many lost faith, especially the religious leaders, who saw Him as a threat to their power.

The Law or Mosaic Covenant was made at Mt. Sinai during the Exodus. It is a conditional agreement, meaning that both parties, Israel and God, had responsibilities under its terms. Essentially, God promised that if Israel (the nation, whether believer or unbeliever) obeyed the rules He set, then the nation would be blessed. If they failed to fulfill their responsibilities under

the covenant, then they would face discipline—even to the point of being temporarily removed from the land promised to them.

**Deuteronomy 28:1** “And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. <sup>2</sup> And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. <sup>3</sup> Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. <sup>4</sup> Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. <sup>5</sup> Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. <sup>6</sup> Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

<sup>7</sup> “The LORD will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you. They shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways. <sup>8</sup> The LORD will command the blessing on you in your barns and in all that you undertake. And he will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. <sup>9</sup> The LORD will establish you as a people holy to himself, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. <sup>10</sup> And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you. <sup>11</sup> And the LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your livestock and in the fruit of your ground, within the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to give you. <sup>12</sup> The LORD will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. <sup>13</sup> And the LORD will make you the head and not the tail, and you shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them, <sup>14</sup> and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.

The negative side of this covenant is shown in verses 15-68, which I recommend you familiarize yourself with.

## The Sacrificial System Could Not Perfect the Conscience

**Hebrews 9:6** ... the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties,<sup>7</sup> but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.<sup>8</sup> By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing<sup>9</sup> (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper,<sup>10</sup> but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.

The scene shows the actions of the High Priest on Yom Kippur when he made sacrifices for both the sins of the people and himself. Then, he took blood from that sacrifice and sprinkled it on the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant. This ritual was performed once a year and was the only time the High Priest could enter behind the veil that separated the Holy of Holies in the Temple. The sprinkled blood “covered” the sins for one year, temporarily “hiding” them from God’s view.

The Jews viewed ritual sacrifices as a way to seek God's forgiveness for their sins. The system clearly demonstrated that this forgiveness was only temporary, needing renewal each year. This, of course, foreshadowed the blood of Christ shed on the Cross, and the pre-cross Jew was meant to recognize that connection when the Cross came.

The key points here are that the Law focused only on external cleansing. As part of the “shadow of things to come,” it could not bring about internal transformation. The Law could not save anyone; it was merely a reflection of the one who would save. It offered only temporary (one-year) forgiveness for sins. The Law was provisional, awaiting something better—the “time of reformation” (v.10). “Reformation” is the Greek word *diorthosis*, which means, in a physical sense, making something straight or restoring it to its natural, normal condition. This, of course, refers to the judgment of sin at the Cross.

## **The Law Was Bound to the Levitical Priesthood**

**Hebrews 7:11** Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron?  
**12** For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.

The priesthood under the Law was limited to descendants of Aaron. If the Aaronic priesthood was “perfect,” what need was there for a new priesthood? For the priesthood being changed, of necessity, there is also a change of the Law.” The Mosaic Law stands or falls with the Aaronic priesthood. Christ’s priesthood is of a different order (Melchizedek). A new priesthood requires a new legal arrangement.

## **The Law Was Weak Because It Depended on Human Ability to Comply**

**Hebrews 7:18** For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness <sup>19</sup> (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.

The weakness of the Law was not moral but functional. The Law could identify sin but not eliminate it because it relied on human effort for obedience. The Jews under the Law during the Age of Israel did not experience the universal indwelling of the Holy Spirit and His empowering influence as we do during this Church Age.

## **The Law Regulated Access — Christ Grants Access**

**Hebrews 9:8** By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing.

Under the Law, there was limited access, repeated sacrifices, and a closed veil blocking entry to the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. Under Christ, access is open.

**Hebrews 10:19** Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,

The Law's structure itself testified to its temporary nature.

## **The Law Was Replaced by a Better Covenant**

**Hebrews 8:6** But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. <sup>7</sup> For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

**Hebrews 8:13** In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

“Obsolete” *palaioumenon* means aging, ready to vanish. The Law served until the New Covenant was inaugurated after the Cross.

## **One Sacrifice Ended the Law's Sacrificial Function**

**Hebrews 10:11** And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. <sup>12</sup> But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, <sup>13</sup> waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. <sup>14</sup> For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

The repetition of sacrifices under the Law indicated that the process was incomplete, but a time was coming when it would be final and complete, with Christ offering a single sacrifice for sins for all time (v.12). Once Christ “sat down at the right hand of God,” the Law's sacrificial role was over.

## **The Law Functioned Until the “Time of Reformation”**

**Hebrews 9:9** ... According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper,<sup>10</sup> but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.

“...Imposed until the time of reformation.” The Law had a terminus, and Christ and the judgment of sin on the Cross are that endpoint.

## **What We Have**

Israel is a unique nation established by God when He gave this ethnic group the Law and called them to Himself. Through Israel, God will interact with humanity, aiming to use them as the vessel to restore what was lost by Adam in the Garden.

In calling them His own, he gave them the Law, captured in the Halakah, which outlines how they are to conduct themselves as children of God. We will examine these requirements in detail in upcoming lessons.