

Questions and Answers for World Religion Classes

from Rabbi Mark Cohn Temple Emanuel, Winston-Salem, NC 336-722-6640

- When and how were you first introduced to your religious tradition?

As a child. My parents are both Jewish and I am the youngest of four children. I grew up in an active Jewish home where holidays and Shabbat (Sabbath) was observed and marked regularly – not in a hyper or super observant way but definitely marked with prayers and rituals at home and participation in our synagogue.

- What do you think is the most fundamental aspect(s) of your religious tradition?

The rabbis of old (from the 1st/2nd centuries, in Israel) wrote that there are two lines of Torah that are the central line(s).

Genesis 5:1, “These are the generations of Adam...” To remind us that we are all from the same Source and Creator – so no one can come along and say that their father or mother is more important than someone else’s.

Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Boiled down: Be nice! Though it is a little more than that :) . “Love” in the Torah (5 Books of Moses, opening 5 Books of the Hebrew Bible) is about commitment and loyalty as well as the emotional connection. So that phrase to love your neighbor is about connection, loyalty and commitment.

- What does your particular religious tradition share in common with other religious traditions?

I think that in general many religious traditions can be boiled down to ... or carry at their root that idea of “Love your Neighbor” and the essential business of being kind. We certainly share the idea of monotheism with Christianity and Islam. After all ... we kind of (dare I say) invented it!

- What distinguishes your particular religious tradition from other religious traditions?

Our rituals and holidays have elements that – and in certain instances their sheer existence – are unique to us. The fact that we operate according to a lunar AND solar calendar might make us unique.

I’ll give you a couple of those unique traditions:

1. Eating matzah (unleavened bread) for 7 days to remember the Exodus from Egypt (Passover).
2. Shaking the four species (branches from a palm, a myrtle, a willow and the fruit of a citron) during the 7 day holiday of Sukkot (Feast of Booths).
3. Wearing fringes on the corners of our prayer shawls to remind us of the 613 commandments of the Torah.

... I could go on with many more.

The fact that we are a people and a religion and an ethnic group and a culture ... all rolled up into one.

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- Does your religious tradition assert that it is just one of many ways to commune with “God” or does it assert that it is the only authentic way to commune with “God”? Why does it hold this belief? Do you agree with it? Why/why not?

First off – I should have prefaced before – I certainly do not speak for all Jews or for all of Judaism. I come from the liberal/progressive arm of Judaism. We do not hold that we own the Truth. We simply follow what we hold to be our religious truth(s). The Torah (a term for both the 5 Books of Moses as well as Jewish teaching in general) of Jewish life is our mode to connect with God and with our community, with Jews of ages past and those yet to come. The presumption of the Hebrew Bible is that, yes, this is the way to believe in and understand God. But over the centuries, Jewish belief has opened up to a myriad of interpretations and understandings (all within a framework and based on the Torah).

- How does your religious tradition respond to societal issues such as poverty, war, and human sexuality?

Jewish life is predicated on a connection to the world around us and a sense of responsibility for justice, peace, and well-being among all humanity. After all, the Torah begins with the Book of Genesis and the creation of the world, to remind us that we are first off connected to humanity as human beings. The question that Cain asks after killing his brother (Abel), “Am I my brother’s keeper?” is answered very definitively by Joseph at the end of the Book of Genesis with a resounding: YES! And we can see through Joseph’s actions a responsibility not only for his brother but all of their families and quite frankly the whole nation of Egypt, the foreign land he is living in – despite the horrific treatment his brothers had shown him earlier in life.

So ... on poverty, the Torah is replete with laws to take care of your brother who is poor. And there are laws to provide for the widow, the orphan and the stranger.

On war, murder is prohibited (that’s one of the ‘Big 10’ - Don’t murder) but killing for self-defense is permissible. Note: The well-known commandment, ‘Don’t murder’ is sometimes (mis)translated as Don’t Kill.

On human sexuality, Judaism (particularly non-Orthodox – like me, in the progressive arm of Judaism) view gays and lesbians as just as much a part of the community as anyone else. So, yes, gay marriage is allowed and is affirmed based on the idea that we are all created in the image of God (see Genesis 1). The Torah affirms strong ties to family and tribe. Two people who want to support a loving home and marriage should be allowed to do so.

- What are some misconceptions about your religious tradition?

Some people think of Jews as all the same – in other words that there is only one way to be Jewish ... but the truth is there are Jews with all sorts of different levels of observance and participation. So too, people often think of Jews as only coming from eastern European countries (before the large migration of Jews to these shores in the late 19th century and early 20th). Truth is, Jews continue to live all over the globe (though concentrated in Israel and the US) and prior to the middle of the 20th century, there were many many Jews who lived in Arab countries.

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- What do you want others to know about your religious tradition?

It may seem funny to say – but many people just don't give thought to it ... Jesus was a Jew. The observance of holidays like Sukkot and Passover, Shabbat (Sabbath) ... These are all things he would have known and celebrated.

- When and why did you become a religious leader? What was the process?

I was ordained as a rabbi in 1998 at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, OH. It came after five intensive years of study and practicum (and before entering rabbinical school, a bachelor's degree is required). My schooling involved living in Israel for a year, studying Jewish texts from the Bible to the Modern Era, working with small synagogues as a student rabbi, and working in a hospital setting as well.

- What are some of your responsibilities as a religious leader?

I am involved with a myriad of tasks but at the core: I work with the spiritual and soulful expression of Judaism. That translates into teaching kids in our religious school, leading services, doing pastoral visits at homes and in the hospitals, working with our temple staff to create a creative and productive environment, serving in the community at large as a representative of the Jewish community.

- What do you enjoy most about your position and what are your greatest challenges?

I enjoy working with people in a myriad of settings: from cradle to grave. I am in a very privileged position to do what I do and people let me into their lives at critical moments. My greatest challenge is finding ways to bring people along with views and visions I have for the synagogue and seeing their point of view and finding a satisfying middle ground, without giving up on my own principles and beliefs.

- How does your position affect your daily life and standing in the community?

I think that as the sole rabbi for the sole synagogue in Winston-Salem, I am in a unique position to be a presence in the larger community. As I am now in my 15th year here, I am recognized as I go around town as 'the local rabbi' and am known as such.

- What do you believe about "God" and "God's relationship to the world and humanity?"

I believe God is the spirit/wind/energy of the Universe. God is the power and force that sustains the Universe and all Creation. God is what is in the plants and animals, the trees and humanity. We are all of the same matter and material and therefore a desecration done to one is a desecration done to all and to the One that created us all. I do not believe in an interventionist God or one who controls the outcomes of events. God has created us with free-will and therefore we are in partnership with God to determine the nature of how the world will look.

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- Do you have any type of scripture or literature that you read and follow? When were they written and why are they important to you?

The Tanakh (The Hebrew Bible: Torah, Prophets, Writings) is our sacred scripture. They were assembled in the form that we know them between the 8th and 4th centuries, before the Common Era (i.e., roughly 2300-2800 years ago) in Israel. The Mishnah (Oral Law of Jewish Life) and Gemara (commentary on the Mishnah) are from the 2nd – 6th centuries and were written in Israel and Babylonia (modern day Iraq) are fundamental in understanding the growth of 'rabbinic' Judaism which is the basis for much of the Jewish life/ritual up to today.

- Do you pray? If so, why?

Yes, I pray. Because I believe in the need to create and foster a spiritual life in connection with God and my tradition and my ancestors who created these customs.

- If you could do anything else other than what you do, what would that be?

Be a farmer. I am an avid gardener and I believe deeply in the connection between man and the earth. In Hebrew the word for earth/soil is 'adamah'. That is why Adam is named Adam in the bible. Adam was created from the Adamah. (Eve by the way is called Eve because her name in Hebrew means: life-giver. Every name in the Bible has a meaning that has to do with the individual and/or his/her birth story.) Adam is told to serve and protect the Garden (of Eden) and so I see it as my role to do so.