

REL 402 - Judaism - The Sabbath

When studying the traditions of Judaism, a non-member of the faith cannot help being overwhelmed by an awe-inspiring awareness of the history of the religion and its adherents. There is a sense, obtained even by just a cursory survey of some of its practices, of a link to ancient, foundational traditions underlying all of Western civilization. The ability of the Jewish people to have maintained throughout the centuries their historical awareness and their written and oral historical record is unique among the world's religions. Despite incredible obstacles, including mass-scale persecutions, conquests of their homeland, and the dispersal of their population throughout the world, the Jewish people have preserved their identity and culture for close to thirty centuries. In the process, they have maintained a belief system that became the model and foundation for the world's other two great monotheistic faiths, Christianity and Islam. At the heart of Judaism is a theological and ethical core that gave rise to the life philosophies of most of humanity. The notion of one universal, omniscient God of creation, as the authoritative source for mankind's understanding of the purpose of existence came from Judaism. This God's instructions to man on how to comport himself in this world were the faith's greatest gift to humanity.

Taking into account the power of this history and influence allows an outsider to understand and appreciate the ancient rituals and practices of the faith. Whether one believes, like observant members of this religion, that these practices are sacred and holy within themselves, or that their endurance and their role in keeping the Jews unified as a viable people throughout their worldly trials invests them with a sacredness independent of acceptance of the faith itself, it cannot be denied that the maintenance of Judaism's traditions has been of significant influence on the development of humanity. Considering all of this, I have approached this assignment not with the naïve idea that I could somehow gain a meaningful degree of understanding of the Jewish faith, but with the goal of paying a sort of homage to the religion that brought so much to mankind.

For the purpose of this assignment, I attempted to participate at least nominally in two areas of Judaism's traditional practices, the keeping of the Sabbath and the invocation of "blessings" used in daily life. For the former, I tried to observe some semblance of the time-frame and focus of activity of the Jewish Sabbath. Admittedly, without a deeper study of the tradition and a participation in an actual Sabbath observance within the Jewish community, my observance could only produce a shadow of the experience achieved by those who actively pursue the faith. I did, however, gain a little bit of insight regarding the history and purpose of this particular spiritual aid. The same sort of disclaimer applies to my use of some of the faith's traditional blessings. I would not begin to claim to have obtained some sort of deep mystical understanding of the religion from scratching the surface of these traditions, but do think I gained some knowledge and understanding of their role and purpose in Jewish life.

The observance within Judaism of a faith-wide day of rest, contemplative study, and prayer every seventh day has done much to preserve the continuity of Jewish existence over the centuries. Together with the faith's other sacred practices and rituals, it has linked Jews to the comfort and fellowship of their ancient forebears during even the darkest times of persecution and diaspora. With its roots traced to the very beginning of time in the Genesis account of creation, this day of rest both honors and parallels that traditionally thought to have been taken by God after his six days of creating the world. It is a time for removal of one's thought and activity from worldly purposes in favor of contemplation of higher ideas.

In that sense, I tried at least to mimic its purpose in some form in my own life. From sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday, I removed my attention entirely from the physical world and its distractions and tried to focus on meditating about spiritual concerns. I avoided all of the types of activities proscribed by the traditional strictures of Jewish Sabbath observance, refrained from "work" of any sort (admittedly the easiest part of my task), and attempted to schedule my meals, sleep, and schedule in general in a way that to at least some degree emulated the tradition. The effect I obtained was one of a sense of peace, of a link to an ancient history and awareness of things on a plane beyond normal understanding. To me, the greatest benefit of a weekly observance of this practice would be the attainment of a greater sense of perspective regarding what is truly important in life. Completely setting aside the world in favor of spiritual contemplation gave me the opportunity to reevaluate my own somewhat hazy beliefs and convictions, and I can appreciate the role played by a weekly observance of this sort in helping one gain a more balanced and spiritually aware outlook on life.

Regarding the use of traditional Jewish blessings, I did not in all honesty feel as though I gained much insight into my own spirituality from attempting to incorporate them into my own life. Specific prayers such as these seem to call for a greater understanding of the religious tradition underlying them than I possess. In this short timeframe, this level of understanding was of course impossible to obtain. In fact, I felt like sort of an imposter, presuming to insinuate myself into a tradition of which I had no basis of understanding. Still, while not specific to the "berachoth" themselves, I did find myself regaining an appreciation for the function and benefit of prayer itself.

To me, the specific words and meanings of individual, ritually repeated prayers have never seemed as important as the decision to invoke them. The power of prayer, and indeed of any sort of religious ritual, seems to me to lie in what one invests in it. A sincere devotion to one's deity can be expressed without the structured formulas of ritualistic prayer, in my opinion. Similarly, the formulaic structure itself does not, without a sincere basis of devotion within the heart, make a prayer sacred. What all this means to me is that, basically, my own preference for a sort of free-form, conversational style of prayer that is never expressed the same way twice was reinforced. As someone who does not adhere to a particular denomination or even a particular faith, the significance of religious ritual for me lies in the realm of the historical and traditional rather than in the sacred. This week's exercise provided me with the opportunity to explore some of the bedrock beliefs and traditions that have so greatly influenced mankind's development, and I am grateful to have had that experience. There is an undeniable, recognizable link among everyone descended from the monotheistic cultural and religious traditions founded upon the tenets of Judaism, myself included. The belief sets that the ancient faith of Judaism fostered have been the foundation for much, if not most, of what has been great and noble in human history, and it was nice to be reminded of this.