



Ecumenical Interfaith Committee Joint Committee on Franciscan Unity

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH – AND A FEMALE JEWISH RABBI WHO LEADS AN INTERFAITH ORGANIZATION

by Rabbi Dorit Edut

What does it mean to be Jewish ?

Being Jewish is not only belonging to a faith group, but is also a culture and a people. It takes on many shapes and forms today – from ultra-Orthodox men in black coats and wide-brimmed hats who spend their days in study and prayer to those who are non-religious activists for many social and political causes while enjoying a dietary connection to their Jewish heritage. Even the old cliché about “looking Jewish” doesn’t hold in Israel, where there are Jews from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and South America. So what are really the elements all these different individuals have in common?

First, there is a common history, going back some three thousand years to Abraham, and then through Moses, Kings Saul, David and Solomon, the Destruction of the First Temple and Exile to Babylonia (modern-day Iraq), the Return and life under the Persians, Greeks, and Romans until the Destruction of the Second Temple and Exile all over the Roman Empire.... And so on, until the Holocaust of the Nazi era in the 20th century and the miraculous establishment of the State of Israel as an independent Jewish country in 1948.

During all these years, we learned survival skills and kept our devotion to the learning of the Torah (the source of Jewish laws, which have been adapted to the different living conditions and challenges by the sages of each generation and written down in our Talmud, Codes and Responsa literature). From these sources, the values of education, of preserving life, of treating others with kindness, and pursuing justice for all human beings evolved and have been embedded in the lifestyles of Jews to this day. This is the second common factor we all share.

Thirdly, there has been a connection to the Land of Israel since the beginning of our history, for many centuries a dream that we would all return there when the Messiah would come and establish a center of world peace. When the Zionist movement began at the end of the 19th century, many Jews believed it was

time to make this dream a reality so there could be a refuge from anti-Semitism and a chance to show the rest of the world that we were a normal people like everyone else. Today, 69 years after the United Nations recognized the Jewish state, Israel is definitely a source of great pride for our people, although it has also engendered much debate and criticism among Jews and non-Jews, for some of its policies. Suffice it to say that Israel remains a major focal point for Jews all around the world, and it is still considered a great and good deed to “go up” to live there permanently.

Fourth, Jews have their own calendar – a lunar one with some solar adjustments – that is filled with holiday celebrations that have brought families together since the Temple times so the values of our heritage can not only be experienced through the rituals, customs, foods, prayers and stories but also passed on to the next generation. There is actually only one month in the year without a single holiday or fast day – but even this month contains four Sabbaths, which are considered weekly holidays.

Finally, the main thing we all share – except for those who are humanist or secular Jews – is the belief in one God Who is the Creator of all life, Who cares for all creatures, Who is compassionate and just, all-knowing, and eternal. It is through God’s guidance that we have received the Law, God’s moral requirements of humanity, which, if followed, will bring about world peace and grant us all eternal life.

How did you become a female rabbi?

My own journey to become a rabbi began in 1949, when I was born the daughter of Holocaust survivors who met after WWII in New York City. My mother, who came from Luxembourg, was hidden by the French Resistance in southern France for four years with false Catholic identity papers. My father, who fled to Israel from Berlin with his family in 1934, ended up in the American Army as a translator getting intelligence from German POWs and later supervised the German translators at the Nuremberg Trials. Their experiences impacted my sister and me

very deeply, and we often felt the need to succeed and help secure our own lives and those of our parents here. We also grew up with strong Jewish identities, and already at age 13 I had the desire to become a rabbi – at a time when girls could not even have a Bat Mitzvah. (In the early 1960s only boys had a Bar Mitzvah, a ceremony marking an adolescent’s responsibility to take on Jewish ritual and ethical practices; the Bat Mitzvah is the ceremony for girls.)

So I bided my time, going to Israel to finish college, where I became fluent in Hebrew and immersed myself in life there, finding my wonderful husband some 46 years ago. When we returned to the United States, I became both a teacher of both Jewish studies and of public school social studies and then a crisis and family counselor. Finally at age 50, I applied to rabbinic school. Of course, during all this I was also busy raising our three daughters.

When I was accepted to the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York City, I was overjoyed. Yes, it took quite a lot of hard work and sleepless nights, but I loved my teachers, my studies, and my new friends – all of whom were also mid-life career changers who had similar dreams. As part of our training, I took a nine-week course and served as a hospital chaplain in Michigan, served as an administrator of a part-time Jewish school for two years, and was a student rabbi for several congregations in both New York and Michigan.

But it was not until I had my own pulpit in upstate Michigan that I encountered those – both men and women – who did not yet accept the idea of a female rabbi. So it took some special efforts on my part to understand their resistance and to do what I could to show them that I could be their spiritual leader and teacher – which is what “rabbi” really means. It was there, too, that I began my first efforts in interfaith work, mainly in order to help this congregation feel more secure and integrated into the community. We held several ecumenical services at the synagogue, inviting Christian congregations to participate in the prayers and the luncheon that followed.

How does your Judaism inform your interfaith work?

When my next pulpit brought me to the heart of downtown Detroit, I knew I needed to reach out to the other faith groups nearby to let them know of the desire of this small Jewish enclave to be part of the community and to help in the revival of this great city.

I also believed that the idea of One God, which we affirm twice daily in our prayers, leads us to be connected and caring for ALL people, much like the examples of our ancestors Abraham and Sarah. Furthermore, the importance of working for equality and justice is ingrained through the words of our Prophets and the slavery experience of Egypt, which we are bidden never to forget – through the Passover holiday and in our daily prayers as well. Thus, it was a natural impulse for me to find leaders of other faith-based groups – Baptists, Catholics, Methodists, Unitarians, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Unificationists, Hare Krishna, etc. – to create an interfaith outreach networking group that would bring the resources of our different congregations and civic groups together to help the families and children in Detroit during this time of transformation.

From my own experiences as a teacher and crisis counselor, I knew the non-profits and faith organizations had been filling in the huge gaps to help the needy when the local and state governments and private businesses had failed to provide vital resources, especially during the Recession years. I saw there was a lot of duplication going on, so I thought it would be best if we could combine our efforts to meet these needs, as well as to create new programs where needs were unmet.

Of course, I learned so much about other faiths and social processes this way, and continue this personal growth daily. I was thrilled that so many others willing to join this effort, and today the Detroit Interfaith Outreach Network is a vibrant group, with more than 300 people attending our different events and participating in our projects. For me, one of the highest moments of spiritual awakening and gratitude came during our first interfaith service and potluck at the Catholic church of St. Peter Claver in Detroit. I sat at the altar, looking out at the large interfaith assembly that had just heard a young Muslim boy chant by heart from the Kor’an, and that were now singing a praise to God along with the Hare Krishna group. ‘This’, I said to myself, ‘is what God wants of us – to be together in peace, enjoying life and aware of God’s goodness.’

