

**There Is One God: Judaism**  
**[A dialogue with Rabbi Sarah W. Weissman, Associate Rabbi, Temple Beth Am, Los Altos Hills, California]**

**Deuteronomy 6:1-7**

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**Mark S. Bollwinkel**

Mark Bollwinkel:

Friends, this sermon series "There Is One God" isn't simply a lecture about world religions, as important as that might be. It is yet another attempt to inspire us all to lead a Christian life. Jesus' compassion for and relationships with those of other religions (Matthew 2:1, 8:5-10, 15:21-28; John 4) suggests that those who follow his teachings can be examples of just such respect for our neighbors of other faiths. That means rejecting prejudice in exchange for humility and a willingness to learn about others religions different from our own.

This series is not a debate about "whose religion is the best" nor an apology for our own convictions. To suggest that "there is one God" is not to suggest that "all religions are the same." All religions are not the same.

The three great monotheisms....Islam, Judaism and Christianity...come from the same story. We each claim to be "children of Abraham, "the ancient patriarch who responding to God's call moved his family from the security of wealth and home to a new land. God made a covenant with Abraham that his family would be as prolific as the stars and a blessing to all the nations forever (Genesis 12:1-9, 15:1-6, 17:1-8,18-21).

Let's celebrate our differences and learn from each other because the other might help us see our own.\*

We are privileged today to have Rabbi Sarah W. Weissman, Associate Rabbi at Temple Beth Am in Los Altos Hills as our dialogue partner. On the assumption that the average North American knows little about other

religions, and often little about their own, I asked Rabbi Weissman to help with some of the basics about the Jewish faith.

Rabbi Weissman:        Judaism

I will start telling you about the reformed Jewish Community. It's the largest movement in the United States; about 900 reformed congregations around the country. All denominations of Judaism worship on Friday nights and Saturday mornings. Our Sabbath starts at sundown Friday and ends sundown Saturday.

We have lots of holidays throughout the calendar but I can share some of the big ones. We have our high holy days which are usually in September and October. Those are the start of the Jewish year and the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, which is a day of fasting and reflection and repentance.

The other big [holidays] are traditionally/historically the pilgrimage holidays where Jews would all go to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices and that's Sukkot, our harvest holiday which comes soon after Yom Kippur, that's the festival of booths where you build a little hut.

Then in the spring is Passover which comes around Easter and is the remembrance of the Jews/Israelites exodus from Egypt. And Hanukkah which is a big one in the United States. Traditionally it is not a huge holiday on the Jewish calendar but has become more important in our country. That celebrates the Maccabees overthrowing the Syrian Greeks who desecrate the temple and conquer the land and they get conquered by a small group of determined Jews.

Mark Bollwinkel:

We Christians so often think of other religions as monolithic, assuming that because they have one holy book each member conforms to one creed and culture. We accept the fact that although Christianity has one holy book and one Jesus it is divided into thousands of denominations, sects and movements. Why should we be surprised to learn then that Islam, for

example, has as many denominations and sects as Protestantism? Or that Judaism is divided into many major groups and schools of thought?

Rabbi Weismann:

Since the beginning of Judaism, there have been different groups, but the formal denomination system came about in the mid-1800s as a reaction to the reform movement, which was the first self-identified movement that started in Germany.

It was a group of Jews who wanted to better integrate being modern post enlightenment people and citizens of whatever country they lived in and be Jewish. They were pretty radical. They took a lot of the traditions and customs that had been taken for granted, such as the genders sitting separately during worship, things about not having musical instruments on Shabbat and holidays which harkens back to remembering when the temple was destroyed in Jerusalem's and sort of re-envisioning what it means to be a Jew in the modern world so the reform movement was consciously called reformers and then in reaction to that other denominations came about. The conservative movement was sort of a middle ground, the neo-Orthodox or modern orthodox movement saw themselves as the bearer of tradition, but were definitely defining themselves in opposition of the reform movements. And around the world, Jews have different customs based on where they live.

Mark Bollwinkel:

In preparation for this series I learned a lot about the secondary sources of revelation found in both Islam and Judaism. Both faiths, like Christianity, understand their Holy Books...the Koran and the Hebrew Torah/Prophets/Wisdom in what we call the "Old Testament"....as the revelation of God. Christians call the Old and New Testaments "the word of God," but in Islam and Judaism, the historic recorded interpretation of those scripture are also considered revelation. Muslims consider the

Hadith and Oral Traditions following the death of Prophet Mohammed "the word of God." I ask Rabbi Weissman about the Talmud:

Rabbi Weissman:

Talmud Seen as Revelation – Is it equal to the Torah?

Traditional Judaism sees the Talmud as equal in authority to the written Torah and the traditions tell us that when Moses is in Mt. Sinai, he receives two Torahs. He receives the written Torah, which is the five books of Moses and he receives the oral Torah. Tradition goes that around the year 200, the leadership of the Jewish community was afraid people were going to forget the oral tradition and they started writing it down, which became the Mishnah, the core of the Talmud and the Talmud is the commentaries around it. Most reformed Jews don't believe it is literally true. They take it as product of human beings in their time and in their place and with varying degrees of divine intervention.

Mark Bollwinkel:

For the "progressive Christian" we approach the Bible in much the same way. Where we knock heads "institutionally" is with our brothers and sisters that take it literally; or I should say take it literally when they want to. Nobody is literal when it comes to the Bible's teaching on gluttony!

The traditions in Islam and Judaism to consider the interpretation of their Holy Books as edifying for the faith makes sense for me in one of the teachings of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement. Wesley suggests that there is a "quadrilateral" source of understanding God's revelations to the world. The Bible is first and foremost but always in relationship to Personal Experience, Reason and the Traditions of the church. The interaction of those four sources of revelation requires that interpretation. Although we have never codified interpretation, we Methodists have always welcomed it rejecting notions of Biblical inerrancy and literalism.

With Rabbi Weissman here, I just had to ask, "Are women rabbis common in the other sects of Judaism?"

Rabbi Weissman:

Not as [common]; in the orthodox community, women are not ordained as clergy people although on the left-most part of the modern orthodox, they are trying to ordain women and it is a big dividing line as well. The conservative movement started ordaining women in the 80's and reform movement started ordaining women in the 70s.

Mark Bollwinkel:

The Three Monotheisms - Divided by their personage of Jesus?

Would it be too simplistic to say that the three monotheisms are divided by their understanding of the personages of Jesus and Mohammed? Is that the dividing line between these three faiths that seeming came out of the same story?

Rabbi Weissman:

It is a core difference and historically, it is where Judaism and Christianity diverge. Both traditions have evolved; who Jesus was is a major dividing line; I think Judaism has evolved other ideas and customs and traditions that make it very different than Christianity today.

Mark Bollwinkel:

Challenges of Judaism

You live in a dominant culture of Christian culture here in North America, what are some of the greatest challenges that the Jewish community has today in North American?

Rabbi Weissman:

Jews enjoy more freedom and security and general well-being in North America than we ever have in history. Our challenges are not the same; we have this story of persecution and oppression and fear that is very much part of our story...it is a fact not just a story....but North American Jews have different challenges than our ancestors did because we are in a place where diversity is more welcome than it's ever been and our desire to live and appreciate our differences...we are very lucky. Our main challenge is the question of what we call "assimilation" [which means] losing our Jewish identity because we are so integrated into a non-Jewish world and so comfortable here that the question of "why be Jewish" is still one we have to answer for ourselves and our communities. When it is easy to live a wonderful, fulfilling rich life as an American, I think a lot of Jews are asking what is the point of living a Jewish life and what does it mean to be Jewish and American is our challenge and we are always trying to find ways to answer that question.

Mark Bollwinkel:

Assume you face the same challenge in Silicon Valley. What works best for you at Beth AM?

I would assume that you face that very same challenge here in the Silicon Valley of how to compete with the drive for prosperity, education for our kids and at the same time nurturing the faith? At Beth Am what works best for you?

Rabbi Weissman:

We are constantly trying to ask and answer that question. We try to see ourselves as being counter-cultural in a lot of ways, especially thinking a lot about our teens these days and our kids. It's not about their achievements

and grades or their accomplishments on the soccer field but that we value them for who they are and focus on values and character and making meaning out of life in a different way and I think that speaks to people. It's always hard to compete with those other priorities but I do think we try to be a "haven" from that.

Mark Bollwinkel:

Many, many thanks to Rabbi Weissman for helping us to better understand the context of the Hebrew faith right here in our own community. For although we indeed diverge into separate faiths in our understanding of the person and mission of Jesus we have many, many things in common.

Consider that in our Hebrew scripture this morning from the Book of Deuteronomy we hear Moses speaking to the children of Israel as they are about the end their 40 years of Exile wandering and enter the Promised Land. He reminds them of the first of the Ten Commandments and the Covenant promise given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that if they will remain faithful to the One God they shall be blessed. "Hear, O Israel; The Lord is our God, The Lord alone. You shall love The Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." This confession of faith is called the "Shema" in Hebrew tradition. Of course Jesus quotes it when tested by the Pharisees to state the "greatest commandment" (Matthew 22:34-40), to which he adds from the Hebrew book of Leviticus (19:18), "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On These two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

We children of Abraham come from the same source, confessing an essential faith in the One God and the commitment to live with compassion for others. Again, for the founders of Methodism, that was what really mattered the most. We can find the sacred words of Jesus' greatest commandment etched in the marble of the altar at Wesley's Foundry Chapel, City Road, London, England, the site of the origins of our church.

Although our Muslim and Jewish brothers and sisters still wait for the Messiah, we Christians have found that promised fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. As John the Baptist proclaims at his baptism, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). John is referring to the Passover traditions of the Hebrew people (Exodus 12:1-f) when on the night of their liberation from slavery in Egypt, they were instructed to wash their doorways with lambs' blood as a sign of faithfulness to the One God. That sign saved them as the angel of death passed over taking the lives of the firstborn of Egypt. This final plague launched the children of Israel into their desert journey which would ultimately result in their nationhood and over a thousand years later the birth of Jesus.

It is no coincidence that on his last night with his disciples before his crucifixion, Jesus shared the sacred Passover meal, sang the ancient hymns, told the ancient story but then towards the end did something completely new.

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

As we come forward this morning to receive the sacraments of Holy Communion, rather than considering how it so often divides us...not just from other religions but within Christianity itself....lets receive it as the remembrance it was intended to be; "To Love The Lord your God with heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself."

Amen.

\*(Our Presbyterian friends up in Menlo Park had an extraordinary weekend at the end of January during which their Pastor John Ortberg was in dialogue with representatives of Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Reformed Christianity and Atheistic Humanism. It was a wonderful conversation and can be found on-line at [mppc.org/thinkagain](http://mppc.org/thinkagain).)

Please Note: KQED Channel 9 will be running a five part series entitled "The Story of the Jews" beginning March 25. If you'd like to learn more about their history and beliefs this will prove to be an excellent source.