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Judaism and Christianity: Connections and Distinctives

By Rabbi Barney Kasdan, Kehilat Ariel Messianic Congregation, San Diego, California



It seems that more and more these days people are appreciating the connection between Judaism and Christianity. It wasn't always this way and indeed there have been some dark chapters of history between these two great religions. But the connections are all around us, if we just take a closer look. This stretches from the Liberty Bell inscribed with a verse from the Torah (**Leviticus 25:10**), to the structure of the Western law system with its checks and balances. Some insist that America is strictly a "Judo-Christian" value. This certainly is part of the explanation why America has been such a blessed haven for Jews for so many generations. I believe it also must be factored into the blessing that has clearly been upon our country for nearly 250 years. It is actually a manifestation of the ancient promise to our forefather Abraham. **I will bless those who bless you (Genesis 12:3).**

What is of special interest today is that it is not just one side or the other who is appreciating our inherent connection. It is coming from many Jews and Christians of various denominations. A trip to a local Christian bookstore will reveal new books on "Jewish Roots," "Our Father Abraham," plus many others. In the Jewish community we also have recently seen books on "The Kosher Jesus" and even a "Jewish

Annotated New Testament.” So what are some of these newly appreciated connections?

1. The Hebrew Scriptures: Many are rediscovering the fact that we both share the same Scriptures found in the TaNaKh (Torah/Prophets/Writings). Okay, so Christians tend to call it “The Old Testament.” Nonetheless, most people realize that it is the exact same Hebrew text that is the source of these holy writings. Even though Christians (and Messianic Jews) include the B’rit Chadashah (The New Testament), it cannot be overlooked that both Christian and Jews have a huge amount of common scriptural heritage.

2. The God of Isra’el: This is obviously a direct result of the Hebrew Scriptures. Since the revelation to Moses and the forefathers, Jews have held to the description of the oneness of God and His uniqueness as the only God, Creator of all things. The most foundational declaration in the TaNaKh is affirmed by Jews three times daily: **Sh’ma Yisra’el! ADONAI our God, ADONAI is one (Deuteronomy 6:4)**. There has certainly been considerable debate between Jews and Christians as to what this means. Sometimes it has sounded almost as if there might be three gods. Whatever one’s interpretation of the **Sh’ma** might be, it should be noted that Yeshua, in the New Testament, clearly agreed and even called this, the greatest commandment, for both Jews and Christians (**Mark 12:28-34**). Other religions of the world may have good things to say but they vary on the self-revelation of God. Jews and Christians, while dialoguing about the meaning of this, should be in unity about the meaning of this, should be in unity about our common belief in the only God.

3. The Mitzvah (a general principle for living) of Love: The Scriptures teach that you can tell a lot about a person by the fruit in their lives. For the bulk of the godless world, the fruit is pretty obvious. Just check out the evening news if you want confirmation of this depressing truth! Many times this holds true even for religious groups, especially to the radicals among them. Some religions and philosophies just seem to have a bad root. Judaism and Christianity are not without their historical controversies. But these tragic actions were a direct result of the root of the tree but of people actually straying from the clear teachings of Scripture. To the Jewish imperative to love **ADONAI (Deuteronomy 6:5)** and to love others (**Leviticus 19:18**), Christians should give a hearty “amen” (see my commentary on **Romans, to see link click [Af](#) - The List of “one another” Commands**). In fact, rabbi (Sha’ul/Paul) who wrote much of the New Testament put it this way: **Love does not do harm to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fullness of the Torah (Romans 13:10)**. Yes, there have been moral failings. But it is not

coincidental that many times it has been both Jews and Christians up for social justice, building hospitals and helping the downtrodden. When properly understood, it has been another one of our common connections.

So clearly there are many good connections between Judaism and Christianity. Likewise, there are some obvious distinctives to each religion.

1. Different cultures: To see some of the differences, just follow a Jewish friend around for a week. Then follow a Christian friend. One has to keep a healthy sense of humor when it comes to the “holiday season.” Will it be a Christmas tree or a hanukkah (a nine-branched candelabrum used specifically for the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah) or both? Will it be a matzah at Seder or a ham dinner at Easter? Will you be mowing the lawn on Saturday or Sunday? Of course these are generalizations, but the distinctive cultures hold true for the bulk of society. While some people get upset with the differences, many are coming to appreciate a positive point even here. After all, **ADONAI** has created so many diverse tribes and tongues. Maybe we should appreciate the diversity while holding on to our own convictions. Jews and Christians have so much to learn from each other if we would just look a little beyond our own world view. We need not compromise our own beliefs in order to have a constructive dialogue with those who differ from us.

2. Oh yeah, that Messiah Issue: It is not surprising that most Christians and Jews agree on one other foundational issue: that we disagree on the identity of **Yeshua of Nazareth**. Who do the Jews believe He was (see [Isaiah 53](#) - **The Death of the Suffering Servant**)? Who was this one who came from Galilee? Was he just a zealous Jewish reformer, or was he more? Was he a great rabbi or was he (as He claimed) the long-awaited **Messiah**, sent from **the God of Isra'el**? Both Jews and Christians believe in the concept of a coming **Messiah** to establish **God's** order on the earth. In fact, the Christians originally got that belief directly from the Jews! So despite some rather apparent cultural differences, the watershed difference is about the identity of the true **Messiah**. Is it **Yeshua**, or do we keep looking for someone else? It is here that the Messianic Jews can be helpful. Most of the Jewish people are not interested in converting to a different religion or a different culture. In fact, most are vehemently opposed to such ideas. But what if there is a Jewish way to follow **Yeshua**? What if we can believe in Him within a Jewish context? What if we can have houses of worship called “messianic synagogues” where both Jews and Gentile believers can continue in a Jewish tradition?



It is true that there are some important differences between Judaism and Christianity. But there are also many strong connections that cannot be broken. Maybe all of us can be a bridge of greater understanding and appreciation between these two groups even as we prepare for the return of the Messiah.