

## **Rabbi Richard Margolis**

### **Religious Perspectives**

#### **Introduction to Judaism**

“Good afternoon, I’m Richard Margolis. I am a rabbi therefore I represent the Jewish people and the Jewish tradition. I’m very pleased and honored to be among you. Today marks the completion of 18 years that I have been serving here as a guest of DEOMI and even though I am now successfully retired from my assignments, this is something that I won’t give up. As I have the greatest respect for our military.

My father is a veteran of the Second World Wars and served in the Pacific Theater. Both of my grandfathers came to this country as young immigrants over 100 years ago, immediately put on a uniform to go back to into Europe and to fight for our country. So, my personal family has a long military tradition. And although I was called in another direction I was always cooperated to the extent that I can with any of the branches of the military to which I’ve been of service.

I also have great regard for the work that you do because as an American I’m very proud of our military not only for its might and its prowess but that it’s supposed to be the most egalitarian of American institutions. And you are charged with maintaining that, even advancing it, today and tomorrow. That’s why I’m honored to be amongst you and thank you for the opportunity of serving you.

I’m also pleased to be here because these are world religions here. We are talking about billions and billions of human beings and Judaism is a tiny, minority religion. Jews make up less than 2% of the American population; much less than 1% of the global population. Jews do serve in the military; we’re about 2% of the military as well and many have made careers of it. My former congregation from which I am now retired at one time had as many as six colonels who had served throughout and done combat duty and some of them continued to serve in military careers. Some of them were still barking orders in their retirement. But Jews do serve in the military that is why I am pleased to represent their interests among you here as well.

Judaism actually dates back to almost 4000 years. I think we may have a discussion with Dr. Desai to which religious tradition is older and there are a number of interesting structural parallels between the Indus valley civilizations some of the Vedic traditions and the origins of Judaism. They didn’t interface with each other but there are some very interesting things that are found back there in the second and even the third millennium. Judaism represents the original monotheism. Before Judaism, whatever religions there were pagan in origin. They served a variety of gods and goddesses and pantheons and natural forces and supernatural beings. And, my neighbor friend and colleague Dr. Sheikh mentioned the patriarch Abraham who was the founder of both or religious traditions and Christianity considers itself an Abrahamic tradition as well.

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In the old Babylonian period, roughly the 18<sup>th</sup> century before the common era, he and his family and his small entourage, intuited that...wait a minute, this is not such a complex reality. We think in terms of a universe not a multiverse with all these conflicting and warring powers. And he intuited from his view of nature from the natural order that there really must be one creator. Apparently God approved of this and said, "you're right." And we're going on from here.

Judaism instituted the notion of a single god as creator. And that's important not only to explain, because the Bible is not a book of science and shouldn't be taken as such, but its ideology says that there is a unity underlying all of creation and that's a reflection of the divine creativity. Judaism's moral premise depends upon that because the argument is that the same divine being, who created the natural order, also created and ordained a mortal order for the world. And therefore it's on God's authority that we differentiate right from wrong. Otherwise what have we? We have popular opinion, we have various cultural and national interests in the world and that leads unfortunately to inevitable conflict and sometimes even to war. So better we should find what God wants from us than we should be at irreconcilable battles and conflicts.

Judaism gave the notion of religious thought of the ideal of covenant, that God is not distant he is not inaccessible. You might have heard the term transcendent in some of your theological studies. But that God is interested in human beings and is willing to enter into relationship with them. Event to the point which is sort of bold of the ancient Israelites and Hebrews to say so, but that to say that God was willing to forge a formal relationship with human beings. And it's interesting a covenant of course is actually kind of like a contract. And our daughter religions of Christianity and Islam both embrace the notion of covenant. Muslims enter the covenant from the other side of the family if you will from the descendants of Ishmael. And a Christian enters the covenant through faith in Jesus and the blessings of the church. But we all accept and devoted to this notion of covenanted relationship with God.

You are familiar perhaps with the Bible and the Hebrew Scriptures form the first part of the entire canon of the Christian scriptures. They have their own identity. They span a period of over 1300 years. They're not one monolithic document or tradition and they do reflect the early origins of the Jewish people; its beliefs, its teachings, its culture, its customs, its laws, and its early traditions. We do not live a biblical Judaism.

The world has changed in thousands of years. And most, particularly those of Christian faith, may be familiar with the Bible but Jews haven't lived those details in thousands of years. The temple is gone, the animal offerings and priesthood are gone, I mean that's been replaced with, that which we are more accustomed to here in the West. And so the rabbinic tradition here in the last two thousand years has carried the evolution and development of Judaism forward to this day.

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Key terms; well, think of Judaism as an ethical monotheism. I mentioned the ideal of one sacred or divine god but also that there is an ethical tradition associated with that. Religion without ethics is somewhat totalitarian and dangerous. We had ethics without religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it gave us two world wars. Judaism tries to combine the notion of how we relate to the divine with how we relate to our fellow human beings. And both are essential in Judaism.

Like our daughter religion of Islam, Judaism has a lunar calendar. It is based on the phases of the moon, I don't have time to go into this now but perhaps someone will ask me, but that is how we came up with a seven day week which was not taken for granted in antiquity. There were numerous calendars and this had to do with the phases of the moon. And in the Jewish tradition a day begins at sunset and continues until sunset the next day. Our ancestors didn't know about Greenwich median time and have fancy digital clocks and watches but just you could see if it was light or dark out and that was the way they marked time.

I would like to spend the few remaining moments that I have in going over some of the possible accommodations that Jewish personnel might need from you. And that may answer some of the questions that may come up otherwise I will be glad to take others. First of all, the issue of uniform. There is a uniform dress code and a Jew should adhere to that. Nevertheless, particularly in the Orthodox world, we had some issues, there was a case of an Orthodox Rabbi, or chaplain, who was adjudicated just last year and his issues were: first of all he wears a beard and that does not comport with the normal appearance of a person in uniform. And second, you find the Orthodox and some of the conservative movements with which I'm identified wear a skullcap or a kippah at all times. I wear one in sacred devotions or when I'm in study or engaged in worship or eating a meal where blessings are recited. And they want to wear it all the time. And there are sometimes where that may not comport with, so that might be an accommodation that may be asked of you in terms of uniform.

Food. You've heard the term kosher or the Hebrew term, kasher. It just means fit or appropriate. It has nothing to do with the health code. It's more of a spiritual discipline, a regimen. And it's readily available through the Jewish welfare board. It can be found and can be pervade, it'll become an issue say in the next ten days when the festival of Passover occurs, and it has its own laws and customs and Jews will refrain from eating bread or products with leaven in them. Those too can be found and pervade. Many Jews meet their dietary restrictions or accommodations in the military by being vegetarian which is always available and that is something that you can do.

There might be requests for time for worship or observance of a festival. So that begins at sundown and continues to sundown the next day. We don't have a whole lot of Jewish chaplains or rabbis. So we're short of chaplains and kind of send them around as circuit riders. But if a life cycle event, such as the birth or the naming of a child or marriage or something takes place within the military we do what we can to provide that. Sometime we have to

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stretch a little bit but we do make those accommodations. And finally, you may get a request for daily worship. We aren't quite as prolific as our brothers and sisters in Islam they have five daily prayers, we only have three. They take minutes not hours. So if someone says they need three hours out for worship don't believe them. But they might need to be accommodated in that way for a few moments of personal mediation or personal devotion. And its customary for Jews to orient themselves during prayers towards the holy city of Jerusalem. Which means here in the west they would be facing east. When our personnel were stationed in Iraq and they wanted to worship then they would face west. Okay, just orienting towards the holy city of Jerusalem. I'm going to stop here. Thank you again very much for the opportunity and I'll be happy to take your questions."

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