

Rabbi Richard Margolis

Religious Perspectives - Judaism

What are some misunderstood or controversial practices within your religion?

“I’ll take a moment on each of two aspects of Judaism. One ideological and one practical that are widely misunderstood. The ideological one is this notion of the chosen people. Anybody ever hear that? Okay, of course you have.

You know the rhetoric of the Bible itself says that, ‘you are not summoned to divine service because you are an empire, because of your great numbers, because of your power, because in any way you are innately superior to any other human beings.’ The rhetoric of the Bible says, ‘you have people of the smallest, least significant among the nations.’ The only import to that at all is that the campaign for monotheism through the world had to start somewhere. And it began with this little tribe of Israelites. The authentic Jewish spirit is supposed to be a humble spirit not an arrogant one. So that is something about Judaism which is grossly misunderstood.

There is nothing in authentic Jewish teaching neither in the Bible or the Rabbinic tradition that teaches that Jews are in anyway innately superior. In fact the Hebrew Bible, and again we don’t live a Biblical Judaism in the world today, but it is the basis of the Constitution and all of Jewish law has no fewer than three dozen laws on the books for the protection and the well-being of the non-Israelites who lived among the Jewish people in antiquity. You’re not permitted to abuse them, you’re not permitted to discriminate against them. They have to uphold the norms of society, they can’t say I’m not a native born Israelite therefore I can steal, no that doesn’t work. But there is to be every protection under law and you can pick up the Bibles and the Torah and there are three dozen laws for the protection of the non-Israelite who lives among the Jewish people. So the notion of the chosen people has been grossly misrepresented and grossly misunderstood throughout the ages.

I think one aspect of Jewish practice which is not well understood are the dietary laws. You’ve heard the term kosher. I’m not going to put anybody on the spot here but you know if I order something on an airline they say, “why do you need to order anything special here you’re a Rabbi you can bless your own food and that kind of stuff?” That’s what they tell me and things of that nature. No. It has nothing to do with that kind of ritual magic which is banned in Judaism. Judaism has the premise that he human beings are unique among creation. And only human beings have the notion of the permitted and the forbidden.

I listen to our Buddhist representative [how should I address you, Mr. Andy, Mr. Andrew? I think I could get his name right] saying that a Buddhist takes vows to refrain from certain things. Correct? Has the notion that certain things are permitted to us and other things are not permitted to us. Okay, animals don’t eat that way. Animals don’t mate that way. Correct? They have no such sensibilities. Only human beings have those moral sensibilities and can differentiate. The categories of permitted and forbidden do not exist in lower forms of life. It’s something unique to the human family and to its characteristics. Obviously they’re going to be

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cultural differences. What is permitted in one place is taboo in another. But I wouldn't get too hung up on the ritual aspects of this and take it out of context. It's meant to be part of a regimen that's to lead us ultimately, not just to a spiritual way of living, but a moral consciousness as well. So that is something else about Judaism which is grossly misunderstood and easy enough to understand and accommodate. Thank you."

Disclaimer

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