SHOOT!

EXPANSIVE JEWISH QUESTIONS & DIVERSE IDEAS

Ep. #2: Is Judaism a Religion? (Part I)

[00:00 - Introduction: LOST and its portrayal of "Religion"]

The final scene of the TV show LOST was one of the most polarizing events in television history.

[SFX OF LOST OPENING CREDITS]

For the previous six years, the show had set the standard for how broadcast television could explore themes of philosophy, spirituality, and ethics.

[DIALOGUE FROM LOST:]

John Locke: "This is destiny! This is my destiny!" /

John Locke: "Two players. Two sides. One is light; one is dark." /

Jack Shepherd: "But if we can't live together, we're going to die alone."

It explored themes of free will and fate, and ideas about reality and our perceptions.

[DIALOGUE FROM LOST:]

Desmond Hume: "IT'S REAL! IT'S ALL BLOODY REAL!"

John Locke: "IT'S A LIE! NONE OF IT IS REAL!"

Enlightenment, redemption, communal responsibility, the meaning of existence. You know, the big stuff.

And right at the very end of the show's run, fans wound up asking themselves: "Did any of this actually matter?"

This is not a podcast about LOST. But spoiler alert here if you've never seen the show. You can skip ahead to the 2:45 mark if you want.

In the very final moments of LOST, we see all of the major characters gathering together in an afterlife of sorts; they're in a building clearly intended to convey a church: It has stained glass windows, statues of angels complete with renaissance wings and halos; there are votive candles dedicated to saints. Everybody is sitting in wooden pews facing an altar, and there's soaring white pillars extending up to a gothic ceiling. Everyone embraced in a warm, enveloping white light. You know... a church.

But as the camera pans through the scene, it also lingers over depictions of a Hindu Om symbol, a Muslim Star and Crescent; there's a *Magen David* - Jewish Star of David, a Taoist yin-yang, and the Dharmacakra eight-spoked wheel of Buddhism. So... not a church?

For critics and fans, the finale was polarizing, to say the least. If you want to go down a dark hole on the internet, just Google: "LOST finale." People demanded to know: was everybody dead the whole time? Did anything matter? What did I just give the past six years of my life to?

For me, though, the finale was provocative for a different reason. I wanted to know about all that spiritual iconography! Just what kind of church was this?

What was it saying about the nature of these traditions? Were they suggesting that they are all equal paths to the very same truth? If so, why not gather in a synagogue, a mosque, a temple, or some non-denominational space, instead of what is obviously a church? What did it mean to include Judaism among other religions and spiritual traditions in this way?

[02:45 -Examples of Judaism portrayed as "religion"]

The TV show LOST, in its final moments, accidentally highlighted something perplexing about how we think about Judaism today. Is Judaism a religion? LOST seemed to think that it is. Certainly, so does much of North America and what we call the "Western World." Just think about this:

Many universities include academic programs about Judaism in their departments of ***religious*** studies alongside other things that we call... "religions."

In places which protect against discrimination based on creed, Judaism is frequently included alongside other non-majority ***religions***.

What does it even mean to call something a religion? And then to include Judaism in that definition?

Is Judaism even a religion?

[03:30 - Opening Credits]

Hey, my name is Jesse Paikin, and you're listening to *Shoot*! - a Jewish explainer podcast. One big, Jewish question each episode. With answers that have integrity and inspiration, and the stories behind the questions.

[04:00 - How Judaism Understands Itself]

Right now, and over this first series of episodes, we're exploring questions that each in their own way try to reveal how Judaism understands itself. Judaism doesn't speak in one voice - there's no central authority akin to the Vatican. So even the idea of "how Judaism understands itself" is a hard one to pin down definitively. Maybe a better way of saying this is: what are the different Jewish lenses that we can use to look at Judaism?

[04:40 - Where to Find Definitions]

Before we get started looking at an answer, I want to let you know - sometimes I'll refer to terms, concepts, and historical figures that might be new to you, or even in a different language. And I'll do my best to briefly explain them here live, but if you want to learn more, check out the show notes at shootpodcast.com. I'll always include definitions, translations, and links to where you can learn more.

[05:02 - What Lenses can we use to Understand Judaism?]

In this episode: Part I of the question: *Is Judaism a religion?* That may seem like a surprising question. And you may think you already know the obvious answer.

Here's another way of thinking about this question: if you're using the lens of "religion" to understand Judaism, what is the nature of that lens? How does its clarity and focus affect what you're looking at? Is it magnifying or distorting things? When you use that lens, what are you seeing, and what are you not seeing? And who built that lens?

[05:40 - Why this is a distinctly Modern Question]

You're listening to a podcast right now. Probably on a cell phone or mobile device. Which means that more or less, you - like me - are a citizen of the modern world. That almost certainly means that whether or not you are Jewish, you live a life that is also influenced and informed by things that *aren't* Jewish. Whether or not you would call yourself religious, you can probably differentiate between things that you call "religious" and things that you call "secular"

Why is understanding this important? Because this wasn't always true. It's only in the last three centuries that what we now broadly think of as religion came to be called that.

[06:30 - Why it's Notoriously Hard to Describe the Idea of Religion]

Even now, it's notoriously hard to describe the idea of religion comprehensively. I was surprised to discover this. There's no scholarly consensus on how to define religion. Nobody ever taught me that in

my years of religious education. And I went to a school with the word "religion" in its name! And I think all of us who went there just assumed we knew what the word "religion" meant.

But... is that actually true?

Some of the things that we would call religious are shared with other disciplines - art, philosophy, and psychology. Things like the search for meaning, and ethics, and how to deal with the existential problems of being a human. Oh, the 2020s... There is no shortage of existential problems here!

Other things that we think of as exclusively religious - like the belief in a God or prayer - aren't actually shared by all... religions.

This is why definitions of religion often have the problem of being either too narrow and exclusive, or too broad and ambiguous

[07:48 - Ludwig Wittgenstein's Thought Experiment]

One proposed answer to this challenge comes from the 20th Century Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein was interested in logic, the philosophy of the mind, and, particularly - and helpful for us - language. Here's a thought experiment he proposed of how to try to help with this problem:

When I say the word, "game," you probably know what I'm talking about. But, if I were to ask you to conclusively define "a game," could you do that? What exactly *is* a game? Is it something with a board and moving pieces? Is it something fun that entertains you? Something that has rules and a winner? What exactly is shared among things as widely different as Monopoly, hockey, and poker? How can you precisely define a game, without excluding what you want or including what you don't want?

It's a problem. And yet... you still know what I mean when I say the word "game."

Religions are like games. Even though it's hard to define with certainty what is and what isn't a religion, you likely have a sense of what that word means.

The challenge is: what if Judaism itself isn't so sure about that?

[09:13 - Judaism Hasn't Distinguished Between Religion and Other Things]

For most of Jewish history - and this is the part that makes this question so challenging (and exciting, I'd say) - for most of history, Judaism and Jews have not clearly distinguished between the thing we think of today as "religion," and the things that we think of as spirituality, ritual, culture, ethics; politics, theology, philosophy, nationality, and ethnicity.

The ancient Israelites - around 3,000 years ago or so - likely saw their identity in mostly ethnic or national terms - based on ritual and culture and a shared language.

The earliest rabbis and later medieval Jews - starting 2,000 years ago - they saw their identity similarly, with the added layer of participating in a comprehensive legal, philosophical, and political system.

Today it's even more confusing: we can talk about Jews who are spiritual but not religious; Jews who identify primarily as ritually observant; others who are atheists; some who express their identity through culture and language; some mainly through religious law, and others through nationhood. There are some through all of these, and - confusingly - some through none... but who still considered themselves Jewish.

How is this possible, and what does it mean for how we understand what, exactly, Judaism is?

[10:40 - How the Word "Religion" is Broadly Used Today]

If we're talking about how the word "religion" is broadly used today - you think about how people often describe "religious" experiences as an inner, personal spiritual belief that is just *one* part of life among other, more public and communal things (things like politics, law, ethics, philosophy, or science). If that's what we're talking about, when we say the word "religion," here's the thing...

There's no real equivalent to that in Judaism. There's no word for it in the Hebrew language.

And there's no concept like it in classical Jewish texts.

[11:20 - Judaism as an Oral, Holistic Tradition]

Judaism is historically an oral tradition. The ideas and stories and conversations that have formed the backbone of Judaism were passed down, by voice, from one generation to the next. Over time, those stories, traditions, laws, and practices begin to get written down into texts.

And those texts - they are really interested, primarily, in creating a *holistic* system of being in the world, through things like ritual practices, spirituality, folklore; through an intricate communal calendar; things like theology and civil law, social policy, and ethics - they're all wound up together. Even things that we might call early attempts at psychology, or medicine, or even science.

Judaism has been all of these things, together.

The American scholar of Jewish thought, Leora Batnitzky, in her book *How Judaism Became a Religion,* she writes that "It simply was not possible in a premodern context to conceive" of these things as distinct. This is what Elliot Cosgrove, the rabbi of Park Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan, paints as "an all-encompassing and inescapable identity."

[12:32 - The Word "Judaism"]

Even the word Juda*ism* - as if there is an "ism" here that is similar to other "isms" - even that word is relatively new, compared to the history of the people it's applied to. In its latinized form, the word is only around 600 years old. And the Hebrew word that it originally comes from most certainly never referred to a distinct religion on its own.

For more on where the word Judaism comes from and the people that it's applied to, listen to our upcoming episode in two weeks, where we're going to ask the question "why is Judaism called 'Judaism'?" It turns out that's the same kind of question the Washington Post nervously asked in a 2019 article: "Is Judaism an ethnicity? A race? A nationality?"

[13:17 - The Origins of Modern "Religion"]

That question is closely linked to our question about religion. The very idea that people could define themselves according to their nationality as distinct from their religion is an idea that emerges in Europe at the end of the 18th century.

This is really important: it's only in the 18th century, and *only* in Europe, and *only* in reference to Christianity that Jews start to see themselves as practicing something called a "religion."

There are two pieces to understanding this that I think are important here: one intrinsic and one extrinsic.

The first - the intrinsic idea - is what I shared just earlier: within Judaism itself, there hadn't truly been the idea of religion as something independent or individualized from a much wider and comprehensive identity.

The second idea - the extrinsic - is what life generally looks like for the Jews of Europe at this time: They're not citizens of the countries in which they lived. They were a distinct group with separate rights - or non rights - entirely dependent upon the whims of leaders. Jews could be, and were, subject to restrictions on where they could live and where they could work, arbitrary taxes, persecutory laws, kidnappings, and state-sanctioned violence and genocide - pogroms.

There are bright spots - moments in medieval history that aren't as dire as this sounds. And I think we should resist the urge to define Jewish life only by the persecutions that other people imposed. During this time - even *especially* during this time - there was vibrancy and creativity to Jewish life.

But the question of identity was still real - Jews were still largely viewed legally and socially as outside of the societies in which they lived.

[15:06 - Things Begin to Change for the Jews of Europe...]

This all begins to change as ideas of the Enlightenment spread across Europe. This was largely driven by the French Revolution *[AUDIO OF LA MARSEILLAISE - FRENCH NATIONAL ANTHEM]*, which sought to dismantle old systems of authority in the name of a philosophy of individual liberty, egalitarianism, and rationality.

I like to think of the French Revolution as the engine that drives modernity. So many of the ideas that are a "normal'" part of our societies today - things like the separation of religious and secular law; enshrined rights and freedoms; egalitarianism - these are ideas that explode onto the scene - quite literally - as a result of Napoleon's march across Europe.

[AUDIO OF LA MARSEILLAISE - FRENCH NATIONAL ANTHEM]

[15:53 - ...But not Eastern Europe]

It's telling then that the story we're looking at today doesn't quite make it to Eastern Europe - to the Jews of today's Russia, Poland, Lituania, Belarus, Latvia, Ukraine... Napoleon was stopped at the Russian Empire, and so these liberalizing ideals didn't make it to the Jewish communities there in the same way.

That's important. What we're talking about is a distinctly Western European idea, and in particular, one that grows in 18th Century Germany. There, Jewish integration into society was not yet as realized as it was in France.

After a short break, we'll go to Germany, and learn what's happening there. We'll be right back.

[16:33 - Break]

This season, *Shoot!* is answering questions about how to believe in something that you can't prove is real, how Judaism got turned into an -ism, and why nobody really knows what religion is.

Our first five episodes - a kind of mini-season - are about the very nature of Judaism itself.

There's only so much we can cover in 30 minutes, so you can always learn more at shootpodcast.com. I'll do my best to include dissenting opinions and diverse commentary as much as possible. You can trust me. But you can trust other people, too.

Later on this season, we are also going to look at questions about Satan and capital punishment, and how the story of a Canadian Member of Parliament in the 1900s can teach us about how to read the Torah.

If you want to submit your own question to be answered in an upcoming pisode, head over to the website, or email hello@shootpodcast.com

Now, back to our episode.

[17:39 - Berlin in the 1700s]

[SFX OF MARKET, MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN CITY]

Berlin in the 1700s is a busy market town. There's a growing metropolitan society there. And the Jews who live in Berlin are not the image of European peasant or *shtetl* Jews that you might have in your head.

[AUDIO FROM FIDDLER ON THE ROOF*: "IF I WERE A RICH MAN"]*

These Jews are members of an elite class, but they're only allowed to live in Berlin because they were seen as having something to contribute economically to society. Remember - Jews are a still distinct group without matching full rights. So they were only allowed to live in Berlin because the Kingdom of Prussia decides to let them live there.

But no matter how socially distinct they still were, the Jews of Berlin can't escape the bustling cosmopolitan forces. They are young, they are bourgeois, and they're more open to the social changes emerging from the Enlightenment. So it's no wonder that it's in a city like this that new ideas are about to emerge that will shape Judaism and the world to this day.

It's out of Berlin in the 1700s that we get our question: "Is Judaism a religion?"

[18:48 - Introducing Moses Mendelssohn]

And it's into this Berlin that a leader, a change-agent, a champion of freedom named Moses arrives.

Moses Mendelssohn. This Moses is a young scholar, he's only 14 years old, and he's coming to Berlin to follow his teacher, on the path to become a rabbi. His life there in Berlin will include studying the fairly traditional curriculum of classical Jewish texts.

What Moses Mendelssohn will go on to do with his life will make him one of the most influential figures not only in Jewish history, but also one of the most prominent philosophers of the Western European Enlightenment.

[19:22 - But Felix Mendelssohn is More Famous]

But he's not even the most famous Mendelssohn. That would be his grandson, the Classical composer Felix Mendelssohn. Even if you're not someone who listens to classical music, you probably know him. He's *that* famous:

> *[AUDIO OF FELIX MENDELSSOHN's "WEDDING MARCH" FROM* A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*]*

He wrote that. Classic of big church weddings everywhere.

> *[AUDIO OF FELIX MENDELSSOHN's "HARK THE HERALD ANGEL SING"]*

And he wrote that. Even if you don't celebrate Christmas, it's hard to escape that one.

One more important thing to know about Felix Mendelssohn: His father, Abraham, had renounced Judaism. When Felix is born, there is no *brit milah* - no *bris* - the traditional Jewish circumcision ritual. The Mendelssohn children - Felix's siblings - they're brought up with no religion, but then, when he's seven years old, they're baptized into an Evangelical Protestant Church. Six years later, Felix's parents are also baptized, right around the time when Felix would have been celebrating his Bar Mitzvah. And it's then that the family formally changes their last name to Mendelssohn-Bartholdy.

Identity crisis, anyone?

When Mendelssohn is 20 years old, his father writes him a letter, explaining why they had changed their name. It was, he said, a way to make a definitive statement about their identity. And Abraham, well, let's just say he doesn't pull any punches:

"There can no more be a Christian Mendelssohn than there can be a Jewish Confucius," he writes.

Ok, we're talking about Jewish religion, not classical German composers. Why is all this important?

Because all of the identity changes that Felix and his parents made - this desire to cut themselves off from their Jewish past, to change their name and their public persona, to the musical career that Felix would have - these all likely directly emerged from what his grandfather, Moses had done with his life.

[21:22 - What You Have to Pay in order to Enter Berlin]

Let's go back to 1743. Moses Mendelssohn - then fourteen years old - leaves his hometown of Dessau - a little more than 120 kilometres / 75 miles away - for the five-day walk on foot to Berlin.

Like all magnet cities around the world - New York, Paris, London - it costs a lot to live in Berlin. The economics are driven by how much the government knows that people want to be there. How much they'd be willing, even to *pay* to be there.

So, like tariffs work today, if you want to sell something in Berlin, you have to pay a tax. When farmers come to market from rural Prussia, in order to be permitted to enter the city, they must pay a tax on their agriculture or their animals.

This is where things start to become distinctively *un*modern.

When *Jews* want to enter Berlin, they have to pay an additional tax. On themselves. As if they were livestock being brought to market. And they can only enter through one gate - the same gate that cows enter through - the Rosenthaler Gate. If you were Jewish and couldn't afford this head tax, or if you were deemed otherwise undesirable, there was a special Jews-only hotel, outside the city walls, where you would have to stay.

The Rosenthaler Gate doesn't exist anymore. *[SFX OF SUBWAY]* A u-bahn station was built there in 1930. *[SFX OF CONSTRUCTION WORK]* On the night of August 13, 1961, that u-Bahn station was shut down, just as the Berlin Wall was going up above its head. *[SFX OF STREET LIFE]*

But today, the station is open again, as part of RosenthalerPlatz - a busy intersection in the trendy neighbourhood of Mitte. At the end of 2021, an Apple store was ceremoniously opened there.

[23:10 - Moses Mendelssohn Arrives to Berlin, Gets Angry]

Three centuries ago, it's through the Rosenthaler Gate that Moses Mendelssohn is forced to enter Berlin. And this drives him mad. The idea of paying a tax on himself; of being forced to pay *more*, just because he was Jewish... this reality eventually derails his path to become a rabbi, and it sparks his desire to change how German society viewed Jews, and as a result, how Jews viewed themselves.

I've walked around the neighbourhood of Mitte before. It's a trendy, upscale downtown area with cafes, museums, and embassies. The idea that Jews once had to pay a toll just to be in the same space... it saddens me.

But the fact that *Mendelssohn* is enraged - that's different. That kind of self-consciousness was a new development in the historical psychology of Jews. Medieval Jews never expected non-Jews to treat us as equals. The idea of political or social equality was basically non-existent.

Rember, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution are just getting started.

[AUDIO OF LA MARSEILLAISE - FRENCH NATIONAL ANTHEM]

At most, Jews of the time hoped to be treated fairly and to live with reasonable security and economic success. But there was no idea that Jews were a part of a shared society; that they should be treated as human equals.

So Moses Mendelssohn's anger is not something that should be taken for granted.

Anger is a powerful motivator for change. And Mendelssohn's life was full of moments that would have angered him, I imagine:

There were debates where he was called upon to publicly defend Judaism - In 1771, he actually has a mental breakdown as a result of a particularly intense debate with a Christian theologian.

He faces continual challenges from his otherwise "enlightened" peers to abandon Judaism and convert. They just can't understand how someone so committed to rational thought would *choose* to stay Jewish. How dehumanizing this must have been.

When Moses wins the literary prize of the Prussian Academy of Arts, King Frederick of Prussia intervenes himself, and vetoes his admission to the academy. Why? Simply because Moses was Jewish.

All of these events ultimately propel him, But it's the first, earliest moment, that I think has such symbolic power: Walking through that gate. The path toward his future lay through a door; a door that was theoretically open, but one for which he didn't - couldn't - have the key. A door through which he could enter, but only with permission of the people on the other side, and only as something lesser.

During his time in Berlin, this repeated anger at his lesser status as a Jew coalesces, and Mendelssohn finally concludes that this was a problem that was desperately needing addressing. A life of traditional Jewish studies and becoming a rabbi were not, on their own, going to be enough to change things. And he abandons his path toward the rabbinate, and starts thinking some rather revolutionary thoughts.

[26:25 - Moses Mendelssohn Thinks Some Revolutionary Thoughts]

How is Mendelssohn going to change life for the Jews? Not by activism. Not by debates. Not by converting. He begins developing a new idea of Judaism itself.

And the idea that he's about to put out into the world will radically alter the lives of millions of Jews for hundreds of years to come. It will drastically change life for his own son and grandson, Abraham and Felix.

The idea will anticipate - maybe even create - the problems with the word "religion" that Ludwig Wittgenstein tried to solve.

It will lead to the final scene of the TV show LOST, in that ecumenical space filled with iconography of religions and non-religions.

And this idea will lead directly to the very podcast episode that you're listening to right now and the question that we're asking:

"Is Judaism a religion?"

Moses Mendelssohn, is about to give people an answer to this question for the first time in history.

[27:35 - Closing Credits]

That's it for Part I of this episode. Thanks for listening! In our next episode, Part II of this question. And the answer that comes with it. Make sure to subscribe and listen as we find out what radical and revolutionary ideas that came out of Mendelssohn's head, and what happened to the world as a result.

Shoot! Is written, hosted, and produced by me - Jesse Paikin.

Check out the show notes at shootpodcast.com (that's s-h-o-o-t podcast.com) where you can learn more about the sources behind this episode, including Leora Batnitzky's superb book "How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought,"

A transcript of this episode is available on the website, as are definitions of all the terms and concepts that we learned about. There's also a pretty gnarly painting of Moses Mendelssohn.

I'd love to know what you think about the show. If you like what you hear, you can rate and review us on Apple Podcasts. Doing that makes a big difference - I'm building this from the ground up as a project of love, and it would mean a lot to have your support.

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See you next week, and thanks for listening.