



## Ep. #3: Is Judaism a Religion? (Part II)

### [00:00 - Prologue & Recap]

Hi, You're listening to Part 2 of our episode "Is Judaism a religion?" You absolutely should listen to Part I before listening to this one. It's available everywhere, now.

In Part 1 of this episode, we started off looking at how Judaism tends to be grouped in amongst other things that we call "religion." Here's another example of that:

*[AUDIO NEWS CLIPS OF PEOPLE SPEAKING:]*

"Judeo-Christian"

"Judeo-Christian"

"Judeo-Christian values"

"Judeo-Christian values"

"Judeo-Christian"

"Judeo-Christian"

"Judeo-Christian civilization"

"Judeo-Christian philosophy"

"Judeo-Christian belief system"

"Judeo-Christian western values"

"Judeo-Christian western civilization"

"Judeo-Christian model of behaviour"

“Judeo-Christian civilization, philosophy, belief, behaviour...” Wow. Even if you don’t listen to cable news that much, you’ve probably heard the term “Judeo-Christian” before. And it seems to me to indicate that some people believe there’s something foundationally in common and shared between Judaism and Christianity. But in part one, we hit on the challenge that up until very recently, religion was not how Jews and Judaism understood themselves.

We also learned about how stubbornly difficult it is to even define religion.

Here’s some more background on that...

### [01:25 - What is Religion?]

2,100 years ago, when people first started saying the word “religion,” or “religious,” in its original Latin, they meant that – well actually we don’t know exactly what they meant. The etymology of the word is surprisingly obscure, and it’s clear that different people used it to refer to different things.

Maybe it meant *rituals that are performed for the gods*. That’s what Cicero thought.

Or maybe it was a *specific kind of oath*. That’s what Julius Ceasar thought.

Pliny the Elder used the term *religio* to describe how *the intellect of elephants was a testament to the power of the heavens*.

I like that one.

This history is important, because of how the word tends to be used today. There’s no way to precisely define religion in a way that’s neither too specific nor too vague. But when we say the word “religion,” most people think that we have a shared understanding of what it means.

Think about the question: “Are you a religious person?” Have you ever asked that to anyone? Has anyone ever asked you that? Did you have a particularly strong reaction?

Today, we can think of things that we'd call religious, and we can think of things that we'd call "secular" or "non-religious." But for most of Jewish history, Judaism and Jews have not clearly distinguished between these things.

In Judaism, what we think of today as religion - being one distinct thing - was blended seamlessly into a comprehensive system that encompassed ritual, culture, ethics, politics, theology, philosophy, and things like nationality and ethnicity.

Now those pieces are all still here today, but just in different ways.

The very idea that people could have defined themselves according to their religion as something distinct from everything else - particularly from their nationality - that's an idea that only emerges in Western Europe toward the end of the 18th Century.

### **[03:30 - Back to Moses Mendelssohn]**

It's there, in Berlin, in the 1700s, that a young upstart named Moses Mendelssohn begins thinking some very revolutionary thoughts about the very nature of Judaism.

Moses arrived in Berlin to study to become a rabbi. But history conspired to change his life's trajectory. And, as it would happen, the trajectory of modern Judaism.

For the most part, Jews in this part of the world and at this time were not seen or treated as full and equal citizens with accompanying rights. While the French Revolution and the Enlightenment would begin to change that reality, in practice, what it means to be a Jew at the end of the 18th century in the Prussian empire was far from perfect and certainly not egalitarian.

For Mendelssohn - he had to pay a special Jewish tax on himself just to be permitted to enter Berlin. And he has to publicly defend Judaism against his so-called "enlightened" peers. He continually turns down attempts to get him to abandon what other people call his "irrational" Judaism.

### **[04:40 - Moses Mendelssohn Gets Angry]**

The disconnect between a wider society that was increasingly emphasizing things like reason, and individual liberties, and human rights... the disconnect between that, and a world that wouldn't extend those values to Jews... this infuriates him. And he decides to do something about it.

Mendelssohn begins to come up with a brand new, distinctly modern idea of what, exactly, Judaism is. Judaism... as a religion.

### **[05:12 - 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.

### **[05:43 - Moses Mendelssohn's Very Revolutionary Thoughts About Judaism]**

As Moses Mendelssohn understood it, the so-called problem was that Modern Germans and Christianity saw Jews and Judaism as incompatible because of the *very things* that made Judaism distinctive - this tangled web of belief, and law, and ritual, and ethnicity.

Moses's solution was to say: "No, Judaism actually can disentangle these things, and as a result, be fully compatible with the wider world."

The tool Mendelssohn uses to effect social change is more philosophical than political. He's not an activist, he's a thinker. He wants people - both non Jews and Jews - to *think* about the very essence of Judaism in a new way - a way that, he believed, once understood would inexorably lead to policy changes.

That new philosophy is a radical change in thinking about Jews and Judaism in three significant ways:

- The First is what I just shared - the idea of disentangling all of these constituent parts of Judaism - that's a new, modern idea for Judaism.
- The second way that his philosophy of Judaism is a radical change is that he's not interested in specific policies to improve the economic or physical wellbeing of Jews. In fact, he argues against them.

It's not that Mendelssohn doesn't want life for Jews to get better - of course he does. Remember, he's enraged at being treated like cattle. But Mendelssohn brings a historical perspective to this problem. He's aware that always having to advocate to those in power: "please make life better for the Jews," that's ultimately going to be a never-ending battle. He doesn't think the solution lies in always having to defer and pander to the whims of the State. Instead, he wants Jews to *become* fully a *part* of that State.

- And the third way that his ideas are radical, is that from the perspective of the 18th century, Mendelssohn proposes an even more astounding concept: Jews should receive these rights as *individuals*, and not en masse as part of the Jewish community.

Why is this so astonishing?

Mendelssohn lives in a world where the idea of universal human rights is only *just* beginning to be expressed politically. His was a world where your individuality didn't matter much at all - all Jews were taxed when they entered Berlin. Why? Because they were part of the corporate collective of... Jews.

While Jews of the past might have advocated to those in political power on behalf of all Jews as a collective, Mendelssohn advocates on behalf of Jews as individuals. He's saying to everyone else: "This people that you keep treating unfairly? You keep painting us with the same wide brush. But we're no different from the rest of you. Each one of us is the same as each one of you. Our own Jewish beliefs and ritual practices might be parallel and bound up together, but that doesn't mean we should be treated as one cohort. We should all be seen and treated as unique, individual beings."

This approach is not just a new idea for German society, it's a new idea to his fellow Jews! Mendelssohn is starting to help create the very idea of Judaism as just *one* part of life among others. An *important*

*and integral* part. But a part. And as a result, it's the beginning of modern Judaism: Judaism as a religion.

### **[09:50 - Friedrich Schleiermacher Also Has a Problem]**

Of course, Mendelssohn's ideas were not universally accepted - neither by Jews nor by Prussian and Christian authorities. Among those disapproving figures was a man named Friedrich Schleiermacher, a German theologian, philosopher, biblical scholar. And a figure widely recognized as the founder of liberal Protestant theology.

Schleiermacher also lives in Prussia; he's born 40 years after Mendelssohn. And like his fellow agitator, he also has a problem.

If Mendelssohn is looking out at a world where Jews continually have to deal with the problem of the State exerting its *political* influence too strongly on Jews; that is to say the state is too *dangerous*... Then Schleiermacher is facing the problem of the State being too *culturally* influential, and detracting from Christianity. Both have a problem of a clash with the State.

Schleiermacher is facing a modernizing Protestant world that was rejecting Christianity as outdated and incompatible with the rest of modernity. Like so many religious leaders who are worried about the problem of "*kids these days*," he wants to reconcile being religious with living amongst all of the ideas and luxuries of the modern era.

### **[11:17 - Friedrich Schleiermacher Invents Religion]**

To do that, he argues that you shouldn't judge Christianity against the standards of ethics, politics, philosophy, science. That's a losing game for him. No, he says, Christianity is something entirely different: something internal; something rooted in individual feeling, individual experience, and individual emotion; protected from the outside world. It's something called... religion.

"Religion's essence," he says, "is neither thinking, nor acting, but intuition and feeling."

It turns out that these ideas about religion are massively appealing to German Protestants entering the modern era. And they are accepted and become foundational to Protestant Christianity. It should also be said that many of our ideas of what it means to live in the modern world start here.

Think about it: the idea of religion as an identity that is and can be distinct from politics, science, culture, philosophy, or the wider affairs of the State... that should sound familiar to most of us today.

### **[12:45 - Now We Know What Religion Is]**

Once he makes this thing called “religion” an internal affair, Schleiermacher can now start labelling other things as religions. In Part I of this episode, we learned about the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, and his thought experiment about *games* - how, despite games of all sorts being quite different from one another, you still know what I mean when I say the word “game.”

Well... now you know what I mean when I say the word “religion.”

There is a direct line from Schleiermacher to today. You don't get departments of religious studies, or insufferable debates on cable news about the supposed value of Judeo-Christianity. And without him, you don't get to ask our question: “Is Judaism a religion?”

### **[13:45 - How “Religion” can be (or was) Anti-Jewish]**

In some ways, Schleiermacher has what we might call a surprisingly liberal position: he acknowledges that there are indeed people who have different belief systems. But - and this is critical - he still believes that Christianity is at the top of the chain. At one point, he calls Judaism “a dead religion,” and he says that all Jews do is sit and mourn “beside the undecaying mummy... weeping over its demise and sad legacy.”

A “decaying mummy?” Give Schleiermacher some points for his rhetoric here. But I would use other words to describe Judaism. There is very much an emphasis on memory in Judaism, and yeah,

sometimes that memory is actualized using the rituals of mourning on a collective scale. But “mourning over a decaying mummy”? You can tell that Schleiermacher is trying to make a certain kind of point here.

Why is this important?

Schleiermacher’s answer to Mendelssohn’s kind of argument is that Jewish citizenship is entirely contingent on his own terms - on Schleiermacher’s own terms. And those terms are inextricably tied up in a version of religious supremacism, and on how he defines the very idea of religion.

### **[15:10 - What Jews Have to Give Up in Exchange for Citizenship]**

Schleiermacher is willing to call Judaism a religion, just like Christianity is a religion (well almost like it). And then he’s willing to grant Jews citizenship. But only if they are willing to let go of *any* collective Jewish identity. He wants Jews to relegate Jewish law to an entirely private status, one that won’t govern any communal affairs. That’s an idea based in anti-Judaism that goes back millennia, to the very founding of Christianity as something distinct from Judaism. And for that reason, it’s an idea - at this point - totally foreign to Jewish law. (By the way, we’ll talk about how to understand this thing called “Jewish law” in a later episode).

On that theme of collective identity, Schleiermacher in particular wants Jews to abandon any belief in a fairly core idea within Judaism: the idea of a future of redemption where Jews would be reunited as one people.

Now while there’s different ideas in Judaism about what, exactly, this looks like, and a lot of room for individual opinions on this - so whatever you may personally think about how rational or appealing the idea of future Messianic redemption may be - it is a fairly core idea in much of Jewish spiritual and liturgical thought. So think about what it must have felt like to be told that your rights and worth as a person are contingent upon deleting that kind of idea from your people’s culture.



Schleiermacher wants Jews to reject any group behaviour that he thinks conflicts with public identity as Germans. Fine, you can be Jewish, he says. But only in your head. Only in your heart. After all, that's what religion is: an entirely subjective, private, and internal experience of feelings.

But this locates Jewish religiosity in a very narrow sphere. It fundamentally changes the way that the body of Judaism understands itself. So the alternative is for Jews and Judaism to continue to be seen as separate, and other. But if that's the case, then Jews need to rethink our place in general society: Are we a part of the places that we live? Are we separate? How do we draw these boundaries?

### **[17:35 - What's Changed Today & Why This Question Still Matters]**

Now, it's true that Jewish Christian relations today are not at all what they were in 18th century Germany. And it's also true today that in many places, we live with blended identities in ways that 18th Century Germans just simply didn't. We don't have to accept this facile framework of "you're either *this* or you're *that*." And for the most part, we're getting better at recognizing this.

But that's exactly why this question is so relevant: can we bring back together some of the pieces of Judaism that we were told couldn't exist together. Can we reclaim an understanding of Judaism that isn't limited by what other people decided was "religion"?

### **[18:25 - A Brief Tale of Historical Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations]**

This is why I've always been so troubled by what I think is going on behind the scenes when people talk about "Judeo-Christianity." As if there's a single, unified concept to speak of. This isn't to say that the histories of Judaism and Christianity aren't intertwined to a degree. They are. And it's certainly not to say that interfaith or multi-faith work isn't valuable. It absolutely is!

One of my favourite examples of this is actually around five centuries old. It's a little gem of a teaching by a rabbi named Ovadia of Bartinura. He's an Italian rabbi who's born in the Papal States in the 15th century. And while he was away from Italy, traveling throughout the land of Israel, he writes a letter back home to his family with this observation:

*“Every day in Hebron, bread and lentils are distributed to the poor, whether they are Muslim or Jewish or Christian, and this is done in honour of Abraham.”*

What I think is so beautiful about this observation is that it acknowledges a shared ancestry among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and in fact grounds a specific Jewish obligation - to support the poor and the hungry- in that shared history. But it doesn't conflate them.

### **[19:50 - Schleiermacher & Mendelssohn are *not* Friends, but They're Working Together to call Judaism a Religion]**

Freidrich Schleiermacher and Moses Mendelssohn are not friends. But in some very meaningful ways, they actually are engaged in a shared project: They're both trying to locate where one kind of identity stops and where another begins. They're both wrestling with questions of individual and collective identity. And they're both struggling with the tension between the power of the State and the experiences and the rights of individuals. And both are trying to answer the question of the relationship between this thing called “religion,” and everything else in life.

They of course have very different motives: When Mendelssohn argues for individual Jewish rights, he does this to show that Judaism doesn't pose a threat to the State or to Christianity, and that all individuals are deserving of full and equal rights.

When Schleiermacher argues for individual religious experiences, he does this to show that Christianity is fully compatible with the modern lives of otherwise disinterested *Christians*, and he does this to express an idea of a kind of religious supremacism, and then to compel those lower on that hierarchy to abdicate their cultural distinctiveness in service of loyalty to a new national identity.

But despite these different motives, out of the two of them together, Judaism ultimately becomes a religion - a separate, distinct, and individualized identity.

There are other thinkers and events that also contribute to the growth of the idea of Judaism as a religion. Jewish writers and thinkers and philosophers and spiritual leaders over the past three hundred years have picked up on these ideas and articulated them in their own ways and for their own reasons.

But they are all building on this pivotal moment in Berlin... when Judaism first comes to be called... a religion.

### **[21:55 - What's up in Eastern Europe, North Africa, and Central Asia?]**

It's worth zooming out and considering what's happening in the rest of the world. Jews don't only live in Prussia and Western Europe. What's going on everywhere else?

Remember - these specific ideas of individualism and religion - they're spread largely by the Enlightenment and by the French Revolution. Napoleon's army is stopped cold by the Russian Empire and the brutality of winter there. So these ideas don't make it to Russia and Eastern Europe in the same way.

The Eastern Jews who are living there - they hear about what's happening in the West, and for the most part, they reject these ideas - they just don't fit in with the world in which they live, which isn't liberalizing in the same way.

Further eastward - across Central Asia and throughout the Arab and Muslim world - there's still no concept of "religion" in this way. The Jews who live there are very much identifying as, and are identified as, belonging to a corporate whole.

Eventually, modernization and secularization *will* take place there, but it happens very differently. The Israeli scholar Haviva Pedaya, who is herself a descendent of Iraqi Jewish mystics. She suggests that modernization and secularization in that part of the world - it comes about mostly through *technology* and not *ideology* - that is, it's an inevitable result of the industrial advances of the 19th and 20th centuries, rather than a result of a new philosophical idea. And as a result, for these populations, while they will modernize and individual Jews might become secular, as a whole, religion and peoplehood don't get uprooted from each other.

## [23:45 - Today's Jewish Identities & Geo-Politics]

And how about today? Well, you can see the echoes of this debate mapped out onto geo-politics: In Germany, Judaism has official status as a religion alongside different forms of Christianity.

In the United States, where the Jewish community was largely shaped, initially, by German immigration, Judaism is almost always described as a religion. And yet - if you really want to complicate this, according to most recent demographic studies, 27% of American Jewish adults *don't identify with Judaism as a religion*. That's over a million people, not an insignificant number. Now, we're not really looking at this question from a demographic perspective, but it's worth mentioning.

In Canada, where the Jewish community was shaped more by *Eastern* European immigration, Judaism is officially recognized both as an ethnicity and as a religion by the federal government. On the most recent census, I could tick the box for "Judaism" as my ethnicity. But even here in Canada, the cultural influence of the US definitely impacts individual perceptions, and lots of people speak about Judaism as a religion, because it is convenient and familiar terminology. Thanks for your help, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

So that's to say that this entire conversation is very much a feature of the dominant German Ashkenazi culture in the English speaking world (Ashkenazi refers to Jews descended from the part of the world we've been looking at - France and Germany, and also parts of Eastern Europe).

Outside of this Eurocentric world - across the Middle East and particularly in Israel - communities shaped by the Sefardi Judaism of Spain, Iberia, and North Africa - to the Mizrachi communities of Central Asia, or the Persian Jews of Iran... They were more out of reach of the French Revolution and the Protestant Reformation, so they don't come to understand Judaism as a religion in this way.

But many of these places *did* encounter the impact of the rise of nationalism - so it's not surprising that in those places, Judaism has often, and continues to, express itself in national terms, or it more closely hews to the traditional blurring of lines between ethnicity, politics, and culture.

This is one of the main reasons why I think this is not a question that should be left to be answered three hundred years ago in Prussia. Precisely because millions of the world's Jews today are *not*

descendants of those communities that had grappled with this question. They weren't chewing on it, and internalizing it, and developing their own answers to reflect their own identities. So what does it mean to call Judaism a religion when huge segments of Jews never developed that consciousness?

It's also worth saying again that today, boundaries are also much more permeable and hyphenated - people choose to become Jewish who weren't born Jewish. Families live with hybrid identities. And we can dispel the idea that Judaism is only one thing.

### **[26:40 - Nu? Is Judaism a Religion?]**

So. Is Judaism a religion?

I want to say no. And yes. But mostly no.

If we're talking about religion in broadly *descriptive terms*, then, sure - Judaism today for most North Americans has parts of it that conceptually look similar to other "religions," particularly Christianity and Islam. That explains why you hear people talking about things like "Judeo-Christianity" or the "Abrahamic Religions."

And if we're using the word "religion" benignly to enable us to talk about things like demographics, or sociology, or the psychological benefit of spirituality, then, I get it, I understand why people call Judaism a religion. It can be useful. Thanks a lot, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Was this idea of religion a foreign influence? Most definitely. But Judaism has *always* been influenced by surrounding cultures.

Of course, it's also true that people and ideas evolve and change. So it could be true that originally, Judaism wasn't at all what we would call a religion, but now, for many people, based on their current understandings and practices, it is.

Perhaps the question really only matters in proportion to how strongly you are looking for an internal or “authentic” self-concept of Judaism - something indigenous to the tradition itself.

### **[28:15 - Religion is not a Neutral Category]**

But... I’m also holding on to something that Leora Batnitzky, the Princeton scholar of Jewish history, something that she says:

“The modern concept of religion was and is not a neutral category.”

There’s no way to get away from the fact that the idea of Judaism as exclusively a religion - it was imposed, from the outside, onto Judaism.

It was an attempt to erase the intricate web of spirituality, philosophies, laws, politics, interpretations, cultures, communal practices, and histories. It didn’t do honour or justice to the complex, multifaceted, 3,000-year-old, beautiful tradition that had never made those distinctions. And it tried - largely successfully for certain groups of people - to relegate Judaism to a quiet, private, back room of the mind. Worst of all, so much of this was done in order to make Jews more palatable to our non-Jewish neighbours.

This is why, while I understand why and how people say yes, it’s hard for me to call Judaism just a religion. I still do it myself. All the time. But I wish I lived in a world where I didn’t have to.

And I say this as someone for whom personal religious devotion and contemplative spirituality are a core part of my Jewishness.

At the very least, if I’m feeling a little more generous, I’d say that Judaism is not *only* a religion.

### **[29:52 - What Lens Are You Using to Look at Judaism?]**

I want to go back to the helpful framing from early in Part 1 of this episode: If you’re using the lens of “religion” to understand Judaism, then you have to ask yourself: What is the nature of that lens? How does its clarity and its focus affect what you’re looking at? Is it magnifying things, or perhaps distorting

some things? And when you use that lens, ask yourself: What are you seeing, and what's outside your field-of-view? And: who built that lens?

If you're on the side of calling Judaism a religion, then I think what matters most is an understanding of history: the idea of religion sought to divide public and private, the individual and the community, belief and ritual, mind and body. These divisions, these distinctions = they're not traditionally by Judaism. So if that the lense of religion is what you're operating with, it needs to make room for how Judaism understands these things differently.

And it's here that I want to share one more reason why I think this question is an important one.

### **[31:00 - The Big Question]**

The big, underlying question beneath it is still one that I think should face us today, and it's one that I think we're impoverished for not asking ourselves:

Is Judaism just a series of personal and private beliefs, feelings, and inclinations that can be carried around inside us, shielded from the world, and turned on or off at will, perhaps? Or does it include more transcendent elements - things that connect us and obligate us - horizontally to each other, and vertically to more spiritual, cosmic experiences?

For me, Judaism is not a private enterprise. It is not a mental exercise. It's not something that only lives inside individuals.

### **[31:55 - Being "Spiritual" is not only an Inner Experience]**

"Being 'spiritual' is not solely an inner experience." That's how Jonathan Slater puts it, he's a rabbi who works with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, in New York City. He teaches: "It is an inner orientation, a disporation that orients us to the Divine, while *also* connecting us with *all* creation, with all beings. We satisfy our spiritual lives," he says, and here I might amend: we satisfy our *religious* lives, "not in how we feel, but in how we treat and serve other people. This orientation is cultivated through the classical religious practices... so that it may be extended into the rest of life."

That's why the question is still worth asking.

### **[32:50 - What do you do with the Answer?]**

And that's really what this new podcast is about. Yeah, it's about explaining Jewish answers to difficult Jewish questions and questions about Judaism. But that's just information, that's just data. An answer alone is important. But it's also what you do with it. It's about the stories behind the questions that we tend to miss. The parts of the answer that help us understand why we should even care about asking it.

So asking this question of yourself - "Is Judaism a religion" - it also pushes you to think about: to whom are you accountable? How do you understand your core commitments in life, and how do they - how might they - guide how you live a life of goodness and kindness - those are key ideas in Jewish thought and ritual?

However Judaism has historically defined itself in its core spiritual texts, or however other people have tried to define Judaism... What does that mean for you - you - who are listening to this right now? How does that understanding help you in your own understanding, your practice, or your appreciation of Judaism and what it means to be... Jewish?

### **[34:10 - Closing Credits]**

That's it for this two-part episode. Thanks for listening!

Check out the show notes at [shootpodcast.com](http://shootpodcast.com) to 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*.

You'll also find contrasting ideas, presented by people who positively think Judaism *is* and *should be* a religion, and links to learn more about the other topics we've explored in the episode, including the recent demographic studies of Jews in the United States and Canada.



A transcript of this episode is available on the website, as are definitions of all the terms and concepts we learned about.

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. It makes a big difference - I'm building this from the ground up, and it would mean a lot to have your support.

*Shoot!* is supported by a grant from the *Hadar* Institute, empowering the creation of vibrant Jewish learning and spirituality. Learn more at [hadar.org](http://hadar.org).

You can subscribe to *Shoot!* Everywhere you get your podcasts.

And if you want to get in touch, share a different opinion, or ask your own question, email [hello@shootpodcast.com](mailto:hello@shootpodcast.com)

See you next week, and thanks for listening.