Is Judaism an Ethnicity or a Religion?
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This week's parashah tells the famous story of Jacob wrestling with a mysterious figure that night in the desert.

Some read it as a psycho-spiritual allegory and say the story is about Jacob wrestling with himself. He emerges from the struggle with a new name, "Israel"; though, as Elie Wiesel points out in a masterful essay, Jacob/Israel continues to wrestle with himself for the rest of his life.

It's apropos, then, that we, Jacob's descendants, are called "b'nei Yisrael—the Children of Israel," because, like our eponymous ancestor, we continue to wrestle with ourselves in oh-so-many ways.

This story came to my mind during Thanksgiving week when I was in Houston, where I grew up. As is our tradition, Karen and I had dinner that Wednesday night with some of my oldest and best friends.

My friend Josh showed me his new Star of David. It's not on a necklace or a ring; it's on his forearm: It's a tattoo.

Now, I've been friends with Josh since sixth grade, and I never would have pegged him as a tattoo guy. And until October 7, he wouldn't have either. He decided to get one, though, to show his Jewish pride—like Rabbi Megan spoke about at Rosh Hashanah.

I asked him why a tattoo and not a kippah. He said, "Because a kippah means nothing to me. I've actually stopped doing a lot of religious practices lately."

Which I found to be an interesting response, especially because a kippah is what I choose to wear as the outward symbol of my Jewish identity.

I thought about it for a few minutes and what I realized is that, while Josh and I are really similar in a lot of ways, our Jewish identities are quite different: Mine is religious; his is ethnic.

This is what made me think about Jacob. We Jews have been wrestling with ourselves over this question for, well, as long as we've been around: Is Judaism an ethnicity or a religion?

Let's take a closer look.

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The Hebrew Bible makes it pretty clear that "b'nei Yisrael—the Children of Israel," are an ethnic group.

Ezra the Scribe, who led the Jewish exiles back to the Land of Israel during the Persian period, condemned intermarriage with the locals because it has caused "the holy seed [to] become intermingled with the peoples of the land." (*Ezra* 9:2) For Ezra, Jewishness seems to have been a biological category.

This is probably why the Hebrew Bible itself doesn't have the concept of conversion to Judaism. That only came later, during the rabbinic period.

The biblical heroine Ruth, whom the rabbis taught us to think of as the first convert, chose to cast her lot with the Israelite people, but, in the Bible itself, there was no way for the Moabite Ruth to "become" an Israelite—just like there's no way for a white person to become Black or a Hispanic person to become Asian. This is because, unlike religion or nationality, ethnicity is an immutable characteristic.

One leading proponent in our time of Judaism-as-ethnicity is the South-African-born Israeli scholar Avraham Infeld. In his 2017 book *A Passion for a People*, Infeld argues that the Jews "are not a religion nor simply a nationality. Rather, we are an extended family, a tribe that shares a common past and future, a national home, religious customs…a language…and a collective belief in a common ancestry."[1]

As a modern rabbinic Jew, Infeld goes beyond the Tanakh's limited definition of Jewishness and embraces the now-accepted idea that a person can "become" a Jew. But, based on his understanding of Judaism as a tribe or family, he dislikes the term "convert."

Instead, he prefers to call them "adopted Jews" because, in his view, becoming a Jew is not solely or primarily about accepting religious principles. Rather, he describes it as "mov[ing] in with the family"[2]—taking on their sense of ancestry, familial ties, and ways of doing things, like one does when they *marry into* a family.

The traditional concept of Judaism-as-ethnicity is reflected in the term "the Jewish People," and it's this strain of thought that provides the justification for Zionism and the State of Israel. That is to say, most of the peoples of the world have the natural right to self-governance in their homeland, so why should the Jewish People be any different?

Of course, the ethnic definition of Jewishness does not come without a cost—most notably, the fact that Hitler used it to justify the mass murder of Jews.

Whereas antisemites who saw Jewishness through a religious lens believed Jews could remedy themselves by converting to Christianity or Islam, the Nazis' racial theory left the Jews no way to abandon their Jewishness.

Using starkly biological terms, Hitler put it this way in 1920: "Don't think that you can combat racial tuberculosis without seeing to it that the people is freed from the causative organ of racial tuberculosis. … [T]he poisoning of the people will not end, as long as the causal agent, the Jew, is not removed from our midst."[3]

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Now, the other side of the wrestling match: Judaism-as-religion.

Princeton scholar Leora Batnitzky, author of an excellent book on this topic called *How Judaism Became a Religion*, dates the emergence of this view to Germany in the 18th century. Its chief proponent was a prominent Jewish figure of the time by the name of Moses Mendelssohn.

Mendelssohn was leader of what historians call the "Haskalah," the Jewish strain of Enlightenment thinking that emerged in Western Europe in the latter part of the 18th century. The Enlightenment found

its most potent political expression in the French Revolution, just a few years after Mendelssohn's death, under the banner of "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*"—a vision of liberty, equality, and freedom for all people.

In Mendelssohn's time, the Jews had not yet been granted civil rights in Germany, but he was a strong advocate for the idea that they should be.

As Batnitzky explains, "The Jewish community was increasingly accused of being a 'state within the state' that could not, by definition, be integrated into the Prussian one."[4]

Against this, Mendelssohn argued that the government had it wrong: Judaism, he said, is a religion, and "religion, by definition…is not political."[5]

As Batnitzky puts it, "Mendelssohn allege[d] that by definition, the state concerns power and coercion, while religion, properly understood, does not."

He argued that Jewish law is not the same thing as government law because compliance with it is *voluntary*, left to the discretion of the individual Jew. So, "This means that Judaism…is not concerned with power and therefore does not conflict with the possibility of the Jewish-integration into the modern nation-state."[6]

It probably won't surprise you to know that Mendelssohn's conclusion was that, in a modern, enlightened country, there should be a clear separation of church and state.

Mendelssohn's view of Judaism-as-religion prevailed in the wake of the French Revolution when, in 1789, a member of the French National Assembly argued for Jews to be given full civil rights, declaring: "Jews should be denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals. … The existence of a nation within a nation is unacceptable in our country."[7]

Eighteen years later, Napoleon convened a group of French Jewish leaders—known as the "Napoleonic Sanhedrin"—and asked them to explain how the Jews understood their relationship to France. In response, the Sanhedrin described the Jewish people of France as "Frenchmen of the Mosaic persuasion." In other words: our nationality is French, our ethnicity is Anglo, and our religion is Judaism.

The Reform rabbis who gathered in Pittsburgh in 1885 agreed. In their founding Declaration of Principles of Reform Judaism, they said, "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state."[8]

After all, a religious group doesn't need a state. That's why, before 1948, Classical Reform Jews were, in the main, anti-Zionist.

To the extent that we continue to think of Judaism as a religion and not an ethnicity, it makes the case for the State of Israel difficult. Some critics of Israel argue, in fact, that we Jews have no right to political sovereignty because, generally speaking, that's something reserved for ethnic peoples, not religious groups.

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So, you see this question of whether Judaism is an ethnicity or a religion is a really difficult one, and we've been wrestling with ourselves over it for a long time.

Most of us probably think we're a little bit of both, but it's hard to say exactly. As we've seen, both ethnicity and religion come with significant positives and some dangerous negatives.

In any case, the inability to define Jewishness clearly in the categories of the modern world makes us something unique that, to a great extent, defies words.

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So…which one do you pick? Kippah or tattoo?

When neat definitions fail us, our tradition turns to music and poetry. Stephanie is going to sing a song for us in Yiddish which, to me, expresses something of the religious and ethnic blend we feel in our kishkes.

It's a Hanukkah song called "Borukh Ateh, Zingt der Tate."

I invite you to take a break from wrestling and sit back and enjoy.

Blessed art Thou," sings my father
And he lights the candles.
And the gentle beams fall
Onto his pale face.

And a holy, precious fire
Lights in his eyes.
And the one who is weary in his whole body
Has straightened up.

And it seems, and we believe:
There is still something there.
There is something left to love,
It is a holy hour.

Old, long departed sounds
No, they still resound now.
So sing, father, "Borukh Ateh"
I remain your child.

1 Avraham Infeld with Clare Goldwater, *A Passion for a People*, 25-26
2 Ibid., 31
3 As quoted in Ian Kershaw, *Hitler*, 152
4 Leora Batnitzky, How Judaism Became a Religion, 16
5 Batnitzky's explanation of Mendelssohn's argument, in Ibid., 18
6 Ibid., 19-20

7 Center for Jewish History, https://www.cjh.org/lapidus/France.html#:~:text=In%201789%2C%20speaking%20on%20behalf,is%20unacceptable%20to%20our%20country.%E2%80%9D

8 CCAR, https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/