

Judaism 101: Secular and Religious Jews

“The Jewish residents in my facility say that they’re not religious. What does that mean?”

Many times I hear comments such as, “I have two Jewish residents, but they say that they’re ‘not practicing.’” Or, “Mr. X has Jewish art in his room, but he doesn’t practice his religion very much. When I ask him whether he wants to go to a Jewish religious program, he’s not interested.” Or, “I don’t see anything specifically Jewish in Mrs. Y’s room, but when I offer to put up Christmas decorations, she protests fiercely.” Are these residents Jewish, or aren’t they?!

The answer to this question is more complex than meets the eye. American religious life today has four major religions: Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and Islam. Judaism does indeed belong on this list as a religion: a system of beliefs and practices that lead an individual to a relationship with the Divine. Jews have religious holidays, places of worship, rituals, and customs that parallel the other religions of the world. However, there is also a **cultural** aspect to Judaism that enables Jews to be non-religious (and even anti-religious!) and yet, still Jewish. One can also think of being Jewish as one thinks of being Italian, Irish, or Russian. There’s Jewish music, food, expressions, and attitudes born out of their lives in other lands that are non-religious in nature.

There are also differences between Judaism and Christianity that make Judaism—both the religion and the culture—a little harder to understand. Here are some helpful thoughts:

1) Judaism teaches that action may lead to faith. Therefore, it emphasizes actions more than specific beliefs. Sometimes the belief never comes, or is so subconscious that the resident may be unaware of the depth of his/her actual faith. However, the actions that were taught to him/her as a child may be comfortable and comforting. A resident may not believe in the traditional Sabbath as a day of rest, but women may want to light Sabbath candles (even electric ones) on a Friday afternoon. This is something that their mothers probably did every week, and they may have, too. Even though the practice may be removed from its religious roots, it’s a meaningful connection to your resident’s past.

2) Jews came to America with their own unique culture, which remains vital apart from religious practices. In Eastern Europe (and many other places), Jews were not part of the general culture. They spoke Yiddish (not Polish or Russian) to one another, had separate schools, their own music, and their own foods. Many even dressed differently than the Christians around them. The high value placed on education made Jews stand out from the surrounding culture. Some of this culture still exists, independent of Judaism as a religion. Some

Jews who came to America stopped believing in God; many stopped practicing Jewish rituals, but most still love the language, foods, and music of their youth.

3) To be in a minority can be lonely; members of a minority are comforted by others like themselves. I can't tell you how many times I have visited a facility for a holiday observance and had a resident ask me: "Are there other Jews here? I think I'm the only one!" When s/he comes to a program with 3-4 other Jews, s/he is comforted by being around others like themselves. Frequently I hear, "I didn't know YOU were Jewish, too!" said to another resident. Sometimes along with this is the discovery of shared family, friends, or acquaintances. The Jewish world is really a small community, and a Jewish resident is less lonely knowing s/he is still part of it.

4) There are three major religious movements in American Jewish life: Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox. They make it possible for a Jew to be religious in many different ways. When a resident says, "I'm not really religious," s/he may be trying to say "I'm not Orthodox." In other words, s/he doesn't observe many of the traditional rituals. But many "non-religious" American Jews love to be at events that bring back special memories: a Passover Seder or Hanukkah candle lighting. The Reform Movement in the 1930s and '40s taught that ethics and social action are the heart of Judaism. Jews who grew up in Reform temples may see keeping kosher (the dietary laws) as unnecessary and archaic. Instead, many Jews found an expression of the ideal of God's gifts being available to all through political activism.

5) The outer limit for most Jews is observance of Christian holidays. No matter how secular, most Jews will not celebrate Christmas or Easter in a religious way, since these celebrate events in the life and death of Jesus.

If you have any questions on this, please feel free to contact me:

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