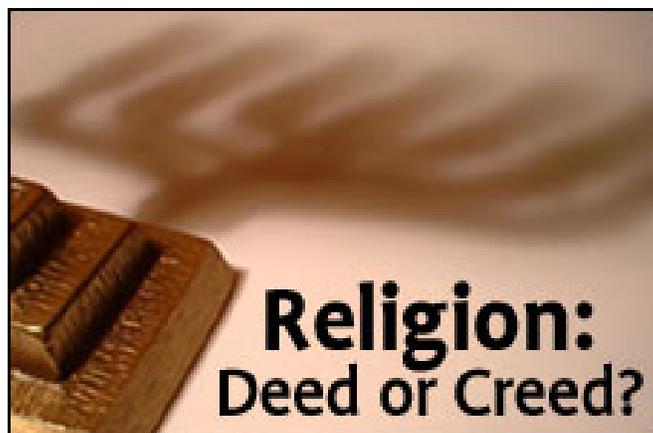




DEED & CREED - CLASS #1



EXPLORING THE DEFINITION
OF A "GOOD JEW."

BY RABBI BENJAMIN BLECH

WITH ROCHELLE LEV

© 2007 JewishPathways.com



PREPARATION

 **VIEW** Religion: Deed or Creed? (14 min. video)

 **READ** *Understanding Judaism* -- Introduction p. xvii – xxii

WORKSHOP

- (1) How is the word 'religious' defined by Catholicism? How is it defined in Judaism?
- (2) Faith and religion are often considered to be interchangeable concepts. According to Rabbi Blech, why is this misleading?
- (3) What is considered to be the 'key' phrase of the Christian Bible? What does a Christian have to do in order to attain a favorable judgment and "go to heaven"?
- (4) According to the Torah, what does a Jew have to do in order to attain a favorable judgment and a place in heaven?
- (5) What was the response of the Jewish people at Mount Sinai when God asked if they wanted to accept the Torah? What was the significance of the order of the words used in their response?
- (6) What is the place of "creed" in Judaism? Is it necessary? Why?
- (7) Can a non-believer have a share in heaven according to Christianity?
- (8) Can a non-believer have a share in heaven according to Judaism?
- (9) What is the definition of a "good Jew"? Is it possible to be a good Jew through belief alone?

(1) Q: How is the word 'religious' defined by Catholicism? How is it defined in Judaism?

A: Religion, for Christians, relates to one's creed – i.e. what you *believe*. For a Jew, Religion relates to one's deeds – it is a person's *actions* that count.

(2) Q: Faith and religion are often considered to be interchangeable concepts. According to Rabbi Blech, why is this misleading?

A: The term *faith* relates to what a person *believes* to be true. The term *religion*, as explained in Question 1, can mean different things to different religions. For Christians, *religion* and *faith* are indeed interchangeable. To a Christian, religion and faith both refer to what you believe to be true and have faith in.

For Judaism, religion and faith are two different concepts. While a basic level of faith is required, being religious refers largely to one's deeds – i.e. acting in accordance with Jewish Law

(3) Q: What is considered to be the 'key' phrase of the Christian Bible? What does a Christian have to do in order to attain a favorable judgment and "go to heaven"?

A: "Believe in Jesus and you will be saved" is a fundamental phrase in the Christian Bible. To be religious and attain a place in heaven, a person must believe that Jesus is the son of God and died for their sins. The person will then be saved by virtue of that belief, regardless of his actions in this world. Conversely, a person who does not believe will not be saved. In Christianity, a favorable judgment is predicated on faith alone.

(4) Q: According to the Torah, what does a Jew have to do in order to attain a favorable judgment and a place in heaven?

A: The Jew is judged constantly on what he has achieved – his actions. Every year, he is judged based on the work he has done over that year. At the end of his lifetime, he is judged again. Every time he does a good deed, it adds a weight to the side of 'good'; every time he does something negative, it adds a weight to the side of 'sin.' God does not weigh our beliefs, thought and ideas. A Jew is judged on his actions. The outcome of that judgment is a result of what the person accomplishes by his hand alone.

(5) Q: What was the response of the Jewish people at Mount Sinai when God asked if they wanted to accept the Torah? What was the significance of the order of the words used in their response?

A: At Mount Sinai, God offered the Torah (and its 613 commandments) to the Jewish people. In response, they replied *Na'aseh V'nishma* – "We will do and we will hear." The people emphasized a commitment to first do and then to take steps to understand. Creed is important, but first we must do. It is a person's actions that make the real difference.

(6) Q: What is the place of "creed" in Judaism? Is it necessary? Why?

A: A certain amount of belief is needed to form the basis of our actions. A mitzvah is a commandment, something we are obligated to do. A commandment implies the existence of a Higher Being Who commands us to *do*. That is why the first of the Ten Commandments begins, "I am the Lord your God." We must first recognize our Creator in order to do His will.

(7) Q: Can a non-believer have a share in heaven according to Christianity?

A: In Christianity, a person is saved by virtue of their belief. Therefore, in strict Catholic terms, someone who does not believe cannot be saved and cannot enter heaven.

(8) Q: Can a non-believer have a share in heaven according to Judaism?

A: In Judaism, a person's deeds are the ultimate measure of righteousness. Righteous people of the nations of the world can have a share in the World to Come, by virtue of their actions alone.

(9) Q: What is the definition of a "good Jew"? Is it possible to be a good Jew through belief alone?

A: A "good Jew" is defined as someone who observes Torah and mitzvot. A person who says, "I believe and therefore I am a good Jew," is mistakenly applying a Christian concept to Judaism. This does not work. Judaism is a religion of deed – actions really do speak louder than words.

SUMMARY

What does it mean to be Jewish? We may know we are Jewish, but without some understanding, the practices we perform may ring hollow. It is not easy to understand a religion from isolated practices or individual readings. In this course, we will introduce some of the fundamental concepts in Judaism. We seek to understand the theme and ultimate purpose of Jewish observance, and in doing so we can better understand our identity and faith, and the aspirations of the Jewish people.

Words mean different things to different people. When we explore the definitions of “religion” and “faith” in Judaism, we see that it has a completely different meaning compared to Christianity and many other world religions. What sets Judaism apart is the respective roles of “Deed and Creed”:

The Christian religion is predicated on creed, and is defined by one’s *faith* – what do I *believe*? Judaism is based on deed, a commitment to action – what do I *do*?

To achieve salvation, a Christian must believe that “Jesus is the son of God and died for your sins.” Believe this and regardless of your lifestyle (your *actions*), you will be saved. Conversely, the person who does not believe will not be saved, regardless of what they do.

The Jew is taught that every time we do a mitzvah, we create a ‘good’ angel or advocate. Every time we do an *aveira* (negative deed), we create a ‘bad’ angel or prosecutor. We are judged constantly, and once a year on the High Holidays, God takes out his scales and judges us based on what we did and didn’t do. At the end of our days, God judges us in the same way: according to our actions and accomplishments, not our thoughts and feelings.

When God offered the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, their response reflected this action-oriented approach. They replied *Na’aseh*

V'nishma – we will *do* and then we will *understand*. Deed comes first; understanding and belief are secondary.

Rabbi Blech points out that every commandment presupposes a Commander. To perform a mitzvah, we need a certain degree of creed – i.e. belief in the Creator. The first of the Ten Commandments is of belief – "I am the Lord Your God." That belief, however, must lead to *action* – the observance of the other 613 commandments that follow.

A Christian hopes for salvation by virtue of belief alone. Without belief, salvation is not possible, regardless of one's actions. By contrast, the emphasis that Judaism puts on deeds teaches that even a righteous gentile can earn a share in the World to Come.

Judaism is a religion of action. To say 'I am deeply religious because I am a Jew at heart' is not enough. This is a Christian approach. To be a good Jew, one needs to be '*shomer Torah u'Mitzvot*' – to perform Torah and mitzvot. In short, we need *action*.