

RABBI'S MESSAGE

What do Jews think about...?

One of the exciting things about being a rabbi is the wide variety of questions that come my way. Some are easier than others...and for many, there is not one simple answer. A random sampling:

- Why are ten people required to say Kaddish? Do they have to be men? Do they have to be Jewish? Does a “virtual” minyan count?
- Why is poultry prohibited to be eaten with dairy when the Torah says, “Don’t boil a kid in its mother’s milk?” (Deut. 14:21)
- Why do some people eat rice on Passover and others don’t?
- Is it OK to have a Passover seder when it is not the first or second night?
- Why do we eat dairy on Shavuot?
- Why isn’t Moses mentioned in the Haggadah? Why isn’t G-d’s name in the Book of Esther?
- What does the “star of David” represent, and why is it such a popular Jewish symbol?
- Why was 13 chosen to have a bar mitzvah? When did bat mitzvahs become common?
- How much of the Torah is “true?”
- Who was the historical Jesus, and how do Christian teachings differ from Jewish teachings?
- What are Jewish views on organ donation, abortion, stem cell research and other topics in the modern world?

Yes, some questions are easy, some are hard, some are controversial and most have multiple possible answers. The responses are not just about the perspective from Orthodox or Conservative or Reform tradition. The Talmud is a Jewish source that gives a lot of information, but it is also full of contradictions and arguments. Judaism’s major movements have developed their own rulings, but there is also disagreement even within those movements. Modern generations have produced countless “responsa,” or the views and opinions of rabbis and scholars attempting to answer the infinite list of questions that arise. When looking these teachings, it is important for learners to consider that the scholar is producing an answer based on the research, texts and historical teachings that are consistent with their own perspectives and opinions. These opinions can have a wide variety of views.

There is a difference between asking a rabbi for a “ruling” or asking for an “opinion.” If you are looking for advice and want a ruling, then you are supposed to follow it, rather than shop around until you find a rabbi who gives you the answer you like. However, if your question is about furthering your own learning, you might consult multiple sources to develop your own opinion. Judaism absolutely encourages deep thinking about every issue, and you might surprise yourself to find out that your own opinion matches some of the great sages of Jewish history, or modern scholars who continue to explore and re-evaluate to create new meanings for ancient traditions.

When I'm asked what Jews think about a particular topic, before giving my own viewpoint, I'm tempted to say: "It depends on the Jew."

Which is true. New thinking and learning, development of tradition and modern thought...depends on YOU!

Keep thinking, keep learning, keep asking and keep growing.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon