Freemasonry And Judaism

by
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Introduction

My father, Martin Bessel, was a Freemason from 1946 until his death in 1977. He was brought up in a religious Jewish family and he was orthodox in following more of the traditional rules than most Jews in the United States. He was very proud to be a Jew, as well as a Mason and an American.

I was somewhat surprised, because I recall hearing rumors that Freemasonry required members to say or do things in accordance with the Christian religion and that it was not really an American institution, but I knew my father would not belong to an organization that had these characteristics.

Years later, on the tenth anniversary of my father's death, I was initiated into Freemasonry and am now an active member of several lodges, plus the Scottish and York Rites and the Shrine.[1] I am trying to learn more about Masonry, just as I continue to read about my heritage as a Jew and as an American. The reasons are the same, because I am proud to belong to each of these groups and to support the ideals for which they stand.

Jews and Freemasonry

Jews were actively involved in the beginnings of Freemasonry in America. There is evidence they were among those who established Masonry in 7 of the original 13 states: Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Georgia, South Carolina, and Virginia.[2]

A Jewish Mason, Moses Michael Hays, helped introduce the Masonic Scottish Rite in America. Hays was also Deputy Inspector General of Masonry for North America in 1768, and Grand Master of Massachusetts from 1788 to 1792. Paul Revere served under him as Deputy Grand Master. There were several other Jews who held the title of Deputy Inspector General of Masonry in the late 1700's: Solomon Bush in Pennsylvania, Joseph Myers in Maryland and later in South Carolina, and Abraham Forst of Philadelphia in Virginia in 1781. Another Jewish Grand Master was Moses Seixas in Rhode Island from 1791 until 1800. There were many other American Jewish Masons in early American history, including one in George Washington's original Fredericksburg Lodge.[3]

Jewish Masons played an important part in the American Revolution, with 24 of them serving as officers in George Washington's army.[4] In addition, several helped finance the American cause, including Haym Salomon, a Philadelphia Jewish Mason who with others contributed and raised money for the American war effort and loaned money to Jefferson, Madison, Lee, and others for their personal expenses. Salomon was imprisoned by the British and died in his 40's bankrupt and with penniless heirs.[5]

There is evidence that Jews, including Rabbis, continued to be involved in the Masonic movement in the United States throughout our history. There have been at least 51 Jewish American Grand Masters, including 2 in Virginia — Solomon Jacobs in 1810-1812 and Seymour Jonas Levy in 1975.[6] Today there are many Jews active in Masonry in America and other countries. Israel has about 60 Masonic lodges with 3,000 members.[7]

Jews had also been involved to a small extent in the formation of modern Freemasonry in the early 1700's in England. Until then Jews were not permitted to participate in many of the ordinary activities of life. Then the Enlightenment concept of the universality of all people brought about a society where people's religious beliefs did not affect their rights as citizens. Jews were gradually permitted to

exercise the rights of citizenship and to pursue their lives as they wished. Judaism as a religion was also affected by the Enlightenment, with the development of Reform Judaism which teaches a continuing belief in the fundamental concepts of the religion without requiring compliance with all the strict rules of observance.[8]

Many Jews viewed joining Freemasonry as part of their "emancipation" from the old legal and social exclusions. Modern Masonry was as much a product of the Enlightenment as the emancipation of Jews. Many society leaders were Freemasons and if Jews could join this fraternity that would prove they were being accepted. They could also use the opportunities presented by their participation in a social organization with Christians to prove the two could prosper by their association. Freemasonry's philosophy of the brotherhood of all people indicated Masonry would accept Jews as members.[9]

There are many common themes and ideals in Masonic and Jewish rituals, symbols, and words.

Judaism's most basic teaching is to believe in God who created everything in our existence and who gave us laws to follow, including the requirements to act honorably and kindly toward everyone. Belief in God, prayer, immortality of the soul, charity, and acting respectfully to all people are essential elements of Freemasonry as well as Judaism, and of course other religions too.

Judaism teaches that God's law is contained in the Torah, which is the Jewish Bible and the first 5 books of all Bibles. Jews are taught that the Torah is the eternal law given to us by God, who has said it is complete, will never be changed even by God, and can never be altered by any mortal.[10] This can be compared with the statement in the Masonic ancient charges and regulations that it is not in the power of any man or body of men to make innovations in the body of Masonry.[11] In both cases this may sound unduly rigid, but hopefully a greater purpose is served. Masonry and Judaism, as well as other religions and statements of ethical standards, teach that we must discipline ourselves and keep our passions in check. We follow rituals in synagogues and in Masonic lodges to help us develop this ability.

I have noticed many other similarities between the best aspects of Freemasonry and Judaism. Some are on the highest level, such as belief in God and ethical behavior toward all people, and some are as mundane as the tradition of having food after completion of the rituals.

Shortly after the birth of all Jewish men, they are circumcised in a family celebration as a sign of the covenant between God and our ancestor Abraham. Thirteen years later Jewish males have a ceremony called a Bar Mitzvah which consists of learning to recite prayers and Biblical portions in Hebrew and to participate in Jewish rituals, and after which we are considered to have all the rights and duties of Jewish men. Masonry similarly establishes a bond with new initiates that is raised to a higher level after the prospective Mason has learned the ritual needed to participate fully in Masonry.

Both Judaism and Masonry give the greatest respect and support for freedom of individuals. Judaism teaches that everyone is capable of good or evil and attempts to help us use our free will to choose the righteous path.[12] Masonry teaches that those who are morally fit can find "light" in Masonry if they desire it of their own free will. The concept of exercising free will to accept the law and atone for past transgressions is what Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are about. Jews believe the ten days at the start of our new year are to be used to atone for past sins and resolve to try harder to avoid sin in the future.

Light is an important symbol in both Freemasonry and Judaism.[13] One of the Jewish holidays is Chanukah, called the Festival of Lights, commemorating the victory of the Jewish people over those who had made the practice of our religion a crime punishable by death around 165 B.C.E. (B.C.E. stands for Before Common Era, and is used in the Jewish

religion as the equivalent of B.C.). Light is also an important symbol in Masonry, representing the Divine spirit, religious freedom, and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem and of the spiritual Temple within us all.[14]

One of the fundamental symbols of Masonry is the Temple of Solomon and the Second Temple, which also figured as the central part of the Jewish religion. King Solomon, one of the greatest figures in Jewish history, is also one of the most important figures in Masonic rituals.

Both Judaism and Masonry also teach support for authorities and the duties of authorities toward those over whom they exercise power. Jews are taught to respect and obey parents and rabbis, just as Masonry teaches the authority and the duties of those who have been elected to leadership positions in our fraternity.

Finally, there is a positive effort in both Judaism and Masonry to encourage learning. This has led to the large numbers of Jews who have had distinguished careers in science and other professions, and it also explains part of the reason for the continuity of Masonry and Judaism for centuries. Those who encourage scholarship insure the perpetuation of their ideals.

While there are many common aspects of Judaism and Freemasonry, it also should be recognized that because of the history of attempts to force Jews to convert they can be uncomfortable about being asked to say Christian prayers or otherwise indicate non-Jewish beliefs. Some parts of Masonry use New Testament prayers, references to Saints, the cross as a religious symbol (although it is stated that the cross is being used as a symbol of religion in general rather than the Christian religion), and one Masonic organization requires aspiring members to swear to support the Christian faith. Jews can deal with these references to other religions by remaining quiet or not participating in those parts of Masonry. I do not want to overemphasize these matters, though, since they are outweighed by the deepest meanings of Freemasonry — the universality of all people.

Historical Disputes within Freemasonry about Jews

Masonry did not always welcome Jews. Although a Jew, Edward Rose, became a Mason in a London lodge in 1732 this event apparently excited attention and led to other lodges debating whether they should permit Jewish members. Eventually, significant numbers of Jews jointed English Masonry where they were apparently welcomed.[15]

The French Revolution and Napoleonic wars carried the ideals of the Enlightenment throughout Europe, including the legal emancipation of Jews and the secularization of the State. French Masonic lodges, and those in different countries affiliated with the French Grand Orient during the Napoleonic occupations, admitted Jews without restrictions.[16] In 1869 a Jew was Grand Master of the Scottish Rite in Paris.[17] However, later in the 1800's French society became more anti-Semitic, culminating in the Dreyfus affair where a French army officer was unjustly accused of treason mainly because he was a Jew, and French Masonry unfortunately also became more anti-Jewish. Today, some parts of French Masonry are officially neutral about religion and do not even require a belief in God.[18] In Scandinavia, I have read, Masonry is officially Christian and does not accept Jewish members.[19]

It is probably not surprising that the country with the longest history of anti-Semitic prejudice in Freemasonry as well as in society is Germany. Most lodges there did not permit Jews to be members, and they even questioned visiting Masonic brethren about their religion at the doors of their lodges and barred Jews even if they were Masons in good standing in other lodges. This caused lodges in England, the Netherlands, and the United States to protest but they did not retaliate against visiting German Masons.[20]

Even in Germany there were some differences in attitudes. There were three Grand Lodges in Berlin plus some in other cities, and some German lodges were affiliated with Grand Lodges in other countries. Therefore, some German lodges had policies prohibiting visiting Jewish Masons, while others accepted Jewish members or at least permitted them to visit. Some German lodges allowed Jews with resources to become Masons in other countries and then return to become official "permanent visitors" in the German lodges that barred them as members.[21]

German officials feared secret societies as potential sources of subversion, so the Prussian government became involved in Masonry as a means to watch and control it. The future Kaiser Wilhelm I was the patron of the three Berlin Grand Lodges for many years, and he decided that Jews would only be permitted if there was unanimous agreement. Since one of the Grand Lodges was known to be adamant against accepting Jews, this forced the others who wanted to be more tolerant to maintain anti-Jewish policies.[22]

In Russia, Freemasonry was also suppressed because of the belief it might be used to support political activity against the Czarist regime, at the same time that Jews were prevented from obtaining rights of citizenship in that country.

Various claims were made by those who wanted to keep Jews out of Masonry. Some said Masonry was a Christian institution and Jews could not become members unless they converted. Some said only Christians could possess the good character necessary to achieve Masonic ideals.

Others said Masonry has Christian symbols and prayers but Jews could become Masons if they simply complied with requirements such as swearing on the Christian Gospels and eating pork at Masonic meals (eating of pig products is prohibited by Jewish law), without having to convert. However, there was also an argument that if a Jew voluntarily complied with Christian practices he showed he was contemptuous of his own religion and had a bad character, and was thus unworthy to be a Mason.[23]

Another argument was that Jews preferred to be in their own social groups. It was said they should not try to push their way into Masonic lodges where they were not wanted, would be uncomfortable, and would make others uncomfortable by their presence. Some Jews did join lodges that were primarily Jewish and the B'nai B'rith organization in its early days had a ritual parallel to Freemasonry.

Finally, there were the rawest anti-Semitic arguments. Some of those who wanted to keep Jews out of Masonry said the Jewish religion was inherently evil, or that Jews were racially and genetically evil and could never be permitted in Masonry even if they converted.[24]

Some supporters of Jews in Masonry urged Jews to be patient and wait years for a time when they would eventually be accepted. Jews were advised to abide by quotas and try to hide their presence in lodges.

These things may sound ridiculous or horribly racist, but similar arguments are sometimes heard even now as grounds for discrimination against certain people.

There is one story of courage in Masonry that I believe is important enough to single out. The Royal York Lodge in Berlin had been a liberal lodge in the early 1870's but later it went along with the increasing anti-Semitism of those times. When Dr. Hermann Settegast was Master of the lodge in 1890 he proposed that anyone objecting to admission of new lodge candidates should be required to state that he was not objecting because of the candidate's religion. When this proposal was rejected, Dr. Settegast resigned and founded a new Mother Lodge in Berlin with a membership about half Jewish and half Christian. Dr. Settegast's action caused a furor in Masonry. While the three other Berlin Grand Lodges and the German government fought it, Dr. Settegast's new lodge continued.[25]

In general, Freemasonry's attitudes toward Jews mirror those of the rest of society. Jews became more acceptable from the late 1700's until the 1870's. From that time on, anti-Semitism increased in many countries. This also occurred in Freemasonry, but by then Judaism and Masonry were being jointly attacked.

Attacks on Freemasonry and Jews Together

Freemasons and Jews always had critics. Eventually the bigots realized they could promote their ideas by tying Masons and Jews together as objects of hatred.

Critics said Freemasonry and Judaism were dedicated to undermining the institutions of existing society, including Christianity and the State, and pointed to the secrecy associated with both as proof of their evil intentions. Masons and Jews were said to be involved in, or benefited from, radical efforts such as the American, French, and Russian revolutions. Masonry and Judaism promoted free will of men, contrary to efforts of those who sought to insure that people had the "correct" thoughts. (This may explain why the Roman Catholic Papacy has expressed its antagonism toward Freemasonry so frequently and strongly since 1738[26], and why extreme conservatives in other religions also oppose Freemasonry.) Gradually the charge was made that Freemasons and Jews were both evil and they were purposely supporting each others' radical schemes.

Ironically, Masons and Jews were also sometimes accused of being too reactionary. Aristocrats often belonged to Masonic lodges, and some German Masons promoted the return of the Kaiser after World War I brought about a republic. Also, some Jews still dressed and acted in the same conservative ways as their ancestors in the middle ages and thus kept themselves apart from modern society.

Increasingly Jews and Freemasons were accused of being disloyal to their countries, keeping strange secrets, and designing to take over the world.

The ultimate form of this hatred was the sinister "Protocols of the Elders of Zion", which originated in Russia and received wide circulation after it was translated into German in the 1920's. Some bigots claimed this document was a transcript of a meeting of Jewish leaders plotting world domination, in partnership with Freemasons.[27] Although this document was not even a clever hoax, its influence was unbelievably widespread and long-lasting in whipping up hatred against Jews and Masons by many, including Henry Ford in the United States during his long anti-Jewish campaign in the 1920's and 1930's.[28]

It was a short step from this to the ideology of the Nazis. Hitler attacked Masons as well as Jews, and after taking control of Germany and other European countries Nazis used the slogan "All Masons Jews — all Jews Masons", and persecuted Masons, Jews, and others. The Soviet Union and other totalitarian regimes have consistently attacked Freemasonry, because they cannot tolerate an organization whose basic beliefs are freedom of individuals and tolerance and generosity toward all people.[29]

Dictatorships have regularly attacked and persecuted Masons and Jews, and these attacks on Masons and Jews together are not all in the past. Last year, a group called the "Islamic Resistance Movement - Palestine" said that Freemasonry and other "Zionist-affiliated" organizations are about to be liquidated.[30]

As usual, there is one country that has the longest and most sustained tradition of tolerance — the United States. With few exceptions, this country has been the haven for people with different ideas, religions, and beliefs. Freemasonry in the United States has been accepted, except for a brief period around the 1830's[31] and Jews generally found a haven of peace and acceptance in America. Abraham Lincoln said our country would be a shining light for the whole world.[32] Its attitudes toward Freemasonry and Jews have generally met that standard.

Conclusion

Freemasonry and Judaism have been subjected to attacks and persecution. Both, plus all others of good will, must continuously be alert and prepared to defend against prejudicial attacks.

At the same time, we should candidly recognize that sometimes differences have existed even among those with similar goals, and we should emphasize these common ideals and aspirations.

The fundamental tenets of Freemasonry and Judaism are similar. We should promote the greatest goals of religion and the dignity of all people, through the free will of men who demonstrate their strength of character.[33] These are the things Masonry, Judaism, and the United States stand for, and this helps me understand why my father was proud of his heritage as a Jew, a Mason, and an American.

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Endnotes

[1] The author of this paper is a member of the following Masonic lodges and appendant bodies: Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22; A. Douglas Smith Lodge of Research No. 1949; Mr. Vernon Royal Arch Chapter No. 14; Triangle Royal Arch Chapter No. 73; Alexandria Scottish Rite bodies; and Kena Temple, A.A.O.N.M.S.; all in Virginia; and Zeredatha Lodge No. 483 in Brooklyn, New York, where my father was raised a Master Mason on March 4, 1946.

[2] *The Jews and Freemasons in the United States before 1810*; and *Encyclopedia Judaica*, "Freemasons", page 124.

[3] Same as previous note.

[4] "Jewish Masons in the American Revolution", The Oklahoma Mason, Dec. 1924, page 10.

[5] Biography of Haym Salomon available in the Robert Livingston Masonic Library and Museum in the headquarters of the New York Grand Lodge of Masons

[6] *The Jews and Masonry in the United States Before 1810*, and "Jewish Grand Masters in the United States", Short Talk Bulletin.

[7] *List of Masonic Lodges, 1989 edition*, pages 254-255.

[8] *Jews and Freemasons in Europe 1723-1939*.

[9] Same as previous note.

[10] See, for example, *Judaism and Christianity*, page 81.

[11] But see the discussion of "Landmarks" of Freemasonry in *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia*, page 359, 364-365, citing Pike's opinion of Mackey's Landmarks and concluding with several reasons why there should be no such thing as unchangeable landmarks in Freemasonry.

[12] See, for example, *Judaism and Christianity*, pages 41-45.

[13] See, for example, the *Bible*, Proverbs, 6:23, "...the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light..."

[14] "Enlightenment of Light", by David Kruger in The New Age, December 1988, pages 5-7.

[15] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, "Freemasons", page 122.

[16] *Jews and Freemasons in Europe*, page 56.

[17] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, "Freemasons", page 123.

[18] See *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia*, "France", page 260.

[19] Same as previous note, page 515.

[20] The source for this and the following paragraphs concerning the relationship of Jews and Freemasonry is *Jews and Freemasons in Europe 1723-1939*, pages 89, 104, 109-111, and elsewhere in that very comprehensive book on this subject.

[21] *Jews and Freemasons in Europe*, page 136.

[22] Same as previous note, page 103.

[23] Same as previous note, page 76.

24 Same as previous note, pages 146-147.

25 Same as previous note, pages 166-167.

[26] *The Mythology of the Secret Societies*, pages 68 and 83.

[27] *Warrant for Genocide* provides a comprehensive history and description of the "Protocols".

[28] *Henry Ford and the Jews* contains a detailed account of Ford's anti-Semitism, use of the "Protocols" even after they were proven false, and support of and from Adolph Hitler.

[29] *Jews and Freemasons in Europe*, and *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia*.

[30] *The Philalethes* magazine, "Through Masonic Windows", February 1989, back page.

[31] See *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States 1826-1843*, by William Preston Vaughn, published by the University Press of Kentucky in 1983, available in the Robert Livingston Masonic Library and Museum in the headquarters of the New York Grand Lodge of Masons, presents a complete account of the organized anti-Masonic movement and points out its limited extent.

[32] *Abraham Lincoln: The Man Behind the Myths*, by Stephen B. Oates, pages 57, 60, citing *Collected Works of Lincoln*, by Roy Basler, 2:276.

[33] The Virginia Masonic Constitutions state: "Whosoever...desires to be a Mason...is to believe firmly in the Eternal God...leaving such brother to his own private judgment as to particular modes and forms...by whatever religious names or persuasions." See *Methodical Digest and Virginia Textbook*, pages 5-6.