

# THE CATHOLIC CHALLENGE™



*Louise Haggett  
shares her wisdom and  
an introduction to her  
latest research and  
analysis.*

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## Introduction:

I am a retired mainstream Catholic businesswoman who 30 years ago discovered a shortage of priests, clergy sexual abuse and that there were over 100,000 priests who resigned to marry. I was inspired to found Celibacy Is the Issue (CITI Ministries/Rentapriest), a nonprofit organization that nudges married Catholic priests, still valid according to Canon Law, back into public ministry to help those with spiritual needs. The action defied institutional politics but followed Canon Law. Most readers of CORPUS REPORTS are aware of the ministry that still exists today.

My CITI involvement introduced me to the inner circle of church reform where I became more aware of the extremes of both sides of Catholic reform issues in general. As one who is middle-of-the-road oriented, I began to wonder about Judaism and how it transitioned to a religion with three basic tenets—Orthodox, Conservative and Reform—and the fact that Judaism is still intact despite its differences. Catholicism on the other hand has split over the centuries into many forms of Protestantism—worshippers who are still Gentiles, for lack of a better word. My curiosity led to a cursory examination of the transformation in Judaism and the parallels between the two cultures.

The Winter issue of CORPUS REPORTS reporting on a church reform seminar that took place months ago among COR organizations (Catholic Organizations for

Renewal) was for me *déjà vu*, a redux of Call to Action conferences in the 1990s. It also reminded me about my curiosities that led to the research and writing The Catholic Challenge in 1996, a slightly updated version of which is presented here.

## Louise Haggett

In 1836 when some of the teachings in Judaism were being questioned by a new generation of reformers looking to change their religion to conform with the times, a young rabbi named Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) wrote a book entitled, *Nineteen Letters about Judaism* by Ben Uziel<sup>1</sup>. A fictitious dialogue between a philosopher and a youthful intellect, *Nineteen Letters* challenged opponents to examine their identity and religious belief.

The concept proposed was so divergent, yet so simple, that Rabbi Hirsch used a pen name for fear of embarrassment. The book became a benchmark in transforming Judaism into the three-tenet religion it is today, and Rabbi Hirsch is still considered to be the supreme head of German neo-Orthodoxy<sup>2</sup>.

Although he agreed that reform was needed, he submitted that it was the Jew who needed reformation, not the Jewish religion; that the failure had been in the emphasis of its teachings. He also believed that Jews with varying philosophies could maintain a working relationship.

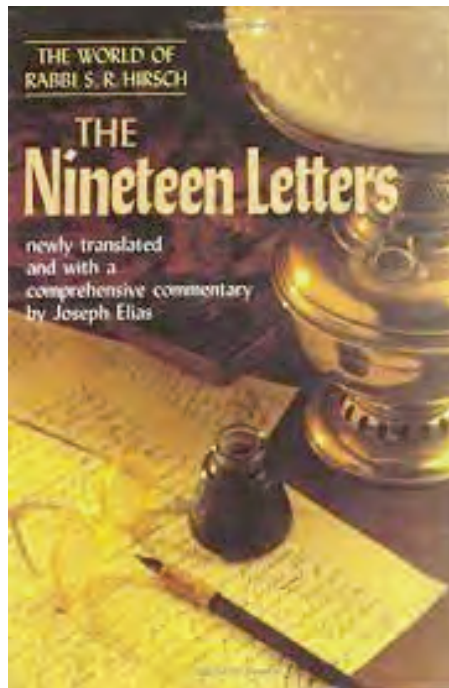
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The contents of *Nineteen Letters* could help us understand how the Catholic dilemma of the last fifty years may be like that of the 19th century Judaism. These may also provide an outline for a study of our own. A brief synopsis of Hirsch's book follows:

The *First letter, Complaint*, presents the main arguments raised against traditional Judaism by the reformers. The basic complaint: Judaism just was not up to par with the times (1836); religious practice and observance of the Torah, the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, interfered with the lifestyle of the new generation.

In the *Second letter, The Proper Approach*, Hirsch through the character Ben Uziel, suggested that before trying to judge Judaism, a study of its history and teachings must be done, "from the only authentic source, the Torah."

*Letter Three, God and World*, teaches that in order "to understand Judaism and the Jewish people in their historical role, we must first learn about God and His creation of the world, the role of man (humankind) in the world, and the course of human history in general," and how it is all inter-related according to God's plans. It explains how everything and everyone in life is very different, created to be different, but to harmonize with one another. Rabbi Hirsch says, "In this way everything contributes according to its strength, however much or little, to the existence of the whole; and if it destroys a fellow creature, it robs itself of what it needs for its own existence." "None exists by itself and for itself; there is a constant striving of each creature with, through and for others, on behalf of the whole, and of the whole on behalf of the creature." "The Harmonizer of Opposites is His Name," says Hirsch.



*Letter Four* focuses entirely on *Man* (human species), and how we differ from the rest of nature because we are the only beings who have the freedom to do God's will or to disobey, the only ones who can take advantage of the world God has provided us.

We will be judged by God and God alone, according to how well we have used, and provided for, God's world.

The *Fifth letter* entitled, *Education*, covers good and bad deeds, sin and punishment and the education that takes place from our life experiences. We relive in this chapter, the stories of Adam, Cain and the great Flood with reminders of how important our loyalty to God is.

*Letters Six through Nine* review the *history of the Jewish people, and the significance of the Torah in their lives throughout the ages*.

*Letter Ten, The Classification of the Mitzvos*, begins the discernment process, examining the Torah with emphasis on

The Ten Commandments and its application in the Code of Jewish Law. The process continues in *Letters Eleven through Fifteen* with a more practical examination of The Commandments, *grouping them into three basic concepts*:

- **JUSTICE** means consideration for every being as a creation of God, for all possessions as having a purpose before God and for the natural order as being ordained by God; and therefore, compliance with the claims that they make on us.
- **LOVE** means acceptance of all beings as children of God and as our brethren, and promotion of their welfare and of their fulfillment of their God-given mission—all this without their having any claim on us, but purely because it is the Will of God, the fulfillment of a Divine command.

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• **EDUCATION** of oneself and others to such a way of life means taking these truths to heart as one's moving principles, giving expression to them for himself and for others, and—if through life's vicissitudes he has lost sight of them—struggling to re-instill them in his heart."

The *Sixteenth letter, Emancipation*, stresses that the bond among people needs to be spiritual rather than political; that it is possible to lead a normal civilized life and still be loyal servants of God.

*Letter Seventeen* admits that there is certainly a need for, *Reform*, improvement. Fault, however, is placed on the "system," a system that has spent too much time teaching the law when it should have concentrated on the spirit of the law. Rabbi Hirsch suggests that, "Instead of dwelling on the present sad picture, let us rather sketch some outlines for bringing about what we see as authentic reform as well as means to attain it."

In the *Eighteenth letter*, Rabbi Hirsch spoke of two generations confronting each other, one which had "inherited Judaism practiced by men from habit, a revered but lifeless mummy which it is afraid to bring back to life; and the other, though in part burning with noble enthusiasm for the welfare of the Jews, regarding Judaism as bereft of any life and spirit, a relic of an era long past and buried...threatening to sever its last life-nerve." His message: "Judaism must be studied and understood out of itself and be elevated, all by itself, to science of wise living."

Hirsch stressed that Jews must not be concerned about each other's school of thought. It was necessary to go back to truth... the Torah. He asked the questions, "What does it mean that I am a Jew?" and "What is Judaism?" He further asked, "Should we just look at its (Judaism) dusty exterior and solely because of that, cast away as worthless the precious possession for which our ancestors' sacrificed life, property and liberty and all of life's joys?"

He said in the *Nineteenth letter*, "By all means, let the scales swing. The more freely they land, and the more reliably they will assess truth and life in the end, the more violently they must swing at this time. But, once the scales have come to rest, the spirit of Yisrael will stand revealed in its full brilliance, comprehending itself, its teachings and its destiny, pervading all Yisrael's members and engendering the fullest life in this spirit."

## Reconstructing Judaism

What many people, including some Jews, don't know is that it wasn't until the 1800s (a short time ago in comparison to how far Judaism goes back in history) that the religion took the form that it has today—a community expressed through three major religious groups—Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. The Orthodox maintain a strict code in the letter of the Jewish Law. Conservative Judaism, while it recognizes the authority of Jewish law and tradition as Divine, believes in and observes differing interpretations. Reform Judaism puts more stress on the prophetic teachings and less on the ritual observances of Judaism. Faith in God forms the basis of Judaism and the three basic groups (now with various other options) still have one umbrella.

While biblical law is taught and observed, it only serves as a standard for religious practices and community conduct in the non-Orthodox clusters. Local custom usually prevails. (Soferim 14:18). Several recordings attest to the fact that Rabbis "do not impose a hardship on the community that the majority cannot endure." A general statement might be that in these times, issues like LGBTQIA, divorced individuals, marriages of mixed faiths and other life choices are encouraged to continue practicing their faith and can find a supportive community within the Jewish structure<sup>3</sup>. The basis for the argument, "When Moses went up to heaven, he refrained from food for forty days and forty nights. And when the angels came to visit Abraham, they partook of his means, each one submitting to the custom of the place<sup>4</sup>." (*Talmud*: Baba Metzia 86b)

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At the time this paper was originally written (1996), the Orthodox Tenet did not recognize women as rabbis. Today, women rabbis serve in some Orthodox synagogues. They are, of course, common in the Conservative and Reform synagogues, as they were in 1996.

## Catholicism

The history of Roman Catholicism is one of schism (separation) with many Protestant offshoots. For the first time in history, Catholicism like Judaism, has a new meaning beyond religion; maybe we too have become a culture. A Jew is a Jew forever. It is a Way of Life, not a religion. Is it possible that Catholics have also reached that pinnacle?

Finding Catholicism's authentic source may be more challenging than we think. While Catholics agree that Jesus is center to our culture, there is reluctance by some to use the New Testament as our authentic source because the Christian Church was formed before the New Testament was written. The Ten Commandments, which we also observe, are found in the Old Testament.

If we were to follow the traditional route (early history of our church), we will find evidence of a married priesthood, divorced remarried Catholics accepted as full members of worshipping communities and women priests, according to Vatican archives.

If the study goes back to the history of Judaism, we will have to wonder if Jesus might have been married. Almost every Jewish historical account indicates that no Jewish male was still single at 33 years old, especially if he preached in the temple. (Several theologians including Margaret Starbird have produced strong evidence on the possible marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene).

## Some similarities between Judaism and Catholicism

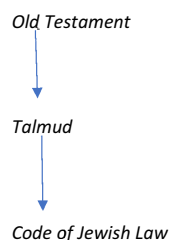
We are alike in many ways. The *Catechism* though different is our version of the Jewish *Talmud*. They have The *Jewish Book of Law*. Ours is entitled *The Code of Canon Law*. We have Confirmation; they have Bat/Bar Mitzvahs, both acknowledging the age of spiritual reasoning. The Torah, central to Jewish worship, is kept in a curtained "ark" in synagogues; in the Catholic Churches, a Tabernacle holds the Communion Host believed by Catholics to be the Body of Christ. Both are isolated from the public when not in use. Vestments are also an important part of each religion's rituals. At one time, we each had dietary laws. We each have a Sabbath, though on different days. Even our hierarchy wear a Catholic version of the "Yarmulkes" reserved for High Priests in the Scriptures. And the list goes on.

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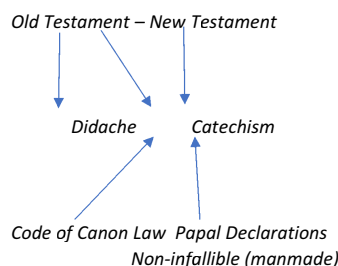
If we apply the same percentage of American Jews of varying philosophies to American Catholics, we would be looking at approximately 26% liberal/reform, 40% traditional/conservative and 20% orthodox (remaining 14% split among different degrees in between). These three basic groups might easily transition into a new structure like the aforementioned in Judaism. There are bishops in each of the three basic philosophies who could also change without much difficulty. A middle-of-road Pope, a "Harmonizer of Opposites" in the likeness of God as described by Hirsch, could make it work. (Opponents to this suggestion need to remind themselves that this format in Judaism has prevailed for over 100 years and Jews are one of the most cohesive ethnic people in the world.)

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## JUDAISM



## CATHOLICISM



### Some of our differences

Apart from our hierarchical structure which contrasts Judaism's Home Rule, we believe that Jesus was the Messiah, not just another prophet. There are also major differences between Catholicism and Judaism in the process used to arrive at practical laws for worship and conduct.

Great emphasis in Judaism is placed on the Torah which contains the *Ten Commandments*. The *Talmud*, written version of the Oral Law is an interpretation of the *Torah*. The *Code of Jewish Law* contains practical application of the *Talmud*.

Catholic lineage, on the other hand, is not so clearly defined. Our original catechism was called the *Didache* and was written in the first century of Christianity.<sup>5</sup> It too was an interpretation of the Old Testament. The New Testament had not yet been written. The *Didache* evolved through the centuries to our current Catechism. The newest revision (2018) is a combination of the Scriptures, non-infallible Catholic teachings and Canon Law, published after the original Catechism (1918).

### The Challenge

Questions that come to mind in 2022:

1. Why are Catholic reformers today on the same threshold of reform that Jews were 200 years ago?

2. Instead of discussing the politics of the Catholic institution, should God's role in our existence be examined?
3. Do we need to ask ourselves what it means to be Catholic?
4. What is Catholicism?
5. Should we go back to our Jewish roots where Jesus began?
6. Has God's concept of Christianity been fulfilled?
7. Has the failure been in the Catholic Church's teachings, a question that was asked of Jewish reformers in 1836?
8. If we separate what is real and what is not real about our Catholic faith, could it become our DNA—Our Way of Life – our Culture?

In the Nineteenth letter, Rabbi Hirsch wrote, "given these insights, one would ordinarily begin with scholarly investigation and then apply to life those conclusions that had proven true...however, the events of the time demand a different course." He added, "Will I be able to write the truth with all the clarity needed to convince the minds, and all the forcefulness required to capture the hearts?"

An updated English version of *The Nineteen Letters* was published in 1995, providing the blueprint for an existential examination of our Catholic heritage. Having female theologians will automatically put a new perspective on this very important work. All of Scripture(s) and church history throughout the ages may have been authored by men because women were not allowed to be educated, to have a voice or a written word. Interpretations of the Scriptures were, therefore, conceived by male biblical scholars. All practical laws deriving from same would have been studied, interpreted, written and controlled by men.



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There is much beauty and sacredness about our religions and its people that must be preserved. There may also be a truth about our history that is yet unrevealed, a truth and a spirit that could change the culture of not just Catholicism, but the world, a truth which might bring together two (or more) religions that, heretofore, might not have been thought possible. I wonder if it is not time to begin the labor process of looking for the truth about our heritage and faith with new eyes and clear minds?

Note: Louise welcomes your comments and opinions. You can contact her at [lhaggett@aol.com](mailto:lhaggett@aol.com)

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<sup>1</sup> The Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel, newly translated and with a comprehensive commentary by Joseph Elias. Feldheim Publishers, Jerusalem, Israel and Nanuet, NY. 1995. Also available on Amazon.com.

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<sup>2</sup> Judaism: Between Yesterday & Tomorrow by Hans Kung. Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> The Second Jewish Book of Why by Alfred J. Kolatch, Jonathan David Publishers, Middle Village NY, 1995, pages 151, 289, 290, 295

<sup>4</sup> The Jewish Book of Why by Alfred J. Kolatch, Jonathan David Publishers, Middle Village NY, 1985, page 121

<sup>5</sup> Catholicism by Richard P. McBrien, Winston Press, Minneapolis, 1981, page 802

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