Twitter Thread by ■



■
@kilovh

Alright, it's time for my @threadapalooza - 100 tweets (if I can limit myself) on:

Judaism Is Not Christianity

2. When I was in Yeshiva, a certain Rabbi once explained the process of studying Chassidus as follows:

"The beginner thinks everything is different. Then he learns more, and thinks everything is the same. Then, he learns more, and finally realizes everything is different."

3. In my opinion, this process is broadly applicable. When we first enter any field, because we understand nothing, there seems to be an infinite variety of ideas. Then we learn, and each level of understanding reduces things to fewer and fewer central principles.

4. The Sophomoric student thinks not that everything is different, but that everything is the same. Only when we move on to actual understanding do we realize there is infinite or near-infinite variety and differences are real, despite or because of shared underlying principle.

The same is true when you learn about Judaism and Christianity. Judaism is not Christianity, and all semblances of similarity are mere semblances.

In fact, the illusion cannot hold under any close scrutiny at all. What follows is intended merely as close scrutiny. /5

THE FOLLOWING IS NON-EXHAUSTIVE. I have in mind various things I am specifically planning on not mentioning, lest the thread become a book. The things I do mention will be mentioned only generally. This is just an introduction.

Okay, I'm disclaimed, let's roll

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Historically, everyone knows Judaism≠Christianity. For many Jews, this is enough. The predations of Christianity of multiple diverse denominations over centuries go without saying.

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Today's proselytizing efforts 'out of love, because I want what's best for you' used to have an alternative of death and destruction, pogroms, pillagings, burnings at the stake, etc.

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The cultural antisemitism of Christendom is inextricable from Christianity herself, if not in principle or in practice then at least historically, in the stories we possess, passed down in the family.

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And it goes without saying that as a reviled and ostracized race, Judaism, historically, built a unique civilization in exile quite apart from, if geographically distributed among, Christian civilization.

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It was this separate civilization that became integrable once the kingdom of Catholicism retreated, and for some reason, after many centuries of revulsion, scapegoating, persecution, fear, etc. it did not go well.

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Even Karl Marx's antisemitism is profoundly Christian in flavor, associating Jews inherently with Capitalism and Capitalism with all evil.

But, I don't hesitate to say, history can be history, and change, forgiveness, and repentance are fundamental to this reality.

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Assuming we are no longer living in history, and want to understand the relationship of Judaism and Christianity in the eternal present - What about the philosophical, theological, scriptural unity of Judaism and Christianity in the "Judeo-Christian tradition"?

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Many, many Jews (and perhaps many Christians) think that the core departure of Christianity from Judaism is theological. This is not so.

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I do not mean to say that Christian theology is ultimately compatible with Judaism - it isn't. The doctrine of the trinity, in particular, is antithetical to the unity of G-d Jews affirm multiple times a day.

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However, this antithesis is not as easily demonstrable as most assume. Theology is, as all who study it know, an extremely subtle and complex form of wisdom.

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G-d's unity in Judaism does not preclude a Torah full of anthropomorphisms, nor the 13 Attributes of Mercy, nor the emanated Sephirotic Divine Traits in the Kabbalah. Why they should be IN while the trinity is OUT is not for beginners, though it certainly can be done.

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No, the real theological difference between Judaism and Christianity is that Judaism is fundamentally not a theological religion.

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That is, Judaism is NOT AT ALL defined by ideas about G-d. It is defined by a people's relationship with G-d within history.

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G-d, to the Jew, is family history, not a theory. Jews often forget this to our detriment, perhaps under the influence of Christianity.

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This is not to say Judaism G-d forbid has no fundamental beliefs about G-d. It is to say that those fundamental beliefs are a function of, and historically followed, family history, and not the reverse.

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There is a reason there's no systematic theology in Judaism whatsoever until the early middle ages, despite thousands of pages of Midrash, Mishna, Talmud over many generations of elders, prophets, and sages.

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The Nicene Creed, for example, came about around 3 centuries after the birth of Christianity.

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R'Saadiah Gaon, conversely, wrote the first systemization of Jewish dogma about 1300 years after the story of Purim, the LAST of all Jewish holidays with roots in the Tanakh itself. Over 1800 years after the birth of King David, 2200 years after the event at Mount Sinai.

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Jewish theology, per se, as a systematic understanding of G-d, is like if a Christian scholar sat down 180 years after this year, 2020, and first started making sense of the divinity involved at the founding of Christianity.

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The matter is more complicated than I'm letting on here, but the sheer weight of those millennia preceding the practice of theology should hint to the wise how different Jewish and Christian theology are.

And in practice, two facts emerge:

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1. R'Saadiah Gaon's system is of infinitely less practical relevance to Judaism than the Nicene Creed is to Christianity, and even among Rabbis those who have studied it are rare.

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2. None of the classical Jewish philosophers - not the Rambam, not R'Saadiah, not Yehuda HaLevi nor R'Chisdai Crescas nor Rabbeinu Bachya - could be said to have impacted the practice of Judaism among their communities or students one iota through philosophy.

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A Crescasite Jew (if such a thing ever existed) and a Maimonidean Jew (ditto) would eat each other's food and pray at each other's synagogue, all else being equal.

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Theology just has never been central to Judaism, unless it was made such by challengers.

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Once those specific challengers went the way of most things in the face of Judaism's seeming-immortality, the interest in the theological disputes they gave birth to has generally dissipated and been left to scholars alone.

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But what about when philosophy DID change Judaism, enough that you wouldn't pray in the synagogue of followers of certain philosophies?

I'm glad you asked...

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There is a major reason certain Jews today wish to play up theological and historical differences with Christianity - because the real difference is in the Law, and it is difficult to find the Law that groovy, in the year of our Lord 5781.

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The Law is what distinguishes and has always distinguished between Judaism in all its multifarious manifestations, riotous disagreement, and varied history, on one hand, and Judaism-inspired non-Judaism on the other.

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In Judaism, The Law (broadly, Halacha - the translation of 'law' doesn't do Halacha too many favors, but that's another thread) is the core of the religion. The Law does not reduce to broad moral principles, faith, or ritual. If anything, these things reduce to the Law.

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And so, when Christianity early on rejected the Law, declared themselves the recipients of a new covenant in violation of what most Jews considered the Law, and claimed that the Law was obsolete and superseded, it ceased to be a form of Judaism.

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This, then, is the simplest reason why Judaism ≠ Christianity. Judaism is built around the Law. Christianity is not.

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Christianity, therefore, doesn't MATTER to Judaism in the way some assume it must. Judaism-inspired non-Judaisms, as defined by the abrogation of the Law, are not so rare.

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Some seem to believe Jews are or ought constantly to be worried by the once-in-history claim by Jews that a certain Jew is the Messiah, whose coming renders the law obsolete, that this poses an eternal counterpoint to Judaism.

This is not how Judaism sees it.

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Christianity presents no crisis of this sort to Judaism because unfortunately there are more recent instances of a similar phenomenon. Take, for example, the Sabbateans of the 17th century.

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World Jewry was extremely open to the possibility that Shabtai Tzvi was the long-awaited Messiah. The question was a live one, and very serious, authoritative Rabbis considered it.

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In fact, it is extremely likely that a larger percentage of respected Rabbinic authorities considered Shabbatai Tzvi's claim seriously than considered that of the founder of Christianity, based on what evidence is available.

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And of course, once Shabtai Tzvi converted to Islam and started permitting that which the Law forbids, he became one of the greatest disasters in the history of modern Jewry, one that in many ways the Jewish people have not yet recovered from.

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The Christian challenge to Judaism, as more than what the kids would call a 'cultural hegemony' (which I'm not sure I believe in anyway) but an actual unique once-and-for-all replacement of the covenant, to Judaism does not pose a more serious question than the Sabbateans.

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Now all of this, as mentioned earlier, is because intellectual systems have never been the foundation of Judaism.

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And this leads us to an interesting Jewish understanding of Christianity's significance to Judaism beyond the alleged world-historical 'challenge' - i.e., the way we are open to Christianity, how it can teach us things, and what significance it holds to us.

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At one level or another, everything in the world matters to Judaism, a natural consequence of the rootedness of all things in the One Creator.

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So, my goal is not to downplay Christianity. It is merely to note that inasmuch Christianity matters at all to Judaism, it's not because of Christianity per se (things PER SE don't matter to Judaism) but because of Christianity's ROLE IN THE LAW.

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Historians and anthropologists study the influences of one culture on another. But historians and anthropologists move in a world formed by other axioms.

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The Jew as a Jew lives in a world formed by Jewish faith, that faith which received The Law.

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The Law says that everything G-d creates, He creates for the sake of His Glory.

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And Maimonides, not writing as a philosopher but as a Rabbi, a teacher of the Law, in his magnum opus, the Mishne Torah, explains regarding Christianity and Islam alike:

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If this is the extent of Christianity's true significance to the Law and thus to 'core Judaism', we must conclude that 'Judeo-Christian values' are not, at least from the Jewish side, what they have been sold to be.

...Or are they?

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A lot of people want Judaism to be like Christianity to build a common political cause.

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But I think in many cases when it comes to building a common political cause, even Christianity isn't like Christianity and Judaism isn't like Judaism.

Uniting them with each other seems a stretch.

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The pursuit of power or the application of one's will is a terrible recipe for lasting unity. No union could be more conditional or temporary. This is not Judaism and Christianity coming together.

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If anything, it is Judaism and Christianity ceasing to be themselves in order to help people climb the greasy pole...

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Which brings us to the futility and even counterproductive contrivance called the 'interfaith dialogue.'

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We tell people "if you are less yourself, you can sit in peace with others", and then are surprised when all the religions hollow out and disappear.

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No, if Jews and Christians are to get along and truly meet each other as what they are, I couldn't tell you what needs to happen on the Christian end, but on the Jewish end, we must meet them in the place they've been given by the Law.

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Only then do we meet them as Jews.

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So, nu, what is that place? Have you not received contradictory messages from this thread? HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE?!

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So Christianity is, to the Law, a preparation for the Messianic age...but is a non-Judaism and an abrogation of the Law. But it is also a tremendous source of historical antisemitism and actively working against the Jewish people/mission...?

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It is not a 'challenge' in the sense of a countervailing religion against Judaism, but it also ought not to be met in politics or in 'interfaith dialogue', but it also can't be ignored because it surely like all other things contributes to the glory of G-d...

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How does this all work?

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We have already discussed most of the pieces to the solution, but how do they fit together?

With an eye to the Law, I propose as follows:

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Judaism views the societal relationship with G-d at two fundamentally different levels.

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The first clue lies in the Seven Noahide Laws, which Judaism holds apply to all of humanity.

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The difference between these seven and the Jewish 613 is not quantitative but qualitative as well.

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Though some, such as Dennis Prager LOL, see the Ten Commandments as the recipe for a successful civilization, in fact this is traditionally the role of the Noahide Laws.

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After all, the Ten Commandments and the experience at Sinai are the birth of Judaism, where G-d refers to Himself specifically as the redeemer from Egypt.

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Morality and G-d's moral law, on the other hand, predate the Sinaitic event by the Torah's account.

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The Noahide Laws serve as the rules that make order out of human chaos, that transform the jungle of homo homini lupus into a sustainable civilization and, as such, constitute Judaism's clearest statement of universal human morality.

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And the first of the Noahide Laws is the belief in G-d.

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Then there is the relationship with G-d that has nothing to do with the refinement of man and everything to do with the Divine Mission, the purpose preceding creation.

The Law thus acknowledges two truths about the One G-d.

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He is both the Creator of heaven and earth and He who took us out from Egypt, and these are different not only contextually but to their very core.

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The G-d who creates heaven and earth is, in the eyes of Judaism, a fundamental pillar of creating a lasting civilization, Jewish or otherwise.

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Awareness of His knowledge of and involvement in worldly affairs is paramount, per the Law, for just and flourishing civilization to spread on the earth.

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Once upon a time, knowledge of this G-d was much rarer. It has been spread throughout the entire world chiefly by Christianity and Islam...

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On the other hand, the G-d of the exodus from Egypt is He who made a personal covenant with a certain group of people, that same covenant serving as the foundation of the Law.

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This conception of G-d is, indeed, the one that historically has been hampered (to put it delicately) by various Christian churches and adherents in the name of their religions.

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However, none of this negates the following snippet of information that, as a young student when I first heard it, blew my mind:

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The Holy R'Yisrael Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760), the founder of Chassidus, refused to ride with a non-Jewish wagon driver who did not cross himself when his wagon passed a church.

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In the matter of civilization and order and moral law in the world, Christianity has overall been a force for great good.

Its net effect, per Maimonides, is to pave the way for a Messianic consciousness!

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So, to make of matters lengthy and complex and broader than this thread can address, a summary:

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If Judaism's fundamental apartness from Christianity seems somewhat ambivalent, with mixed messages flying, it is rooted in the law.

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If we are looking, as Jews, for those who would truly aid us in our G-dly mission, for JEWS who can further the mission of JUDAISM i.e. the Law, Christianity is institutionally disqualified.

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We would have better luck searching in Las Vegas or the Red Light District or, heaven forfend, on the other side of the political aisle.

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There, we might at least find someone with the wrong actions but the right ideas and goals.

Since Christianity is inherently an abrogation of the Law, it IS NOT JUDAISM, and its goals will never be Judaism's.

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If, however, we seek not allies but merely for civilized men who are guaranteed not to murder us in their wagon, the Vatican is a much, much better bet than Reno or Amsterdam.

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Its men are bound by rules, and even though they are not the rules of the Law, not Jewish rules, they are rules placed out of man's hands and in the hands of a Heavenly Judge.

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Thereby, they help move the world from a state of dark animality, of pagan amorality and thundering ego, toward a day when the world will be transformed forever.

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True, we Jews do profoundly and emphatically believe that the G-d of the Jews is also the G-d of the universe, but we cannot argue it and we cannot share it. It is not a theology. It is the Law.

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Ultimately, much of the truth of Judaism is intimately tied up with being Jewish, which is not a choice we make. (We even say this is true of converts, who in the eyes of the Law are retroactively revealed to be lost Jewish souls.)

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Ultimately, the Law prescribes an objective relationship with the creator that belongs to everyone.

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It is this common ground that we value, the common ground where Judaism and Christianity can meet. Beyond it, we have no desire or need to convince anyone. We do not seek converts for a reason...

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This is what paves the way for that future age when men will know not hunger or war or competition and will spend all their days knowing G-d.

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Through our daily efforts to add in good deeds of love and kindness, we bring it ever closer.

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May we soon see, together, the day described by Isaiah as "The world will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the ocean bed."

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Amen.