
WHAT IS JUDAISM?

An Introduction to a Journey of Self-Discovery

Heralded by an awesome display of thunder, lightening, smoke, shofar blasts and fire, God's Presence descended upon Mount Sinai. Thus the stage was set for the most momentous moment in history: God's declaration of the Ten Commandments, a scene heard and seen by millions of people. (The Stone Chumash, Mesorah Publications, p. 405)

The birth of Judaism over 3,300 years ago infused the Jewish people, and then the world, with transformational values and transcendent wisdom that has continued to shape humanity until today. Picture yourself 133 generations ago in the most consequential event in history – God giving the Torah to the entire Jewish nation. Never again has such a powerful moment, involving such a large group of people, occurred. With the giving of the Torah, Judaism was up and running. The Torah introduced revolutionary concepts such as Divine ethics, *tikun olam* (guiding mankind to achieve its purpose), and personal self-perfection. Judaism established monotheism – not as an academic concept, but as the dynamic reality where the Creator of the universe continually sustains and guides the world to its destiny and seeks a personal relationship with each individual.

This class, and the syllabus as a whole, is not intended to be a Judaism-made-simple guide. Rather, it is meant as an introduction to Jewish concepts and Jewish life. This particular class is based on many of the core sections of the Morasha Syllabus, serving as a potential starting point to explore the curriculum in part or in its entirety. As much as Judaism values profound, analytic study, *experiencing* the mosaic of Jewish life – Shabbat, Festivals, Weddings, Bar & Bat Mitzvah, practicing Chesed etc. – brings alive a compelling awareness of the vibrancy and totality of Jewish living. This awareness cannot be experienced by textual study alone. Equally imperative to grasping Judaism is meaningful student-teacher relationships, since one can learn much by observing the teacher integrating and applying Torah values. Along with these other means, the Morasha Syllabus can be a launching pad for a journey of self-discovery.

This shiur will address the following questions:

- What according to Judaism is the purpose of life?
- What does Judaism stand for? What are its core beliefs?
- Another Jewish holiday celebrating “we fought; we won; let’s eat”?
- Why is Judaism so focused on mitzvot and details?
- Is Jewish law just made up by the Rabbis?
- What does Judaism teach about creating successful interpersonal relationships?

Class Outline:

- Introduction. An Unforgettable Encounter in the Library

- Section I. Purpose of Man in the World
 - Part A. Body and Soul
 - Part B. Free Will
 - Part C. Resembling God's Kindness
 - Part D. Divine Providence

- Section II. Core Beliefs
 - Part A. Monotheism
 - Part B. The Torah and its Study
 - Part C. The Responsible Choice

- Section III. Jewish Calendar
 - Part A. Shabbat
 - Part B. Passover
 - Part C. Shavuot
 - Part D. The Three Weeks and Tisha B'Av
 - Part E. Rosh HaShanah
 - Part F. Yom Kippur
 - Part G. Sukkot
 - Part H. Chanukah
 - Part I. Purim

- Section IV. Spirituality & Kabbalah
 - Part A. The Jewish Vision of Spirituality
 - Part B. Prophecy
 - Part C. Reincarnation
 - Part D. This World and the Next

- Section V. The Jewish Lifecycle
 - Part A. Brit Milah
 - Part B. Bar & Bat Mitzvah
 - Part C. The Jewish View of Love and Marriage
 - Part D. Death & Mourning

- Section VI. Mitzvot
 - Part A. Prayer
 - Part B. Other Mitzvot

- Section VII. The System of Halachah – Jewish Law

- Section VIII. Bein Adam L'Chavero – Interpersonal Relationships
 Part A. Judging Favorably
 Part B. Watching Words
 Part C. Loving Others
 Part D. Personal Growth and Development
- Section IX. Jewish Survival – Our History and Destiny

INTRODUCTION. AN UNFORGETTABLE ENCOUNTER IN THE LIBRARY

1. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 33:4 – Judaism is the heritage of the Jewish people.**

The Torah that Moshe (Moses) commanded us is the heritage of the Congregation of Yaakov (Jacob).

תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה קהלת יעקב:

For Jews, Judaism is our timeless heritage. It was bequeathed to us from the past to be used in the present in order to make a better future. The connection between the Jewish people and the heritage of the Torah is one that runs deep. Inculcating an appreciation for this depth is the most basic purpose of Torah study. For that reason, this verse is the first one that a father is supposed to teach his child.

2. **Talmud Bavli, Sukkah 42a – The central pillar of Torah taught to the young is that Torah is their heritage.**

Our Rabbis taught: When a child is old enough... to speak – his father must teach him Torah and the reading of [the] Shema [prayer]. What Torah does he teach him? – Rav Hamnuna said: “The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the Congregation of Yaakov.”

תנו רבנן: קטן היודע... לדבר - אביו לומדו תורה וקריאת שמע. תורה מאי היא? - אמר רב המנונא: (דברים לג) תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה קהלת יעקב:

What is it supposed to mean to us that the Torah is our heritage? Most Jews know that they are Jewish because they descended from people who were born Jews or converted to Judaism. In the modern world in which we live, what difference does it make where we came from or what our ancestors believed and practiced?

3. **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now*, Continuum Publishers, pp. 38-42 – Modern identity is like a library...**

At some stage, each of us must decide how to live our lives. We have many options, and no generation in history has had a wider choice. We can live for work or success or fame or power. We can have a whole series of lifestyles and relationships. We can explore any of a myriad of faiths, mysticisms, or therapies. There is only one constraint – namely, that however much of anything else we have, we have only one life, and it is short. How we live and what we live for are the most fateful decisions we ever make...

[I]magine that we are in a vast library. In every direction we look there are bookcases. Each has shelves stretching from the floor to the ceiling, and every shelf is full of books. We are surrounded by the recorded thoughts of many people, some great, some less so, and we can reach out and take any book we wish. All we have to do is choose. We begin to read, and for a while we are immersed in the world, real or imaginary, of the writer. It may intrigue us enough to lead us to look for other books by the same writer, or perhaps others on the same subject. Alternatively, we can break off and try a different subject, a different approach; there is no limit. Once the book no longer interests us, we can put it back on the shelf, where it will wait for the next reader to pick it up. It makes no claim on us. It is just a book.

That, for the contemporary secular culture of the West, is what identity is like. We are browsers in the library. There are many different ways of living, and none exercises any particular claim on us... The various lifestyles into which we enter are like books we read. We are always free to change them, put them back on the shelf. They are what we read, not what we are.

If Judaism is really our heritage, then what that means is that it is not like any other book in the library. It is not just what we read.

4. **Ibid. pp. 42-43, Judaism is the book that bears our own name on the spine.**

Judaism asks us to envisage an altogether different possibility. Imagine that, while browsing in the library, you come across one book, unlike the rest, which catches your eye because on its spine is written the name of your family. Intrigued, you open it and see many pages written by different hands in different languages. You start reading it, and gradually you start beginning to understand what it is. It is the story each generation of your ancestors has told for the sake of the next, so that everyone born into the family can know where they came from, what happened to them, what they lived for and why. As you turn the pages, you reach the last, which carries no entry but a heading. It bears your name.

According to the intellectual conventions of modernity, this should make no difference. There is nothing in the past that can bind you in the present, no history that can make a difference to who you are and who you are free to be. But this cannot be the whole truth. Were I to find myself holding such a book in my hands, my life would already have been changed. Seeing my name and the story of my forebears, I could not read it as if it were just one story among others... Once I knew it existed, I could not put the book back on the shelf and forget about it, because I would now know that I am part of a long line of people who traveled toward a certain destination and whose journey remains unfinished, dependent on me to take it further...

This is more than an imaginative exercise. There is such a book, and to be a Jew is to be a life, a chapter, in it. This book contains the knowledge of who I am and is perhaps the most important thing I can be given.

Judaism is our heritage; it is the sum total of our people's achievements and aspirations, and more fundamentally, our identity and our purpose in this world. It is with this perspective in mind that we introduce the overview to the Morasha Syllabus Project, over 120 classes covering a wide range of what Judaism has to teach us about the world and about ourselves.

SECTION I. PURPOSE OF MAN IN THE WORLD

Life can be beautiful, profound, and rich with meaning. But to gain access to this meaning we need to ask: What is our purpose in this world? Volumes have explored that question, but put succinctly, the purpose of life is to achieve self-perfection and form a close relationship with God, the single Source of all existence. To do this, we must develop the spiritual essence of the self.

PART A. BODY AND SOUL

Judaism teaches that our true essence is a Godly soul, but it has been placed in an earthly, animal-like body.

1. Bereishit (Genesis) 2:7 with Rashi – Man was created from the “breath” of God and from the dust of the earth.

God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living being.

Rashi: [God] made him from the upper and lower realms – the body from the lower realms and the soul from the upper realms.

וַיִּצְרֶה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם, עָפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה, וַיְנַפֵּחַ בְּאַפָּיו, נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים; וַיְהִי הָאָדָם, לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה.

רש"י: עשאו מן התחתונים ומן העליונים גוף מן התחתונים ונשמה מן העליונים.

What does it mean that God “breathed” the soul into man and he became alive?

2. Rabbi Jeremy Kagan, *The Jewish Self*, Feldheim Publishers, pp. 22-23 [and Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, *Morasha*] – The soul is the life-force that connects each person to the Divine Source.

Man was initially formed from the earth. This gave him existence with mobility, sensory experience, and rudimentary emotions. What the Torah considers life however only came with the addition of a Divine soul. God blew his breath into man's nose, and he came “alive”. The Hebrew term for soul, *neshama*, reflects this origin for it comes from the root *neshima*, meaning breath. The soul is the “breath” of God.

The Torah clearly wishes to convey the fundamental nature of the relationship between God and man. Breath is the basis of life. The breath of the Creator connotes the basis of His “life.” Such a concept seems odd when applied to the Creator, the source of all existence. The meaning becomes clear when we realize that the Torah specifically associates the term “life” with physical expression of spiritual essence. The breath of God refers to the basis of His expression and connection with physical reality. When the Torah states that God breathed a living soul into man, it means that, as the Creator took on physical expression through the act of creation, man became the focus of that expression.

This definition of life also explains why man came to “life” only with the infusion of a Divine soul. This soul gave the man the ability to speak. Speech is the most rarified form in which spiritual essence takes on particular physical expression, and as such is the bridge across which the spiritual realm actually enters physical reality. God “breathes” through man, for man is the one through whom the Creator connects with his creation. We are man only when we fulfill this role, and every dimension of human experience offers its own unique opportunity for doing so. Whether through prayers to the Creator, contemplating the Divine root of our own being, relating to the image of God which is everyone, [or through *halacha*], we must always strive to connect the finite physical world to its Infinite Source.

The soul is to the body as a rider is to a horse, or a driver is to a car. Once we know who we are – a soul placed in a body – then we have the opportunity to fulfill the purpose of life: to perfect our bodies and souls, and develop closeness to God. The body is a *means* to fulfill this purpose, and not an *end* in itself (see Morasha class *Body and Soul*).

PART B. FREE WILL

The co-existence of a body and a soul is what gives us free will – the ability to choose between the impulses of the body and the longings of the soul. By using our free will correctly, we earn our perfection ourselves rather than being given it directly by God. As such, it becomes more intrinsic to our being and is therefore an even greater fulfillment of God's desire to give than had He just made us perfect to begin with (see Morasha class *Free Will I*).

1. **Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Derech Hashem (The Way of God) 1:2:1-2 – This world is an opportunity to earn the greatest good – attachment to God.**

God's purpose in Creation was to bestow of His good to another... His wisdom therefore decreed that the nature of this true benefaction be His giving created things the opportunity to attach themselves to Him to the greatest degree possible for them.

God's wisdom, however, decreed that for such good to be perfect, the one enjoying it must be its master. That is, he must earn it for himself...

הנה התכלית בבריאה היה להיטיב מטובו ית' לזולתו...
על כן גזרה חכמתו שמציאות ההטבה האמיתית הזאת
יהיה במה שינתן מקום לברואים לשיתדבקו בו ית',
באותו השיעור שאפשר להם שיתדבקו...

ואולם גזרה חכמתו, שלהיות הטוב שלם, ראוי שיהיה
הנהנה בו בעל הטוב ההוא. פירוש - מי שיקנה הטוב
בעצמו...

2. **Ibid., 1:3:1 – We are here with the challenge of earning perfection.**

As we have discussed, man is the creature created for the purpose of being drawn close to God. He is placed between perfection and deficiency, with the power to earn perfection.

Man must earn this perfection, however, through his own free will and desire. If he were compelled to choose perfection, then he would not actually be its master, and God's purpose would not be fulfilled.

It was therefore necessary that man be created with free will. Man's inclinations are therefore balanced between good and evil, and he is not compelled toward either of them. He has the power of choice, and is able to choose either side, knowingly and willingly, as well as to possess whichever one he wishes. Man was therefore created with both a *yetzer tov* (good inclination) and a *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). He has the power to incline himself in whichever direction he desires.

כבר זכרנו היות האדם אותה הבריה הנבראת לידבק בו
ית', והיא המוטלת בין השלימות והחסרונות, והיכולת
בידו לקנות השלימות.

ואולם צריך שיהיה זה בבחירתו ורצונו, כי אילו היה
מוכרח במעשיו להיות בוחר על כל פנים בשלימות, לא
היה נקרא באמת בעל שלימותו, כי איננו בעליו, כיון
שהוכרח מאחר לקנותו, והמקנהו הוא בעל שלימותו,
ולא היתה הכונה העליונה מתקיימת.

על כן הוכרח שיונח הדבר לבחירתו, שתהיה נטיתו
שקולה לשני הצדדים ולא מוכרחת לאחד מהם,
ויהיה בו כח הבחירה לבחור בדעת ובחפץ באיזה מהם
שירצה, והיכולת גם כן בידו לקנות איזה מהם שירצה.
על כן נברא האדם ביצ"ט ויצ"ר, והבחירה בידו להטות
עצמו לצד שהוא רוצה.

Furthermore, these correct choices make a statement to others (and ourselves) that God's will, the way He wishes us to direct our lives, is more important than anything else. And when people see us making these choices, we might inspire them to do the same (Morasha class *Kiddush Hashem*).

PART C. RESEMBLING GOD'S KINDNESS

We perfect ourselves by using our free will to be like God. While the basic act of using our free will makes us God-like (see *Nefesh HaChaim* 1:1-3), we also become like Him by acting in ways similar to Him, the perfect Giver. God is infinite and has no needs from this world. The whole creation is an altruistic act of loving-kindness. Just as God is a Giver, we strive to become givers as well (Morasha class *Being Like God*). For this reason, acts of loving kindness are central to Jewish life (Morasha class *The World was Established for Chesed*).

1. **Rambam (Maimonides), Sefer HaMitzvot, Positive Mitzvah # 8 – Being like God means incorporating His character traits – compassion, graciousness and righteousness – into one's personality.**

We are obliged to resemble God to the best of our ability, as it says, "You should go in His ways" (Devarim 28)...just as God is compassionate, you should be compassionate. Just as God is gracious, you should be gracious to others.

והמצוה השמינית היא שצונו להדמות בו יתעלה לפי יכלתנו והוא אמרו) דברים כח (והלכת בדרכיו...ובא בפירוש זה מה הקדוש ברוך הוא נקרא רחום אף אתה היה רחום מה הקב"ה נקרא חנון אף אתה היה חנון...

By resembling God's attributes of kindness we come closer to Him (see Morasha class *Being Like God*).

2. **Devarim 13:5 with Rashi – Cleaving to God is achieved through acts of kindness.**

Follow after the Lord, your God...and cleave to Him.

Rashi: "Cleave to Him" – [this means:] cleave to His attributes: Bestow kindness, bury the dead and visit the sick, just as God does.

אחרי ה' אלוקיכם תלכו...ובו תדבקון.

רש"י: "ובו תדבקון – הדבק בדרכיו: גמול חסדים, קבור מתים, בקר חולים כמו שעשה הקב"ה.

Developing the trait of kindness is therefore seen as one of the primary purposes of our existence (See Morasha class, *The World was Established for Chesed*).

3. **Rabbeinu Yonah, Sha'arei Teshuvah (The Gates of Repentance) 3:13 – Making an all-out effort to assist others is one of man's main tasks in life.**

One is obligated to toil in exerting himself to the depths of his very soul, on behalf of his fellow man, be that person rich or poor. *This is one of the most crucial and important things that man is called upon to do.*

חייב אדם לטרוח בעמל נפשו על תקנת חבירו אם דל ואם עשיר וזאת מן החמורות ומן העקרים הנדרשים מן האדם.

PART D. DIVINE PROVIDENCE

We become more God-like by incorporating His traits into our personalities. However, the great variety of human personalities and life circumstances creates diverse individual challenges in our duty to emulate God.

To ensure that we all have a maximum opportunity to fulfill life's purpose, Judaism says that God directs all events and influences in our lives perfectly (Morasha class *Hashgachah Pratit* and *Toward Understanding Suffering & Adversity*).

1. **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Handbook of Jewish Thought, Vol. 2, 19:3 – All created things exist only for man's sake and serve as an environment in which God can guide him.**

God created this planet and all that is on it for the sake of man. As a result, His providence extends to man in a very particular and individual manner. Every deed of man is weighed, every hair measured, and every bruise counted, leading each man toward the destiny for which he was born.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ≈ Jewish life is beautiful, profound and guided by a purpose: to perfect our body and soul and form a close relationship with God.
- ≈ God has given us both a body and a soul, and therefore we have free will to choose which aspect of ourselves to develop. When we use our free will correctly – to develop our spiritual side – then we earn our perfection and closeness to God.
- ≈ Practically speaking, this self-perfection is achieved by shaping our personality and actions to be like God, Who is the perfect Giver. For this reason, acts of loving-kindness are central to Jewish life.
- ≈ To ensure that we all have the maximum opportunity to fulfill life's purpose, God directs all events and influences in our lives perfectly. He then gives us the ability to choose how to respond and thus earn our own perfection.

SECTION II. CORE BELIEFS

Try and ask people, "What are your core beliefs?" and you're likely to get a blank stare.

Oh, I'm not aware of too many things, I know what I know, if you know what I mean

Philosophy is a walk on the slippery rocks

Religion is a light in the fog

I'm not aware of too many things, I know what I know, if you know what I mean, d-doo ya?

("What I Am" lyrics, Edie Brickell & New Bohemians)

Judaism asks us to wake up! To contemplate the purpose of our short years on this earth. Judaism deems a few core beliefs as central to fulfilling the purpose of life. These fundamentals include such basics as the belief in God and in the Divinity of the Torah. Jews have always taken a stand and made responsible decisions about their core beliefs.

PART A. MONOTHEISM

One of the main tenets of Judaism is the belief in God. How do we know that He exists, that He created the world, that He continues to be involved with it, and that He gave us the Torah?

The universe exhibits such mind-boggling evidence of orderliness and design that the possibility of randomness or chance occurrence is unfathomable. This evidence is taken as a proof of the existence of an Intelligent Designer of the world. Furthermore, since nothing finite creates itself, the finite nature of the world – the fact that it has a beginning and an end – clearly points to a creator. We call the creator of the world “God” (see Morasha class, *Developing and Strengthening Belief in God*).

1. **Otzar Midrashim, Temurah 7 – Everything has a creator; the world is no different.**

A heretic once asked Rabbi Akiva, “Who created the world?” Rabbi Akiva answered, “The Holy One, Blessed be He.” The heretic said, “Show me clear proof.”...Rabbi Akiva asked, “Who wove your shirt?” The heretic replied, “A weaver, of course!” Rabbi Akiva said, “I don’t believe you. Prove it to me.” The heretic answered, “What’s there to prove? Don’t you know that it was a weaver?” “And don’t you know that God made His world?... Just as a building testifies to the existence of the builder and a garment testifies to the weaver...so too the world testifies to the existence of the Creator.”

ומעשה שבא מין ואמר לר' עקיבא העוה"ז מי בראו
א"ל הקב"ה, א"ל הראיני דבר ברור, א"ל למחר תבא
אלי, למחר בא אצלו א"ל מה אתה לובש, א"ל בגד,
א"ל מי עשאו, א"ל האורג, א"ל איני מאמינך הראיני
דבר ברור, א"ל ומה אראה לך ואין אתה יודע שהאורג
עשאו, א"ל ואתה אינך יודע שהקב"ה ברא את עולמו...
כשם שהבית מודיע על הבנאי והבגד מודיע על האורג
והדלת על הנגר, כך העולם מודיע על הקב"ה שהוא
בראו.

God is without physical form, is not bound by time, and is infinite. All of existence depends on Him. Since He makes the universe out of Himself (there was no cosmic hardware store before creation), we say that there is no existence but Him (see Morasha class, *The Jewish Understanding of God*).

2. **Rambam, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah (The Laws of the Fundamentals of Torah) 2:9 – Every entity in the world is sustained directly by God.**

All of the entities of the world...from the primordial form at creation to the smallest insect under the ground – everything exists from His absolute existence.

כל הנמצאים... מצורה הראשונה עד יתוש קטן
שיהיה בטבור הארץ הכל מכח אמתתו נמצאו.

PART B. THE TORAH AND ITS STUDY

Furthermore, we know that God communicated to humanity the purpose of life and the instructions for how to achieve that purpose (Morasha classes *Evidence for Torah MiSinai*). These instructions for living are a body of wisdom called the Torah. The intensity with which the Torah is cherished and studied ensures that we will fulfill the purpose of our creation. (Morasha class, *Torah Study: The Foundation of Jewish Life*).

1. **Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim 4:11 – Since the Torah is the blueprint and origin of this world, keeping the world going necessitates continued involvement in Torah.**

Therefore, the primary source of life, light, and existence of all the worlds is the involvement of the Jewish people in Torah study.

ולואת עיקר חיותם ואורם וקיומם של העולמות כולם
על נכון הוא רק כשאנחנו עוסקים בה כראוי.

A particular segment of humanity – the Jewish people – have been issued a higher calling and responsibility,

to be a “light unto the nations” and a shining example of ethical monotheism (Morasha class, *The Chosen People*). Within the Jewish people, every individual is responsible to carry a part of the national mission (Morasha class, *Taking Responsibility*). If someone is unaware what his particular mission is, or even deliberately abandons it, it is *always* possible to discover it or re-dedicate oneself to it (Morasha class *Teshuvah*).

PART C. THE RESPONSIBLE CHOICE

There are strong arguments in support of these two basic core beliefs of Judaism – belief in God and the Divinity of the Torah (see the series of Morasha classes on *Developing and Strengthening Belief in God* and *Evidence for Torah MiSinai*). However, no argument can prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that God exists or that He gave the Torah, for such proof would thwart the maintenance of our free will. Does this mean, then, that it is impossible to be convinced of the existence of God? Can we only offer arguments but produce no proof?

The decision whether or not to believe in God must be approached responsibly. It is a decision that affects not only what we believe, but also how we will choose to live our lives. If there is a Creator and Designer of our world, then it matters what He has to say about how we should and should not act. It is of utmost importance then that the decision be made responsibly.

1. **Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb, DovidGottlieb.com, Living Up to the Truth (1996), p. 18 – Judaism is both a matter of theoretics and of decision.**

Religion is both a matter of theoretics (Is there a God? Did He reveal himself at Sinai? Did He create the world in such and such a fashion? What is the nature of the soul?) and a matter of decision. Religion is in part a matter of how one chooses to live. Soon it will be the Sabbath. You will have to decide – shall I light up a cigarette or shall I not light up a cigarette? During the week you will have to decide – shall I have a cheeseburger or shall I not have a cheeseburger? These are life decisions. The criterion for making a life decision responsibly is to make the decision on the basis of high probability of truth vis-à-vis alternatives. A person who waits for the Cartesian standard to be fulfilled, a person who waits for an absolute refutation of all possible alternatives, is a person who is not behaving responsibly.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ≈ The universe exhibits complexity and orderliness that is antithetical to randomness. The astounding order of the world is clear evidence of an Intelligent Designer. Furthermore, since this finite universe could not have created itself, it was created by an infinite Creator we call “God.”
- ≈ God is non-physical, is not bound by time, and all of existence depends on Him. Since He makes the universe out of Himself, we say that there is no existence but Him.
- ≈ The purpose of life and the instructions were communicated by God to humanity. These are called the Torah and are studied with great joy and intensity.
- ≈ There are many arguments in support of core Jewish beliefs, but when it comes down to it we all have free will. However, since religion is not just a matter of belief but also a matter of conduct, we seek to make the most responsible decision about how to live our lives.

SECTION III. JEWISH CALENDAR

The hyper-business of keeping up with technology is overwhelming. Many of us can't tell when our personal time ends and the workday begins (or vice versa). We blast off emails like our hair is on fire; we quickly skim the surface of information online just to ingest something, anything; and we even obsess over friends on social networks (not to mention battle feelings of jealousy). It's no wonder, then, that the tag line for Microsoft's new mobile devices is, "a phone to save us from our phones."

I know how it feels to be slogging through digital quicksand, because I've been there. And some days I am still there. (Daniel Sieberg, Five Steps to Escape Digital Slavery, money.cnn.com)

Running on the digital hamster wheel? Every wonder where it's all going? The Jewish year offers a rich tapestry of moods, emotions and insights. And it's a welcome escape from the hamster wheel routine. But first we need to understand how Judaism sees time:

1. Events on the Jewish calendar are "places" in time. Just as each physical place has unique resources and opportunities, so too each event on the calendar affords the possibility of spiritual, emotional and physical enrichment. There are days when different spiritual energies are available, for example: happiness, freedom or wisdom. One who is aware of the possibilities will gain from the prospects of the time.
2. Time is not a straight line, nor is it a circle of yearly repetition. Rather the Jewish view of time is a spiral. Each year we pass through the same places in time, but we're on a higher level due to the growth and maturity over the last year (Morasha class *Introduction to the Jewish Calendar: Holiness in Time*).

1. **Rabbi Shalom Noach Brezovsky, Netivot Shalom, Vol. II, p. 189 – Each festival contains its own spiritual essence.**

Each of the Jewish festivals carries a spiritual gift with it, one that gives us inspiration throughout the entire year. This "gift" is the special essence of the festival.

לכל חג משלושת הרגלים יש את סגולתו המיוחדת,
המאירה ליהודי לכל השנה, והיא עיצומו של חג.

Apart from the yearly holidays, we also travel through a weekly cycle and encounter Shabbat once a week. What is it that we can find in these "places" in time?

PART A. SHABBAT (EVERY FRIDAY SUNSET UNTIL SATURDAY NIGHTFALL)

The message of Shabbat is that the world has a Creator that runs it. We demonstrate this by resting from various forms of creative physical activities, enjoying festive food, wearing beautiful clothes, praying, and studying Torah. The opportunities of the day are: (1) gaining awareness that we humans don't run the world, which leads to (2) experiencing an inner sense of peace and (3) obtaining clarity about the purpose of our daily lives.

1. **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Radical Then, Radical Now, p. 130 – Rest as a spiritually creative endeavor is a uniquely Jewish phenomenon.**

The Sabbath was a totally new institution in human history, and at first no one else could understand it...Neither Greeks nor Romans could understand the idea that rest is an achievement, that the Sabbath is Judaism's stillness at the heart of a turning world, and that it was *this* that God had created on the seventh day.

PART B. PASSOVER (MARCH/APRIL, 15-22 NISSAN)

Passover is the time of the creation of the Jewish nation as God's chosen people. After enduring 210 years of slavery in Egypt, they were given freedom amidst a blaze of miracles, including the Ten Plagues and the Splitting of the Sea. This experience transformed a former slave people into a new nation under God's guiding hand. We re-tell and re-live this story from the *Haggadah* (lit. the narration) on Seder night, the first night of Passover. The opportunities of these days are: (1) to identify ourselves with our exalted status as God's chosen people, (2) to attain inner freedom from our own personal "Egypt," and (3) to sensitize ourselves to God's hand in history and in our personal lives.

1. **Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu, Vol. II, p. 18 – Pesach is not only a celebration of historical freedom, but also a time to find freedom for our own souls.**

This time of year, Pesach-time, is not only a commemoration and celebration of a historical event. Rather, this time every year is also a spiritually auspicious and opportune time to fight for the freedom of our souls.

הזמן הזה אינו תאריך היסטורי גרידא לחוג בו חגיגת שמחה שעברה, אלא שמדי שנה בשנה הנו זמן בו מסוגלים אנו ללחום למען חירות נפשנו.

PART C. SHAVUOT (MAY/JUNE, 6 SIVAN)

In contrast to Pesach, Shavuot is the day of the creation of the Jewish people in terms of our spiritual heritage as the bearers of the Torah. On this day the Jewish people stood at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah from God. After celebrating freedom on Passover, we celebrate the purpose of that freedom on Shavuot.

1. **Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim 4:11 – If there would be even a single moment when Torah would not be studied anywhere in the world, the entire world would cease to exist.**

The indisputable truth is that if the entire world would be devoid, for even one moment, of our involvement in and study of the Torah, all the worlds would be instantly destroyed and would become an empty void, God forbid.

והאמת בלתי שום ספק כלל שאם היה העולם כולו מקצה עד קצהו פנוי ח"ו אף רגע אחד ממש מהעסק והתבוננות שלנו בתורה, כרגע היו נחרבים כל העולמות, עליונים ותחתונים, והיו לאפס ותהו ח"ו.

The period between Pesach and Shavuot is called the Counting of the Omer/Sefirat Ha'Omer, and is a 49-day growth process from freedom to purpose.

PART D. THE THREE WEEKS AND TISHA B'AV (JULY/AUGUST, 17 TAMMUZ UNTIL 9 AV)

Profound historical mistakes in our relationship with God and our fellow Jews resulted in national tragedies that led to the establishment of these days of mourning, fasting, and self-improvement, ultimately intended to ensure we avoid repeating these mistakes.

PART E. ROSH HASHANAH (SEPTEMBER, 1 TISHREI)

Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the Jewish year. It is known as the Day of Judgment, since all of the coming year's resources are decided on this day, including one's life, prosperity, and opportunities for spiritual growth. On Rosh Hashanah we coronate God as King and acknowledge that we each have a personal

mission within His Kingdom. We blow the shofar and eat apples and honey. The opportunities of the day are: (1) to recognize that God is the CEO, and to make a “proposal” so that He will invest in us in the coming year, and (2) to recreate ourselves, just as the first man, Adam, was created on this day.

1. **Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Mishnat Rabbi Aharon, Vol. II, p. 196 – Rosh Hashanah is a chance for us to recreate ourselves.**

The definition of Rosh Hashanah is the renewal of reality...and so too] God gives a person the power to renew himself. It is as if he was created this very day!

גדרו הוא התחדשות במציאות... נתן הקב"ה לאדם כח של התחדשות, והוא בבחינת אדם חדש כאילו היום נברא...

PART F. YOM KIPPUR (SEPTEMBER, 10 TISHREI)

Yom Kippur is a joyous yet serious fast day at the culmination of the Ten Days of Repentance that began on Rosh Hashanah. Whereas Rosh Hashanah affords a global perspective of our role in the world, Yom Kippur is the day wholly dedicated to intense personal improvement. The opportunity of the day is *teshuvah*, the process by which a person returns to his true essence and re-establishes his relationship with God.

PART G. SUKKOT (OCTOBER, 15-23 TISHREI)

Sukkot is an eight-day festival characterized by outdoor sukkah-huts in which we eat, sleep and socialize. In doing so, we relive the huts that the Israelites dwelled in during their forty years of wandering in the desert. The “Four Species” of plants are also waved together each day. The opportunities of Sukkot are: (1) to experience and internalize the immense joy of living a purposeful life, and (2) to strengthen our trust in God’s protection by living in a flimsy hut rather than in a sturdy house.

1. **Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, Akeidat Yitzchak, Emor, p. 130 – Our focus should be on accumulating spiritual wealth.**

We go out into a small sukkah that has only the basics – some food, a bed, table, chair, and lamp. Living simply for a week inspires a person to put materialism in perspective... for over-involvement in physical pursuits reduces genuine achievements.

ויוצאין אל סוכה קטנה זו אשר אין בה רק ארוחת יום ביומו ועל הרוב מטה ושלחן וכסא ומנורה, שהוא התעוררות נפלא שלא יתעסק האדם להרבות מאלו הקניינים ... כי הנה המרבה בענייני העולם הזה ממעיט בקניינים האמתיים.

PART H. CHANUKAH (DECEMBER, 25 KISLEV – 2 TEVET)

The eight nights of Chanukah lights celebrate the miraculous victory of a small Jewish group against the Syrian-Greek army. It also commemorates the miracle of the tiny flask of oil that lasted eight days in the Temple in Jerusalem. On a deeper level, Chanukah represents the *spiritual* survival of the Jewish people against all odds and affords us the opportunity to re-dedicate ourselves to a higher cause.

PART I. PURIM (MARCH, 14 OR 15 ADAR)

Purim celebrates the miraculous arrangement of events that saved us from a Persian plan to annihilate the Jews (300 BCE). These dramatic events caused the Jewish people to rededicate themselves to Torah and

brotherly love. To celebrate, we give charity and gifts, read the Megillah, wear costumes, and enjoy a festive meal. On a deeper level, Purim represents the national survival of the Jewish people in exile and faith in God's unseen protection. It affords us the opportunity to see God's hidden hand in our lives.

1. **Rabbi Shimshon Pincus, Purim, Ch. 2 – Purim reminds us to see God in the natural world.**

Where does one find more intense love: in Passover or in Purim? On Passover God raised us over the entire world, but on Purim we discover God in every nook and cranny of the natural world.

היכן רואים יותר אהבה בפורים או בפסח? בחג הפסח הרים אותנו הקב"ה מעל העולם, אבל בפורים אנו מגלים את הקב"ה בכל נקודה ונקודה של טבע.

SECTION IV. SPIRITUALITY & KABBALAH

My grandfather believed that our world is a manifestation of a miraculous invisible world. As a computer engineer, my world is different from my grandfather's. But my fellow technicians and I share a belief in an invisible world that is no less miraculous than my grandfather's, and many would say, no less evident of a beneficent God.

I was demonstrating some graphics software during a "career day" event and had just closed a window on the screen. "Where did the picture go?" asked an inquisitive boy of 13.

"It's in memory." There was a puzzled look on the boy's face. "It means that the picture is now stored in a different way and in a different place."

"OK, where is it?"

Drop down into the next world.

"Not where, what. It's not a picture anymore, it changed when I closed the window; transformed like a butterfly going back to a caterpillar. It's an arrangement of bits now, each consisting of millions of electrons."

"Can I see the electrons?"

And into another world. "Um, sorry. Any attempt to see them changes, in a random way, what you're trying to see. It's like trying to grab smoke."

"How do you know they're really there?"

"By their effects. They're detectable in how they influence other things."

When all is said and done, I'm not so far from my grandfather. It's possible to leap from a visible world we sense, to an invisible one we can detect but never really "see," but is real nevertheless. The vast majority of the world is invisible. We perceive this indirectly. All of our doings, petty and otherwise, are built on a foundation that runs very deep. We would do well to remember, with awe, the worlds that exist just out of sight. (Invisible Worlds, Fil Yeskel, aish.com)

Jewish spirituality begins with understanding that there is an invisible essence to a person deeper than his outward appearance. The same is true of the world as a whole, and even of time.

PART A. THE JEWISH VISION OF SPIRITUALITY

The great pioneer in this field was Abraham, who understood that all of existence has a single essence and Creator, whom we call God.

1. Bereishit (Genesis) Rabbah 39:1 – Avraham looks at the world and realizes that it must have an owner.

It is like a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a mansion on fire [without anyone coming to extinguish the flames]. He wondered, “Is it conceivable that the mansion is without a caretaker?” Thereupon, the owner of the mansion appeared to him and said, “I am the owner of this mansion and its caretaker.”

Similarly, because Avraham our father wondered, “Is it conceivable that the world could be without a caretaker?” the Holy One, Blessed be He, appeared to him and said, “I am the Master of the universe and its Caretaker.”

אמר רבי יצחק משל לאחד שהיה עובר ממקום למקום, וראה בירה אחת דולקת אמר תאמר שהבירה זו בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו בעל הבירה, אמר לו אני הוא בעל הבירה.

כך לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם אומר תאמר שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו הקב"ה ואמר לו אני הוא בעל העולם.

But the Jewish path to spirituality goes a step further. Abraham's revolutionary step was that although one should try to perceive God, it is a higher level to actually *resemble* God in character by acting as a giver and shaping the world according to God's plan (Morasha class *The Jewish Vision of Spirituality*).

Where does Kabbalah fit in? Kabbalah is the study of the interaction between the physical world and its deeper, underlying essence. Since the Torah is the blueprint from which the world is created, every Torah concept also has a deeper, underlying essence. For example, the Kabbalah identifies at least four layers of meaning to every Torah concept, ranging from the simple to the esoteric. Correspondingly, there are also four worlds, ranging from the physical to a world that borders on the infinite (Morasha class *Kabbalah*).

2. Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Kuf Lamed Chet Pitchei Chachmah (138 Gates of Wisdom) 30:1 – The goal of Kabbalah is to understand the purpose of Creation and how God is guiding it toward its ultimate perfection.

The wisdom of the Kabbalah is to understand how God's infinite will runs the finite universe, why He created every creature, what He wants from them, what will happen at the end of history, and how all the fascinating cycles of history are to be explained.

כל חכמת הקבלה היא לדעת הנהגתו של הרצון העליון, על מה ברא כל הבריות האלה, ומה הוא רוצה בהם, ומה יהיה סוף כל סיבובי העולם, ואיך מתפרשים כל הגלגולים האלה אשר בעולם, שהם כ"כ זרים ...

PART B. PROPHECY

Since we lack organs that can sense and access the spiritual world, an authentic understanding of it has to be received via a process called prophecy, in which God communicates directly with mankind. The path to prophecy begins with Torah study and character perfection. To qualify as a true prophet one has to predict a future event that is confirmed by a Jewish court of law (Morasha class *Prophecy*). For regular folk like us, Jewish spirituality can be accessed by studying the writings of the prophets and the Torah Sages.

1. **Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 7:1 – Developing wisdom, self-restraint, and knowledge.**

Prophecy only comes to one who is very wise; one who has control over his character traits; one whose evil inclination does not control him at all but overcomes it through his intelligence at all times; and one who is extremely knowledgeable.

... ואין הנבואה חלה אלא על חכם גדול בחכמה, גיבור במידותיו, ולא יהיה יצרו מתגבר עליו בדבר בעולם אלא הוא מתגבר בדעתו על יצרו תמיד, והוא בעל דעה רחבה נכונה עד מאוד.

PART C. REINCARNATION

So what does Jewish spirituality say about a person's inner essence? A person's inner essence is his soul. It exists before a person is born and is placed into the fetus soon after conception. At a person's passing, the soul is separated from the body and continues to live in the Soul World. If a person's soul is not yet perfect following his efforts in this world, he may be reincarnated into a new body and life situation so that he will have further chances (Morasha class *Reincarnation*).

1. **Mishnah Berurah, Sha'ar HaTziyun 622:6 – We have the responsibility to perfect our soul; if not in this lifetime, then the next.**

A person may experience recurring thoughts of despair about ever improving as a person and will thus continue acting in a certain way. He'll conclude that if God decrees that he dies because of his shortcomings, there is nothing he can do about it. However, this is wrong... The soul will be reincarnated again in this world... until the correction is achieved.

כי האדם חושב כמה פעמים לייאש את עצמו שאין יכול לתקן בשום אופן ועל כן יתנהג תמיד באופן א', ואם יגזור עליו הקב"ה למות ימות. אבל טעות הוא, שסוף דבר יהיה... ויבא עוד פעם ופעמים לעולם הזה ... לתקן.

PART D. THIS WORLD AND THE NEXT

Parallel to the individual's journey to perfection, humanity and the Jewish people are also on a journey. The journey is divided into three phases: 1) This World, 2) The Messianic Era, and 3) The World to Come.

We are currently in This World, which is the present world of opportunity to attain perfection. It will last up to 6,000 years and we are presently in the year 5772. At the appropriate time decided by Divine wisdom, and in response to the actions of the Jewish people, this phase will end with the arrival of the Messiah.

The Messiah (Mashiach) will be a Torah scholar and recognized world leader who will rebuild the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and return the Jewish people to the Land of Israel (Morasha class *Centrality of the Land of Israel*). He will introduce a long-awaited, utopian era of world peace and prosperity in which spiritual truth and Torah wisdom will be clear to all (Morasha class *The Messiah*).

Following the Messianic Era will begin the World to Come, a world in which the souls of mankind will be resurrected in physical bodies. Based on the choices a person made while alive, God will grant each body/soul unit a precise reward in actualization of its full potential. Both body and soul will forever enjoy the infinite delight of closeness to God – the pleasure for which they were created (Morasha class *The World to Come*).

1. **Ramchal, Mesillat Yesharim (Path of the Just), Ch. 1 – The delight of attachment to God in the World to Come is the very purpose of Creation.**

Our Sages have instructed us that man was created for the sole purpose of reveling in the Eternal and delighting in the splendor of the Divine Presence, this being the ultimate joy and greatest of all pleasures in existence. The true place for this pleasure is in the World to Come, which was created solely for this purpose.

והנה מה שהורנו חכמינו זכרונם לברכה הוא, שהאדם לא נברא אלא להתענג על ה' ולהנות מזיו שכינתו שזהו התענוג האמיתי והעידון הגדול מכל העידונים שיכולים להמציא. ומקום העידון הזה באמת הוא העולם הבא, כי הוא הנברא בהכנה המצטרפת לדבר הזה.

SECTION V. THE JEWISH LIFECYCLE

Perhaps our generation is one that has seen more change than any other. And change means that ideas about life – from birth to death and everything in between – lack definition.

Just before Valentine's Day this year, Sunday Styles did something very unromantic: we asked college students nationwide to tell the plain truth about what love is like for them. We weren't sure what to expect, but we thought we wouldn't receive many essays about red roses and white tablecloths.

When the contest deadline passed seven weeks later, more than 1,200 essays had arrived, from 365 schools in 46 states and Puerto Rico. In perhaps typical collegiate fashion, nearly 700 poured in on the last day, 400 over the final hour.

We counted only three red roses among them. As for the more complicated stuff, and the uniquely 21st century struggles – those we got by the hundred. They told us the truth about what love was like for them in this age of 24/7 communication, blurred gender roles and new attitudes about intimacy and dating.

*I was a handsome,
technology-savvy
prince – online.
Roger Hobbs*

*For my generation
casual is attractive
caring is creepy.
Joel Walkowski*

*When would I see him
after his trip?
That was a loaded question.
Marguerite Fields*

(Modern Love College Essay Contest 2011, New York Times, nytimes.com)

In contrast to the fuzzy attitude towards life in the “21st Century struggle,” Judaism encourages us to master the art of living in all phases of the human experience. For the Jew, life is an exciting journey. It is marked by special and clearly defined destinations. The Jewish lifecycle events give direction and meaning to the human journey, on the personal, family and communal level.

PART A. BRIT MILAH (COVENANT OF CIRCUMCISION)

When a healthy baby boy is eight days old, he receives a Brit Milah, a physical reminder of the 3,800-year-old covenant the Jewish people have with God. It also symbolically represents the purpose of life, in that

each person is born incomplete and is meant to perfect himself through his own actions (Morasha class *Brit Milah*).

1. **Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, Nedarim 31a – The definition of *brit*.**

Every [time] *brit* [appears in the Torah it] is translated as *something that has permanence*. This is because through Brit Milah one has an [ongoing] relationship with God, just like any two people who have a covenant between them.

כל ברית תרגומו "קיימא" וזה מפני כי ע"י הברית יש לו חבור עם הש"י כמו שנים שיש להם ברית ביחד.

PART B. BAR & BAT MITZVAH

At age 12 and 13, girls and boys respectively become Bat or Bar Mitzvah. From now on they are full-fledged adults, being spiritually accountable to do mitzvot and make correct free-will choices. Just as this young adult's physical body is growing and changing, so too is his *yetzer tov*, his good inclination, activated. From this point he now has the capacity to choose between good and evil, between the spiritual and the material (Morasha class *Bar & Bat Mitzvah*).

1. **Rabbi Elazar Menachem Shach, Thoughts of Elders, p. 342 – The Bar Mitzvah is the true celebration of one's birthday.**

This is the underlying theme of a Bar Mitzvah: a person becomes obligated in mitzvot, and by means of mitzvot he is able to acquire eternal life, such that every year does not diminish his lifetime but rather increases it, and even in death he is considered to be alive... This is the greatest of all joys.

וכך הוא כשיהודי נעשה בר מצוה הוא נעשה אדם הוא מתחייב במצוות ועל ידי קיום המצוות הוא קונה את עולמו ואז לא יורד לו מחייו אלא אדרבה הוא מוסיף חיים וגם במיתתו הוא נקרא חי... וזהו האושר הגדול ביותר.

PART C. THE JEWISH VIEW OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE

There are almost no human drives stronger than love and sexuality. Within a Jewish marriage, these drives are developed, become holy and are guided by time-tested Torah wisdom. A Jewish marriage helps a person become a giver, which is the source of true happiness and the path to generating love for another. The marriage is the means to fulfill the mitzvah to procreate, to build a Jewish family and become a building block for a peaceful world (Morasha class *The Jewish View of Marriage*).

1. **Talmud Bavli, Sotah 17a – The appropriate union of man and woman is worthy of God's Presence.**

Rabbi Akiva taught: When a man and woman are worthy of it, God's Presence is found between them...

דריש ר"ע איש ואשה זכו שכינה ביניהן...

Dating and Relationships

Dating and forming relationships are the path toward this lofty goal of love and marriage. Judaism recognizes that infatuation can ignite a relationship, but only real love based on mutual giving can keep it

going. To this end, avoiding touching during dating, while difficult if you are not used to it, actually creates the space where each person's essence can come to light. Judaism teaches that in dating, we should look for a person with good character, humility, a desire to grow, and warmth. Additionally, there should be mutual attraction (Morasha class *Dating Jewish Style – The Search for a Soul Mate*).

2. **Maharal, Derech Chaim, ibid – Some level of personal completion is needed before dating can begin.**

Until the age of eighteen, a person is not complete in his own right; therefore he need not attempt to further complete himself through marriage, which is to be built upon a preexisting complete person... Once he has reached the age of eighteen and is a fully developed human being... he can further complete himself through marriage.

כל זמן שאינו בן שמונה עשרה אינו שלם בעצמו... לכך אינו צריך להשלים עצמו באשה שהיא תוספת יותר על עצמו. אבל כאשר הוא בן שמונה עשרה, שכבר נשלם עצמו... יש לו להשלים עצמו באשה.

Celebrating a Jewish Wedding

With the joy and excitement of the wedding day begins the journey of re-uniting two halves of the soul that were originally one. The husband signs a *ketubah* (marriage contract) promising to cherish and care for his wife. At the wedding canopy (*chuppah*), many have the custom that the bride circles the groom seven times. Subsequently, the groom gives his bride a ring, a glass is broken, and then the dancing and celebrations begin!

3. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur I, p. 246 – Bringing happiness to the couple brings God's Presence to their new home.**

What is [the significance of] the mitzvah to bring joy to the bride and groom? Besides the aspect of endearing the bride to the husband, there is also a mitzvah to be among those who help to bring God's Presence into the home that is now being established. For "God's Presence only dwells amidst joy!" (Berachot 31a, Rosh)

ומהי המצוה לשמח חתן וכלה- מלבד מה שיש בה גמילות חסד "לחבבה על בעלה,"- אם לא זו: להיות מן העוזרים להוריד את השכינה לתוך הבית הנוסד זה עתה, שהרי "אין השכינה שורה אלא מתוך שמחה!" (ברכות לא, א וברא"ש שם)

PART D. DEATH, MOURNING AND BURIAL

Judaism provides a meaningful and structured approach to mourning that involves three stages (7 days, 30 days, and 1 year). When followed carefully, these stages guide mourners through tragic loss and pain, gradually easing them back into the world.

On a deeper level, death is the start of a new process in which the soul lives separately from the body in the World of Souls (Morasha class *Death, Mourning and Burial*).

KEY THEMES OF SECTION V

In Judaism, life is an exciting journey with special destinations:

- ≈ Brit Milah: at eight days old a baby boy receives a Brit Milah as a physical reminder of the 3,800-year old covenant the Jewish people have with God.
- ≈ Bar & Bat Mitzvah: at age 12/13, girls/boys become adults, being spiritually accountable to perform mitzvot and make correct choices.
- ≈ Dating & Relationships are the path toward the goal of love and marriage. Defining who you are and avoiding touching during dating help the process.
- ≈ Marriage: in a Jewish marriage the drives for love and sexuality are developed, sanctified and guided by time-tested Torah wisdom.
- ≈ Celebrating a Jewish Wedding: re-uniting two halves of the soul begins with the husband signing a *ketubah* and culminates with dancing and celebration.
- ≈ Death & Mourning: Jewish mourning provides three stages that gradually ease the mourner back into the world.

SECTION VI. MITZVOT

The Torah is the instruction book for life, and its mitzvot are the framework. In the context of the purpose of life – perfecting our bodies and souls and forming a close relationship with God – the positive mitzvot make our soul healthy and bring us closer to God. The negative mitzvot prevent damage to the soul and remove any blocks between us and God (Morasha class *The Mitzvot & Why They Are Detailed*). There are generally two arenas for mitzvot: the man-God relationship and the man-man relationship. In this section we discuss mitzvot between man and God and in section VIII we will turn to those between man and his fellow.

1. **Rabbi Jeremy Kagan, *The Choice to Be*, Feldheim Publishers, pp. 3-4 – Judaism is a holistic way of life built on a system of action.**

The way people connect is through relationships; that is as true of our connection to our Source, the Creator, as any other connection we make... Pen pals are nice but don't last, because the connection never goes beyond ideas. A husband can tell his wife he loves her, but if he doesn't do something that conveys that love, the relationship will inevitably flounder. This is not only because there is something missing in what he receives. It is also because without actual deeds, the self we commit to the relationship is critically deficient. Full relationships need actions to incorporate our physical energies. And those actions must also give expression to our spiritual root so that it too is joined to the other. But how can we know what actions will accomplish this when our spiritual self lies beyond our conscious reach?

We turn to the Torah for guidance. In fact the word "Torah" comes from the root *horaah* which means to teach in a practical way – to guide. Though Torah conveys an understanding of reality that is deep beyond measure, it is essentially a book of commands to action – mitzvot. Obviously, those mitzvot assume and manifest all the spiritual depth that is in the Torah. When we are required, for example, to give charity, it is not as a utilitarian band-aid to inequity – God can take care of his poor. Rather, it is because giving charity profoundly impacts the nature of our humanity.

In general, when fulfilling a command out of obedience, we are nullified to its commander; our action becomes a vehicle of his will, endowing it with his intention. In case of the Torah's mitzvot, obedience invests our action with the Creator's purpose, a spiritual content which transcends human understanding. The mitzvot of the Torah thus bind our spiritual root to our awareness and physical being, fostering a relationship of our whole self with our Source, the Creator.

But just as an assembly of disjointed acts cannot form the basis for a relationship between two people, so a bunch of random commandments cannot form the basis for a relationship between man and God. Torah is not a mere jumble of mitzvot. Rather the mitzvot are a system through which a relationship with the Creator develops and takes on physical expression. Understanding the relationship we are striving to form with the Creator and our overall responsibilities in achieving it requires that we grasp all the mitzvot together as a structured whole – i.e. what they are about as a system.

PART A. PRAYER

Prayer is the mitzvah of talking to God. It is the “service of the heart” where we express our amazement at creation, vulnerability in the face of challenge, and gratitude for all that we have. On a deeper level, since God knows the future and what's best for us, we are not trying to change Him. Rather, we are trying to change *ourselves* (Morasha classes *Overview of the Shemoneh Esrei; The Shema*).

1. **Ohr Yechezkel, Darchei Avodah p. 97 – The prayers themselves provide a framework to enable a person to develop himself and reach new levels.**

Prayer is not merely the recitation of certain words, rather its goal is to change a person, and enable him to grow from one level to the next...

ואין התפילה אמירת פרקים וכדומה, אלא מטרתה להפוך אותו ולשנותו ממדרגה למדרגה...

One can pray at any time, in any place, in any language, and under any circumstances. Nonetheless, it is most powerful when done at certain times of day, in a synagogue, in the original Hebrew, and with a group (Morasha class *The Beit Knesset: The Jewish Communal Spiritual Connector*).

PART B. OTHER MITZVOT

Other mitzvot help us connect to God in our day-to-day life, like tefillin (phylacteries) in the morning, *brachot* (blessings) before we eat, and *tzitzit* throughout the day. The mitzvah to eat only kosher food prevents our earthly body from acting as a barrier to our Godly soul. In total there are 248 positive mitzvot and 365 negative mitzvot! (Morasha classes *Tefillin, Why Keep Kosher, and Mezuzah*)

1. **Talmud Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud), Peah 1:1 – The difference between a priceless jewel and a mezuzah.**

The Parthian king, Artibon, once sent a priceless jewel to Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi (Rebbi). He asked that he send him something in return. Rebbi sent him a mezuzah. The king said, “I sent you something precious, and you sent me something that can be bought for a paltry sum.” Rebbi answered, “You sent me something that I must watch over; however, I have sent you

ארטבון שלח לר' הקדוש חד מרגלי טבא אטימיטון א"ל שלח לי מילה דטבא דכוותה שלח ליה חד מוזהא א"ל מה אנא שלחי לך מילה דלית לה טימי ואת שלחת לי מילה דטבא חד פולר א"ל חפציך וחפצי לא ישווה בה ולא עוד אלא דאת שלחית לי מילה דאנא מנטיח לה ואנא שלחי לך מילה דאת דמך לך והיא מנטרא לך דכתיב (משלי ו) בהתהלךך תנחה אותך וגו'.

something that will watch over you.”

Why are there so many mitzvot? And so many details to each one? Just as the human body is complex, the human soul is also complex – if not more so. There are many ingredients to physical health and many details to the science of medicine. Similarly, there are many ingredients to spiritual health – the mitzvot – and many details to the science of the soul – which is Torah.

2. Chofetz Chaim, Introduction to Shmirat HaLashon – The 613 mitzvot correspond to the anatomy of the body and the soul.

It is known that every person has 248 spiritual organs and 365 spiritual sinews, and on them are “clothed” the 248 physical organs and 365 physical sinews...

Corresponding to this, God gave us 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments, which relate to these organs.

ידוע הוא דכל אדם יש לו רמ"ח איברים ושס"ה גידים
רוחניים, ועליהם מלבשים הרמ"ח איברים ושס"ה
גידים גשמיים ...

וכנגד זה נתן לנו הקדוש ברוך הוא רמ"ח מצוות עשה
ושס"ה לא תעשה, והם מחלקים גם כן על האיברים...

KEY THEMES OF SECTION VI

- The mitzvot are the do's and don'ts in our relationship with God. They are also the actions that nourish our soul and prevent damage to it.
- Prayer is the mitzvah of talking to God. It is an exercise in which we change and align our deepest desires with the plan of creation.
- Other mitzvot help us connect to God in our day to day life. In total there are 613 mitzvot corresponding to the 613 parts of the body and soul.

SECTION VII. THE SYSTEM OF HALACHAH – JEWISH LAW

In almost all human systems, the people make the law. In Judaism, it is different. The law makes the people. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888)

The process of determining how to apply the mitzvot to every life circumstance is the system of *halachah* (Jewish law – lit. the way to walk). The process begins with a Torah scroll which contains all 613 mitzvot as they were dictated by God to Moses (Morasha class *Revelation of the Torah*).

1. Devarim 4:9-14 – At Sinai, God revealed Himself to the entire Jewish people. He instructed Moshe to teach the mitzvot to the people.

You approached and stood at the foot of the mountain... Then God spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sounds of words, but saw no

ותקרבון ותעמדון תחת ההר וההר בער באש עד לב
השמים חשך ענן וערפל. וידבר ה' אליכם מתוך האש
קול דברים אתם שמעו ותרמונה אינכם ראיתם וזולתי

image; there was only a voice...God commanded me at that time to teach you the rules and laws, so that you will keep them in the land you are crossing into, to occupy.

קול... ואיתי צוה ה' בעת ההוא ללמד אתכם חקים ומשפטים לעשותכם אתם בארץ אשר אתם עברים שמה לרשתה.

But the Five Books of Moses contain only 79,847 words. How can it explicitly account for every one of your life circumstances, let alone for all of humanity throughout history?

The answer: the Oral Torah. Alongside the written dictation to Moshe, was a non-written, oral explanation from God. It explains each mitzvah's principles and the details of its practical application. The relationship between the Written and Oral Torahs has been likened to that of notes to a lecture: the notes are concise but they contain coded information and principles that were transmitted orally. (Morasha class *Necessity, Advantages and Accuracy of the Oral Torah*).

2. **Shabbat 31a – Without an oral transmission one does not even know how to read the Hebrew alphabet!**

Our Rabbis taught: A certain non-Jew once said: "...Convert me to Judaism on condition that you teach me only the Written Torah"...He went before Hillel, who accepted him. On the first day, Hillel taught him, "Aleph, bet, gimmel, dalet..." The following day he reversed the order to him. "But yesterday you taught me differently!" he protested. [Hillel said] "Must you then not rely upon me? Then rely upon me with respect to the Oral [Torah] too."

ת"ר מעשה בנכרי אחד... גירני ע"מ שתלמדני תושב"כ... בא לפני הלל גיריה יומא קמא א"ל א"ב ג"ד למחר אפיך ליה א"ל והא אתמול לא אמרת לי הכי א"ל לאו עלי ידי קא סמכת דעל פה נמי סמוך עלי.

The Oral Torah is transmitted orally, from person to person. Originally, at Sinai, Moshe told it to the Elders, who then told it to their sons and daughters. Each Rabbi tells it to his students. And it continues to the present day in a living chain stretching back 3,300 years to Sinai.

Accuracy of transmission is ensured by cross-checking with the written Torah and with people from the previous generation. Along the way, notes were written down to maintain accuracy. Eventually the Oral Torah was published in condensed form in the works of the Mishnah (200CE) and the Talmud (500 CE) (Morasha class *The Chain of Torah Transmission*).

3. **Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 54b – The Oral Torah we have today began with Moshe hearing it from God, and then telling it to the nation.**

How did Moshe teach Israel? Moshe would learn from the mouth of the Almighty. Aharon would enter and Moshe would teach him the chapter. Aharon would then sit to Moshe's left. Then Aharon's sons would enter, and Moshe would teach them the chapter. They would then sit to the left and right of Moshe...The elders would enter and Moshe would teach them the chapter. Then they would sit on the sides.

כיצד סדר משנה? משה למד מפי הגבורה, נכנס אהרן ושנה לו משה פירקו. נסתלק אהרן וישב לשמאל משה. נכנסו בניו ושנה להן משה פירקו, נסתלקו בניו, אלעזר ישב לימין משה ואיתמר לשמאל אהרן... נכנסו זקנים ושנה להן משה פירקו, נסתלקו זקנים, נכנסו כל העם ושנה להן משה פירקו. נמצאו ביד אהרן ארבעה, ביד בניו שלשה, וביד הזקנים שנים, וביד כל העם אחד. נסתלק משה, ושנה להן אהרן פירקו וכו'.

The rest of the nation would enter and Moshe would teach them the chapter. Thus Aharon had four lessons, Aharon's sons had three, the Elders had two and all the people had one lesson. Then Moshe would get up, and Aharon would teach everyone the chapter. [And the process would continue until everyone had heard it 4 times.]

Today, a Torah scholar is anybody who has mastered the Talmud (it has 2,711 pages!) and has studied under a rabbi who is part of the chain going back to Sinai. He must also be a model of integrity and character refinement.

4. **Sifri on Devarim 1:13 – A Torah scholar has integrity and is a living role model of the Torah's ideals.**

"You shall have men of wisdom and understanding" – What is the definition of a wise man?...One who practices what he studies.

הבו לכם אנשים חכמים ונבונים - איזהו חכם...
המקיים תלמודו.

Each Jew has a mitzvah to study the Torah and Jewish law and fulfill the precepts. Whenever questions arise in Torah law, we are instructed to seek out a learned scholar or attempt to answer the question ourselves from a study of the relevant texts. Consulting a Torah scholar or reading their works is the only way to know and understand the details of mitzvah observance. (Morasha classes on *Rabbinic Authority, The Concept and Dynamics of Machloket – Dispute, The Halachic Process and Codification of Jewish Law*).

KEY THEMES OF SECTION VII

- ⌘ Determining the details of each mitzvah is the system of halachah and begins with Written Torah which was dictated by God to Moses.
- ⌘ Alongside the written dictation to Moses, was a non-written, oral explanation from God. It explains each mitzvah's principles and details.
- ⌘ The Oral Torah is transmitted from parent to child, Rabbi to student, and continues to the present day. You can learn how to apply it to everyday life by studying from a Torah scholar who has mastered the Talmud and has studied under a rabbi who is part of the chain going back to Sinai.

SECTION VIII. BEIN ADAM L'CHAVERO – INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Who was the famous Roman philosopher who protested the killings in the Coliseum in Athens? No one. (Rabbi Motty Berger, Jerusalem)

The Bible has been the Magna Carta of the poor and oppressed; down to modern times. No state has had a constitution...in which the duties so much more than the privileges of the rulers are insisted upon ...Nowhere is the

fundamental truth that the welfare, in the long run, depends on the righteousness of its citizens, so strongly laid down. (Gabriel Sivan, *The Bible and Civilization*, 1973, pg. 77)

Judaism's guidelines for interpersonal relationships are inspiring and exquisitely sensitive. Every person is created "in God's image," and is therefore unique, of inestimable value, and essentially good.

PART A. JUDGING FAVORABLY

Since the essence of people is good, we must interpret their actions positively instead of instinctively focusing on their faults (Morasha class *Taming the Inner Critic*).

1. Pirkei Avot 1:6 – We are enjoined to judge others favorably.

Judge each person favorably.

והוי דן את כל האדם לכף זכות.

PART B. WATCHING WORDS

In speech, we are called upon to speak positively of others. In fact, so powerful is our speech that speaking negatively about others is prohibited, unless there is a direct constructive benefit. Even *listening* to negative speech about others is forbidden unless it is relevant to you, for example, regarding a potential business partner (Morasha class *The Stunning Power of Speech*).

1. Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, Arachin 15a, s.v. v'nimtzaḥ – Speech is man's defining essence and can affect him positively or negatively.

The essential definition of man is a living being who speaks ... Therefore, someone who slanders another ... transgresses with his speech, which is his essence. [On the other hand, if he speaks properly] he perfects his essence.

וזהו צורת האדם שהוא חי מדבר. ולכך המוציא שם רע... שחטא בדיבור אשר הוא צורת האדם, ועל ידו הוא אדם שלם.

PART C. LOVING OTHERS

Aside from maintaining a positive attitude toward others and speaking positively about them, the mitzvah to love others extends to action as well. Judaism requires us to *act* lovingly: to visit the sick, host guests, return someone's lost property and to give charity, no matter how poor we may be (Morasha classes *Love Your Neighbor as Yourself*, *Visiting the Sick*, *Hospitality to Guests*, *Tzedakah*).

1. Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 127a – Hospitality to guests is even greater than being in the Presence of God.

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav, "Welcoming guests is greater than greeting the Divine Presence."

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: גדולה הכנסת אורחים יותר מהקבלת פני השכינה.

Mutual love has been a key to Jewish unity throughout our challenging history. The family of the Jewish people is also bound by a spiritual pact: we are all accountable for each other's growth and development. It is

an honor to pass this responsibility and privilege to one's children.

2. **Rabbi Moshe Cordevero, Tomer Devorah, Chap. 1 – All the members of the Jewish people are like one body.**

The entire Jewish People is intimately connected, like parts of the same body, by virtue of the fact that all of their souls are bound together... This is the reason that "all Jews are responsible for each other" [Shevuot 39a].

כל ישראל הם שאר בשר זה עם זה מפני שהנשמות כלולות יחד... וכן מטעם זה כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה...

So all-encompassing is Judaism's beautiful approach to relationships, that it covers everything from honesty to confidentiality, from business ethics to medical ethics. As one historian noted, while the Romans were throwing people to lions for entertainment, the Sages were teaching mutual love and instituting the world's first social welfare systems (Morasha classes on *Ethics*).

PART D. PERSONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Love for others is only possible if one has a measure of *self-love*, as the verse says, "Love your fellow as yourself." Genuine self-love comes from embarking on a program of self-development and growth. This program consists of the 613 mitzvot which gradually shape and refine a person's personality (Morasha class *Judaism and Personal Growth, Controlling Anger*).

1. **Vilna Gaon, Even Shleimah 1:2 – What is life for if not for character refinement?**

The prime purpose of man's life is to constantly improve his character traits. If not, why is he alive?

עיקר חיות האדם הוא להתחזק תמיד בשבירת המדות, ואם לאו – למה לו חיים?

Since every person is unique, everyone has a unique mission that is expressed not only in his spiritual pursuits but also in his day-to-day work life. Detecting this mission, moving toward it and appreciating the tools at your disposal are the keys to genuine happiness and self-esteem (Morasha class *Defining One's Role in Life, The Jewish Vision of Happiness*).

KEY THEMES OF SECTION VIII

- ⌘ Judaism's distinctive guidelines for interpersonal relationships are expressed in thought, speech and action – judging others positively, speaking positively of them, and performing kind acts such as hosting guests and giving charity.
- ⌘ Judaism also requires a person to generate self-esteem, self-love and genuine happiness by embarking on a program to perfect his character and emulate God.

SECTION IX. JEWISH SURVIVAL – OUR HISTORY AND DESTINY

Asked to make a list of the men who have most dominated the thinking of the modern world, many educated people would name Freud, Einstein, Marx and Darwin. Of these four, only Darwin was not Jewish. In a world where Jews are only a tiny percentage of the population, what is the secret of the disproportionate importance the Jews have had in the history of Western culture?

- Ernest van den Haag, *The Jewish Mystique*, Dell Publishing Company, pg. 13

Even by non-Jewish accounts, Jews have made an impact on history and generated leaders in far disproportion to their numbers. Why is this so?

Being Jewish means that we descend from spiritual super heroes and moral visionaries. For example, Abraham was a role model of kindness and rational thinking in an age of brutality and superstition (Morasha class *Avraham Avinu*). His descendent, Moshe, was the world's most inspiring educator and leader, and yet he was humble and had a stutter.

Jewish leadership is built on quality of character, not on popularity or political power. Some of the required qualities are: wisdom, compassion for others, readiness to take action, patience, humility, seeing the good in everyone, and generally having a refined character (Morasha classes on *Jewish Leadership*).

1. **Pirkei Avot 2:5 – When the hour calls for it, Judaism requires that we all be ready to become leaders.**

In a place where there are no leaders, strive to be a leader.

ובמקום שאין אנשים השתדל להיות איש.

Being Jewish also means that we are descended from a rich and glorious past. Today, the rich tapestry of Sephardic, Chasidic and Lithuanian Jewry is testimony to the indestructible and creative Jewish spirit that has survived holocaust and inquisition. Indeed, the fact that we're still here is living proof of the miracle of Jewish survival and our supernatural status of being "a light unto the nations" (Morasha classes *Pivotal Events in Jewish History*).

2. **Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (pp. 292-3) – Jewish survival cannot be explained by natural forces.**

We have already quoted the judgment of a sociologist that "by every sociological law the Jews should have perished long ago"; to which we may now add that of a noted philosopher, Nicholas Berdyaev: "The continued existence of Jewry down the centuries is rationally inexplicable."

If what these facts and judgments attest to is true and Jewish history and achievement *have* been atypical, there are two possibilities. Either the credit belongs to the Jews themselves, or it belongs to God. Given this alternative the Jews instinctively turned the credit God-ward. One of the striking features of this exceptional people has been their refusal to see anything exceptional in themselves *as people*... The only alternative was that it had come from God's special grace. Thus it is that a concept which looks at first to have been prompted by national arrogance [i.e., the Chosen People] turns out to be the humblest interpretation of the facts they saw coming their way.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IX

- ≈ Jewish leadership is built on quality of character, not on popularity or wealth. We all need to be prepared to be leaders should the situation arise.
- ≈ Jewish history is filled with a rich and glorious past, and is headed toward a bright future. Our very presence today is living proof of the miracle of Jewish survival and our special role in history.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHAT ACCORDING TO JUDAISM IS THE PURPOSE OF LIFE?

The purpose of life is to perfect our body and soul and to form a close relationship with God, the single Source of all existence. Judaism says that our true essence is the Godly soul, placed in an earthy, animal-like body. We perfect ourselves by becoming like God, Who is the perfect Giver.

WHAT DOES JUDAISM STAND FOR? WHAT ARE ITS CORE BELIEFS?

Since this finite universe could not have created itself, it undoubtedly was created by an infinite source we call “God.” God is non-physical, not bound by time, and is the Source of all existence. The instructions for living were communicated by God to humanity. These laws for living are called the Torah and are studied with great joy and intensity.

ANOTHER JEWISH HOLIDAY CELEBRATING “WE FOUGHT; WE WON; LET’S EAT”?

Not quite. Each Jewish holiday has its own unique message and spiritual opportunities. For example, Passover and Shavuot celebrate the physical and spiritual creation of the Jewish people respectively. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are times to begin again and re-examine our lives. And every seven days, Shabbat reminds us Who created the world and Who runs it.

WHY IS JUDAISM SO FOCUSED ON MITZVOT AND DETAILS?

Just as the human body is complex, the human soul is also complex – if not more so. Therefore, perfecting the human soul is complicated and detailed. The soul also matures, and the Jewish lifecycle events guide a person through this process.

Another answer is that the goal of life is to form a close relationship with God, and as with every relationship, it's the details that count. You wouldn't say about your spouse, “She wouldn't mind either roses or weeds; after all, they're both plants!”

IS JEWISH LAW JUST MADE UP BY THE RABBIS?

No. Determining the details of each mitzvah is the system of halachah. It begins with the Torah, the Written Law which was dictated by God to Moses. You can learn how the principles and details of every mitzvah are derived by studying the Oral Torah.

Torah scholars are those who have mastered the Oral Tradition and have studied under a rabbi who is part of the chain going back to Sinai.

WHAT DOES JUDAISM TEACH ABOUT CREATING SUCCESSFUL INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS?

It begins with realizing that every person is created “in God’s image,” and is therefore unique, of inestimable value, and essentially good.

Relationships are expressed in thought, speech and action – judging others positively, speaking positively of them, and acting kindly.

Dating and relationships are the forerunner to marriage which is built on mutual giving and realizing that husband and wife are two halves of a soul that is now reuniting.

RECOMMENDED ADDITIONAL READING

Gateway to Judaism, Rabbi Mordechai Becher, ArtScroll Publishers

Living Inspired, Rabbi Akiva Tatz, Targum Publishers

Permission to Believe, Rabbi Lawrence Kelemen, Targum Publishers

Permission to Receive, Rabbi Lawrence Kelemen, Targum Publishers

The Choice to Be, Rabbi Jeremy Kagan, Feldheim Books

The Jewish Self, Rabbi Jeremy Kagan, Feldheim Books

The Informed Soul, Rabbi David Gottlieb, ArtScroll Publishers

Worldmask, Rabbi Akiva Tatz, Targum Publishers

WEBSITES

www.aish.com

www.innernet.org.il

www.simpletoremember.com