



Chapter Eight

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Torah and Mitzvot

Torah and Talmud—

So How Many Torah's Do We Actually Have?

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Q) What is the Torah?

A) The word “Torah” is related to two Hebrew words: hora’ah (a teaching) and ohr (light). So from the start, two powerful ideas are encoded in the word that describes this unique document: that the Torah is going to teach us something, and it is going to bring light and clarity into our lives. The Torah is sometimes called the Five Books of Moses because Moses was prophetically taught every word of the Torah by God over a forty-year period and he wrote it down precisely as it was dictated to him. (Hold that question: we talk about prophecy elsewhere in this book!) The Written Torah is divided into five main sections, which is why the Hebrew term Chumash (Five Books) is often applied to it.

In part, the Torah relates world history, from the creation of mankind, through to the stories of the lives of many key

historical figures in the ancient world. It then details the formation of the Jewish People as a nation and follows them until they enter the land of Canaan (later to be renamed Israel). So in total, the Torah covers around 2,488 years of world history.

But don't make the mistake of thinking the Torah is a history book. The Torah may tell you a lot about Jewish history, but it isn't an account of all historical events, nor is that its purpose. It is a history of human accomplishments and tragic failures, basically a history of people. That's why the Torah spends very little time discussing the creation of the universe (only a few pages) and quickly begins discussing people and what they achieved, whether good or bad.

We consider the Torah God's manual for mankind, a User's Guide for the humans he placed in His universe. So the Torah also contains a good deal of law, rules to make civilization work in a way that is productive, fair, and pleasant for everyone. Some of those laws are meant for all mankind; others are for Jews alone.

When Moses received the Written Torah (the five books) he also received an Oral Torah, which he did not write down. All of this happened 3,326 years ago in the Sinai desert after the Children of Israel left Egypt and were en route to settle in the Land of Israel.

Q) Why was the Torah given to the Jewish People outside the Land of Israel?

A) Israel would have seemed like the perfect place for the Torah to be given! Israel is the holiest land, the Torah is the holiest item; it makes sense. In addition to that, around half of the mitzvot can be performed only in Israel. So why would God give such a special gift as the Torah outside of Israel?

Let's imagine the opposite scenario; that the Torah had been given in Israel. What understandable mistake do you think most people would have made? They might have thought that keeping the laws of the Torah applies only if you are residing in Israel, but not if you live outside its borders.

For example, a US citizen is subject to American laws when in the US. If you were to go to England, for example, you would be permitted to drink alcohol legally at the age of 18 years and not adhere to the US age minimum of 21.

So had the Torah been given in the land of Israel, you might have concluded that if you were to leave Israel, for even a short while, the mitzvot would not apply to you—which, of course, is the furthest thing from the truth. And of course, when God gave us the Torah, He knew that the Jewish People would someday be exiled from Israel, scattered all over the globe. Giving us the Torah outside of Israel sends a clear signal that the Torah is an international law for all Jews, no matter where they find themselves.

Q) Why were the “Ten Commandments” given on two tablets? Couldn't all Ten Commandments have been written on one large block?

A) It is no coincidence that the Ten Commandments were given on two different blocks of stone. The first block contains five commandments that express the relationship between God and the Jewish People. The second block has the other five commandments that create civilized behavior between people.

So they look like this when laid out:

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| 6. Do not murder. | 1. I am the Lord your God. |
| 7. Do not commit adultery. | 2. Do not worship idols. |
| 8. Do not steal. | 3. Do not take God's Name in vain. |
| 9. Do not be a false witness in a court of law. | 4. Keep the Shabbat day holy. |
| 10. Do not covet other people's possessions. | 5. Honor your father and mother. |

The reason that the commandments were not written on one big block is because our relationship to God and our relationship to one another are equal. So as not to imply priority of one set of laws over the other, God told Moses to take two equally sized blocks, and put them side-by-side, as if to say your relationship to your fellow Jew is equal to your relationship to God.

Another reason the two tablets were put side-by-side: not only is there a vertical connection between the commandments (commandments 1-5 connecting us to God, and 6-10 concerning relationships between each of us to each other), but also a horizontal relationship between the two tablets. That means commandment 1 connects to commandment 6, 2-7, 3-8, 4-9 and 5-10.

Let's work through these five connections, and see how the fact that they face each other reflects how they are connected to each other as well:

Commandment One: I am the Lord your God

Commandment Six: Do not murder

Connection: Acknowledgment

We believe in the existence of God, and we acknowledge the human right to life. We don't have the right to kill people for no reason, (as opposed to self defense, which would be a reason) because it is God Who gives life, and God Who decides when to take it away.

Commandment Two: Do not worship idols

Commandment Seven: Do not commit adultery

Connection: Exclusivity

By worshipping idols, we are being unfaithful to God. And by committing adultery we are being unfaithful to our marriage partners. We are expected to have an exclusive relationship with God and with our life partner too.

Commandment Three: Don't take God's Name in vain

Commandment Eight: Do not steal

Connection: Respect

By not honoring God's Name, such as using it to swear purposelessly or falsely in a court of law, we are treating Him with disrespect. It's as though we are taking something which does not belong to us for our own selfish purposes. This connects to stealing other people's things (which in the Ten Commandments refers to kidnapping, by far the worst thing to steal—a person's freedom) and using it for your own purposes. In both these examples, the thief is showing disrespect to God by "stealing" His Name, and to his fellow man, by taking away his freedom.

Commandment Four: Keep the Shabbat

Commandment Nine: Don't be a false witness

Connection: Truth

The Torah tells us to keep Shabbat for two reasons: because God created the heavens and the earth in six days and rested on the seventh, and because we were slaves in Egypt until God took us out to become a free nation. By keeping Shabbat once a week, we are testifying to these truths. Just as a person testifies truthfully in a court of law about what he saw, and does not falsely testify about what he didn't see, so too the Jewish People are God's witnesses: we testify to the world once a week that God created the heavens and earth and made us a nation.

Commandment Five: Honor your father and mother

Commandment Ten: Don't covet

Connection Appreciation

When you are appreciative for everything your parents have done for you, you are honoring them. From changing your diapers, to feeding you, to giving you a roof over your head, to the education they gave you, there's a lot to be grateful for. So the Torah tells you not to covet what others have; honor your parents and don't desire other people's parents and life circumstances, believing that with those parents, your life would have turned out so much better. The parents you were given was not a coincidence. God chose them for a reason to be your parents!

Your parents are also what make you Jewish! Judaism is passed down from generation to generation. You could covet other people's religions and beliefs. The Torah says, therefore, that you should honor your Judaism (a gift from your parents) and don't stray after other people's spiritual achievements:

you have been given the correct spiritual tools to achieve the goals intended for you!

Q) What is the difference between the Torah and Tanach?

A) Tanach is an acronym of three Hebrew words: Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim. These are the three parts of the Torah (that comprise what we refer to as the Bible):

1. Torah: The Five Books of Moses; dictated by God to Moses, the greatest of all prophets.
2. Nevi'im: The books of the prophets (for example Isaiah and Jeremiah), who wrote of their prophetic experiences during the time that the Jewish People lived in the Land of Israel.
3. Ketuvim: The books of other holy writings, such as the Psalms of King David and the Purim Megillah.

Q) What is the Talmud?

A) Imagine a really important piece of family history, information that you heard from your father, who heard from his father and he heard from his father, going back many generations. Now imagine that the original giver of this information forbade writing it down. It had to remain oral. That is the Talmud.

Together with the Written Torah (the Five Books of Moses) Moses transmitted an Oral Torah to the Jewish People, the Oral Law—which clarifies the written laws. This was meticulously handed down generation after generation until it was codified in the written Mishnah in the second century C.E. (in a process that continued for several centuries until approximately 500 C.E., culminating in the Talmud). All Jewish law is based on both the Written Law and its explanatory Oral Law. The more commonly studied Talmud was redacted

in Babylonia, and hence called the Babylonian Talmud; the one redacted in Israel is called the Jerusalem Talmud.

The Oral Torah details each of the 613 mitzvot in the Torah. It also contains anecdotal accounts, philosophy and much more. Because it was not written down, it was imperative for each generation of Jews to interact with the next generation to transmit this vital information. Fathers would have to communicate with their sons, mothers with their daughters, teachers with their students.

This system engages every Jew in a discussion of what the Torah is all about. If the Torah had only been a written document without any further oral elaboration, it would sit on the shelf as an encyclopedia, which could be read without communication—and certainly without the warmth, passion and importance of human interaction. The Oral Torah ensures that the Torah remains an organic and growing reality, with each generation contributing to its growth and dissemination.

The Talmud is infinitely deep with many layers of meaning, from the most simplistic to the most profound. Some people spend months or even years studying only a few pages in incredible depth. Even though it was eventually written down, the Talmud is intentionally worded in such a way that it is nearly impossible to understand it without a teacher, ensuring that the oral traditions of its meaning will be imparted.

Q) Why is the Talmud sometimes referred to as Shas?

A) Shas is an acronym of the two Hebrew words *shishah sedarim*, meaning “six orders” (or sections). The entire Talmud is divided into six sections:

1. *Zeraim*: Dealing with the subjects of blessings, tithes, and agricultural law.

2. Moed: Dealing with the laws of Sabbath and the holidays.
3. Nashim: Dealing with questions of marriage, divorce, and vows.
4. Nezikin: Dealing with monetary matters, courts of law, ethics and idolatry.
5. Kodashim: Dealing with the Temple service and kashrut.
6. Tohorot: Dealing with questions of ritual purity.

Q) My friend at work says he “does the daf” every day. What is he talking about?

A) The Babylonian Talmud is made up of thirty-eight tractates, which amount to around 2,700 pages. Many Jews do what is called “Daf Yomi,” a system of learning a “page a day.” These individuals will study alone, or with a study partner. They will go to classes, listen to CDs or learn online. It takes true dedication, come rain or shine, no matter what else may threaten to interfere they learn that day’s of Talmud. It takes seven and a half years to finish the Talmud at a rate of a page a day.

The idea of studying Daf Yomi was the brainchild of Rabbi Meir Shapiro who lived in Poland in the 1920s. He felt that if all the Jewish People would study the same page of Talmud wherever they were in the world, when they travelled to another town or abroad to another country, they could easily fit into any community and join in with their learning. Though it started small, this initiative enabled many to set aside time daily to learn the Talmud.

The Daf Yomi is now studied by tens of thousands of Jewish People all over the world. In New York and Israel, the completion of the entire seven and a half year cycle is celebrated in huge arenas where a hundred thousand Jews gather together. Similar celebrations are held in cities throughout the world,

with televised coverage at each location. Not all have studied every page, but they want to participate in this national celebration of the accomplishment of the many thousands who have earned the right to mark their “Siyum” (completion) of the Talmud. The study begins again immediately.

It’s a Mitzvah!

So Much More than a Good Deed.

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Q) What is a mitzvah?

A) Mitzvah (plural, mitzvot) is usually translated as “good deed,” but it’s much more than that. This Hebrew word is connected to an Aramaic word, tzavta which means connection. The mitzvot are the spiritual obligations you have as a Jew and their purpose is to connect you to God, to the rest of humanity and to yourself. Whether you are keeping Shabbat, eating matzah on Passover, sitting in a sukkah on Sukkot or giving charity, all of these actions fulfill commands from God to the Jewish People. All the mitzvot given by God can be found in the Torah. (The Rabbis added a few more—like lighting Shabbat and Chanukah candles, for instance.)

Technically, there are 613 Torah mitzvot—but don’t panic! No one person is meant to keep them all. You would have to be a man and a woman, as well as a Kohen (priest), and live in Israel. (Around half of the mitzvot can be done only in Israel!) You would also need to get married and divorced (Judaism isn’t happy when divorces happen, but if it becomes necessary, it is a mitzvah). Many of the mitzvot could only be performed in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed in 70 C.E.

The 613 mitzvot are divided in different ways. One of the most common divisions is by positive and negative mitzvot.

Positive mitzvot are the ones we are obligated to actively do, such as eating matzah on Passover or hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. Negative mitzvot are forbidden actions—such as not stealing or not eating on Yom Kippur. We have 248 positive mitzvot and 365 negative mitzvot, which add up to the golden number of 613.

Mitzvot can also be divided into three categories: Mishpatim, Chukim and Eidot.

Mishpatim—Judgments: The common sense laws, the kind of things you could have figured out on your own. These include any laws that are moral in nature, which make up the entire ethical structure of Judaism. Examples: not killing, not stealing, not committing adultery, giving charity.

Chukim—Statutes: These laws have no self-apparent reason. They may be considered “ritual laws” as their main function is to strengthen the bond between God and mankind. Examples: eating kosher food, not mixing wool and linen threads in the same garment.

Eidot—Testimonies: This last category falls between the other two. These commandments have no moral basis, but still have the logical purpose of strengthening Judaism by reminding us of important religious truths or events in our history. Examples: the mitzvot of tefillin, mezuzah as well as Shabbat and Jewish holiday observances.

So when the Torah says we have 613 mitzvot, it means for all the Jewish People, over the entire world, for all of Jewish history. We’re all in it together!

Q) Why are the mitzvot so detailed? Why can’t we just do a mitzvah in a general way without all the details?

A) A mitzvah works like a computer. If you are not a computer expert and were to open up a computer and see all the jumble of wires inside, you may say, “What are all these messy wires

and cables doing in here? Let's tidy this up, and cut a few away." Of course, each wire has a purpose and a function in the grand scheme of the computer workings. Removing one wire could potentially make the entire computer inoperative. If you plug the red wire into the white socket, it won't work properly.

It's pretty much the same with mitzvot. Each mitzvah has details which must be performed the right way. Without the details, you may not be fulfilling your mitzvah properly, so you're really not achieving the mitzvah. For example, on Rosh Hashanah, the shofar must be blown by day; do it at night and you have not fulfilled a mitzvah. Shabbat candles must be lit before Shabbat: light them after sundown on Friday and you've actually sinned. Light them on Tuesday and all you've done is created ambiance, but not Shabbat.

Awareness of the details of a mitzvah is our way of showing how much we love the mitzvah, and how we want it in our lives. Very much like the love between two people, the love between the Jewish People and God is in the details.

Q) If we have 613 mitzvot, why do we need those extra "Ten Commandments"?

A) The Ten Commandments were not given in addition to the 613 commandments—they are part of them. Of the 613 mitzvot God gave to the Jewish People at Mount Sinai, all of them are today written onto parchment, but some were singled out to be given in carved stone. The Torah does not refer to these anywhere as the "Ten Commandments" (that was Cecil B. DeMille's classic movie) but as the "Ten Statements." (In fact, they comprise more than ten mitzvot.) These ten statements are actual laws, but they also represent ideas related to the other commandments. They contain some of the most important principles of Jewish philosophy.

The Ten Commandments have become a symbol of the

entire Torah, and most synagogues have a representation of them somewhere in the sanctuary.

(See the question on the Ten Commandments in the Torah and Talmud chapter.)

Q) Doesn't being Jewish and observing all the mitzvot take all the pleasure out of life?

A) That depends on how you define pleasure. Pleasure comes in many forms. Eating pizza is pleasurable; so is hanging out with friends and talking sports. However, there are higher levels of pleasure too, which may take more effort to achieve. Going to the gym, for example, can be a painful and challenging experience, yet still a pleasurable one. Studying hard for an exam may not seem pleasurable at the time, but the accomplishment you feel after having achieved your grade is also a form of pleasure.

Connecting Jewishly and doing mitzvot sometimes feels like the “eating” kind of pleasure (especially on Shabbat), but it can also stimulate a higher level of pleasure. For example, helping a person in need, giving charity, and not becoming angry or vengeful when you feel justified are difficult things to do. The feeling of pleasure you experience by overcoming these bad character traits can also be a highly rewarding experience. It will stay with you longer than the taste of the pizza you enjoyed for lunch.

What makes something pleasurable? What is it about that pizza that makes it so enjoyable? What makes looking at a sunrise or sunset so inspiring? How about a piece of music you love—what makes it such a pleasure to listen to?

All pleasures have one thing in common, a unifying trait that connects them all: harmony.

Let's go back to our pizza for a moment. The deliciousness comes from the harmonizing of ingredients, just the

right proportion of cheese to the right amount of sauce. If the sauce has too much salt, you can't eat it; too little salt, and you can't taste it.

The same goes for the music. When every instrument harmonizes, the result can give you an ecstatic experience. But not everyone shares the same harmony levels: some folks prefer classical, some hard rock, and some jazz. Whatever harmonizes in your head is pleasurable to you.

So, in essence, we humans are not pleasure seekers, but seekers of harmony. And harmony can be achieved in many different ways. By performing the mitzvot, the Torah offers you the chance to enjoy every type of pleasure, and thereby find true harmony in your life. By enjoying the pleasures of this world, whether you are eating, drinking, falling in love, being intimate, creating or enjoying any other pleasure in this world, you have the potential to make that act into a holy spiritual activity and connect to God. That's why the first directive given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was that they could eat everything and find pleasure in the garden. Then they were warned to not eat from one tree (which obviously became the one they just had to try!) So too when it comes to your life and the pleasures in this world—God wants you to savor them all. The only questions that you need to answer yourself before indulging in a physical pleasure is “why, when, where and with whom?” Once you have resolved these questions according to Torah principal, you can indulge in every type of pleasure!

Q) Do all mitzvot require a physical action, or are there some I can do just by thinking about them?

A) You can fulfill six mitzvot without any physical actions all of the time! These six are done with your mind. That means

whenever you are able, and wherever you are, you can recall these six principles, and get a mitzvah for each! They are:

1. Know there is a God—Based upon the first of the Ten Commandments, belief in God is the foundation of Judaism. The Torah is telling you that your belief in God should not be based upon “blind faith,” but on investigation and knowledge.
2. Don’t believe in other gods—Based upon the second of the Ten Commandments, you are not allowed to ascribe any power to anything independent of God. Every single person has a direct connection to God; accepting any other being as a deity is a denial of the essence of Judaism.
3. Know that God is one—The first words of the Shema prayer are the source for this mitzvah: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” The greatest contribution the Jews gave the world is the concept of monotheism. One God implies one absolute truth and one system of justice and morality. God being “One” means that God is unchanging and has no partners.
4. Love God—The Torah tells us to “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all your soul and all that you possess.” Although love is an emotional pleasure, the Rambam explains that you can only love to the degree you know the object of your love. If you know a little, you will love a little; but if you know a lot, you will love a lot.
5. Fear God—Fear is not only a negative emotion, it can motivate you to achieve greatness. Fear of missing opportunities in life can motivate you to get the job done. God watches our every move and expects us to achieve a life of productivity, not wastefulness.

6. Don't be misled by your heart and eyes—With so much sensory stimulation, we are sometimes led by our desires rather than logic. In the original Hebrew, the Torah pluralizes the word “heart” to “hearts.” The idea is that we all have “two hearts” inside us. One wants to do the right thing, seek justice, be honorable and act responsibly. The other “heart” seeks fleeting satisfaction of our senses and a world of comfort. One represents the soul, the other the body. We are told to channel both of these drives in honor of God to fulfill our spiritual purpose in this world.

Being Jewish

So I'm Chosen! Chosen for What Exactly?

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Q) What is a Jew?

A) A Jew is a member of the Jewish nation. Various people through history have tried to describe the Jewish People as a race. For example, Adolf Hitler attempted to define us that way, ascribing to us certain racial features that he felt were dangerous to the pure Aryan nation he was attempting to create. The fact is that racial features, customs and ethnicities differ among Jews. We are a nation, in Hebrew—“Am Yisrael, the Nation of Israel.”

You can be considered part of the Jewish nation in two ways:

1. you were born a Jew; or
2. you can convert and become Jewish.

Both of these methods make a person and their descendants Jewish.

The Jewish People have a unique role in this world that was given to us by God. Our mission is to be a spiritual light to all the nations in the world, through our actions and behavior towards others. The rules for these actions are inscribed in our Torah, the book of Jewish law (and so much more), often called The Five Books of Moses. Most of these laws are known mitzvot (singular, mitzvah), which means simply commandments. Through these God-given mitzvot we have the ability to become “a light unto the nations,” inspiring them to live meaningful, moral lives. This concept, sometimes expressed as “the chosen people,” makes many people uncomfortable, as it is sometimes misunderstood as Jewish elitism.

But it most definitely isn't! The question is who “chose” us and for what purpose? The answer is quite humbling. At Mount Sinai, more than 3,300 years ago, God gave us the opportunity to accept His Torah, with all of its mitzvot, laws that create a singular way of life. And we chose to accept it. In doing that, He “chose” us as well, entrusting all Jews with the mission to fulfill the Torah's mandates. You could say we volunteered for this mission.

One of the finest writers of the last century, Mark Twain, wrote the following words in his essay “Concerning the Jews,” which was published in Harper's Magazine, in March 1898:

“The Egyptian, the Babylonian and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive

mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

I believe we can answer the question, "What is the secret of his immortality?" The Jewish People have an open secret: God has a plan for the world and we have a key role in bringing that plan to fruition. So the secret to Jewish immortality can be found in the Jewish mission, to bring God into the world for all the nations, and the Torah is the guide to doing just that.

Twain, (a non-Jew, by the way) realized something special about the Jewish People and their unique impact on the world. The Jew has a deep-seated desire to improve the world and make it a better place. That's what Judaism calls for, and that's what being a Jew is about.

Q) What does the word "Jewish" mean?

A) The word Jewish in Hebrew is Yehudi, which comes from the name "Yehuda" (Judah), one of the sons of Jacob. An entire tribe eventually grew out of Judah's family. The Jews lived in the Land of Israel after they left Egypt, with each of the twelve tribes assigned to a specific location in Israel. Over the course of time, various tribes were exiled from their homeland and became "lost." Most of the surviving remnants of the Jewish People were from the area around Jerusalem, the location of the tribe of Judah. Therefore, they became known to the world as Yehudim, "Jews." Because the tribe of Levi did not have one specific territory and were scattered throughout all the tribes, some of the tribe of Levi went into exile with the tribe of Judah when the Temple was destroyed. Descendants of the tribe of Levi are Jews with the added titles of Levite or Kohen.

On a deeper level, we are called Yehudim because the word is related to another word, ho'da'ah meaning grateful. (Hebrew for thank you is todah!) The Jewish People are meant to live a life of gratitude. We are grateful for all the goodness

that exists in this world. We are grateful to God for the beautiful world around us, we are grateful for our health, our families, even our shoes! You name it, we Jews try to be grateful for it. So when someone asks you what your religion is, you can answer, “I’m Jewish, we are the nation of gratitude!”

Q) Who was Abraham? Was he the first Jewish person?

A) Here is an incredible fact you probably didn’t realize: Abraham and his wife Sarah were not even Jewish! Okay, now that you’re over the shock, let me explain. The Jewish People became a nation in the Jewish year 2448 (1313 BCE). At that time, forty-nine days after leaving Egypt, we stood at Mount Sinai and received the Torah and 613 mitzvot from God.

Abraham lived hundreds of years before that event. So technically, he was not “Jewish.” So why are Abraham and his wife, Sarah, such key figures in Jewish tradition?

Abraham became the forefather of the Jewish People because he discovered that there is one God and believed in Him. Long before his time, belief in God had been handed down since Adam, but paganism gradually took hold. At first, people sought an intermediary between them and the one true God. Or they believed that some natural forces (think sun, moon, fire) were representatives of God. Eventually, however, those beliefs degenerated into full-blown idol worship, as people believed that those forces or intermediaries were actually independent powers. They found it easier to believe in gods you could see and appease through various rites.

Abraham was different. He reasoned that there could only be one power that created and controlled everything, and he did something about that belief. He developed refutations, disproving all forms of paganism of his day, and he and Sarah taught people about God. They made their home a magnet, open to everyone, eventually welcoming thousands of people

and caring for their welfare. When people asked them why they were being so kind, they explained that the one true God expects that of us!

Though considered dangerous and subversive by the political leaders (not to mention the priests of various cults) of his generation, Abraham started a powerful movement. The name “Abraham” even hints at his mission. In Hebrew, it means “Father of Many [Nations]” which is exactly what he was. He cultivated a relationship between himself and God, and between himself and many others whom he influenced. Millions of people over world history have identified with belief in one God, thanks to him.

Without Abraham, none of the world’s major monotheistic religions would exist today, and certainly not the Jewish People. We are not only direct descendants of Abraham and Sarah; we also carry and live the message they preached for their long and productive lives.

Q) Why were Jews called “Hebrews” and why aren’t they called that anymore?

A) The title “Hebrew” or Ivri was first used in connection to Abraham, the first Patriarch of the Jewish nation, for a couple of reasons. Abraham came from a place connected to that name, but the term also signifies the individualistic ideals he lived by. The word Ivri is connected to the word eiver meaning “on the other side.” Abraham was countercultural. Ivri in this context means to stand up for what you believe, even if the whole world is against you. Most people in his time worshipped idols. In defiance of his society’s paganism, Abraham preached belief in one God and spent his life going against the norm. He stood apart from them, and advocated a moral code to live by, based upon the principles of showing kindness to others—in Hebrew, chesed—and the belief in a kind God

who loves them. We, the descendants of Abraham, follow this example, as we stand up for what's right in this world, and stand against evil, even if world opinion is against us.

“Hebrews” used to refer to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, specifically through the line of their son, Isaac, who married Rebecca, and their son Jacob and his children who expanded into 12 extended families, sometimes called The Twelve Tribes of Israel. Jacob's name was changed by God to “Israel” when he returned to the Holy Land from his father-in-law, Lavan; the name expresses his ability to overcome all obstacles and attain superior status.

The Jewish People are direct descendants of Jacob. When they left Egypt at the time of the Exodus, they became known by the more popular name, “Children of Israel.” Even a convert who is not part of the bloodline of Jacob, becomes a fully fledged member of the Jewish People, and is considered and referred to as part of the Children of Israel.

Q) What's the origin of the Star of David? How did it become a Jewish symbol?

A) One of the symbols of Jews and Judaism is the hexagram, referred to as the Magen David, the Shield of David. The term is used in one of the concluding blessings made at the end of the Torah reading, as stated in the Talmud. It may relate back to the time of King David himself, who says, “You, God, are a shield for me” (Psalms 3:4).

David refers to God as his “shield.” Strangely, there is no source for this hexagram symbol in any authoritative Jewish book. Yet the symbol does appear at various points and places in Jewish history.

A Shield of David, drawn as a six-pointed star, appeared on a Jewish tombstone in Taranto, Apulia, in Southern Italy. It is thought the monument may date back as early as the third

century B.C.E. The Jews of Apulia were noted for their scholarship in Kabbalah, which has been connected to the use of the Star of David.

A siddur (prayer book) dated 1512 published in Prague displays a large hexagram on the cover with the phrase, “He will merit to bestow a bountiful gift on anyone who grasps the Shield of David.”

By the seventeenth century, the Shield of David as a hexagram began to represent the Jewish community generally. The Jewish quarter of Vienna was formally distinguished from the rest of the city by a boundary stone with a hexagram on one side and the Christian cross on the other.

Later, the Nazis would identify Jews by making them wear a yellow Star of David on their clothing. Even this loathsome usage of our beloved symbol did not lessen its beauty or importance in our eyes. The State of Israel chose to place a Star of David at the center of its flag.

The great scholar Rabbi Moshe Feinstein postulates the sign’s connection to David as follows: It is clear from a study of King David’s life that he had complete trust in God. Whenever he went to battle, he knew that God was protecting him on every side—above and below, east, west, north, and south—six directions in all. The six-pointed symbol stands for David’s true shield, God Himself! According to this, the Star of David—hallowed by centuries of traditional usage—symbolizes the eternal Jewish faith in God no matter what adversity we face.

Q) Where is Mount Sinai and what happened there?

A) Before Mount Sinai was a hospital in Manhattan, it was a small mountain in the Sinai Desert. In the Jewish year 2448, forty-nine days after leaving Egypt, the Jewish People stood at the foot of the mountain and God spoke directly to the entire

nation. Every man, woman and child heard Him and experienced a spiritual revelation. Through Moses, He gave them the Ten Commandments, a significant summary of the principles of the Torah. Before Moses' ascent on the mountain, they had agreed to keep all Torah laws, the mitzvot we still do today. This is why we are called "The People of the Book." It's five books, actually, the Five Books of Moses.

A few people have theories as to where Mount Sinai is today, but no one is certain. It's not important. What is critical to us individually and as a nation is the singular event that happened there, thirty-three hundred years ago. Every year, on the holiday of Shavuot (see chapter on Holidays) we celebrate the Divine giving of the Torah and the Jews' wholehearted acceptance of it. In this way, we relive the inspiration of the ongoing legacy of the Torah.

Q) Why is Hebrew such an important language?

A) If I asked you to name a romantic language, what would you answer? French? Italian? Can you name a very clear and precise language? English? How about a very strong and harsh language? Maybe German.

Now name a spiritual language. You probably answered Hebrew. If you didn't, let me explain what Hebrew really is. Hebrew isn't just a language; it's a code that reveals information. Most languages develop over time, when groups of people need to communicate information to each other.

Hebrew is different; God created Hebrew as a spiritual language. Hebrew was the language God used to create the world. God "spoke" and the world was created from His words. This point is hinted in the first verse of the Torah. In English, the first verse of the Bible is "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." That tells us a little, but not everything. It tells us who created: "God." And it tells us what

He created: “the heavens and the earth.” But it does not tell us how! Only the original Hebrew can reveal that important answer:

In the first Hebrew verse of the Torah there seems to be an extra word which has no definite translation. The word is *et* and it is made up of two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and not just any two letters. The first letter of word is *aleph*, which is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The second letter of the word is *taf*—which, in fact, is the very last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. We can now read the first verse with an added dimension: “In the beginning, God used the letters *aleph* to *taf* to create the world.” Incredible! God made this world using the Hebrew letters. Hebrew is the spiritual DNA that God used to create this world.

As a language devised by the Omniscient Being that created everything in the world, every word has an inner harmony and infinite, precise logic. The same Hebrew term is used for both “word” and for “object”: *davar*. That’s because the Hebrew word itself contains information about the object it describes.

For example, the Hebrew word for dog is *kelev*. The Hebrew word *kelev* can be broken down into two other words, *kol lev* meaning “all heart.” Isn’t that what a dog is, man’s best friend? Or the Hebrew word for face is *panim*, which can be vowelized differently to spell *penim*, which means “inside.” A person’s face reveals how he feels “inside.” If he smiles, you can see that he is happy; if he frowns, he is sad. That’s what a face does; it reveals your inner feelings.

So when you learn to use the Hebrew language, it becomes an incredible way to understand ideas and concepts that only God’s language can reveal. It is the key that opens many doors to understanding some of the most profound questions that exist today.

Q) Throughout history the Jewish People seem to have been persecuted and exiled more than any other nation; why is this?

A) Contrary to what you may think, Jews don't enjoy being kicked out of their host country. However, a quick review of Jewish history will reveal that we Jews have been moving around from place to place for millennia. One of the greatest miracles is that after all of our exiles, the Jewish People were not lost or simply buried in historical archives like the ancient Babylonians, Egyptians and Hittites. We are still here, and thriving as a nation.

Let's trace the journeys of the Jewish People from the beginning of the world to the present day. Take a deep breath . . .

Adam and Eve are banished from their home in the Garden of Eden. Cain killed Abel and is sentenced by God to eternal wandering. Noah and his family escaped the flood by floating in a boat for a year. (Ok, so none of those people were exactly Jewish. But they were definitely connected to God and the point is that exile was never a new idea. Every example that follows is reliably Jewish, so we're still on track.) Abraham was told to leave his home and begin a new life for himself in a new country. Jacob fled his home to escape his brother Esau who was trying to kill him. Jacob's son, Joseph, was sold by his brothers and sent from his homeland in Canaan (we like to call it Israel, though that was not its name at the time) to Egypt. Joseph's eleven brothers eventually wound up in Egypt with him.

Two hundred and ten years later, the twelve brothers' families grew into what became known as the Children of Israel. (That's because Jacob's other name was Israel.) They were the original Jewish People, even before they became a nation officially. The Jews left Egypt and walked into the desert. They spent the next forty years travelling and camping forty-two

times. They finally entered Israel and eventually, after four hundred and forty years, built the First Temple in Jerusalem. Four hundred and ten years later, the Babylonians destroyed the Temple and exiled the Jewish People from the land of Israel. They spent seventy years outside the land, following which many returned to Israel and rebuilt the Temple. After four hundred and twenty years, the Romans destroyed the Second Temple and massacred hundreds of thousands of Jews. The survivors were exiled from Israel once again.

The Jews spread out far and wide, with Babylonia remaining a major hub. Another hub of Jewish civilization eventually developed: Western Europe. Spain of the tenth and eleventh century is known as “The Golden Age.” The Jews thrived there for hundreds of years until 1492 when “Columbus sailed the ocean blue” and the Jews were forced by the monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella to either “kiss the cross” (convert to Christianity) or suffer expulsion from Spain. Though the latter choice was fraught with life-threatening peril—and included leaving their valuable possessions (except their Torah scrolls) behind—hundreds of thousands fled from Spain. A good number of them fled to Portugal (and many died on the way), where thousands were forcibly baptized five years later. Eventually Jews spread throughout Europe and the Middle East, with frequent expulsions from various countries causing waves of Jewish immigrants to seek new havens. Thus, the Jewish People emigrated to the New World and came to populate the entire globe (even China!). In every country, they were subject to hatred and violence.

This brings us to modern history, with the Holocaust of six million Jews in Europe and the killing and the expulsion of nearly a million Jews in the 1940s and ‘50s from many of the Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Lebanon and Egypt.

Why would God instill anti-Semitism so deeply in so many cultures, forcing the Jews to run from country to country? Believe it or not, it's part of our being a "chosen people," one that must live by a higher standard. Let's look at a few of the possible reasons.

Being constantly on the move throughout history, even though incredibly challenging, can have some positive effects. To begin with, it keeps us fresh, just like water that needs to be constantly moving in order to stay fresh. (Interestingly, the human body is made up mostly of water, which also needs to keep moving in order to stay healthy.)

By constantly being in a state of flux, the Jewish People never sit back and get too comfortable. We are always looking for ways to grow and achieve greatness wherever we find ourselves in the world. As we arrive at a new location, we never know how long we are going to be stationed there, so we grab every opportunity before we must move on.

The constant movement we have endured as a people has other side benefits. Here are a few of them:

1. We cannot be too dependent on physical possessions. Moving from place to place, you can't take everything with you! You are forced to limit the amount of things you have, and this helps you keep your focus on the spiritual and not just the physical things. So we learn from Jewish history that physical things are transient, and only spiritual accomplishments are everlasting.
2. We demonstrate that this entire physical world we live in is also transient! Just as your soul comes into this world for a short period of time in order to achieve its task, so too the Jewish People are constantly on the move—a living example of the soul's short stay in this world.

3. We learn not to put all our faith in nations and their governments. By putting too much trust in one nation, we sometimes forget that we should really be putting our faith in God. Exiled from country after country, we are forced to put our faith in God, and God alone, as only He is constant.

Q) Why does Judaism always bring stories and ideas from the past? Why isn't it more forward looking?

A) Let me answer this with an analogy. Imagine you are hiking on a clear path through a forest. After a while, you reach a crossroad, which allows you to proceed in three possible directions, right, left or straight. You look for a signpost. You find it, but a strong wind has blown it to the ground and you don't know which way to go. What can you do?

Well, you don't know which way to go, but you do know from where you have come. So you can lift up the sign, point the side that tells you where you came from, in the direction behind you, and the other three directions will fit in. Now you can make a choice on which way you want to go.

Once you know where you came from, you can have a better handle on where you're going. And that's why Judaism is often focused on the past. By knowing your past, you will have a better sense of where your future decisions will lead you.

Q) Do non-Jews have commandments too?

A) Sure they do, just not as many as the Jews. The Jewish People have 613 mitzvot and the rest of the world is obligated to the "Seven Mitzvot of Noah" or the "Seven Noahide Laws." They have this name because Noah (the one with the ark full of animals) was a non-Jewish prophet who preceded Judaism. Through him, God revealed these seven laws that apply to all non-Jews throughout the world. These seven laws are really

categories, with more detailed laws falling under each category. Some scholars say there may be as many as sixty-six sub-laws involved. In no specific order here they are:

1. Do not blaspheme God.
2. Do not eat a limb from a living animal.
3. Do not steal.
4. Do not indulge in forbidden sexual relationships.
5. Do not worship idols.
6. Do not murder.
7. Establish fair and just law courts.

Non-Jews who abide by the laws and spirit of these rules, acknowledging that they are from God, are fulfilling their spiritual mission in this world (and constructing a mighty fine society too!)

Q) I have always wanted to be Jewish. Since I was very young, I felt that I should be Jewish and would be one day. I am a non-practicing Catholic. Do I need to convert?

A) The short answer is that you do not need to convert. You are fine as you are. While you may feel as though you have a need, you do not actually have to convert to Judaism. If you keep the seven laws of Noah (mitzvot stipulated in the Torah for non-Jews), you can fulfill your spiritual mission in this world.

Telling you that you do not need to convert to Judaism may seem unusual coming from a rabbi. Most of the other major religions demand that a person become a follower of their faith if they want to be “saved” and make it to heaven. This is not true in Judaism; in fact, conversion is usually discouraged. For a non-Jew, keeping the seven laws of Noah is sufficient to make you a “spiritual person.”

Yet anyone who truly desires to become Jewish and fulfill the laws and principles of the Torah can convert to Judaism.

Some of the greatest Jewish heroes and heroines of Jewish history were converts or direct descendants of converts.

Jethro is considered one of the first converts to Judaism, and he was the father-in-law of Moses. King David was a direct descendant of Ruth, who started life as a Moabite princess, before converting to Judaism. Rabbi Akiva, one of the most revered and famous scholars of the Talmud, was a descendant of converts. The fact that these men and women, and many more like them, were converts does not lessen their status in Jewish tradition in any way.

In most respects, a convert is viewed as a Jew born to Jewish parents. However, since they take on a new lifestyle of mitzvot and may have possibly lost their support system of friends and family, the Torah stipulates that we reach out to the convert with extra love. He or she is considered a precious gift to our people and must be treated as such. Judaism forbids us from saying or doing anything that could hurt a convert's feelings or make him feel excluded. Even comments such as "Oh, you were non-Jewish once—what, so now you're Jewish, huh?" besides being stupid and unfeeling, are actually prohibited by the Torah.

Q) Why would anyone want to convert to Judaism? If keeping the seven laws of Noah is sufficient, why do non-Jews want to become Jewish?

A) One of my own rabbis, with whom I became close in college, was a convert to Judaism. Over the years, I have worked very closely with many young men and women who have taken the road to converting to Judaism. At one point or another, I've asked all of them why they want to convert. The incredible thing is that I have never received a clear answer from any of them! They will express some general idea about admiring

Jewish life and wanting to keep mitzvot, but rarely will they have a precise and rational answer to this simple question.

I've thought a good deal about this, and I think a possible reason is because their real motivation is not a logical calculation, but a spiritual need. To understand it, we need to go back in history.

According to Jewish tradition, the founders of Judaism, Abraham and Sarah, spent their entire lives preaching the word of God and monotheism to thousands of people. They created an entire community of followers who admired them and were committed to their beliefs. The question is: what happened to all these people? Only the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, through their son Isaac, and his son Jacob, ended up becoming the Jewish People. So what of all the others? One thing we can hypothesize about the people influenced by Abraham is that they spread the idea of monotheism to their families and children, which was the subconscious seed for the eventual widespread acceptance of monotheism throughout the world outside of the Jewish People.

But Kabbalists offer a fascinating footnote to this story. They say that the souls of Abraham's followers are reincarnated as non-Jews who become converts in future generations! But wait, there's more! Jewish tradition tells us that other nations were offered the Torah before the Jews accepted it at Mount Sinai. Each nation responded that they did not want the responsibility of accepting the Torah. Yet some individuals within those other nations actually wanted the Torah, but were "voted down" as they were in the minority. The Kabbalists once again say that all converts right through history are "sparks" of those original non-Jewish souls who wanted the Torah; but they had to be reincarnated into various generations and locations that were right for them to become part

of our people. Perhaps this is the meaning of the Talmud that the mazel of every convert was present at Mount Sinai. This is one possible spiritual reason why God scattered the Jewish People to so many countries throughout history. It was necessary to disperse the Jews over many countries and continents in order to allow potential converts to find them and become part of our nation.

So the desire for non-Jews to become Jewish is not purely rational; it's more of a spiritual need, based in the soul, which defies rational explanation. They want to be part of the Jewish People, independent of any outside motivation or rationale.

Q) I am Jewish and my husband is a non-practicing Christian. Every year, we have put up a Christmas tree in our home. This year, our children came home from Hebrew school and complained about having a tree in the house. We explained that we don't have a tree for religious purposes, but they are adamant that we should get rid of it. What should we do?

A) Let's begin by learning what Christmas is really all about. Although the birth of Jesus is estimated among historians to have been between 7 and 2 BCE, the exact month and date are unknown. It wasn't until the early to middle fourth century that the Church designated December 25th as Christmas. The Jewish holiday of Chanukah begins on the 25th of the mid-winter Hebrew month of Kislev. So it's no accident that the early Church chose that date, as it coincided with a Jewish festival. Remember that many of the first Christians came from Jewish stock. By the fourth century, there was a strong need to separate the two religions in Christian minds, while still permitting followers to celebrate when the Jewish world was celebrating. To this day, Chanukah and Christmas often vie for recognition at the same time. Note that both are celebrated with illuminations in the windows. (But it was our custom first!)

The Christmas tree was a later addition to the Jesus birth celebration. Some conjecture that it stems from pagan tree worship. Here's what it says in the Encyclopedia Britannica: "Tree worship was common among the pagan Europeans and survived their conversion to Christianity in the Scandinavian customs of decorating the house and barn with evergreens at the New Year to scare away the devil and of setting up a tree for the birds during Christmastime; it survived further in the custom, also observed in Germany, of placing a Yule tree at an entrance or inside the house during the midwinter holidays."

Pope John Paul II introduced the Christmas tree into the Vatican in 1982, and it has since become an integral part of the Vatican Christmas celebrations." The Catholic Church's official book of blessings has a service for the blessing of the Christmas tree in one's home.

While you may have no religious motivation for placing a tree in your home at Christmas time, the tree itself represents the idea of Christmas, the birth of Jesus and Christianity in general. Your husband is not Jewish; but you and your children are. And it sounds like your children would like to connect to their Jewish heritage. I would therefore suggest removing the Christmas tree from your Jewish home and replacing it with Jewish symbols that will reinforce the Jewish faith of your family. Try a menorah, shofar or Shabbat candlesticks: they look great on any shelf!

Q) I understand why you think Jews shouldn't celebrate Christmas, but is there any reason not to celebrate New Year's Eve, which is a totally secular holiday?

A) New Year's Eve and Day are not as secular as you would think. New Year's Day is observed on the first day of the year on the modern Gregorian calendar. In the Christian world, this date was liturgically marked as the Feast of the Circumcision

of Jesus. (If Christmas was said to be his birthday, you count eight days until you reach January 1st, which would coincide with the circumcision of Jesus, who was a Jew by birth. The Torah states that one is to circumcise a male baby on the eighth day, and Jesus was no exception.) It is still celebrated as such in the Anglican and Lutheran churches.

The Romans dedicated New Year's Day to "Janus" the god of gates, doors and "beginnings," which is where January got its name. Julius Caesar reformed the calendar in 46 B.C.E. After he was murdered, the Roman senate voted to deify him on the 1st of January, in honor of his life. The god Janus had two faces, one looking forward and one backwards. So you can assume that New Year's celebrations are founded on pagan traditions.

What's quite interesting is that the start date of the secular calendar was very close to the Jewish calendar. Historically, March first was the original "New Year," making October the eighth month (hence the "Oct" part, as in octopus); November was the ninth month; December was the tenth month ("Dec" is ten, as in decade); January was the eleventh; February was the twelfth month; and March first was the beginning of the new year! This explains why the leap day is at the end of February, which is the last month, and allows for the fudge factor at the end of the year. When the calendar was moved around, it was changed to fit in with the Christian milestones of Christmas and New Year's.

In the seventh century, pagans in the Netherlands used to exchange gifts at the New Year. And until the 1900s it was celebrated as a religious feast. The Roman Catholic Church celebrates the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of Jesus, on this day, which is also a Holy Day of Obligation.

So while January 1st is celebrated as a secular holiday, it was originally pagan, and is now a Christian holiday. Not so secular, in my opinion.

Q) Should Jews participate in Thanksgiving celebrations?

A) Unlike Christmas and New Year's Day, Thanksgiving has no direct connection to paganism or Christianity; it is regarded simply as a day to thank God for our blessings. The holiday is rooted, of course, in the first Thanksgiving proclaimed by Pilgrim Governor William Bradford to celebrate an abundant harvest. The custom of holding a day of Thanksgiving continued annually after every fall harvest, with several attempts to make it national and official. That happened in 1863 when President Lincoln made it a national holiday. As Jews, you can thank God for allowing you to live in a land that permits you to be free and able to worship in accordance with your heritage—on Thanksgiving, and every other day of the year!

Q) Why does anti-Semitism still exist?

A) Anti-Semitism has been around as long as Jews have been around—actually longer! The lives of our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were threatened for being the God-fearing individuals they were. When the Jewish People left Egypt, the nation of Amalek attacked us and managed to kill a number of our people, solely because we were Jews. History is full of nations that have wanted us removed from the stage of history.

Many scholars have tried to figure out why some people hate us so much. They have come forward with reasons that are geographical, sociological, psychological and pathological, but all of these theories do not go to the spiritual root of such hatred. Jewish tradition does give a possible deeper root cause, and it may surprise you.

I have tried the following experiment many times in my classes. I ask my students to imagine they are now from different nations: one student represents the “Romans,” another is the “Babylonians,” one more is the “Greeks,” another is

“the French,” and so on. (I love the next part because I get to play God.) I point to one student and tell him that he is the “chosen” nation. Because I have designated him, he will be held to a different standard than anyone else in the class; he is different. Everything he does, and everything he says will now be carefully monitored. He must try to be perfect. He cannot dress like the other students, and he will have to take on extra work in the class. And he must do it cheerfully. In short, he will now be the spiritual role model for the rest of the class.

I ask the other students how they feel about this person. Revulsion, envy, and suspicion are freely expressed. They don’t want to hang with him; they feel nervous whenever he comes near.

Why would they act like this? Don’t they realize this student is no different from them, but has just been given a role to inspire them to be better?

No, they don’t. They hate him because he has become a moral voice, and people don’t like to feel judged by anyone, especially by one of their peers.

In a nutshell, this is the position of the Jewish People. We were chosen to be a moral light for the world, a people that others could look to for spiritual guidance, God’s representatives in this world. The thought of such a nation can drive other people crazy, as the mere existence of a moral standard forces people to take a long, hard look at themselves, and this can cause them tremendous anguish. Rather than take the message, they decide to kill the messenger.

This explanation, of course, is an over-simplification of one of the biggest problems that has plagued our people forever. Once the root cause is in place, numerous ideologies and theologies have tried to justify anti-Semitism. In some cultures, Jew-hating is a patriotic or a religious imperative.

Many people have written whole books about this, and I'm not about to write another one.

Q) What does the word “goy” mean?

A) The Hebrew word goy, (plural, goyim) is found commonly in the Torah and means nation or people. In the Torah, the Jewish nation is referred to as a goy kadosh, a holy nation. Today, it has become a popular synonym for gentile. It is not a derogatory term as some would now claim.

Character Traits

You Make Me So Mad!

.....

Q) Is it more important to have a good relationship with God or with people?

A) You would think that Judaism considers your relationship with God more important than your relationship with people. However a number of stories from the Torah demonstrate the exact opposite. God wants you to have shalom, a peaceful relationship between you and your friends, your family or your community. The idea that your relationship with God is equal to your relationship with other people can be seen in the design of the Ten Commandments. When God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses and the Jewish People, they were given on two separate tablets. The first set of five statements, which were engraved on the first tablet, are between God and man; the second set of five statements, on the second tablet, are between man and man. Why couldn't God have simply given one long list on one tablet, one through ten? The answer is that had all ten been listed straight down one tablet, you might have thought that the top five were more important

than the bottom five. Since the tablets were put side by side, we are shown that the way we treat each other is of equal value to how we relate to God.

Q) What does Judaism mean by “character traits”?

A) The Hebrew word for character traits is *midot*, which literally means measurements. Why would character traits be referred to as measurements? One possible answer is that we measure a person not by his height—6’2” (or if they are Jewish, 5’4”)!—but by how he treats others. The common English expression, “How does that person measure up?” expresses that idea nicely. That’s not a question to gauge his height, but his character.

Another reason character traits are called measurements is that your traits can be assessed by how you measure your responses to challenges you experience during your day. When you feel slighted by a friend, do you take revenge, or do you have a conversation? When a car cuts you off in traffic, do you lose your temper, start pounding the wheel and reach for your baseball bat, or do you let the fleeting discomfort pass over you? When your kids are told to leave their muddy shoes at the front door, and you find muddy footprints all over the house, do you yell for hours, or do you keep calm, explaining to the children their mistake? Do you give punishments that are commensurate with the crime, or do you overreact out of anger?

You have to measure what you are going to do and how you will speak. That’s called working on your *midot*. The Rambam (Maimonides) says that the reason all the 613 mitzvot were given to us was so that our character traits could be perfected. Sometimes this seems clear, such as when you don’t take revenge, don’t get angry or when you make it a point to give charity. However the Rambam was not only talking about the obvious examples of mitzvot that can refine our

characters. It includes all the mitzvot, such as eating matzah on Passover, putting a mezuzah on your door, and sitting in a sukkah on the holiday of Sukkot. All these and the other mitzvot help you become a kinder, wiser and more thoughtful person in your relationship to others, even if we can't discern how this happens. To achieve this, says the Rambam, is the reason you were put on earth, and the entire reason the mitzvot were given to us!

Q) Why is getting angry such a terrible thing? Isn't it a natural reaction?

A) Just because something is natural, does not make it right and something that is right at times, may not be right all the time.

Anger is viewed as one of the worst character traits, for it can destroy families, communities, careers and even lives. Yet strangely enough, the Talmud describes the trait of anger as the "inner teacher." This could be because what you get angry about says a lot about what's important to you. If you lose your temper over losing a parking spot to someone else (easy to do) and you verbally or even physically attack the other driver, then you have learned something about yourself and how you react to frustration. You also know what triggers your anger and can learn to work on that part of your personality.

The Mishnah teaches that people tend to fall into one of four categories:

1. Those who are quick to anger, but quick to calm down.
2. Those who are slow to anger, and slow to calm down.
3. Those who are quick to anger, and slow to calm down.
4. Those who are slow to anger, but quick to calm down.

Of the four, the worst are those who are quick to anger and slow to calm down. The best, of course, are those who are

slow to anger but quick to calm down. What is interesting is that we have no fifth group, those who don't get angry. Everyone in this world has to work on conquering anger.

This Mishnah also teaches us that the group you belong to is your choice! You can change; you can decide what or who you allow to anger you.

According to the Rambam (Maimonides), the reason Moses was not permitted to enter the land of Israel was because he once lost his temper during the Jews' forty-year sojourn in the desert. It happened when God told him to talk to a rock so that water would miraculously flow from it, and instead he struck it with his staff. He was led to this action because the people seemed rebellious and he became angered and frustrated when speaking to the rock did not work at first. When a great leader loses his temper in public, it not only reflects badly upon him, but also on his superior and the group he is leading. In this instance, Moses' reaction was a very poor reflection on God and the Jewish People. And for that, he forfeited his right to enter Israel.

Q) I get angry quite a lot, especially at work, and most of the time it's justified. What am I supposed to do—hold it in?

A) Denying your anger is not the solution. If you feel it, you must do something about it. The Rambam makes a very interesting halachic ruling. If a person upsets you, do not just ignore him, keeping the anger locked inside. You should go up to that person when you have calmed down, and ask why he did that to you. Inform him that he upset you very much, and that you want an apology. This should never occur in public, and should not be done when either of you are in the midst of rage. This conversation should be in a low voice.

Think of this recommendation as a mitzvah you can do whenever someone hurts or upsets you. In most cases,

the offender never wanted to hurt you, and was unaware of this impact. Making peace in this way will allow you both to move on.

Q) Why is jealousy such a bad thing—doesn't it inspire a person to be better and achieve what others have?

A) The only emotion that makes its way into the Ten Commandments is not coveting other people's property, home, workers or spouse. To make it into that list, it must be very damaging. Jealousy has some pretty heavyweight company in the Ten Commandments; do not murder, do not commit adultery, no idol worship. How does jealousy make it onto the same list as those terrible things? It's not like you did anything wrong, you just thought enviously about someone.

It's true that merely admiring someone else's property does not fall under this category. Jealousy becomes a problem when it translates from mind into action. As the expression goes, "compare leads to despair." And despair often leads to desperate action. For example, if you're jealous of someone's car, and now make it your mission to acquire that car by pressuring him or her to sell it to you, you have transgressed one of the Ten Commandments.

Being jealous of someone's husband or wife also falls into this category if you attempt to separate that wife from her husband in order to marry one of the spouses. The kind of jealousy that results in interference in someone else's marriage is the jealousy the Torah is talking about.

On a spiritual level, the problem with jealousy is more than just wanting someone else's things. Wishing you had someone else's husband or wife, for example, is a lack of faith that what you have been given is a gift from God. In other words, God gives you exactly what you need to survive or thrive. If someone else has something, it must be what God

wants him to have, so why do you want to take it from him? This is why not “coveting” others people’s things made it into the Ten Commandments, as the tenth is connected with the first command, “I am the Lord your God.” By avoiding jealousy, you are actually putting your faith in God—demonstrating (mostly to yourself) that what you have is precisely what God wants you to have.

Jealousy of other peoples’ possessions is related to how you view other people in general. We are quick to look at what they have, whether that means a nice car, house, or business. What we don’t naturally do is look at their entire life as a whole; we just envy the parts that look best. So you may be jealous of your friend’s house, but you may not be aware of the struggles he has in keeping up his payments, or his medical situation, or his stress at work. If you are going to want what another person has, you have to deal with all of it. Everything has a counter balance, and wanting what someone else has is no exception.

Imagine that you are standing at the baggage carousel in an airport, waiting for your luggage after your flight. You watch as all the bags go by and you notice a luxurious Louis Vuitton suitcase. You realize that this suitcase is so much nicer than yours, so you take it and leave yours at the airport. Arriving at your destination, you begin unpacking your new suitcase. As you pull out the suits, shirts, shoes and other items, you realize that nothing fits! So too in life, you may want the pretty exterior that belongs to someone else, but how much are you willing to take of the other parts of that person’s life that does not fit your own? What’s in his suitcase fits him and his life; what’s in your suitcase fits you. That’s how God wants it.

Like all character traits (which, after all, are bestowed upon us by God for our own good), there must be some positive application of the desire to own something belonging to

someone else. According to the Talmud, when you see a person with great passion for what they do—whether in business, studies, or interpersonal relationships—and that motivates you to better your skills and improve who you are as a person, you have channeled the positive aspects of an otherwise dangerous trait.

Q) Why does Judaism speak so highly of humility? Isn't it just another form of low self-esteem?

A) If I were to ask you, what trait a potential leader of the Jewish People would need in order to be successful, what would you answer? Intellectual brilliance? Charisma? A good speaker? Knowledge of his people? All of these are wonderful things. However the Torah describes the greatest Jewish leader, Moses, in a different way. He's not called the smartest, nor the most charismatic; and he was not a good speaker. Moses himself admitted this when God asked him to go to Pharaoh to ask him to let the Jewish People go. He didn't want the job because he had a speech impediment and was a poor communicator.

So what was the characteristic that made Moses worthy of eternal leadership of the Jewish People? "He was extremely humble, more than any person on the face of the earth." That means that no one among all the Jews or any other people in the entire world, was as humble as Moses.

How could this be? How could the greatest Jewish prophet and leader have been so humble? The mistake many people make is that they think of humility as low self-esteem. This equation is incorrect. Low self-esteem is absolutely forbidden in Judaism. You must view yourself as being made in the image of God and must appreciate your worth.

Humility is the exact opposite. Humble people know they have great talents and aptitudes, but realize that each of their

abilities, whether to be a successful teacher, musician, doctor, lawyer, or business person, is a gift from God. They also realize that no matter how great they are, there is room for improvement.

That was the greatness of Moses. No matter what heights he reached, he realized that he had a God-given talent, and there was always more to learn and strive for. His awareness must have been incredible, for God chose him to lead the Jewish People from Egypt and to transmit the Torah to us. He understood that this was the most important mission ever bestowed upon a mortal. He felt all the more humbled by the trust God placed in him and by the gifts and privileges He bestowed upon him.

One of the most famous verses in the Torah tells us to love others like we love ourselves. Why didn't the Torah simply tell us to love other people? What does "like yourself" add to the meaning of the verse? The answer is that if you love yourself and have a high level of self-worth, you will be able to love others. However if you do not love yourself and suffer from a low sense of self-esteem, you will not be capable of truly loving others. It's interesting that modern day psychologists have just discovered this truth, though we've been learning it from our Torah for thousands of years.