

# Pre-reading: ANSWERS TO YOUR QUESTIONS ABOUT GOD AND JUDAISM

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**From questions submitted to Rabbi James Bennett and Cantor Linda Shepherd; Edited by Rabbi Linda Joseph**

## **THE “CHOSEN PEOPLE”**

*Does a modern day Jew believe they are “God’s chosen people”, and will I, a Christian, Moslem, Sikh, Buddhist, Atheist (or add your belief system here) expect us to be in heaven together upon our deaths?*

The term “chosen people” is still in use in today’s Judaism, although it is perhaps more downplayed than it once was. It is usually used in the sense that we have chosen to take on the extra obligations of the commandments in the Torah. It is not that we have been singled out for favoritism, but for extra responsibility that is available to anyone willing to make the choice to take it on. Judaism doesn’t focus much on heaven as a doctrine, but I don’t know of any Jews who would think that anyone of another faith should be turned away from heaven if they were righteous! In fact, Jewish tradition clearly states that a righteous person following their own faith will attain life everlasting in the world-to-come.

*What are the general feelings Jewish people have about being labeled as the “chosen people”? Negative or positive? “Chosen” for what exactly?*

It’s difficult to give an answer about what Jews generally feel or believe, and many have mixed feelings about “chosenness”. Jews are proud of the responsibility of carrying out the covenant, and feel blessed to have the opportunity to carry out God’s commandments, but get upset when others interpret “chosenness” as thinking we’re better than anyone else—we believe that the Jewish path makes sense of the world in a special and holy way, but also believe we’re not inherently better than others of any faith who are righteous. That being said.....

*Why is it that throughout history, the Jews have been so persecuted?*

...it has been noted by many that if the Jews had been singled out for anything, it's been for persecution! (There are those who say, "Why didn't God choose someone else?") While traditional Christianity answered this question by saying that the Jews were being punished for not accepting Jesus as the Savior, it was also the Church that used this as a reason to sanction and even instigate much of the persecuting. Orthodox Judaism's understanding is that Jews suffered as a punishment for sins, but these do not include anything to do with Jesus. Another answer is that the Jews are like an egg—the higher the heat, the tougher they get. This implies that persecution is somehow necessary for Jewish survival. If one looks at the incredibly long history of this statistically insignificant portion of the population, why have Jews survived all this time amidst such odds?

These answers, however, failed to answer the horror of the Holocaust, which certainly was beyond any punishment that anyone could ever deserve, and clearly not in the interest of Jewish survival! We don't have definite answers, but find the questions worthwhile ones with which to wrestle. It is related to the question of why *any* good people suffer.

*Why does Jewish faith seem to discourage outsiders by using so much in Hebrew and not understandable by non-Jews?*

Judaism is a highly context-oriented religion. Because it is based on texts that can really be best understood in the Hebrew language, because tradition carries such an important role in bringing us closer to God and the generations before us, and because study is considered so important to understanding God and ourselves, it is impossible to completely separate the language from the religion. Reform Judaism was the first to offer anyone the opportunity to pray in the vernacular. At a Reform Jewish synagogue, services always contain a significant amount of English, but even in many Conservative and Reconstructionist Jewish synagogues some English is used and in Orthodox synagogues, English translations are readily available for the non-Jew.

Perhaps one could compare it to those sing-along versions of the Handel's Messiah that are done around Christmastime. You can come and find some enjoyment in listening, but you'll get a lot more out of it if you can read music, follow the score, sing the notes, and are familiar with the melodies. Does that make it exclusive? Only if we don't provide opportunities for outsiders to learn--and we do!

## FAITH AND BELIEF

*What is role of faith in Judaism?*

It has been said that Judaism is a religion of Deed, not Creed. Faith, i.e., belief in God, is assumed as a people, but not insisted upon for individuals. You can be a Jew and not believe in God, since belief is not part of the criteria for being Jewish. While the religion expresses belief in God, and certainly its teachings make every effort to persuade people that this belief is logical and right, it is not a requirement. What is important is what one *does* as a Jew.

*Do Jews have to make a personal commitment to their faith in order to join the synagogue and become Jewish? Or is a person Jewish because he or she is born that way?*

According to tradition, it is possible to be a Jew in one of two ways--by birth or by conversion. Traditionally, Judaism is transmitted through the matrilineal line -- one is Jewish if one's mother is Jewish. (This was based on a decision that one can always tell who a child's mother is; but one can't always tell who the father is.) It was considered a primary parental obligation to train one's children about Judaism. Reform Judaism made a significant break with other branches of Judaism about 10 years ago when it adopted the position that if one's father is Jewish AND one is raised as a Jew, then that person too is Jewish.

In order to convert to Judaism, an individual must study about all aspects of Judaism, begin to practice Judaism in the home and by attending synagogue, and then, when both the teacher and the student feel the time is right, go through the rituals of conversion. Synagogues always welcome anyone of any faith who wishes to worship with us, but certain parts of leading and participating in worship are for Jews alone.

*If a fellow human being says that he or she does not believe in God, what is your response? How is the life of such an individual different from the life of a believer? What is the fate of that person now and after death?*

Belief in God is considered a personal matter, and Judaism leaves it to God to be the Judge and Arbiter of us all. The way that their beliefs affect their life and death is not dealt with in a doctrinal way -- the emphasis is on the positive. One famous statement talks of "the deeds which are without measure, and their reward too is without measure: to honor father and mother, to perform acts of love and kindness, to attend the house of study daily, to welcome the stranger, to visit the sick, to rejoice with bride and groom, to console the bereaved, to pray with sincerity, to

make peace when there is strife. And the study of Torah is equal to them all (since it leads to them all)."

*Do souls get recycled/reincarnated in the Jewish view?*

Reincarnation is not part of mainstream traditional Judaism, although there are folk tales about souls that are reborn and it is part of the Jewish mystical tradition. In the Jewish mystical tradition known as Kabbalah, the reincarnation of souls is known as GilgulHaNefesh (the turning of the soul). It is believed that souls recycle until they have completed their purpose of existence. Another idea from mainstream traditions suggests that when a baby is conceived, it has full knowledge of Torah, heaven and earth; but an angel comes before birth and taps it below the nose, making the slight indentation in our upper lip, and the baby forgets everything.

*If you are born Jewish and are agnostic, are you still a Jew? Is there anything in the Talmud pertaining to this?*

Yes, Jewish agnostics are still considered Jewish, although it's clearly preferable from a Rabbinic perspective to believe in God. There is a well-known concept from Talmud which may be relevant: God will forgive all the sins of the one who fits the following ideal: "Those who are insulted but do not insult, hear their shame but do not reply, act out of love and rejoice even in suffering, of them it was written, 'And those who love God will be as the sun in its splendor.'" In other words, as stated above, "deed" is more important than "creed."

*Is there a belief in predestination?*

Different scholars have put forth different points of view about predestination. There is no doctrinal Jewish answer. Some believe it, some don't. Many people are familiar with the movie "A Stranger Among Us", which introduced the term "beshert"--that which was foreordained--to the general public. In the context of the movie, it meant the right spouse. Actually, this Yiddish word is a lot broader in meaning than that, and could be used in any context in which it seems as if something was "meant to be." However, even though this concept exists and is given a word, most Jews believe that we have a great deal of choice in the world. God has given us a good inclination ("yetzer tov") and an evil inclination ("yetzerhara"), and we have the responsibility to follow the good.

*Do Jews believe in life after death?*

There is hardly any discussion of individual life after death in the Bible, but there is some discussion of community resurrection for the nation of the people Israel. In Rabbinic times, during which Jesus lived and preached, there was such a belief, although again there is no clear doctrine about life after death. There is, however, a universal Jewish belief in the concept of the eternal life of the soul, reunited with God.

## **CREATION**

*Is God Jewish? If Adam was created in the image of God, was Adam a Jew?*

God is beyond any such label, but is the God of all the universe. Virtually all Jewish prayers have in them the formulaic phrase, "Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olam--Blessed are You, Eternal One, our God, Ruler of the universe." Judaism considers Adam to be the first human being, and Abraham to be the first Jew.

*How is the creation treated in reference to the theory of creation (i.e., Darwinism, Big Bang, etc.)?*

This varies according to how literally the Bible is taken. Some Jews believe in the Bible literally, though even many ancient Jewish scholars questioned a literal reading. For many Jews, not only are the theories of evolution acceptable, but we have no trouble in interpreting text figuratively and reconciling some of the stories with science as we know it. For example, who says that a "day," to God, has to be 24 hours? Maybe it was several billion years. Similarly, one can say that we are all formed from atoms that were once part of the dust of the earth; the Garden of Eden can be interpreted as the birthplace of civilization, the Big Bang as the beginning of creation etc. As a whole, Judaism tends to be responsive to new factual discoveries, and to be willing to reinterpret tradition in light of them.

*How did God create the world?*

There is no set answer to this, although there are some interesting ideas from Jewish mysticism. The famous Jewish mystic, Isaac Luria (16th century), taught that God had to contract in order to make room for creation. Then, after the creation of divine light, vessels were formed to hold this light. Some of these vessels couldn't contain the light, and shattered. The shards went in all

directions. God began to repair world ("tikkunolam"), but left the finishing of that repairing to humanity. We, then, are partners with God in the act of creation.

## **ISRAEL**

*All the bloodshed to settle and create Israel--how do you justify it to your faith?*

There is a difference between approval and justification. Judaism teaches that bloodshed is not right. (Of course, so do most other religions, and there has been plenty of bloodshed in the name of other faiths too.) It is unclear whether you are talking about in the time of the Bible, or in the modern world. However, some parts of the answer are the same. In both ancient and modern times, Jews had a right to the land, which was usurped by others. (In biblical times, God gave the land to Abraham and his descendants, it was taken over by others during their enslavement in Egypt--and it was clear the Israelites had nowhere else to go. They were attacked many times on the road.) In modern times, too, Jews would be infinitely happier not to have any bloodshed. A single death in the Arab-Israeli conflict is given far more treatment in the world press than thousands of deaths in other parts of the world. This is in part reflective of the agony that Jews in the press feel, and the pressure on the state of Israel to behave in an ethical manner--far greater than for any other nation!

## **THE STRUCTURE OF ORGANIZED JUDAISM**

*Are there religious hierarchies in Judaism?*

There is no clergy hierarchy in Judaism. Each rabbi or cantor holds a contract with his or her congregation, and each interviews for a job just as in a non-religious field. There are no assignments to pulpits, and in cases of controversy, the "higher authority" is a committee of lay and organized leaders that are elected or appointed by elected officers of the organization.

*What is "cantor" vs. "rabbi"?*

Both are ordained clergy, able to perform weddings and funerals, provide counseling teach, etc. Literally, "rabbi" means "teacher", and "chazzan" means singer. Their roles have varied from place to place and from age to age, but basically, the jobs are complementary and closely related.

The practical implications in most synagogue services is that usually, the cantor sings and leads the music, and the rabbi gives the sermons and leads the reading.

*What roles of leadership are women allowed to hold in the synagogue?*

Traditional Judaism follows a statement from the Talmud that the voice of a woman is an incitement to lewdness, and will not allow women to be heard or seen in ritual settings, so as not to distract the men from prayer. They interpret this as "separate but equal" paths to God. Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism sees women as 50% of the Jewish community, not to be excluded in any way, and women serve in every capacity.

*What is the relationship between the various Jewish denominations?*

Historically, in the 19th century, Reform Judaism challenged tradition on many levels, including the structure and length of the service, the decorum of the participants, the dominant language of the service (Hebrew or vernacular), etc. The group which now terms itself Orthodox Judaism was the first response, in which traditional community leaders sought a modern institutional structure to preserve the traditional way of life. Conservative Judaism aimed for mostly being faithful to tradition while being a little more flexible to the challenges of modernity. Reconstructionist Judaism is the brainchild of Mordechai Kaplan, and speaks to the issue of reconstructing the Jewish civilization and culture. The relationship between the movements is complex. Perhaps the greatest hallmark of Reform Judaism is its insistence on personal autonomy and choice--each individual is encouraged to make decisions for him or herself about Judaism, and to take the community into account in making those decisions. Reconstructionist Judaism also encourages autonomy. Conservative Judaism, which does make some changes from tradition, makes them as a group and asks its members to be bound by the organizational decisions on worship and observance, lifestyle and practice, etc. Orthodox Judaism teaches that the TaNaKh (bible) is God's law and must be followed according to Jewish legal interpretation. The relationship between the movements varies according to the issues. On some, all are united; on others, they are very far apart.

## **THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

*What is the Jewish concept or explanation of evil?*

As with so much else, there is no one clear answer. Judaism holds that ALL of creation, even evil, comes from God. Why should an all-good God create a world that is capable of evil?

Humans are seen as inherently good, but with the capacity for good or evil action. There were some thinkers who believed that the force of evil, the *yetzerhara*, could also be the impetus for good or for creativity, when subdued and put to proper ends--to the service of the *yetzer tov*, the good inclination. The fact is, we are not sure why there is evil, but only that it is real, and we must work to overcome it.

*Why does God let bad things happen to good people? (Yes, I read the book).*

The book is "Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People", by Harold Kushner. See below for some elaboration.

*If God is all-powerful, is God allowing good, young people to die comprehensible?*

As with so much else in Judaism, there is no one fixed answer to this troubling question. Certainly, the story of Job shows that even in the Bible, life is not as simple that good always is rewarded and evil always is punished. Ultimately, there seem to be relatively few answers: either God has purposes which we cannot understand, or God is not all-powerful, or God is not all-good. The last is intolerable; the first works for some, but the middle alternative fits with the ideas of Isaac Luria, mentioned above--that God gave up some power in order to create us and allow us the meaning and purpose in our lives to God's partners. In order for that work to be significant, we have to take significant responsibility for ourselves and our world. In other words, it's up to us to prevent those deaths by furthering medical research, safe laws, etc.

## **FACTUAL QUESTIONS--THE EASY ONES**

*What is the name of the caps worn by mostly Jewish men and some women and what is the reason behind it?*

The cap is called a "kippa" in Hebrew, or a "yarmulke" in Yiddish. We're not sure where the custom originated, but the priests in the Bible covered their heads with turbans, and it may have been a reminder of that time. The custom probably arose in medieval Europe. It's worn as a sign of respect for God, and a reminder that God is above us, just as the Kippa is on top of our heads. Traditionally worn only by men (women wore other kinds of head or hair coverings), now both men and women can be seen with them in liberal communities. Orthodox Jews wear them all the time; liberal Jews may wear them always, at certain times or not at all.



*Why are non-Jews called gentiles?*

Gentile is based on the Latin word “gens”, which means people, and it means other nations besides Israel. The Hebrew word for nation is “goy”, which also has come to mean non-Jew. Both terms are originally meant to be descriptive, not pejorative.

*Is the present-day Jewish race descendants of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin only, or of the entire twelve tribes?*

Centuries ago the Jewish community lost track of the tribal affiliations of ancient times. With the dispersion of Jews throughout the world (the Diaspora), Jewish lineages were mixed and the so-called lost tribes of Israel were created. The only tribal affiliations maintained were the Priestly (Kohanim) descendants of Aaron and the tribe of the Levites. Some modern Jews can trace their ancestry to these lines. All others are part of the lost tribes of Israel in general.

## **JESUS IN JUDAISM**

*What role does Jesus have in Judaism?*

There are many views of Jesus among Jews. Jesus has no theological role at all; most Jews believe Jesus to have been a Jew, a rabbi or teacher, and a charismatic figure in his day. He was a liberal, rebelling against the religious authorities and hypocrisies of his day, and he had a tremendous influence on the people of his time. However, Jews do not believe he was the son of God except in the manner in which we are all children of God.

*Why do the Jews not accept Jesus as God?*

The more appropriate question, from the Jewish point of view, is why do Christians accept Jesus as God? Jews do not accept the evidence of the New Testament as proof of the divinity of Jesus. According to a Jewish interpretation, Jesus did not fulfill the biblical expectations of the messiah. However, Liberal Jews have a tremendous respect for those who do believe that Jesus is the son of God.

*What does liberal Judaism think of “Jews for Jesus”?*

A so-called “Jew for Jesus” is actually a Christian. Belief in the divinity of Jesus makes one a Christian. One cannot be a Jew and believe that Jesus is God or the son of God.

*Does the rift between Christianity and Judaism exist because the belief in Christ and God is considered polytheistic?*

There is no “rift” between Judaism and Christianity. Liberal Jews have tremendous respect for Christians and their beliefs, and hope that Christians will mutually respect us. Jews do not deny the belief in Christ as being polytheistic. Rather, we simply do not accept that God had a son in human form, as we deny the possibility of virgin birth, immaculate conception, and other Christian doctrines necessary for belief in Christ. These beliefs are not considered with a Jewish understanding of Hebrew Scripture, and they were never convincing to Jews. However, they are the foundation of Christian belief, and we support those who choose to accept them as equally legitimate as Jewish beliefs, but for Christians, not for Jews. Finally, Jesus did not fulfill the biblical prophecies and requirements of the messiah as seen through Jewish eyes.

*Why is it still inconceivable that God can be three-in-one? [Matter can be solid, liquid or gas, and still be the same entity, so why not God?] God is anything and anywhere He wants to be...*

It is not inconceivable. God can do anything God wants. This three-in-one concept is not the reason Jews deny Jesus as the messiah or as the son of God. As noted above, Jews simply do not see or understand, as Jews, that God chose to do so in the person of Jesus. However, there may be a problem, even from a Christian perspective, with the analogy of the three states of matter. Matter can only exist in one of those states at a time, while, as you mentioned, God is anything and anywhere, all at once. Judaism actually has hundreds of names for God, each of which identifies an important characteristic—and none of which, separately or together, defines God in God’s entirety.

## **GOD**

*I can’t think of a question about God that makes sense?*

Good point! The famous medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides pointed out that we can never know what God is, only what God is not. We are human, and cannot understand God.

Even questions about God may be incomprehensible. God is something other than what we are, and yet we are a part of God.

*Does God exist?*

The existence of God is a fundamental belief of Judaism. In fact, the first of the Ten Commandments, “I am the Lord your God...” posits the existence of God. God’s existence is no doubt, but the nature of God is up for interpretation by all.

*My question is: why question God? Why not accept God at a level that is comfortable for you?*

If you can make sense of your belief of God without question, all power to you. The Jewish tradition, however, encouraged people to question and challenge, giving voice to our doubts. Abraham questions and argues with God, Moses does the same, Jacob wrestles with the angel and becomes “Israel” which means “one who wrestles with God.” This became another name for the Jewish people – Jews are those who wrestle with God!

*How do you affirm and strengthen your relationship with God?*

Through prayer, through study of Jewish tradition, and through deeds of lovingkindness. This trio of obligations, identified in the Talmud centuries ago can still deepen our relationship with God.

*God sees all, hears all and knows all, but does God feel what we feel?*

A beautiful concept endorsed by Jewish tradition. The rabbis centuries ago envisioned God as “hearing the cries of the Israelites” and crying with them. In this view of God, God can feel empathy for humanity. On the other hand, there are beliefs which suggest that God is so “other” that God has no empathy for us. God does what God wants or needs.

*Is “God” in Hebrew singular or plural?*

There are many words and names for God in Hebrew. Elohim, El, Adonai, Av, Melech, Shechinah... some are singular. Some are plural. Some are masculine. Some are feminine. One of the most well-known is “Elohim” which literally means “God” in the plural form (“El” is singular). In the ancient world, the Israelites main contribution to theological belief was the

concept of the unity of God: all the gods worshipped by other people are really part of the unity of God.

*Why did there have to be a blood sacrifice for God to be able to forgive sin?*

In the Bible, God asks the people to offer sacrifices as an act of contrition for their sins. God does not explain why. One has to assume that they represented the people's willingness to give up something important to them for God's sake—i.e. sacrifice. Anthropologists point out that this is a universal concept involving "feeding God" giving God what God wants or needs. Thankfully, blood sacrifice went out of existence with the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70. The blood sacrifices of the Temple times was replaced by prayer in synagogues.

*If God is all-powerful, could God be put in a box that God could never get out of?*

One of the many paradoxical questions posed by theologians through the ages. I don't know! Can God make a rock so large that God cannot lift it? Does it matter?

*What do you think of this definition of God: "God is a many that permits Itself to be thought of as one."*

I'm not sure about the "permits" part of this definition. One of the central prayers of Judaism says, "Hear O Israel, the Eternal One is our God, the Eternal One is One." If this statement means that God's oneness IS, but that we may see God differently and offer different names, then this seems consistent with the Jewish concept of the unity of God.

*How can I bring God into my daily life?*

As noted above, through study, prayer, and acts of lovingkindness. Through devotion to the obligations that God has told us about through the Torah, the "mitzvot" or commandments. By loving your neighbor as yourself. By working with God for the perfection of the creation.

## OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT JUDAISM

*What are the defining characteristics, the essence of Judaism?*

Some say God, Torah and Israel. God—a belief in the unity of God, and a devotion to the obligations God sets for us. Torah—the means God has of communication with us, revelation, and the symbol of God’s love for us. Israel—a sense of peoplehood, ethnic pride, and obligation to fulfilling the role of being a “light unto the nations.”

*How do I bring Judaism into my life, my home, my daily routine without prayer, but with teachings?*

Study the Torah, fulfill the ethical commandments to do justice, love mercy, care for the sick, the stranger, the needy, etc. Observe the holidays, life cycle events, and the prophetic obligations to make our world a better place. You may find that prayer becomes natural through the process.

*Do American Jews face discrimination? If so, please cite examples.*

Anti-Semitism is still a real force in the world today, but on an individual basis in most places, not on a communal basis. It is known that sometimes Jews lose their jobs because they are Jewish, become the victims of anti-Semitic attacks, having swastikas painted on their homes, etc. Children frequently tell of being called names, or being forced to participate in Christian religious observances at school. But by and large the entire USA, is a pleasant, largely discrimination-free place for Jews to live.

**Please Print the Following Pages and Bring Them With You To Class:**

# Questions for Class: Spirituality

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Pick any two-three texts from the page “Texts for Class: Spirituality”.

Together read the texts out loud.

What do these texts you have picked teach you about the Jewish view of God?

What questions would you have for these texts?

Be prepared to share with the group as we discuss Jewish Spirituality.

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## Texts for Class: Spirituality

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Why does this prayer say “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Rachel, and God of Leah” [and not just God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel]? To teach that each of our ancestors had a unique idea of God and a unique relationship to God.

(after Rabbi Zev Ya'avetz)

Why do we say “our God and God of our ancestors?” [Why use both of these phrases to refer to the same God?] Because there are two types of people who believe in God. There are those who have adopted the beliefs of their ancestors and there are those who have arrived at their own beliefs. The first have the advantage of strong faith which cannot be shaken, but the disadvantage of having accepted it blindly. The second have the advantage of having struggled to achieve their own faith, but the disadvantage of being susceptible to challenges from others. Why does “our God” come before “God of our ancestors”? To teach us that one should not believe in God merely because one’s ancestors did, but as a result of one’s own search and study of Torah

(*OtzarHat'fillot*)

Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

(Deuteronomy

6:5)

“...Adonai, God, [made earth and heaven]” (Genesis 2:4). This may be compared to a king who had some empty glasses. The king said, “If I pour hot water into them, they will burst; if cold, they will contract [and break].” What did the king do? He mixed hot and cold water and poured it into them, and so they remained [unbroken]. Similarly, the Holy One who is blessed said, “If I create the world with the quality of mercy alone, its sins will be great; with the quality of judgment alone, how could the world survive. Therefore, I will create it with the quality of judgment and the quality of mercy and may it then exist.” (Genesis Rabbah 12:15)

Even the Holy One prays. What does God pray? “May it be My will that My mercy overcomes My anger, and that My mercy dominates all My attributes so that I may deal with My children mercifully, and for their sake not extract strict justice.”

(Berachot 7a)

God created the world in a state of beginning. The universe is always in an uncompleted state, in the form of its beginning. It is not like a vessel at which the master works to finish it; it requires continuous labor and renewal by creative forces. Should these cease for only a second, the universe would return to primeval chaos.  
*Rabbi Simchah Bunam of Przysucha*

God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am *Adonai*. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *El Shaddai*, but I did not make myself known to them by My name *Adonai*.” (Exodus 6:2-3)

A heathen once asked Rabbi Joshua ben Karcha: “Why did God speak to Moses from the midst of a thornbush?” Rabbi Joshua replied: “To teach you that there is no place free of God’s presence, not even a thornbush.” (Exodus Rabbah 2:5)

You find that wherever Israel was exiled, the Divine Presence was with them. They were exiled to Egypt; the Presence was with them. They were exiled to Babyonia; the Presence was with them. They were exiled to Rome; the Presence was with them. And when they shall return, the Presence, as it were, will be with them.



*(Mechilta Exodus 12:51)*

A Jew can be Jewish with God, against God, but not without God. *(Elie Wiesel)*

## Questions for Class: Ethics and Rituals

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Pick any two-three texts from the page "Texts for Class: Ethics and Rituals".

Together read the texts out loud.

What do the texts you have picked teach you about the Jewish view of Ethics and Rituals?

What questions would you have for these texts?

Be prepared to share with the group as we discuss Ethics and Rituals.

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## Texts for Class: Ethics and Rituals

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Ben Bag Bag said: "Turn it [Torah] and turn it for all is in it and look in it and grow gray and old in it, and do not turn away from it for there is no better measure for you than it." *(PirkeiAvot 5:25)*

Once a non-Jew came before Shammai and said to him: "I will become a Jew if you teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot. He drove him away with the builder's cubit that was in his hand. He came before Hillel, who said to him: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the entire Torah; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it." *(Shabbat 31a)*

If there is no sustenance, there is no Torah. If there is no Torah, there is no sustenance. *(PirkeiAvot 3:21)*

The following are commandments for which there is no prescribed measure: the crops on the border of the field to be left for the poor and the stranger, the gift of the first-fruits, the pilgrimage offerings brought to the ancient Temple on the three festivals, deeds of lovingkindness, and the study of Torah is equal to them all. *(Peah 1:1)*

Moses received the Torah on Sinai, and handed it down to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the men of the Great Assembly. *(PirkeiAvot 1:1)*

It has been taught: On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought every answer in the world, but they [the sages] did not accept them. He said to them: "If the law is according to me, let this carob tree prove it." The carob tree was uprooted from its place a hundred cubits (and some say four hundred cubits). They said to him: "One may not bring proof from a carob tree." He then said to them: "If the law is according to me, let the stream of water prove it." The stream of water began to flow backwards. They said to him: "One may not bring proof from a stream of water." He then said to them: "If the law is according to me, may the walls of the house of study prove it." The walls of the house of study inclined to fall. Rabbi Joshua rebuked them. He said to them: "if scholars and arguing with each other in matters of law, what right do you have (to interfere)?"... A Divine voice went forth and said: "What do you have against Rabbi Eliezer, for the law is according to him in all matters?" Rabbi Joshua stood on his feet and said: "It is not in heaven" (Deuteronomy 30:12). What does "It is not in heaven" mean? Rabbi Jeremiah said: "(It means) that the Torah has already been given at Mount Sinai. We do not give authority to a Divine voice, for it is already written at Mount Sinai in the Torah: "One must incline after the majority" (Exodus 23:2). Rabbi Nathan happened upon Elijah. He said to him: "What was God doing at that moment?" He said to him: "He was laughing and said: 'My children have defeated Me, my children have defeated Me!'" *(Baba Metzia 59b)*

You shall be holy, for I, Adonai, your God am holy. *(Leviticus 19:2)*

We will be called into account on judgment day for any pleasure we might have enjoyed, but did not. *(YerushalmiKiddushin 4:12)*

Rabbi Leib son of Sarah said: "I did not go to the Maggid (Dov Baer of Mezeritch) to hear him teach Torah; I went to see how he unties his shoes and ties them again. *(Chasidic story)*

Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and

occupy the land that Adonai, your God is giving you.  
(Deuteronomy 16:20)

First a person should put his house in order, then his town, then the world.  
(Israel Salanter)

## Questions for Class: Community

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Pick any two-three texts from the page "Texts for Class: Community".

Together read the texts out loud.

What do these texts you have picked teach you about the Jewish view of community?

What questions would you have for these texts?

Be prepared to share with the group as we discuss Jewish Community.

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## Texts for Class: Community

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And Adonai said to Avram: "Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you and I will make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse anyone who curses you, and all the families of the land will be blessed with you."  
(Genesis 12:1-3)

You stand this day, all of you, before Adonai, your God, your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger in your camp, from the woodchopper to the water drawer, to enter the covenant of Adonai, your God, which Adonai, your God is making with you this day, with its sanctions; to the end that God may establish you this day as God's people and be your God, as God promised you and swore to you ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but with those who are standing here with us this day before Adonai, your God and with those who are not with us here this day.  
(Deuteronomy 29:9-14)

For you are a people consecrated to Adonai, your God; of all the peoples on earth Adonai, your God chose you to be God's treasured people. It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that Adonai desires you and chose you. Indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; but it was because Adonai loved you and kept the oath made to your ancestors that Adonai freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.  
*(Deuteronomy 7:6-8)*

Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, Ruler of the universe, who has chosen us from among all the nations and given us the Torah. Blessed are You, Adonai, Giver of the Torah.  
*(Blessing before Torah reading)*

We learn to drive, to swim, to throw a football, or to play the piano not by reading a book about how to do it, but by watching people do it correctly and trying to imitate them.... The Jewish people were [chosen by God] to be a "pilot project," a demonstration community. God would give them explicit instructions about how to carry on the God-centered life. If they did it . . . they would bring the other peoples of the world to see how satisfying it is to live that way.  
*(Harold Kushner, To Life, p. 31)*

Hillel said: "Do not separate yourself from the community."  
*(Pirkei Avot 2:5)*

All Israel is responsible for one another. *(Shavuot 39a)*

Alone. A Jew is nothing, but if he is with other Jews he is a force, because then automatically he inherits all the strengths and the tears, all the despairs and all the joys of his ancestors. A Jew alone cannot be a Jew. A Jew can be Jewish only if she is part of a community. *(Elie Wiesel)*

The Jew's religion is but one element in his life that is challenged by the present environment....  
Judaism...is...something far more comprehensive than

Jewish religion. It includes that nexus of a history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, and esthetic values which in their totality form a civilization.  
*Mordecai Kaplan, Judaism as a Civilization*