

Chapter 13



Jewish Belief

What, according to Judaism, is the meaning of life?

Judaism sees the life that is given to each human being as a gift to be used for the benefit of all humanity.

Being a good person is clearly at the core of Judaism, and God's first concern is with a person's decency.

In an interesting Talmudic passage (Talmud, Shabbat 31a) that I have studied, a person is brought before the heavenly court for judgment and asked a series of questions. One might think the question would be, "Did you observe the Jewish holidays and pray a lot?"

I was so surprised to learn that the first question quoted in the Talmud was instead, "Did you conduct your affairs honestly?"

A Jewish person is to stay honest and learn to be good and honorable by adhering to Judaism's special system of mitzvot. God gave us a variety of religious obligations, and if we are diligent, I believe, they will help us do our part in bringing more mercy, loving kindness, and peace into the world.

The Book of Deuteronomy tells us to "follow God and walk in God's ways." I understand this phrase to mean that we should follow the attributes of God. Just as God clothed Adam and Eve, so should we give clothing to those in need. Just as God visited Abraham when he was sick after his circumcision, so we too should make it our duty to

visit sick people. All acts of justice and goodness are closely connected with the concept of honoring God's name by following God's ways.

A few years ago I was chosen to host a local radio program called "The Jewish American Hour." As host, I decided to end each program by going off the air with a verse from the Bible that was so important to me that I wanted my listeners to always remember it. The verse I chose is one of my favorites (it even adorns my office wall). The verse is from the Book of Micah, a prophet, and sums up for me what God requires of us, and thus how God intended for us to find life's meaning:

God has told you what is good, and what God wants of you:
Only to do justice, to love goodness, and to walk modestly with
your God. (Micah, 6:8)

Is it ever permissible to lie?

Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be obliged to tell the truth for twenty-four hours? Many have tried and failed. Some have gotten themselves into trouble in the effort. No doubt you know the story of Pinocchio, whose nose grew every time he lied, until it became grotesque. Social scientists have pointed out that Americans tell many lies each day, in normal life, including white lies and false excuses.

This is why all religions extol the virtue of truth. Without truthfulness, morality cannot exist, and it is said that where truth abides, God's presence is felt. The Bible leaves no doubt about the fundamental virtue of truth: "You shall not deal falsely, nor lie to one another." Moses chooses "men of truth" to serve as judges over the Israelites. Bearing false witness against one's neighbor is condemned in the ninth of the Ten Commandments.

The Talmud is also unwavering in its support of truthfulness. False speech is compared to idolatry. God despises the person who says one thing with his mouth and another with his mind.

Jewish tradition is concerned with more than the mere uttering of truth when one speaks. A person is not permitted to withhold the truth by remaining silent. To protect a criminal by maintaining

silence when one can assist the law is as serious a transgression as outright lying. Likewise, to create a false impression without directly lying is to distort the virtue of truth. For example, inviting someone to your home when you are certain that he will refuse is a kind of insincerity that the Talmud criticizes.

People have long debated whether a white lie is a departure from the truth. There are always dangers that a white lie, like petty stealing, leads in time to more serious dishonesty. But there are times when even the Jewish tradition recognizes that the white lie is permissible, especially if the interests of peace are involved. For example, if a separation can be prevented between husband and wife or between two friends, then for the sake of peace the truth may be withheld. In other words, only when a virtue higher than truth is served may truth be set aside.

The Talmud (Baba Metzia 23b, 24a) observes several instances when lying is permissible. It says that a scholar will never tell a lie except in the three instances of “tractate,” “bed,” and “hospitality.” The commentators explain the first to mean that a modest scholar is permitted to declare he is unfamiliar with a tractate of the Mishnah in order not to flaunt his learning. The second is understood to mean that if a person is asked intimate questions regarding his marital life she need not answer truthfully. The third is understood to mean that a person who has been generously treated by a host may decide not to tell the truth about her reception if she fears that as a result the host will be embarrassed by unwelcome guests.

Finally, the question has often been asked, “Should a doctor let a person who is seriously ill know about his or her condition?” According to most rabbinic authorities, one should make a seriously ill person aware of his or her illness, without issuing any definitive pronouncement that deprives him or her of hope.

Do Jews believe in hell?

The word *hell* is not part of the Jewish vocabulary. The Tanach, the Hebrew Bible, uses a term, *Gehinom*, that in some circles has been understood as hell. In fact, Gehinom is a term borrowed from an ac-

tual place name, *Gei-Ben Hinom*, located south of Jerusalem, in a valley where the wicked once sacrificed their children to false gods. Thus when a Jew learned about the concept of hell from his neighbors, he often used this appropriate name to signify the home of the wicked beyond the grave.

Gehinom, or Gehenna, passed into use as a metaphoric designation for the place of punishment in the hereafter. According to a Talmudic view, the doors of Gehenna close behind apostates, informers, promoters of sin, and tyrants for many generations. According to the mystical holy book, the *Zohar*, sinners are punished for twelve months, half of the time in fire and half in snow. Among those who do not face Gehenna, a Talmudic passage includes the very poor and diseased.

Despite the many differences of opinion as to the meaning of Gehenna, it is nowhere considered to be a dogma or a doctrine of faith that Jews are required to profess. Even those rabbinic sages who delighted in describing the torments of Gehenna and other shadowy places were usually aware that they were permitting their imagination to roam freely.

During the Middle Ages, when Jews were susceptible to the folklore of their neighbors, belief in Gehenna was most evident. The Jewish scholars, however, sought to discourage belief in physical torture and punishment after life. They interpreted reward and punishment in the hereafter in a spiritual way. To the kabbalist Judah Lowe of Prague, the hereafter was a purely spiritual state. Neither rewards nor punishments were physical. Its joys consisted of union with God, its tortures alienation from God. Heaven was the satisfaction of life well lived, and Gehenna was the pain or remorse of having failed to live the good life.

Do Jews believe in an eye for an eye?

Few references in the Bible are more misunderstood than the ancient Hebrew law of an eye for an eye.

In Israel, for example, it is often understood in a pejorative manner. Critics often accuse the Israeli army of practicing eye-for-an-eye morality for immediate retaliation against a terrorist attack.

The Book of Exodus 21:24 states “an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” Critics of the Torah point to lines such as this in an attempt to indict the Scriptures for a so-called primitive nature.

The rule of an eye for an eye, which appears to lay down the principle of literal retribution, was not at all formulated for such a purpose. In fact, no case of physical retaliation is recorded in the Bible where a penalty was ever exacted.

The Talmudic rabbis pointed out that, inasmuch as the law seeks equity, its literal enforcement would frequently lead to gross inequity. For instance, they said, taking the eye of a one-eyed assailant would not be just retribution but excessive punishment. Or, how is one to guard against the fatal effect of retribution upon the offender? If he dies he gives a life for an eye or a hand, and the objective of the law is thwarted. Therefore Jewish law made detailed stipulations for monetary compensation, much as modern insurance contracts are apt to do today.

In all likelihood, an eye for an eye is a graphic way of expressing the abstract idea that the punishment should not be too lenient or too harsh but should fit the crime and the circumstances. Both in insisting that evil must be punished and in equally insisting on setting limits to the punishment, an eye for an eye is a basic principle of biblical justice.

Do Jews believe in the devil?

There are a number of references to Satan in the Jewish Bible. It is doubtful if Jews ever took these references literally. In Judaism, Satan was the mythical figure of all the evil forces in the world. At times, he was identified with the Tempter, the evil impulse, which prompts people to heed the worst side of his nature. But even this notion was never too deeply rooted, for Judaism teaches that God is the Creator of both good and evil, and God’s dominion alone is real.

In the Book of Job the character of Satan is more real. He is portrayed as an adversary (God’s black humor, if you will) who begrudges man’s contentment and well-being and is the indirect cause

of Job's misery. But the Talmudic rabbis debated whether the Book of Job was fact or fiction; a number of rabbis contended that the entire book was actually a product of the imagination of some of our ancestors—a parable or allegory.

By and large, Satan in Jewish lore is most identified with the evil impulse, the lower passions that are a hindrance to man's pursuit of the nobler things in life. This can serve as a useful reminder of the all-too-frequent human tendency of rationalizing sinful conduct into saintly behavior, or of seeking the line of least resistance in a situation that calls for tenacity and courage. Eradicating Satan in our lives can symbolize for us the need to wage war against the evil in ourselves.

Satan is also sometimes identified with the angel of death. He leads souls astray and brings accusations against people. His chief functions are those of temptation, accusation, and punishment. Under the control of God, he always acts solely with the divine permission to carry out his plots. Even though he seems to have a will of his own in the Book of Job, he still keeps within the limits that God has fixed for him.

It is the genius of Judaism to draw on elements of popular folklore for moral instruction. Among the Jewish people there persisted vestiges of a primitive belief that the sounding of the shofar, the ram's horn, was intended to destroy Satan and other evil spirits. This accounts for Rabbi Isaac's explanation (Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 16b) that the purpose of blowing the shofar twice during the Rosh Hashanah service is to confound Satan. Rabbi Isaac's comment is also reflected in the later practice of reciting, before the first series of shofar sounds, six biblical verses that form an acrostic of the words *kerá Satan* (destroy Satan).

Finally, in the prayer *hashkeveynu* the Hebrew word *Satan* appears. This prayer for peace, recited in the evening, asks God to remove Satan (often translated as "evil forces"), which surrounds us. It is comforting to have a prayer for tranquility, and for many in my congregation this prayer is a must to be recited before going to sleep at night.

Is it possible to be excommunicated from Judaism?

The Hebrew term for excommunication is *cherem*, a word that is said to be related to the Arabic word *harem*. The two words have a similar connotation. In Jewish tradition, excommunication means setting apart people who are guilty of crimes of Jewish law.

In the Middle Ages, when Jews were granted considerable autonomy and civil and religious transgressions were left to the rabbis to deal with, rabbinical courts were established and excommunication or banishment from the social and religious life of the community was meted out as a severe punishment.

In seventeenth-century Amsterdam, the Jewish community was so intolerant of any deviation from traditional teachings that the Dutch Jew Uriel da Costa (who had written an anti-Jewish ritual treatise) was excommunicated in a ritual that required people to step over his prostrate form on the threshold of the synagogue. Eventually he committed suicide.

The philosopher Baruch Spinoza came under a similar ban for his highly unorthodox writings, including his denial of angels, immortality of the soul, and God's authorship of the Torah. His exile from the community was a total ban; no Jew was ever to conduct business with him—or for that matter, ever speak to him. There is no evidence that he ever did again speak to another Jew.

During the past century, a ban of excommunication has rarely been issued in Jewish life. Today the ban might be seen in traditional Orthodox communities, when a man refuses to give his wife a *get*, a Jewish divorce. In Israel, religious courts are empowered to imprison a recalcitrant husband who refuses to give his wife a divorce, although women's groups complain that the courts rarely use their power.

Does anyone really believe that the world was created in six days?

Yes, there are certain Jewish traditionalists, fundamentalists, and others who believe in the world literally having been created in six days. For those who do, that's perfectly fine. I do not and never did. Great Jewish scholars and commentators of the medieval period did not

consider the details of the biblical account of creation theologically binding. The great medieval philosopher Maimonides declared that it was not to be taken literally; the medieval commentator Joseph Albo and Rav Kook, a contemporary sage, agreed.

How the world came into being in Jewish texts is presented in varying forms and is expressed in several ways. The Bible itself contains at least three descriptions. The first chapters of Genesis give us the creation story in the form of a divine drama unfolding in six momentous acts in the course of six days. Psalm 104 presents a poetic description, and Proverbs 8 gives still another picture of the birth of nature.

In the writings of the rabbis, there is considerable speculation as to the manner of creation. Some expressed the view of successive creations, where God experimented with and destroyed many worlds before this world was finally established. Others held to the view of continuing re-creation; that is, God renews each day the work of creation.

According to Genesis, God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. What is most interesting is that in the Babylonian Genesis story the world is also created in six days, with the gods throwing a big party on the seventh day. Other ancient creation stories have the six-day model of creation too.

Evolution and scientific data need not be considered in contradiction to any of the moral and spiritual views of the biblical creation story, and numbers in the Bible were rarely ever taken literally. A single day in the creation story might well symbolize several million years.

From the beginning, when God willed it into being, the world held the seeds of its own future development. Scientists can explain only how the potential became actual; the *why* falls into the province of religion. Science cannot and does not deny the belief that the universe is God's creation.

For me, the creation story is meant to teach us a number of things that we cannot learn from science—for example, the God that creates the universe is eternal and the universe was conceived by God's will for a reason, and it is still evolving according to God's words. The sanctity of the Sabbath, the seventh day, is divinely established. Last

and perhaps most important, we learn that people are made in God's image, with the power to choose and transcend themselves.

Do Jews believe in Armageddon?

In chapter thirty-eight of the Book of Ezekiel (read as a Haftarah on the Intermediate Sabbath of Sukkot), there is a prophecy of messianic days called the "War of God and Magog," which bears a similarity to the Armageddon of the New Testament. Ezekiel foretells that the restoration of Israel to the land of his fathers will not pass unchallenged. Formidable armies from the extreme north, under the leadership of Gog, will invade Israel, but the invasion will end in the utter destruction of Gog and his confederate forces. The identity of Gog is obscure, and he is probably to be understood as an apocalyptic figure, personifying the forces hostile to Israel, rather than as a particular person. Magog in Ezekiel is the country of Gog, but in rabbinic literature Magog becomes his inseparable partner, and the war of God and Magog appears to be the great Armageddon that will immediately precede the messianic age. Note that the words Gog and Magog are similar in sound to Armageddon. An old tradition to the effect that this final war would be waged during the festival of Sukkot determined the choice of this passage as the Haftarah for the Intermediate Sabbath of Sukkot.

Armageddon is not mentioned prior to the New Testament, but it is believed by some to be a corrupt spelling of Megiddo, a city mentioned many times in the Tanach, the Jewish Bible. The Book of Revelation in the New Testament refers to Armageddon as the site of the final and conclusive battle between good and evil, involving "the kings of the earth and the whole world," on the "great day of God Almighty."

What is considered the holiest day of all for Jews?

Although the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, has been called the Sabbath of Sabbaths, I believe that each Sabbath itself is the holiest of all days. The Sabbath is the only day that is mentioned as being holy in the Ten Commandments, and its origin goes back to the beginning of creation. The Bible relates that God made the world in six

days and rested on the seventh, thereby blessing it. Since that time, the Sabbath has remained the holiest day of the year for Jews, despite its occurring fifty-two successive times.

The Sabbath has many work restrictions. Observing the Sabbath gives people an opportunity to rest their mind and body, as well as an opportunity to express their appreciation for many of the things they are often too busy to notice during the week. My philosophy teacher at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, once said that the most important ingredient in creating a Jewish home is the celebration of Shabbat.

I began observing the Sabbath in all its detail just before my Bar Mitzvah. In 1960, a couple of months beforehand, my parents sent me to the sleep-away camp that was one of a network of such camps run by the Conservative movement. The camp offered me a community of observant people who each day expressed their love of Judaism, Jewish study, and Jewish values. We had lively prayer services each day, and on Friday evening and Saturday morning the entire camp prayed outdoors in an amphitheater that was on the shore of a beautiful lake. I was so moved by the spirited singing and fervor I experienced every Shabbat at camp that, upon returning home, I too was devoted to Sabbath observance and became a regular worshipper at my synagogue.

I can honestly say that the Sabbath is my special day of rest and relaxation. I love to take walks on the Sabbath in the afternoon with my family and dog. It's so nice to know that people will not phone or e-mail me, and that I can put aside all business concerns and requests, at least for one day, and have a Shabbat Shalom, a day of Sabbath peace.