

# I Am A Jew

## *Discussion Guide and Lesson Plan For Educators*

### INTRODUCTION

The American Jewish pre-teen considers their Bar or Bat Mitzvah to be various things. For some it is the end of religious schooling. For others it is the task of learning a Torah portion. For many, it's plans for a big party. And while formal Jewish education may indeed conclude at the age of 13, a young person's understanding and appreciation of their roles as Modern Jews has only just begun to develop. As these perceptive 'tweens' approach the often-confusing stages of adolescence, their Judaism can continue to be an integral source of dignity and strength in their lives. The time for answering their questions about Judaism will soon be over. The opportunity to build an intellectual foundation of progressive Jewish pride is now.

The video **I Am A Jew** allows educators to re-present the history, mysteries, and moral purposes of Judaism for our modern world. It is an approach that speaks directly to the values of today's pre-teens, encouraging them to integrate Judaism into their social, emotional and intellectual development. This is a real opportunity for their parents and their community to make a major difference: Through this bold new presentation of Jewish values and ideals, we can teach our kids to be good people.

A discussion and classroom activity guide has been created to further explore these vital topics. This film asks the questions that all Jewish pre-teens ask and provides answers that support dialog, guidance and continued discovery. It is a frank and honest presentation of the spiritual, cultural and ethical opportunities of Judaism that respects a child's intelligence and encourages their own personal connection to religion. Now and forever, Judaism belongs to them. They can – and must – 'own it'.

The goal of this guide is not to teach students 'how to be a Jew', but rather how to think about and practice Judaism in a proud new way. Only then will they understand and appreciate what it means to say, "**I Am A Jew.**"

### STUDY/DISCUSSION GUIDE

#### ➤ CONTEXT

**I Am A Jew** encompasses basic – and decidedly distinctive – aspects of both religious school and junior high curriculum, including theology, anthropology,

social studies, civics, world & American history, and even basic philosophy. It's a wide-ranging program of teaching that reflects – and emphasizes – the broad based uniqueness of Modern Progressive Judaism. Utilize the Online Resources listings at the end of each section for websites that provide additional information.

## ➤ AGE GROUP

The discussion guide and classroom activities are designed for pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah students as a companion program to their basic studies, as well as an essential component of their Bar/Bat Mitzvah training.

The video asks six questions essential to understanding the film's fundamental messages and underscoring its final statement.

### Question #1: What Is Judaism?

Throughout its history, Judaism is and has been a search not for certainty but for understanding. And because a pre-teen's knowledge of the world is constantly evolving, a spirituality predicated on understanding will demand that we integrate the truths of human experience with the truths we find in Judaism.

**Judaism is a religion in which individuals – and individualism – matter greatly:** Because we are unique individuals, our communication with God is always one-on-one. You don't need a priest or a rabbi to deliver your prayers or ask questions of God. Your relationship with God – and even your understanding of what God is or isn't – is yours and yours alone. Consequently, *your Judaism* is your own. And it is your obligation to always question it and discover more.

Of all religions, Judaism has distinguished itself as one deeply concerned with approaching life in a rational way. It champions query, study and an ongoing search for truth. Judaism is unique in its willingness to even question God. Consider these pivotal tales from the Torah that exemplify our calls for justice, consistency and integrity:

- ❖ **Justice:** In the story of Sodom & Gomorrah, Abraham entreats God to spare the cities if 10 innocent people can be found. *“Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike,” he challenges God. “Shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly?” (Genesis 18:17)*
- ❖ **Consistency:** It is only through Moses' impassioned imploring that an angered God spares the Children of Israel. Moses reasons with God, *“Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Thy servants to whom Thou didst swear by Thyself, and didst say to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’”<sup>14</sup> So the Lord*

*changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people" (Exodus 32:12-14)*

- ❖ **Integrity:** Perhaps the most heated arguments occur between God and Job, "a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." After a series of terrible tragedies – including professional ruin, the death of his children and painful disfigurement – Job calls God to judgment as if in a lawsuit: *"I would speak to the Almighty and I desire to argue my case with God... (Chapter 13:3a) Let me have silence, and I will speak, and let come on me what may. I will take my flesh in my teeth, and put my life in my hand. Behold, He will slay me; I have no hope; yet I will defend my ways to his face. This will be my salvation—that a godless man shall not come before him. Listen carefully to my words, and let my declaration be in your ears. Behold, I have prepared my case; I know that I shall be vindicated. Who is there that will contend with me? For then I would be silent and die. Only grant two things to me, then I will not hide myself from thy face: withdraw thy hand far from me, and let not dread of thee terrify me. Then call, and I will answer; or let me speak and do thou reply to me. ..."* (Chapter 13: 13-22a)

In Judaism, challenging God is not only encouraged, it is *expected*. Most of all, your own personal and direct relationship with God is not about getting the right answers, but rather asking the right questions. Prepare your case, study the evidence and enjoy the deliberation. Your findings will give you the greatest knowledge possible.

**The Jewish people have a history unlike any other people or religious group:** For nearly 3500 years, Jewish history and Western history have been virtually indistinguishable from one another: Canaan, The Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and Reformation, the Industrial Revolution and the entire 20<sup>th</sup> Century have all, in a myriad of ways, been influenced by Judaism. And while the majority of Jewish achievement during these eras is often of a non-religious nature, their ethical accomplishment speaks directly to the inborn integrity of Judaism itself.

But at the same time, we must never forget nearly 3500 years of anti-Semitism and persecution that has included Pharaohs in Egypt, Herod and the Roman Destruction Of The Great Temple, The Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Dhimmi Laws, The Grenada Massacre, Blood Libel, Tsarist pogroms, the Dreyfus Affair, the Leo Frank Lynching, Soviet Dissidence, and, of course, the Nazi Holocaust (as well as current Holocaust Denial). Through it all, Jews have risen above evil. Our struggles have not only made us stronger, but also imbued us with an indomitable empathy towards intolerance and injustice. Nearly 4000 years later, Judaism survives, flourishes, and carries a singular compassion towards our fellow man that must be with us always.

**Judaism has always contributed to civilization:** Jesus was a Jew. So were Proust, Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Jonas Salk, Leonard Bernstein, Levi Strauss, Man Ray and Charlie Chaplin, as are Bob Dylan, Steven Spielberg, Gene Simmons, The Beastie Boys, Joey Ramone, Jack Black, Sacha Baron Cohen, Zac Efron, Amanda Bynes and thousands more great thinkers, leaders, writers, actors, athletes and singers. Their commonality? Intelligence. Instinct. Charisma. Talent. Leadership. And while these qualities are in no way exclusive to Judaism, Jews have always used these qualities within themselves to make great scientific, academic, political, theological, athletic and creative contributions to the society of which they are a part. These contributions are more than just a shared gift to mankind; they are yet another essential aspect of the Jewish responsibility to respond creatively to the challenges of contemporary society and transform the world in which we live.

**Judaism is the religion that helped establish the foundation of our proud American ideals:** Perhaps even more so than the ancient Greeks, Judaism has done the most to establish the concepts of free will and democracy. As a religion, Judaism is built upon the belief that ethical behavior, personal liberty and fundamental equality are essential requirements for a good society. It is a connection that led our founding fathers to directly inscribe Leviticus 25:10 – *"Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof"* – on The Liberty Bell in 1751. In fact, most of the democratic concepts that created America come directly from the Torah. The covenant between God and the Israelites speaks to the essential concepts of mutual responsibility, obligation and consent. A passage such as Deuteronomy 17:14/20 explains a system of rule that eschews monarchies in favor of instead electing an honest and responsible leader of people:

- ❖ *When thou art come unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that [are] about me; ☐ Thou shalt in any wise set [him] king over thee, whom the LORD thy God shall choose: [one] from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee: thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which [is] not thy brother. And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them: ☐ That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, [to] the right hand, or [to] the left: to the end that he may prolong [his] days in his kingdom, he, and his children, in the midst of Israel.*

It is just one of many passages that have a startlingly direct connection to our venerated American system of government. The Declaration Of Independence echoes this essential assertion that 'law is above the king':

- ❖ *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.*

Even the basic Jewish view of monotheism is a fundamental component of our Constitution. Consider the preamble alone:

- ❖ *"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."*

So many significant correlations can be drawn between the basic moral principles of Judaism and the documents that still serve as the supreme law of the United States of America.

The American Jewish community, making constructive use of these democratic ideals, has been the most prosperous and creative Jewish community in history. The Jews in America not only took from American values but found in America the opportunity to draw from the great storehouse of Jewish ideals; values which emphasized creativity, the intrinsic dignity of every human being, the need for ongoing study and a sense of responsibility and industry. America wouldn't be as great a nation without Judaism. And we wouldn't be as proud a religion without America.

**Judaism instills the core values for living your life:** Integrity. Honesty. Trust. Respect. These core values of Judaism cannot be stressed strongly enough. Yet we are all part of a community, not just of fellow Jews but all of humankind. And as a member of this community, Judaism teaches that we all have a moral responsibility to help others. Throughout history and everywhere we have lived, Jews have stood up when people were doing the wrong thing and fought for the right thing. In America, we have stood up for women, for workers, for civil rights, for the poor and homeless. This is our contribution to the world. We fight for justice in the face of all opposition. We have an obligation to be a people of charity. We must believe that we can make a difference. And through meaningful ethical behavior, Judaism gives us an ethical blueprint for living an exceptional life.

## **Discussion Questions/Activities:**

- ❖ What 'officially' makes us Jewish? Is Judaism about bloodlines or hearts and minds?
- ❖ Discuss Genesis 1:26. In what way might this passage speak to our individuality and responsibility to our world?
- ❖ Discuss Psalm 8. What does it say about a world much larger than ourselves?
- ❖ What kind of questions can we ask God? What kind of answers can we expect?
- ❖ Explore several major events of Anti-Semitism throughout history. What caused them? What was their impact/outcome?
- ❖ Discuss the basic tenets of the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. In what ways are they influenced by core Judaic teachings and moral principles?
- ❖ Identify several prominent Jews in each of the fields of movies, music, politics, sports, science and literature. Who were you most surprised to discover was Jewish?
- ❖ When does a Jew's individual responsibility become a group effort? Why is it essential for Jews to transform the society in which they live?
- ❖ What are the core values of Judaism? How do these values create a unique resource within us all?

## **On-Line Resources:**

### **Jewish History:**

Hebrew History Federation:

<http://www.hebrewhistory.info/>

American Jewish Historical Society:

<http://www.ajhs.org/publications/chapters/index.cfm>

Center For Jewish History:

<http://www.cjh.org/>

350 Years Of American Jewish History:

<http://www.350th.org/history/timeline.html>

American Jewish Historical Society:

<http://www.ajhs.org/>

Builders Of America – The Jewish Heritage:

<http://www.borisamericanjews.org/>

### **Anti-Semitism Through History:**

Anti-Defamation League:

<http://www.adl.org/>

Florida Holocaust Museum Timeline:

[http://www.flholocaustmuseum.org/history\\_wing/antisemitism/room1\\_timeline.cfm](http://www.flholocaustmuseum.org/history_wing/antisemitism/room1_timeline.cfm)

SICSA/The Hebrew University of Jerusalem:

<http://sicsa.huji.ac.il/studies.html>

Southern Poverty Law Center:

<http://www.splcenter.org/intel/hatewatch/?source=redirect&url=hatewatch>

Czarist Pogroms:

<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1E1-pogrom.html>

The Dreyfuss Affair:

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/Dreyfus.html>

The Leo Frank Case:

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/frank.html>

The Nazi Holocaust:

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/>

“Fate Did Not Let Me Go”:

<http://www.fatedidnotletmego.org/main.html>

The Anne Frank Center USA:

<http://www.annefrank.com>

National Conference On Soviet Jewry:

<http://www.sovietjewry.org/>

### **Famous Jews:**

Jewish Politicians:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Jewish\\_American\\_politicians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Jewish_American_politicians)

Jewish Actors/Celebrities:

<http://www.juf.org/tweens/celebrities.aspx>

Jewish Athletes:

<http://www.jewishsports.com/jewsin/>

Jews In Rock Music:

<http://www.jewsrock.org/>

### **Judaism & American Democracy:**

The Constitution:

<http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/constitution.html>

Declaration Of Independence:

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=2&page=transcript>

House Of Representatives:

<http://www.house.gov/house/Educate.shtml>

United States Senate:

<http://www.senate.gov/>

## **Question #2: What Do Jews Believe In?**

What are the basic fundamental beliefs of Judaism? Did one period in time 3500 years ago define Jewish truth forever? The simple fact is that no one group or denomination ‘owns’ Judaism; Judaism is lived by us all. The truth of this can

only be found in understanding the definitive core values of our faith, accepting the responsibility of our moral purpose, and embracing the possibilities of change.

**Social justice. Peace. Tolerance. Knowledge. Dignity. Independence:** As Jews, we must always believe in our core values. It is only through continued fulfillment of these virtues that we each will become the people we want to be. And if we all have an ethical responsibility to these beliefs, then we also have a moral responsibility to make the world a better place. We do this through words and deeds, through living by example and believing in mankind. Who can we be compassionate with, or gracious to, or patient with except for our fellow human beings? As our moral actions bring about our better selves, we in turn build a better world. In order to discover the truth about God, we must first find the truth in each other. You can call it personal growth, self-actualization or embodying the traits that move us closer to the Divine. As the philosopher Hermann Cohen said, “When we look for God, we find man. When we look for man, we find God.”

**Our interpretation of these truths can change:** Because it is our responsibility to continually question our concepts of God, we have the freedom to question authority and our own ideas. Through this questioning, we achieve new understanding of ourselves and others. Most of all, we will gain new perspectives on a 3500 year old religion that can only survive through change. That change must begin with us. It's a responsibility we must approach not with 'certainty', but 'understanding'.

The challenges we will face in our lifetimes must be met with the values that always matter. The basic truths of Judaism – peace and justice, wisdom and strength, freedom and justice, courage and respect – are indisputable. They have served as the moral foundation of Jews throughout history. These truths themselves cannot change. But what can change is how we choose to apply them to our world today. We embrace openness to truth from every source, including philosophy, science, art and literature. We follow what Freud referred to as 'The Reality Principle', which cites the application of reason over immediate gratification. We overcome selfishness in order to gain vision. Change begins with us...and continues through our ever-developing relationship with Judaism.

**Our ancestors were the first to see that the world is driven by a moral purpose:** Despite slavery, persecution, poverty, and attempted genocide, Jews have never lost sight of Judaism's basic truths. Most of all, they have never tired of fighting for what's right. It is a single moral purpose that all Jews are driven by, called 'tikkun olam'.

'Tikkun olam' literally means 'repairing our world'. It originated not as biblical law, but by rabbis to support and encourage a model social order that would influence the rest of the world, to create an ideal society committed to justice and peace. Any commitment to social justice and change can be considered 'Tikkun olam': Acts of charity and kindness, peaceful social protest, support for humanitarian



causes, and so much more that can – and will – transform our world are all ‘tikkun olam’. And it all begins with our roles as Jews. After all, what are the Ten Commandments if not a revolutionary summary for mutual respect and getting along? Jews must always believe that our role as human beings comes from the pursuit of justice, a sense of humility, the idea of mercy, and an obligation to make peace with ourselves and with other peoples of the world. And we must prove it with everything we do, every day of our lives.

### **Discussion Questions/Activities:**

- ❖ How do Judaism’s core beliefs reinforce our obligation to live for the common good? How does everything we do bring us closer to God?
- ❖ “In order to discover the truth about God, we must first find the truth in each other.” What does this statement mean to you?
- ❖ What is ‘moral purpose’ and how has it sustained Judaism? How can it continue to sustain us as not just Jews, but as human beings?
- ❖ Discuss the Civil Rights Movement of the ‘60s and the American Jewish role in the struggle.
- ❖ Can you name other examples of Judaism’s ‘tikkun olam’ in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?
- ❖ Can you name examples of your own ‘tikkun olam’ in the past year?
- ❖ Encourage students to volunteer their time to a local charity, become involved with a social action group, or learn more about a national/international human rights organization.

### **On-Line Resources:**

#### **Jews & The Civil Rights Movement:**

350 Years Of American Jewish History:

<http://www.350th.org/er/lp/haven/lp04.html>

Religious Action Center:

<http://rac.org/advocacy/issues/issuecr/>

American Jewish Committee:

[http://www.ajc.org/site/c.ijlTI2PHKoG/b.838243/k.B0AB/Civil\\_Rights.htm](http://www.ajc.org/site/c.ijlTI2PHKoG/b.838243/k.B0AB/Civil_Rights.htm)

Social Action:

[http://www.socialaction.com/issues/human\\_civil/MartinLutherKingDay/JewsandCivilRights.shtml](http://www.socialaction.com/issues/human_civil/MartinLutherKingDay/JewsandCivilRights.shtml)

Civil Rights Movement Veterans:

<http://www.crmvet.org/disc/jews.htm>

The Murders of Chaney, Goodman & Schwerner:

<http://www.core-online.org/History/Chaney,%20Goodman%20&%20Schwerner.htm>

#### **Jewish Philanthropic Tradition:**

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/philanthropy.html>

**American Jewish War Veterans:**

National Museum Of American Jewish Military History:

<http://www.nmajmh.org/>

**Service & Volunteering:**

United Jewish Communities:

<http://www.uja.org/>

Jewish Coalition For Service:

<http://www.jewishservice.org/>

Social Action:

<http://www.socialaction.com/teens/teens.shtml>

Volunteer Match:

<http://www.volunteermatch.org/>

Youth Service America:

<http://servenet.org/>

American Jewish World Service:

<http://www.ajws.org/>

Do Something:

<http://www.dosomething.org/>

Union For Reform Judaism Youth Workers:

<http://rjyouthworker.urj.org/>

**Human Rights Watch/Social Action Organizations:**

Amnesty International:

<http://www.amnesty.org/>

Amnesty International USA:

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/>

Citizens For Global Solutions:

[http://www.globalsolutions.org/about/vision\\_and\\_mission](http://www.globalsolutions.org/about/vision_and_mission)

Save Darfur:

<http://savedarfur.org/content?splash=yes>

Jewish Council For Public Affairs:

<http://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org/>

Coalition On The Environment And Jewish Life

<http://www.coejl.org>

Jewish Alliance For Law & Social Action

<http://www.jewishalliance.org>

The Innocence Project:

<http://www.innocenceproject.org/>

**Question #3: Who – Or What – Is God?**

There is, in all of us, a constant quest for answers of how our lives ultimately hang together. We all have a profound need for reassurance; that things are going to be all right. We need recognition, to feel on some level that we are

special and that our lives have meaning. We need a feeling of connectedness, not just to our fellow human beings but to a transcendent reality that connects us to something higher, richer and more valuable than ourselves. The question 'Who – or what – is God?' is perhaps the most elemental and important question we can ask of our teachers, our rabbis, and our faith.

**God is a reality much larger than ourselves.** God may be someone or something that is experienced when we lift ourselves above the pettiness, the littleness and the selfishness of life. God is our simultaneous key to greatness and humility, our greater conscience and consciousness. The ancient rabbinic text the Mishnah states: *"A single man was created in the world, to teach that if any man has caused a single soul to perish, scripture imputes it to him as if he had caused a whole world to perish. And if any man saves alive a single soul, scripture imputes it to him as if he had saved alive a whole world. Therefore everyone must say, for my sake the world was created."* (Sanhedrin 4:5)

Judaism teaches that if you want to raise yourself up to a Godly spiritual plane, to find the Divine spark in yourself and in others, you must ask yourself: "Am I living my life in such a way that indeed I have the right to say 'for my sake the world was created?'" Like Spider-Man, there is no spirituality without great responsibility. Through our own transformation, we transform the world.

There is no one correct answer to the question of 'Who – Or What – is God?' Instead we must guide our young people to discover their own understanding about God – however they may choose to understand and interpret this Divinity – within themselves. Only then can their personal connection to spirituality mature and grow.

Jews were the first religion to believe in monotheism: Jews founded the belief in a uniquely spiritual, creative and liberating deity. In fact, the first Commandment – *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"* (Exodus 20:2) – directly connects God to personal freedom. We believe that our people first dreamed the dream of one God, and that God became the symbol of the kind of world our world could be; that our heritage still points the way and lights the path. Both Christianity and Islam adapted their monotheistic foundations from Judaism. Monotheism focuses our faith, refusing to engage in fantasy and otherworldly solutions to our worldly problems. Most of all, one God means one world and one humankind. Monotheism is the foundation of human rights for all.

**Does God exist? Do miracles exist?** If monotheism is the basic foundation of human ethics, why does God allow war, injustice and cruelty? Our belief in – and questioning of – God is Judaism's essential response to human existence. And our aspirations to the Divine begin when we learn how to understand and manage both the good and the evil we confront in ourselves. Jews are a people of destiny. We must believe we are called to higher things. Our goals – like our

faith – must evolve throughout our lives. What God has done is create a universe of great possibility. But while God has provided us with the ideals, wisdom and inspiration to make this vision manifest, it is our responsibility to fulfill the world's promise. We are – with God – co-creators of the world.

Simply put, spirituality is how we can develop the image of God within us. The reason that it states that God made man in his own image is so that each of us – man and woman – can develop what is divine within them. Ultimately, spirituality is the nurturing of the godly spark within us all. It deals with those feelings in our natures that elevate us in moral worth and dignity. Our belief in God – however we choose to interpret it – can be the blossoming of that which makes us uniquely human, the taking upon ourselves the task of character development, the paths of righteousness, and the acceptance of our Jewish responsibility to live an ethical life.

### **Discussion Questions/Activities:**

- ❖ What was the world – and individual faith – like before monotheism? Discuss the ways in which the concept of monotheism may have transformed the totality of human existence.
- ❖ Is there a separate God for Christians? For Muslims? Do the Jews 'own' God?
- ❖ Is there a right or wrong way to think about who – or what – God is?
- ❖ How is God – or our personal perception of God – manifested in 'tikkun olam'?
- ❖ Are religious fundamentalists – no matter what religion – saying, "Our God is better than your God"? How and why can religious zealotry lead to intolerance and hatred?
- ❖ How can we look up to God with all the pain and suffering that exists? Who is responsible for injustice? Discuss the concept of how we are – with God – co-creators of our world.
- ❖ If God is a reality much larger than ourselves, how does our understanding of God evolve?

### **On-Line Resources:**

#### **Monotheism/Interfaith Studies:**

The Center For Inter-Religious Understanding

<http://www.faithindialogue.org>

Ollendorff Center For Human and Religious Understanding

<http://www.ollendorffcenter.org>

Center For Islamic Pluralism

<http://islamicpluralism.org/>

## Question #4: What Do Rituals And Traditions Really Mean?

Just as learning and questioning transform us, so do our traditions. Jewish tradition and ritual are a vital part of our ethnic identity and religious practice, and must be consistent with the highest standard of ethics. They solidify our values and give expression to our relationship to the Divine. The challenge is clear: If we do not make rituals and traditions relevant to the lives of our young students, they will eventually reject them. And if they reject them, they will ultimately reject Judaism.

**Rituals connect us to our history and heritage.** Rituals and traditions – such as studying torah, observing Yom Kippur, participating in the Seder, and especially becoming Bar and Bat Mitzvah are all designed to bring out the best in us and enable us to overcome the worst. They provide us with handy insight into what is holy and that which is divine. They afford us a regular opportunity to think about what it means to live a good life. Best of all, they bind generations of Jews in celebrations and observances based on thousands of years of insight and wisdom. As Kierkegaard said, “Life is lived forward, but understood backwards.”

**Certain elements of certain rituals may – in context – apply to specific historical conditions:** The torah contains numerous stories that include such elements as monarchies, slavery, animal sacrifice and treating women as second-class citizens. Can we affirm things in Judaism that do not meet our modern ethical standards as well as the best of Judaism itself? Is it wrong to deny these aspects that we *know* are wrong? Absolutely not. But understand that ancient times followed codes that often have little bearing on our lives today. They represented certain limitations and restrictions. Particular historical situations answered particular historical needs. And while strict fundamentalism in any religion can – and will – lead to intolerance, we cannot outright dismiss any rituals that may contain offensive elements. Somewhere within them all, these stories and rituals embody fundamental rationales about ultimate questions.

It is our task to refashion Judaism for our world. Once again, these traditions and rituals are yours to question and make real within yourself. Is studying Torah about re-affirming ancient Jewish law, or are we continually re-interpreting its layers of lessons? Could Yom Kippur be both about a Book Of Life as well as a moral inventory of our own lives? Isn't the Passover seder as much about our freedom from slavery in Egypt as it is a contemporary celebration of human rights? Should your Bar/Bat Mitzvah be considered a conclusion to your Jewish education or a proud new beginning? Jewish rituals and traditions are more than just things we do; they are a deeply profound 'best of' or our past 3500 years. Rituals and traditions are a part of us all. They are the reassuring signposts on our path to ethical living.

The Torah is not simply the Five Books Of Moses, or even the entire Bible. More correctly, it is the whole gamut of Jewish teaching and wisdom contained in the written and oral law. And while 'Torah' is often translated by the word 'law', it's more literal meaning is more appropriately translated as 'direction, instruction and teaching'. The Biblical stories are not simply retelling the basic events in the lives of Jacob, Moses, Jonah, Sarah or Job. Rather they are narratives that directly confront us with our own lives and actions. They call us to inner reflection. They expect us to continually re-interpret them.

The Torah is the prism through which one strives to understand the significance of one's self, the Jewish people, the world, and the Divine. It embodies an ethic that directs behavior towards all human beings, other creatures and the environment. It exposes us to the depth of life. We interpret its text in light of our own experience, and interpret our own experience from creative understanding of its text. Our role is to continually make the connection. The Torah is God's creative blueprint for a world that is constantly and creatively renewed. Consequently, it must be received and understood in our own unique way. It is not something that is read, but rather re-discovered and continuously – and creatively – made our own.

In fact, the Torah itself changes its own teachings on several occasions. Consider this passage from Exodus 20:5/6, in which God gives The Ten Commandments to Moses and admonishes:

*Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy upon thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments.*

Yet later in Deuteronomy 7:9/11, this commandment is modified to make faith the responsibility of the individual alone:

*Know therefore that the Lord thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations; Thou shalt therefore keep the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which I command thee this day, to do them.*

Clearly, the Torah has conceptually changed its position to bring out the best in itself and in us. In doing so, it encourages those who follow it to do the same.

The core teachings that are embodied in Torah and its rituals must now be made responsive to the needs and values of our contemporary world. Again, it is our duty as Jews to not practice blind obedience, but to exercise good judgment. There are layers upon layers that we study and learn to apply in order to become

God's partners in Creation. It is your responsibility to ask the questions. Clarify the reasoning. Understand and respect the source, then decide what's real for you. Our moral values do not simply come from ancient one-dimensional codes, but from the core values of Judaism we find within ourselves.

**Rituals are things you do. Faith is who you are.** Clearly, faith is our personal connection to spirituality. But if our heritage is indivisible to our faith, then the truths found in rituals and traditions must serve and enhance our lives of the Divine. Nothing in Judaism – particularly the Torah – is one-dimensional. The great sage Hillel was approached by a pagan who asked if he could be taught the Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel offered a response that has become central in Judaism: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow human being. This is the essence; the rest is commentary. Go and learn. Judaism is a means of learning how to do it.”

In Leviticus 19:17 the Torah tells us, *“Let there be no hate in your heart for your brother; but you may protest to your neighbor, so that he may be stopped from doing evil.”* Could we not easily apply this passage to the American Civil Rights Movement for which so many Jews devoted their time, energy and sometimes even their lives? Could it not also apply to the Anti-War movement of the '60s? Couldn't it also apply to our world today? It is a passage that can be relevant to our organized concerns about the genocide in Darfur or the Myanmar massacres. It can apply to any human rights issue that is important to us. It could – and should – apply to our inherent Jewish obligation to fight intolerance and injustice wherever it may be. So many passages in the Torah can do this, as do the fundamental meanings behind virtually all of our holidays and rituals. They too are an essential foundation of our legacy. They call on us to reflect on what we have done and who we are. Rituals and traditions create a common ground of our humanity.

### **Discussion Questions/Activities:**

- ❖ How do rituals and traditions connect us to Jewish history? How does Jewish history connect us to our modern faith?
- ❖ Discuss several major Jewish holidays and re-interpret their messages for our contemporary world.
- ❖ The Torah contains startlingly relevant applications to our world today. Is this evidence of divine inspiration or merely the presence of extraordinary wisdom? Is there a difference?
- ❖ Discuss the differences between Exodus 20:5/6 and Deuteronomy 7:9/11. If the Torah is willing to modify its concepts, is it inviting us to do the same?
- ❖ Explore Leviticus 25:10 and 19:9/10. Establish correlations for each passage as they might directly relate to specific historic events of our time.

- ❖ Ask students to randomly choose other passages from anywhere in the Torah. Have them establish at least correlations for each as they might directly apply to their lives or the world around them.
- ❖ Is it sacrilegious – or responsible – to *not* take the Torah literally? Choose Torah stories of ancient history and re-interpret their lessons for our modern world.

## On-Line Resources:

### Jewish Practice & Rituals:

Jewish Virtual Library

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/ritual.html>

### Jewish Holidays:

Union For Reform Judaism Calendar

<http://urj.org/holidays/jcal/index.cfm?>

### Rituals, Ethics, Science, Literature & The Prophets:

Being The Blessing

<http://www.beingtheblessing.org>

## Question #5: What Can You Do For Judaism's Future?

There is a need for being connected to something abiding and valuable in the nature of things. Today, we are all experiencing a search for security, for certainty, and reassurance that one's life embodies something of meaning and significance. It is both a personal search and a search for community. It is a search for something more profound than ourselves.

This search leads many to something that is indeed universal and not particular, which is the attraction of such Eastern religions as Buddhism. What we as educators must do is preserve the genuine aspects of this need for reaching deeper, but also separate it from what unfortunately is a vague, self-centered idealism. We are Jewish because we believe that Judaism embodies fundamental truths about ultimate questions.

**Be proud of yourself. Be proud of your Judaism:** Spirituality is inner growth. And just as the physical and emotional blossoming of pre-teens is what makes them uniquely human, their spiritual development must speak to their individuality. Every child is different. Every child is special. And every child has now begun to seek answers to that which transcends them. Because we are not infallible beings, 'God-Seeking' must take the place of strict 'God-knowing'. As this world changes, our young people will reach as far as they can for whatever knowledge they can. And as they stand and reach, Judaism is their ground for hope.



We can only champion our faith if it becomes a personal possession. Judaism is not something finished and handed down, but rather something that becomes every generation's challenge to shape for themselves and their communities. Your students must recognize Judaism as making sense and being true. They must strive to build upon its past. Most of all, we must make them understand that Judaism is theirs to know, to feel, and to own with pride.

**Ours is not a 'messed-up' world, but just an unfinished one.** We cannot believe that all comes from God and human beings contribute nothing to the future. Instead, our task now is to increase the truth and righteousness that Jewish people have discovered. The best in Judaism and the Jewish people have taken the high road, very often the heroic road. It is a road that continually seeks to implement values of justice and peace in one's life, in society, and in the world. We must always feel that we are greater than we know. Now is the time for young people to reject racism and intolerance. Now is the time for young people to embrace interfaith understanding. Now is the time for young people to accept the responsibilities – and profound truths – of their own Judaism.

### **Discussion Questions/Activities:**

- ❖ As we get older, how can we find Judaism in a synagogue, in our relationships with others, or both?
- ❖ How is your Judaism the same as your parents and grandparents? How is it different?
- ❖ In what ways does 'The Jewish Community' extend far beyond a synagogue?
- ❖ Is it possible to intermarry yet still keep a Jewish identity?
- ❖ How can young Jews change Judaism? Discuss ways in which we can evolve the religion and simultaneously strengthen our faith.
- ❖ Picture yourself 10 years from now. What will you be doing with your life? How will your Judaism be a part of it?
- ❖ How can Judaism continue to change our world?

### **Question #6: Who Are You?**

The virtue for the relationship with oneself is Peace. Shalom. But peace here doesn't mean what the English word – which comes from the Latin *pacem* – means, in that physical things are externally calm but internally can be a torrent. Peace, in the true Hebrew meaning of the word means integrity and wholeness. Peace means we are not at war within ourselves, but rather have an internal integrity. Judaism teaches us that you can't have justice with your fellow man until you are at peace with yourself.

But how does one come to peace with one's self? Judaism also teaches us that the only way you can be at peace with yourself is if you have the proper relationship to God. And the proper relationship to God is not justice, but love. If you love God and strive to do the will of God, only then will a new dimension emerge in us all. Judaism is a way of facing the truth about ourselves and changing what we do. And by overcoming the worst in ourselves, we take upon the task to make the world a little better than we found it.

There is a term the Rabbis use called the *Yetzer Tov*, 'the good inclination'. It is the part of oneself that seeks the truth about oneself, strives to be true to one's best self and live with integrity. The good inclination is the cooperative impulse, that part of us that genuinely wants the best, not just for ourselves but for everybody. It's that part of ourselves that is the loving, caring, giving part that doesn't worry about whether that loving, caring and giving is going to be recognized. It's that part of us that does things because they are the right thing to do. And according to Judaism, it is at the very heart of what it means to be a human being.

Today as our pre-teens look towards the endless wonders of their world, they will ask themselves these questions: Where is my place in this world? What does my life mean? And above all else, who am I?

The answer is clear to your family, your friends, your God and yourself:

You are a Jew.

### **Discussion Questions/Activities:**

- ❖ Is being Jewish a choice...or a higher destiny?
- ❖ Is there one correct way to be a Jew? Discuss the ways we – as individuals – can make our Judaism our own.
- ❖ How can Judaism continue to shape our lives?
- ❖ Review and discuss the many aspects and concepts that make Judaism unique.
- ❖ How are Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs all our brothers and sisters?
- ❖ Review and discuss the ways that Judaism is connected to creativity, intelligence and social responsibility.
- ❖ What does it mean to you to be a Jew?

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