Jewish Tradition

Covenant

In order to understand Judaism, it is important to recognize the importance of the covenant or agreement between God and the Jewish people that forms the framework of Jewish belief and practice. Perhaps the easiest and most obvious way to discuss the covenant is to study the text of the Torah that introduces
the parameters of the agreement between God and the Jews. (See attached excerpts.)

One way to introduce the idea of covenant is to distribute copies of the biblical excerpts to the class and have the students create a list of those essential beliefs of Judaism that are based on the Torah passages. The students can then share their conclusions with other members of the class. The discussion should include references to the following:

1. Covenant is a mutual agreement, which means that both sides accept the terms and agree to certain actions. It is initiated by God and accepted by human beings.

2. Central to the biblical covenant are God's promises of the land of Canaan (e.g., Gen. 12:1, 13:17) to the descendants of Abraham, of the status of nationhood or peoplehood conferred upon those numerous descendants (Gen. 12:2, 13:15-16, 17), that the covenant is everlasting (Gen. 17), of the status of the people as a holy nation (Exod. 19:1-6), and God's liberation of the people from slavery (Exod. 19).

3. The responsibilities of the descendants of Abraham include the circumcision of every male as a sign of participation in the covenant (Gen. 17), to refrain from idolatry or the worship of any other gods (Exod. 20, Lev. 19), not to swear falsely in God's name (Exod. 20, Lev. 19), to keep the Sabbath holy (Exod. 20, Lev. 19), to honor one's father and mother (Exod. 20, Lev. 19), not to murder (Exod. 20, Lev. 19), not to steal or covet the things that belong to others (Exod. 20, Lev. 19), not to lie, especially when one is acting as a witness (Exod. 20, Lev. 19), to observe rules of ritual purity (Lev. 19), to give to the needy (Lev. 19), not to abuse the deaf or blind (Lev. 19), to revere God, judge fairly, not hate others, not take vengeance, love your neighbor, show deference to the aged, take care of strangers, and keep all of these commandments (Lev. 19).

4. One key feature of the Jewish covenant is the interconnection of ritual and morality in the commandments or laws given by God. Thus a commandment about taking care of other people is followed by a commandment about the proper way to weave cloth, which is followed by a commandment to respect one's elders, which is then followed by a commandment to keep the Sabbath.

Understanding Judaism means understanding that these different types of rules constitute an organic whole; they are of a single piece. Any depiction of Judaism as a religion solely of ritual laws that are devoid of meaning is highly inaccurate.

The Rabbis and the Talmud

The Talmud, a Hebrew term that means study, is a large collection of rabbinic interpretation and commentary on the Hebrew Bible. This interpretive
Excerpts from the Torah

**Genesis 12:1-7**

The Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.”

Abram went forth as the Lord had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed . . . and they set out for the land of Canaan.

When they arrived in the land of Canaan . . . the Lord appeared to Abram and said, “I will give this land to your offspring.”

And he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.

**Genesis 13:14-17**

And the Lord said to Abram, after Lot had parted from him, “Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west, for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring too can be counted. Up, walk about the land, through its length and breadth, for I give it to you.”

**Genesis 17**

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am El Shaddai [God Almighty]. Walk in My ways and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous.”

Abram threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further, “As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham [father of a multitude], for I make you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you. I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant through the ages, to be God to you and your offspring to come. I give the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession. I will be their God.”

God further said to Abraham, “As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep My covenant. Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days. As for the homeborn slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not of your offspring, they must be circumcised, homeborn and purchased alike. Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kin; he has broken My covenant.”

And God said to Abraham, “As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah [princess]. I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue from her.”

Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?”

And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live by Your favor!” God said, “Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac [to laugh]; and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come. As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him. I will
make him fertile and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father of twelve chieftans, and I will make of him a great nation. But My covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.”

And when He was done speaking with him, God was gone from Abraham. Then Abraham took his son Ishmael, and all his homeborn slaves and all those he had bought, every male in Abraham's household, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins on that very day, as God has spoken to him.

Exodus 19:1-6

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai . . . Israel encamped there in front of the mountain, and Moses went up to God.

The Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey me faithfully and keep my covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel.”

Exodus 20

God spoke all these words, saying: “I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: You shall have no other gods besides Me.

“You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

“You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God; for the Lord will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.

“Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

“Honor your father and mother, that you may long endure on the land which the Lord your God is giving you.

“You shall not murder.

“You shall not commit adultery.

“You shall not steal.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

“You shall not covet your neighbor's house: you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.”

Leviticus 19 (The Holiness Code)

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: ‘You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy. You shall each revere his mother and his father, and keep My sabbaths: I the Lord am your God.

“Do not turn to idols or make molten gods for yourselves: I the Lord am your God.

“When you sacrifice an offering of well-being to the Lord, sacrifice it so that it may be accepted on your behalf. It shall be eaten on the day you sacrifice it, or on the day following; but what is left by the third day must be consumed in fire. If it should be eaten on the third day, it is an offensive thing, it will not be acceptable. And he who eats of it shall bear his guilt, for he has profaned what is sacred to the Lord; that person shall be cut off from his kin.

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Lord your God.

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Lord.

"You shall not defraud your neighbor. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning. You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling-block before the blind. You shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

"You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your neighbor fairly. Do not deal basely with [or go about as a talebearer among] your fellows. Do not profit by the blood of your neighbor. I am the Lord.

"You shall not hate your kinsman in your heart. Reprove your neighbor, but incur no guilt because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

"You shall observe My laws. You shall not let your cattle mate with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; you shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two kinds of material. If a man has carnal relations with a woman who is a slave and has been designated for another man, but has not been redeemed or given her freedom, there shall be an indemnity; they shall not, however, be put to death, since she has not been freed. But he must bring to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, as his guilt offering to the Lord, a ram of guilt offering. With the ram of guilt offering the priest shall make expiation for him before the Lord for the sin that he committed; and the sin that he committed will be forgiven him.

"When you enter the land and plant any tree for food, you shall regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden for you, not to be eaten. In the fourth year all its fruit shall be set aside for jubilation before the Lord; and only in the fifth year may you use its fruit—that its yield to you may be increased: I the Lord am your God.

"You shall not eat anything with its blood. You shall not practice divination or soothsaying. You shall not round off the side-growth on your head, or destroy the side-growth of your beard. You shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor. I am the Lord.

"Do not degrade your daughter and make her a harlot, lest the land fall into harlotry and the land be filled with depravity. You shall keep My sabbaths and venerate My sanctuary: I am the Lord.

"Do not turn to ghosts and do not inquire of familiar spirits, to be defiled by them: I the Lord am your God.

"You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

"When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.

"You shall not falsify measures of length, weight, or capacity. You shall have an honest balance and honest weights. I the Lord am your God who freed you from the land of Egypt. You shall faithfully observe all My laws and all My rules: I am the Lord."
tradition is called the “Oral Law” in distinction from the Bible or “Written Law.” Both are considered sacred in Judaism, and the interpreters of the Talmud are believed to be divinely inspired.

A survey of the Talmud reveals great room for disagreement among the sages who interpreted and commented upon the Hebrew Bible. This tradition has provided a sanction and a rationale for disagreement within Judaism.

For example, some rabbis believe that generosity and kindness are worth as much as the fulfillment of all of the other commandments of the Torah (Tosefta, Peah IV. 18). Other rabbis believe peace is the paramount virtue and insist that even if Jews commit idolatry, if they live in peace, they cannot be judged (Pesikta Rabbatai). Still others maintain that human pride is equivalent to idolatry and proud individuals are as sinful as if they had denied God (Sotah 4b).

But the rabbis of the Talmud agree that all things are contained in the Torah: “Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it.” The topics covered in the Talmud are wide-ranging, from how to treat animals to precise rules about inheritance; from how to treat other human beings including the poor, widowed, and orphaned, to laws about war; from laws about property and debt to laws about truthful witnesses in a court.

Spirit and Letter of Jewish Law

Jewish law, drawn from the instructions given by God in the Hebrew Bible, is the product of centuries and centuries of debate and discussion among rabbinic interpreters. Halakhah, which means to walk, is the Hebrew term for Jewish law, and halakhah makes up a significant part of the Talmud.

Halakhah is the interpretation and practical application of biblical commandments to everyday life. Jewish tradition constantly interprets and re-interprets the Bible to discern its authentic meanings. In this sense, Judaism is more than the “Old Testament.”

Pivotal to understanding Jewish law is an awareness that the letter of the law, as found in the Hebrew Bible, is reinterpreted to be in harmony with its inner spirit. Many of the harsher commandments in the Torah were deprived of legal force by an underlying spirit of humanity that was often expounded by the rabbis in the Talmud.

The best known example is how the rabbis interpreted “an eye for an eye” (Exod. 21:24, Lev. 24:19) to mean “the value of an eye for an eye,” thus eliminating any possibility or justification for physical retaliation. This type of interpretation is based upon the rabbinic conviction that God is merciful and gracious and thus God’s laws must be read and understood in the light of mercy.
Ritual and Ethical Teachings

Ritual and ethical teachings in Judaism are profoundly interconnected, of a piece, and cannot be fully understood in isolation. Jewish law covers both ritual—for example, celebrating holidays, keeping the dietary laws, observing the Sabbath—and ethics—for example, the proper treatment of strangers, neighbors, relatives, the poor, the elderly, the powerless.

The ideal in Judaism is to fulfill both the ritual and the moral law, but the rabbis acknowledged that there are differences among the various and numerous laws, describing some as “heavier” and some as “lighter” and giving precedence to the moral laws over the ceremonial.

According to rabbis Ben Azzai, Akiba, and Tahuma, the unity of human-kind and the love of neighbor are considered the greatest and most inclusive principles of the law (Genesis Rabbah, Bereshit, 24:7). One of the highest goals in Judaism is the combination of doing and study: “And thou shall make known to them the way wherein they must walk and the work they must do” (Exod. 28:20). Rabbi Joshua said: “The Way” is the study of Torah and Talmud and “The Work” is good deeds (Mekilta, Amalek Yitro).

The Central Commandment to Love

There is a story about a gentile who came to Hillel and arrogantly said, “You may convert me if you can teach me the whole Torah while standing on one foot.” Hillel converted him by saying “Do not do to your fellow what you hate to have done to you. This is the Torah in its entirety, the rest is explanation. Go and learn” (Sabbath 31a).

For thousands of years the rabbis have commented on these passages in the Hebrew Bible: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart...You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:17-18). The Talmud teaches that a consequence of the commandment “You shall love the Lord your God” (Deut. 6:4) is the commandment “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). Lest this be misunderstood to refer only to Jewish obligations to love other Jews, the same chapter contains the additional command, “You shall love the stranger as yourself” (Lev. 19:34).

The rabbis carefully and systematically defined this obligation. The property and good name of another should be as precious as one’s own. And this principle is applied to the laws of trade and competition in business as well as to slander and defamation.

According to the Talmud, God said to Israel: “My children, have I made you lack anything? What is it I seek of you? Only that you love each other, honor each other and respect each other: that there not be found among you either sin or theft or anything ugly, that you never become soiled or base.”
Sholom Aleichem’s “The Search”

The goal of this exercise is to introduce students to Jewish literature as a vehicle for communicating Jewish ethical ideals and to illustrate the application of Talmudic principles to life situations.

The story is a short one, so it is possible to have the students read it as a homework assignment, have them read it silently in class, or read it aloud in class. Prior to reading the story, certain concepts should be explained: Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, the value of study as a holy act, and the Yiddish words sprinkled throughout the story.

Biographical notes: Sholom Aleichem is the pen name of Shalom Rabinowitz, who was born in Kiev, Ukraine, in 1859 and died in 1916 in New York City. His name means “peace be unto you” in Hebrew and is a traditional Jewish greeting.

He writes about the internal life of East European Jewry in the semi-ghetto of the Pale of Settlement, an area in which Jews were forced to live and were subject to robberies, discrimination, humiliation, expulsions, and occasional massacres and were forbidden to own land. The Russian law was that everything is forbidden to Jews except that which is specifically permitted.

As the attached story illustrates, Jewish writers like Sholom Aleichem were intensely concerned with morality and behavior and, as a result, were extremely critical of their fellow Jews.

Students may have some difficulty with the story. Solicit their comments and questions. The students' focus should be on understanding the unhappiness of the rabbi at the end of the story, with reference to the following Talmudic citations:

To put your neighbor to shame is among the gravest of sins, according to rabbinic ethics. Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai said: “It is better for a man to fall into a burning oven than to put his neighbor to shame in public” (Sotah 10b).

Someone came before Rabbi Nachman ben Isaac and taught: “If a man puts his neighbor to shame in public, it is as if he shed blood.” Rabbi Nachman said to him: “You have spoken well, for we see how the red disappears and the pallor comes [to the face of one who has been shamed]” (Baba Mezia’ 58b).

Jewish Belief and Behavior

Responsibility for Humanity

The command “You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor” (Lev. 19:15) is explained in the Talmud: One is obligated to testify in behalf of any person if one knows anything of value or help to that person’s case; it is not
“Now, listen to me,” said a man with round bovine eyes, who had been sitting in a corner by the window, smoking and taking in stories of thefts, holdups, and expropriations. “I'll tell you a good one, also about a theft, which happened in my town, in the synagogue of all places, and on Yom Kippur too! You’ll like it.”

Our Kasrilevke—that’s where I come from—is a small town and a poor one. We have no thieves and no stealing, for there is nobody to steal from and nothing to steal. And aside from all that, a Jew just isn’t a thief. I mean to say, even if a Jew is a thief, he is not the kind of thief who sneaks in through a window or goes at you with a knife. He may twist you and turn you, outtalk you and outsmart you—granted; but he won’t crawl into your pockets, he won’t be caught red-handed and led down the street in disgrace. That may happen to a thieving Ivan but not to a Jew. Imagine, then, someone stealing in Kasrilevke, and quite a bit of money too—eighteen hundred rubles at one stroke!

One day a stranger arrived in our town, a Jew, some sort of contractor from Lithuania. He appeared on the evening of Yom Kippur, just before the time for prayer. He left his bundle at the inn and hurried out to look for a place to pray and found the old synagogue. He arrived in time to attend the evening prayer and ran into the trustees with their collection box.

“Sholom aleichem!”
“Aleichem sholom!”
“Where are you from?”
“From Lithuania.”
“And what's your name?”
“What difference does that make to your grandmother?”
“Well, after all, you’ve come to our synagogue!”
“Where else do you want me to go?”
“You surely want to pray here?”
“Have I any choice?”
“Then put something in the box.”
“Of course. Did you think I was going to pray for nothing?”

Our stranger took three silver rubles out of his pocket and put them in the box. Then he put a ruble in the cantor’s plate, gave a ruble for the rabbi, another for the school, and threw half a ruble into the poor box; in addition, he handed out coins to the beggars standing at the door—we have so many poor people in our town, God bless them, that if you really went at it you could distribute Rothschild’s fortune among them.

When we saw the kind of stranger he was we gave him a place right at the east wall. You will ask how one could be found for him when all the places were occupied. Some question! Where does one find a place at a celebration—a wedding, say, or a circumcision feast—after all the guests have been seated at the table and suddenly there is a commotion—the rich guest has arrived! Well, all the others squeeze together until a place is made for the rich man. Jews have a habit of squeezing—when no one else squeezes us, we squeeze one another.

The round-eyed man paused for a moment, looked at the audience to see what impression his quip had made, and resumed his tale.

In short, the stranger occupied a place of honor. He asked the shammes for a prayer stand and, donning his cloak and prayer shawl, began to pray. Bending over his stand, he prayed and prayed, always on his feet, never sitting down, let alone lying down. He did not leave his stand for a minute, that Litvak, except when the Eighteen Blessings were recited and everyone had to face the Ark, and during the kneeling periods. To stand on one’s feet on a day of fasting without ever sitting down—only a Litvak can do that.

After the shofar was blown for the last time, and Chaim-Chune the teacher, who always conducts the first night prayer after the holiday, began to chant, "Ha-mai-riv a-a-arovim,” we suddenly heard a cry, “Help, help, help!” We looked around and saw the stranger lying on the floor in a faint. We poured water on him to bring him to, but he fainted again.
What had happened? A fine thing! He had on him—the Litvak, that is—eighteen hundred rubles; and he had been afraid, so he said, to leave his money at the inn. You think it’s a trifle, eighteen hundred rubles? To whom could he entrust such a sum in a strange town? Nor did it seem right to keep it in his pocket on Yom Kippur. So, after thinking the matter over, he decided quietly to slip the money into his stand—yes, a Litvak is quite capable of such a thing! Now do you understand why he did not leave his stand for a minute? Someone had apparently snatched his money during the Eighteen Blessings or one of the kneeling periods.

In short, he screamed, he wept, he lamented—what would he do now without the money? It was, he said, someone else’s, not his; he was only an employee in some office, a poor man, burdened with many children. All he could do now, he said, was to jump into the river or hang himself right here in the synagogue in front of everybody.

On hearing such talk the whole congregation stood paralyzed, forgetting that they had been fasting for twenty-four hours and were about to go home to eat. It was a disgrace before a stranger, a shameful thing to witness. Eighteen hundred rubles stolen, and where? In a place of worship, in the old synagogue of Kasrilevke! And when? On Yom Kippur! Such a thing was unheard of.

“Shammes, lock the door!” our rabbi ordered.

We have our rabbi—his name is Reb Yosefel—a true and pious Jew, not oversubtle but a kindly soul, a man without gall, and sometimes he has brilliant ideas, such as wouldn’t occur even to a man with eighteen heads! When the door was locked the rabbi addressed the congregation. His face was white as the wall, his hands were trembling and his eyes burning.

“Listen carefully, my friends,” he said. “This is an ugly business, an outrage, unheard of since the creation of the world, that in our town, in Kasrilevke, there should be such an offender, such a renegade from Israel, who would have the impudence to take from a stranger, from a poor man, a supporter of a family, such a large sum of money. And when? On a holy day, on Yom Kippur, and perhaps even during the closing prayer! Such a thing has been truly unheard of since the creation of the world! I can’t believe such a thing is possible, it just can’t be! Nevertheless—who can tell?—some wretched man was perhaps tempted by this money, particularly since it amounted to such a fortune. The temptation, God have mercy on us, was great enough. So if it was decreed that one of us succumb to the temptation—if one of us has had the misfortune to commit such a sin on a day like this—we must investigate the matter, get to the bottom of it. Heaven and earth have sworn that truth must come to the top like oil on water, so we must search each other, go through each other’s garments, shake out the pockets of everyone here—from the most respectable member of the congregation to the shammes, sparing no one. Begin with me: here, my friends, go through my pockets!”

Thus spoke our rabbi, Reb Yosefel, and he was the first to open his caftan and turn all his pockets inside out. After him, all the members of the congregation loosened their girdles and turned out their pockets, and each of them in turn was searched, and felt all over, and shaken out. But when they came to Laizer Yosl he turned all colors and began to argue. The stranger, he said, was a swindler; the whole thing was a Litvak’s trick, no one had stolen any money from him. “Can’t you see,” he said, “that the whole thing is a lie, a fraud?”

The congregation broke out in loud protests. “What do you mean?” they said. “Respectable citizens have submitted to a search—why should you be excepted?” The whole crowd clamored, “Search him, search him!”

Laizer Yosl saw things were going badly for him, and he began to plead with tears in his eyes, begging that he be spared. He swore by every oath: may he be as pure of all evil as he was innocent of stealing. And on what grounds was he to be spared? He couldn’t bear the disgrace of being searched, he said, and implored the others to have pity on his youth, not to subject him to such an indignity. Do anything you want, he said, but do not go through my pockets. How do you like such a scoundrel? Do you think anyone listened to him?

But wait a minute, I have forgotten to tell you who this Laizer Yosl was. He was not a native of Kasrilevke; he came from the devil knows where to marry a Kasrilevke girl. Her father, the rich man of our town, had unearthed him somewhere and bragged that he had found a rare gem, a real genius, for his daughter, a man who knew by rote a thousand
pages of the Talmud, who was an expert in Scriptures, a Hebraist, and a mathematician who could handle fractions and algebra, and who wielded the pen like nobody's business—in short, a man with all seventeen talents. When his father-in-law brought him, everyone went to look at this gem, to see what kind of rare bargain the rich man had acquired. Well, if you just looked at him he was nothing special, a young man like many others, fairly good-looking, only the nose a little too long, and a pair of eyes like two glowing coals, and a mouth with a sharp tongue in it. He was examined; they made him explain a page of the Talmud, a chapter from the Bible, a passage from Rambam, this and that, and he passed the test with flying colors—the dog was at home everywhere, he knew all the answers! Reb Yosefel himself said that he could be a rabbi in any Jewish community—not to mention his vast knowledge of wordly things. Just to give you an idea, there is in our town a subtle scholar, Zeidel Reb Shaye's son, a crazy fellow, and he doesn't even compare with Laizer Yosl. Moreover no one in the world could equal him as a chess player.

Needles to say, the whole town envied the rich man such a genius, although people said that the gem was not without its flaws. To begin with, he was criticized for being too clever (and what there's too much of isn't good), and too modest, too familiar with everyone, mingling too easily with the smallest among the smallest, whether it be a boy or a girl or even a married woman. Then he was disliked because of the way he walked around, always absorbed in thought. He would come to the synagogue after everyone else, put on his prayer shawl, and page the Well of Life or Ebn Ezra, with his skullcap on askew—never saying a word of prayer. No one ever saw him doing anything wrong; nevertheless it was whispered that he was not a pious man—after all, no one can have all the virtues!

And so when his turn came to be searched his refusal was at once interpreted as a sign that he had the money on him. "Make me swear an oath on the Bible," he said. "Cut me, chop me to pieces, roast me, burn me alive, anything, but don't go through my pockets!"

At this point even our Rabbi Yosefel, though the gentlest of men, lost his temper and began to scold. "You so-and-so," he cried, "you deserve I don't know what! What do you think you are? You see what all these men have gone through—all of them have accepted the indignity of a search, and you want to be an exception! One of the two—either confess and give back the money, or show your pockets! Are you playing games with an entire Jewish community? I don't know what we'll do to you!"

In short, they took this nice young man, laid him on the floor by sheer force, and began to feel him all over and shake out his pockets. And then they shook out—guess what?—chickenbones and a dozen plum pits; everything was still fresh, the bones had recently been gnawed, and the pits were moist. Can you imagine what a pretty sight it was, all this treasure shaken out of our genius's pockets? You can picture for yourselves the look on their faces, he and his father-in-law, the rich man, and our poor rabbi too. Our Reb Yosefel turned away in shame; he could look no one in the face. And later, when the worshipers were on their way home, to eat after the fast, they did not stop talking about the treasure they had discovered in the young man's pockets, and they shook with laughter. Only Reb Yosefel walked alone, with bowed head, unable to look anyone in the eyes, as though the remains of food had been shaken out of his own pockets.

The narrator stopped and resumed his smoking. The story was over.

"And what about the money?" we all asked in one voice.

"What money?" the man said with an uncomprehending look as he blew out the smoke.

"What do you mean, what money? The eighteen hundred—"


"Vanished?"

"Without a t-r-a-c-e."
permitted to hold back. Second, one is under express duty to save and protect any person in physical danger: "If you see a person drowning in the river or being attacked by robbers or by a wild animal, you are duty bound to save that person" (Sifra).

There are also numerous references in the Hebrew Bible on how one must treat strangers:

And a stranger you shall not wrong, neither shall you oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exod. 22:21)

And . . . a stranger . . . you shall do no wrong. The stranger that is among you shall be as the home-born among you, and you shall love the stranger as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Lev. 19:33-34)

He . . . loves the stranger in giving the stranger food and clothing. Love you, therefore, the stranger; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut. 10:18-19)

You shall not pervert the justice due to the stranger . . . but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this thing. (Deut. 24:17)

While the rabbis sometimes interpreted “the stranger” to mean one who has converted to Judaism, the plain meaning of the text implies no such limitation. The repeated comparison to slavery in Egypt contradicts the notion that the stranger was a Jew; the children of Israel as “strangers in the land of Egypt” were despised aliens of the lowest social status, captive foreigners subjected to slave labor. The rightless, unprotected foreigner should be treated with fairness, consideration, and affection.

The prohibition against cursing the deaf or putting an obstacle in the way of the blind (Lev. 19:14) was interpreted broadly by the rabbis as forbidding the doing of anything wrong, even when there is no fear of being discovered; as when one curses a person who does not hear or puts a stumbling block before a blind man, neither of whom can fight back (Moses Mendelssohn, Commentary).

People may feel quite free in cursing the deaf who do not hear and are therefore not distressed by it. This, Mendelssohn explains, is a general prohibition against doing anything wrong in secret, for it is inconceivable that the Torah would permit a person to curse or mislead one who was neither deaf nor blind.
The command with respect to the blind was not limited to persons who were physically without the sense of sight. The *Sifra*, a rabbinic commentary, comments:

Before the person who is blind in the matter, you shall not put a stumbling block. Do not advise a person, “sell your field and get a donkey,” so as to get around that person in order to take the field from him. If you say the advice you give is good, then it must be so as an obligation of your conscience.

It was held that to lead anyone into sin, wrong-doing, or breaking the law was akin to placing a stumbling block before the blind.

**Tzedakah**

A famous formulation of Maimonides for the giving of *tzedakah* or “acts of righteousness” involves eight degrees, each one higher than the preceding one:

- to give grudgingly, reluctantly, or with regret;
- to give less than one should, but with grace;
- to give what one should, but only after being asked;
- to give before one is asked;
- to give without knowing who will receive it, although the recipient knows the identity of the giver;
- to give without making known one’s identity;
- to give so that neither giver nor receiver knows the identity of the other;
- to help another to become self-supporting, by means of a gift, a loan, or by finding employment for the one in need.

According to the rabbis, to help persons in need is considered doing no more than what is just and right. It is not a favor to the poor, not giving them charity, but giving what is their rightful due. The Hebrew word for this humane obligation is *tzedakah*, which means justice or righteousness. From the biblical commandments to care for the poor, detailed rules were elaborated by the rabbis of the Talmud.

Rabbi Hyya said: He who turns his eyes from almsgiving is as if he worshiped idols (*Ketubbot* 68a). Rabbi Yannai once saw a person give money to a poor person publicly. He said: It would have been better to give the person nothing than to give the person something and put the person to shame (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah*).

Some other rabbinic commentaries on the Jewish concept of *tzedakah*:
It is an affirmative command to give *tzedakah* to the poor, as it is said, “You shall surely open your hand” (Deut. 15:8). If you see a poor person begging and turn your glance away and do not give *tzedakah*, you transgress a negative command, as it is said, “You shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand to your needy brother” (Deut. 15:7).

*Tzedakah* is a mark of our descent from our father, Abraham. A person should take to heart that life is like a revolving wheel and in the end you or your children or your children’s children may be reduced to taking *tzedakah*. Do not think, therefore, “How shall I diminish my property in order to give to the poor.” Instead, realize that your property is not your own but only deposited with you in trust to do with as the Depositor, God, wishes.

Anyone who gives *tzedakah* with a disagreeable attitude and downcast expression, even if you give 1000 gold pieces, loses all merit for it and, indeed, transgresses the command: “Your heart shall not be grieved when you give” (Deut. 15:10). One must give, instead, with a pleasant attitude and with joy, and must express sympathy for the poor person in their trouble, as Job said: “If I have not wept for him that was in trouble and my soul grieved not for the needy” (Job 30:25).

It is forbidden to turn back a poor person empty-handed . . . If one has nothing at all to give, one should cheer the person with words. It is forbidden to rebuke a poor person or to raise one’s voice and shout at him, for his heart is broken and crushed, as the Psalmist says: “A broken and contrite heart you will not despise” (Ps. 51:19). Woe unto anyone who puts a poor person to shame. One should be, instead, like a parent both in compassion and in words, as it is said: “I was a father to the needy” (Job 29:16).

The highest degree of *tzedakah*, beyond all others, is to uphold a poor person before he or she is completely impoverished, to give that person a substantial gift in a dignified manner to be used to earn a living, or to associate that person in some venture or procure for that person some business or some work, in order to repair the person’s fortunes so that he or she does not need help from others. That is meant by “you shall uphold him” (Lev. 25:35), keep the person from sinking into utter destitution.

One should be careful to give *tzedakah* as secretly as possible; and if it can be given in such a way that the donors do not know to whom they are giving and the recipients do not know from whom they is receiving. That is the ideal.
Salvation

The idea of salvation is treated very differently in Judaism and Christianity based upon the difference between how one becomes Jewish or Christian. A person becomes a Christian based on a confession of faith. One becomes Jewish by being born of a Jewish mother. Although it is also possible to convert to Judaism, it is not necessary in order to be saved or to find favor with God.

Nor is there a comparable confession of faith that defines one's status in Judaism as it does in Christianity. This is not to say that Judaism does not have vital beliefs or faith commitments. Rather, those beliefs or commitments do not determine one's membership in the Jewish people or how much God approves of an individual.

Different branches of Judaism take different positions on what a person must do to be considered a good or faithful Jew (see below, "Diversity in Judaism"). Adherence to Jewish law and religious practice are the main criteria, with varying interpretations of whether that means Jewish law in its ethical and ritual entirety (Orthodox) or its ethical entirety and only a portion of the ritual law (Reform). To a large extent, one's actions define whether one is a good Jew.

For those who are not Jews, traditional Judaism formulated seven Noahide Laws that apply to all the descendants of Noah—that is, the entire human family. Those laws are considered binding upon all humanity. They are: (1) no idolatry; (2) no blasphemy; (3) no murder; (4) no adultery; (5) no robbery; (6) no eating of flesh from a living animal; (7) establishment of courts of justice.

According to Judaism, all non-Jews who comply with these seven commandments are perceived as Righteous Gentiles who have a share in the world to come. Another way of comprehending the Jewish idea of salvation is in the following Talmudic passage:

Any good deed is of value. Any sin is a loss. One who fulfills one command, or keeps one Sabbath, or preserves one human life, the Torah regards as if he or she had preserved the whole world. And one who commits one sin, desecrates one Sabbath, and destroys one human life, the Torah regards as if that person had destroyed the entire world. (*Avot de Rabbi Nathan* (verse I) 31, 45b, 46a)

Chosenness

To understand the concept of chosenness, it is necessary to be aware of precisely what God chose the Jewish people to do (see the section above, "Covenant"). Judaism teaches that the Jews were chosen by God to bring justice and monotheism to the world by fulfilling God's commandments.
Jewish tradition is emphatic in rejecting any idea that the Jews were chosen by God out of any special merit of their own. The Talmud comments:

It was not for their works that the Israelites were delivered from Egypt, or for their ancestors' works, and not by their works that the Red Sea was split in two, but to make God a name, as it says, "Dividing the water before them to make Himself an everlasting name" (Isa. 63:12). So Moses told the Israelites, "Not through your works were you redeemed, but so that you might praise God, and declare His renown among the nations." "Arise for our help; redeem us for Your mercy's sake" (Ps. 64:26).

According to the Hebrew Bible, the act of choosing the Jewish people was an act motivated solely by divine love: "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you" (Deut. 7:7-8). Thus chosenness is a sign of God's grace which confers extraordinary responsibility, rather than privilege, upon the Jewish people.

Part of that responsibility as the chosen people is to behave in a godly way. Maimonides explained:

As God has been called gracious, so must you be gracious; as God is compassionate, so must you be; as God is holy, so must you follow the path of holiness. Therefore the prophets described God as possessing these attributes: endlessly patient and loving, just and upright, whole-hearted, and the like. Their intention was to teach us that these are the good and praiseworthy paths for us to follow as we attempt, according to our capacities, to imitate God.

Sin and Repentance

In biblical Hebrew, the word for sin, *het*, means "to miss" or "to fail," and refers to the failing or lack of perfection in carrying out one's duty. Sin is characterized by failure, waywardness, and illicit action, as not fulfilling one's obligations to God, and so is understood as transgression.

Distinctions are drawn in rabbinic texts between transgressions against other human beings (*bain adam l'havero*) and transgressions against God alone (*bain adam l'makom*). Transgressions against God can be atoned for by repentance, prayer, and acts of charity. However, transgressions committed against people require making amends to those persons as a condition for atonement.

The Hebrew word, *teshuvah*, refers to the "turning away" from one's evil behavior and returning to God, and is a defining feature of repentance in
Judaism. One can only atone by recognizing the wrong one has committed, feeling remorse, making restitution, and determining not to repeat the offense.

Both the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic interpretation stress that God does not want the death of the transgressor, but rather the return of that person from his or her evil ways. The essential desire of the God of Judaism is to bring back, to save, to forgive. This is illustrated in the following Talmudic story:

A king had a son who had gone astray from his father a journey of a hundred days; his friends said to him, “Return to your father”; he said, “I cannot.” Then his father sent a message to his son saying, “Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way.” So God says, “Return to me, and I will return to you.” (Pesikta Rabbati 184b)

An important idea related to transgression and teshuvah is that of kavanah or intention. In the Talmud, the following brief sentence occurs again and again: “It matters not whether you do much or little, so long as your heart is directed to heaven” (Berakot 17). Maimonides expanded this teaching:

Do not think you are obliged to repent only for transgressions involving acts, such as stealing, robbing, and sexual immorality. Just as we must repent such acts, so must we examine our evil feelings and repent our anger, our jealousy, our mocking thoughts, our excessive ambition and greed. We must repent all these. Therefore it is written: “Let the wicked forsake their ways, the unrighteous their thoughts” (Isa. 55:7).

Jewish Worship and Practice

Prayer

The Hasidic rebbe of Tsanz was asked: What does the rabbi do before praying? I pray, was the reply, that I may be able to pray properly.

According to Jewish tradition, human beings are able to communicate with God individually or collectively. The Jewish tradition requires prayer three times a day: morning, afternoon, and evening. In addition, there are weekly Sabbath prayers to be recited in the home and the synagogue. Special prayers are also recited during the yearly cycle of Jewish holidays.

God hears and responds to human prayer. In the Hebrew Bible, the word for such communication is tefillah, which is derived from the Hebrew word root “to think,” “entreat,” or “judge.” In its reflexive verbal form the Hebrew word has the sense of judging oneself.

Jewish prayer can be either formal or spontaneous. According to the Talmud, the reason for reciting prayers at a fixed time is to learn and remem-
ber what we ought to value, to be at one with the Jewish people, and to guarantee that the ideals for which many have lived and died do not perish from the community.

In the Talmud it is asserted that the world is sustained by three things: by Torah, by worship, and by loving deeds.

Holidays

What follows is a brief summary of the major Jewish holidays and life-cycle events. These limited descriptions cannot do justice to the richness and beauty of these special days and events. Instead, they merely offer a quick glimpse of them. The holiday cycle is based upon a lunar calendar.

- **Shabbat: the Sabbath.** The Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday evening and concludes at sunset on Saturday. Shabbat commemorates the seventh day of creation, when, according to the biblical account, God rested. In order to keep the Sabbath, all work ceases. Exceptions to this ban on most activity include ritual circumcision, the killing of dangerous animals, the saving of a human life, or assisting a pregnant woman in labor.

  There are weekly Shabbat rituals in the home and special synagogue services to commemorate the Sabbath. The services include the public reading of the weekly Torah portion.

- **Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: the High Holy Days.** The High Holy Days take place in the autumn during September and October. Rosh Hashanah ("head of the year") marks the beginning of the Jewish year. It is regarded as a day of judgment for the entire world, during which each person's fate is inscribed by God in the Book of Life for the coming twelve months.

  Important rituals include sounding the shofar (ram's horn) and wearing white clothing as a symbol of ritual and ethical purity. Rosh Hashanah marks the start of the Ten Days of Penitence, the most solemn days of the year, which end on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

  Yom Kippur is the holiest day in the Jewish year, during which Jews individually and collectively ask forgiveness of others they have wronged and of God. On Yom Kippur Jews absent themselves from work or school and it is a day of fasting and deep introspection.

- **Pesach (Passover): Feast of Unleavened Bread.** This eight-day festival occurs in late March or April and commemorates the biblical Exodus from Egypt. According to tradition, the Hebrew name is derived from the verb "to pass over," which is derived from the account of the tenth plague in Egypt when firstborn Egyptians were killed. God "passed over" the houses of the Israelites whose doorways were sprinkled with the blood of the paschal lamb.

  During this festival, the story of the Exodus is recounted in word, prayer, and song and matzah, unleavened bread, is eaten to commemorate the speed
with which the Israelites had to flee Egypt. In their haste to escape, they did not have time even to allow their baked dough to rise.

The highlight of Passover is the festive home meal, the Seder, which recounts the Exodus story around the family table. Special foods are consumed, holiday prayers are recited, and special songs are sung—all designed to remind today's Jews of the fateful and historic escape from ancient Egyptian bondage.

- Hanukkah: the Festival of Lights. Hanukkah ("dedication") is an eight-day festival commemorating the victory in 165 BCE of the Maccabees, a small band of guerrilla fighters, over the much larger armies of the Greco-Syrian empire. When the Maccabees recaptured Jerusalem, the Holy Temple was rededicated to the service of God.

  Hanukkah is associated with the miracle of one day's supply of pure olive oil which kept the Temple's menorah (candelabrum) burning for eight days. The holiday occurs in December and is a time of gift giving.

- Purim. Purim ("lots or dice") is a festival that occurs in late February or March and celebrates the rescue of ancient Persian Jewry from the threat of physical annihilation that was planned by Haman, an evil prime minister. Deliverance comes through the efforts of Queen Esther and her relative, Mordecai.

  The holiday's name derives from Haman's casting of lots to fix a date for his intended annihilation of the Jews. The biblical Book of Esther is read in the synagogue and whenever the name Haman is mentioned, noisemakers are sounded to drown out his name.

  Purim is a time of levity, costumes, and, among young school children, "Queen Esther beauty contests" are held.

- Tisha B'Av: the Ninth Day of the Hebrew Month of Av. This fast day usually occurs in August and commemorates the day when the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE and Titus, the Roman general, later destroyed the Second Temple in 70 CE. The biblical book of Lamentations is read in the synagogue on Tisha B'Av.

- Sukkot: the Festival of Tabernacles or Booths. The eight-day holiday of Sukkot marks the conclusion of the fall harvest in Israel and, more importantly, symbolizes God's protection of the ancient Israelites during their forty years of wandering in the Sinai wilderness following their Exodus from Egypt.

  The temporary booths or sukkot that are erected outdoors during this holiday must have roofs through which the stars can be seen similar to the frail dwelling places of the ancient Israelites. Important ritual items include the etrog, citron fruit, and the lulav branch made of palm, myrtle, and willow leaves.

- Simhat Torah: Rejoicing in the Torah. The holy day that concludes the Sukkot festival during which the completion of the annual reading of the
Torah is celebrated. The last verses of Deuteronomy are read and they are followed by the first sections of Genesis. This symbolizes that the reading and study of Torah is continuous. It is customary to joyously carry the Torah scrolls around the synagogue.

- **Shavuot: Festival of Weeks.** The Hebrew word *shavuot* means "weeks," and refers to the seven weeks that are counted from the second day of Passover. Symbolically the day commemorates the culmination of the process of liberation that began with the Exodus at Passover and concluded with the giving of the Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai.

### Life-Cycle Events

- **Childbirth.** Naming ceremonies and, for boys, circumcisions occur eight days after the birth of a child.

- **Bar and bat mitzvah.** At thirteen and twelve years old, respectively, boys attain bar mitzvah and girls bat mitzvah. The essentials of this ceremony involve the youngster reading in Hebrew from the Torah at a synagogue service. This ceremony symbolically marks the coming of age of Jewish children.

- **Marriage.** According to Judaism, there are two stages in the marriage ceremony: *kiddushin* or betrothal and *nissuim* or marriage. The ceremony itself must take place before witnesses. In Judaism, marriage represents a social, moral and religious ideal. Important ritual items include the *chuppah* or marriage canopy under which the marriage ceremony takes place and the breaking of a wineglass underfoot by the groom to symbolize the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

- **Divorce.** A bill of divorcement or, in Hebrew, a *get* can be obtained to dissolve a marriage. Biblical law permits divorce under certain circumstances, among them the denial of conjugal rights by either spouse, spousal abuse, and adultery.

- **Death and Mourning.** It is Jewish religious teaching that no effort should be spared to save a dying patient, yet the tradition also fosters an acceptance of death when it is inevitable. Judaism maintains that the utmost regard should be shown for the dying person, who must not be left alone.

  Burial in a plain wooden casket is to take place as soon as possible following a death. Memorial prayers and a special mourners' prayer, the Kaddish, are recited, and the bereaved must be comforted by family and friends.

  Following the burial, a seven-day intensive mourning period, *shivah*, takes place during which time mourners are visited in their homes. The *shivah* period is followed by mourning of lesser intensity for thirty days, *sheloshim*. The mourning period lasts for a year.
Diversity in Judaism

In the past, Judaism was essentially a unified community embracing different interpretations of the same tradition. But the modern period has witnessed an unprecedented fragmentation of the Jewish people into a wide variety of subgroups with markedly different religious, political, and social orientations.

This division in Jewish life has been largely the result of the European Enlightenment, which began at the end of the eighteenth century. When ghettoization of the Jews came to an end, they were no longer insulated from non-Jewish elements of culture and thought, and this change led many Jews to seek a modernization of Jewish worship. The spirit of reform spread to other areas of Jewish existence.

Today, the most traditional approach to Judaism is represented by Orthodoxy, which itself is composed of a number of diverse subgroups. Orthodoxy stresses the ritual and liturgical aspects of Judaism.

A middle position on the Jewish spectrum is occupied by Conservative Judaism, adherents of which initially emerged from the Reform movement but opposed radical alterations of tradition. Conservative Judaism offers a revised form of traditionalism, maintaining Sabbath observance and the dietary laws while allowing mixed seating in synagogues, discontinuing some practices like the use of the ritual bath, and permitting the rabbinic ordination of women.

The Reform movement, which originated in Germany during the nineteenth century, introduced profound changes. Reform Judaism includes sermons, prayers, and hymns in the vernacular, the use of an organ and mixed choir, and the shortening of some prayers in its synagogue services.

The original reformers were radical, viewing the Hebrew Bible and Judaism as containing outmoded religious ideas and rituals, and abandoning dietary laws and doctrines such as the resurrection of the dead and reward and punishment in the hereafter. Only the moral code of Judaism, these reformers argued, is binding.

While Reform Judaism differs sharply with Orthodoxy on a variety of issues, there has recently been a distinct increase of traditional observances within the Reform community.

Reconstructionist Judaism views Judaism as an evolving religious civilization, and emphasizes the use of synagogues as centers for all aspects of Jewish culture. This contemporary branch of Judaism was founded on the ideas of Mordecai Kaplan, and the first Reconstructionist congregation was started in 1954.