

# Essential Judaism: Just Enough for a Nosh

By Elijah Levy, Ph.D.

Energy is the basis of everything. Every Jew, no matter how insignificant, is engaged in some decisive and immediate pursuit of a goal... It is the most perpetual people of the earth...

-- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

A religious man is a person who holds God and man in one thought at one time, at all times, who suffers harm done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair.

-- Abraham Joshua Heschel

## The Levy Launch

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The Levy Launch is a center providing organizations with management and strategy consultation to improve organizational performance through systematic analysis of existing organizational problems and developing specific plans for improvement. Our consultants will initiate and guide change processes, design systems and structures to support and manage change and implement technology. We offer corporate training, coaching and corporate education. The center's corporate development workshops include team building, leadership training and increasing managerial effectiveness. In addition, we offer self-improvement workshops. Organizations investing and making a commitment to offer their employee's personal development workshops attract more qualified workers, improve morale, enhance job satisfaction, develop competencies, and create inclusive work environments. In addition, corporations maximizing on opportunities to provide their employees with self-improvement workshops convey a sincere commitment to develop and empower their employees to achieve their fullest potential in relation to their personal and career pursuits.



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## What is Judaism?

Judaism is a religion which prescribes through doctrine how Jews should live virtuous lives. With regard to whether the Jews are a race, it is generally agreed that Jews are not a race. Most Jews identify their Jewishness in terms of a culture or ethnic group. The Bible states that human beings were created in the image of G-d. However, to avoid any misunderstanding, humanity was not created in the physical image of G-d because for Jews G-d is incorporeal, having no physical attributes or appearance. The word image as used to describe humanity refers to the essence or nature of an entity.

With regard to good and evil, G-d created in man two impulses, good and evil. The impulse to do good is driven by the moral conscience and the impulse for evil by our selfish desires to indulge and ignore how our behaviors affect others. In Judaism Satan did not create evil. The good and evil impulse are internal to an individual, meaning that one who commits wickedness cannot blame an external agent for their malevolent behavior.

In Judaism the existence of G-d only indicates the logical necessity for the presence of the universe. The universe is evidence of the existence of G-d. Jews assert there is only one Almighty G-d who created the world. G-d is a single, indivisible entity without any human attributes and is infinite. G-d has no body and Jews are forbidden to create statues or other objects to represent G-d. For Jews, G-d is omnipresent—in all places at all times and he is always available and near to us. The G-d of the Jews is the G-d for all humanity. G-d is also omnipotent, meaning he can do anything and he is omniscient, knowing all of the past, present and the future. Jews also view G-d as eternal, meaning that he transcends time, has no beginning and end. Finally, G-d knows what human beings are thinking all the time.

There are three elements that make Judaism a living religion: G-d, Torah and Israel. The G-d of Judaism is the one and only G-d who created heaven and earth and who gave the Torah to Moses, who directs our lives, and makes us merciful, kind and seeking justice. For the Jews, Torah is G-d's revelation to the holy people of Israel, through Moses at Mount Sinai when he received the Torah. Judaism holds that the Torah was revealed by G-d not just in written form but also in oral form. The oral tradition refers to the teachings transmitted from sage or master to student or disciple—from Moses to Joshua and to other great students. A famous sage named Hillel, who lived around the time of Jesus is credited for crafting a form of the Golden Rule: “What is hateful to yourself, do not do to anybody else.”

Judaism proposes some theological dogma such as: the belief that the Torah was revealed by G-d, G-d is manifest in the Torah and that G-d wants humanity's love expressed as “You will love the Lord your G-d with all your heart.” Jews believe that man was not self-created—meaning that humankind evolved from an entity other than itself and that man's power is limited.

The Jewish people are credited with establishing monotheism—the belief in one G-d because they could not divide their loyalties between more than one G-d. With regard to attaining meaning in life, the Jews believed that the journey toward meaning could only be fulfilled through enduring and overcoming life’s challenges, and leading

righteous lives through altruistic behavior, performing commandments to serve the less fortunate. Performing commandments is virtuous and contributes to perfecting humanity. Like Christianity Judaism obligates its followers to perform acts of kindness to repair the world, which is termed “Tikkun Olam” in Hebrew. So, Judaism is a faith of progress, a linear religion making each adherent responsible for perfecting him/herself and the world.

The G-d of Judaism revealed himself to mankind through action, although it was also in words. It was primarily in action beginning with leading the Jews out of bondage in Egypt and protecting his people. For the Jews, G-ds goodness and ultimate power is expressed through the Ten Commandments. Israel is composed of the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. With regard to practices and rituals, Judaism incorporates these elements like other religions to assist its followers through life’s difficulties—with the focus being on the process; evident in sayings/adages such as “ashes to ashes” and “dust to dust.”

## The Messiah

The Jews are considered an expectant people, because of their historical struggles and ultimately prevailing over their oppressors. The Jews are waiting for the Messiah. The word Messiah means “the anointed one.” According to the Torah references, the Messiah will be a great political leader who is a descendant of King David (Jeremiah 23:5). The Messiah will be a righteous human being who understands Jewish law, is observant and who fulfills G-ds commandments. He may also be a military leader or a great judge. The Messiah will not however be a G-d or a supernatural human being. How do we know when the Messiah has arrived? It is difficult to predict when the Messiah will appear on earth. Scholars believe that G-d has a date in mind for when the Messiah will arrive. He may come when humanity loses ultimate hope that conditions can improve, such as when sin and war prevail on earth. The Messiah will come to alter these conditions.

## Denominations in Judaism

In Judaism there are denominations: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and Humanistic

Orthodox Judaism is the literal, fundamental practice of faith. Orthodox Jews are unwavering to the written law and Torah. Orthodoxy is strongly committed to preserving rituals and doctrine, and not taking liberty to reinterpret law in efforts to adapt to contemporary culture. Thus, Orthodox Judaism is uncompromising in relation to its degree of conformity to Torah and halakhah.



Conservative Judaism strikes a balance between the Reform and Orthodox movements. Although these Jews do not strictly adhere to tradition, they retain a strong commitment to honor past practices and halakhah (Jewish Law), and when necessary they adapt law to contemporary times.

Reform Judaism emerged in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and, of the three denominations is considered to exercise the greatest autonomy when interpreting the Torah. In contrast to Orthodox Judaism and its absolute, literal and fundamental interpretation of the Torah, the Reform movement rejects strict adherence and interpretation of the dictates of the laws of Torah. Reform Jews believe that the Torah was not only written by G-d but by other sources and it remains an inspiration to all Jews. In sum, the Reform movement attempts to retain Judaic life by modifying their meaning and practice in contemporary times.

Reconstructionist Judaism believes that Judaism is a faith that continually evolves. These Jews reject the idea of a personified deity and that Jews are G-ds chosen people. Reconstructionist Jews observe Jewish rituals and practices because of their cultural importance and less so due to their religious meaning.

Humanistic Judaism, created in 1963 by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine in Michigan is a nontheistic approach to Jewish life. These Jews lead a meaningful Jewish life in a secular way and emphasize humanistic elements such as pursuing their fullest, creative and unique human expression rooted in their secular Jewish roots.

## The Jewish Holidays

### Yom Kippur

The holiest holiday for the Jewish people is Yom Kippur. On this day of atonement, Jews refrain from work and attend synagogue services. Yom Kippur means “Day of Atonement” and it is a day Jews atone for sins they have committed in the past year, to repent and ask G-d for forgiveness. On this day, one fasts for 24 hours. For some Jews, they also refrain from bathing, wearing leather shoes, using cosmetics and engaging in sex. These restrictions do not apply if one’s health is compromised.

### Rosh Hashanah

The holiday Rosh Hashanah means “Head of the Year” and is known as the Jewish New Year. In contrast to the American New Year, it is not celebrated in the same way by enjoying a party at midnight. For Jews, it is a time to reflect on the past year and look to modifying one’s life in a positive way in the new year. In the synagogue for services, a shofar is blown to symbolize a call to repentance. The shofar is a ram’s horn which is blown like a trumpet. On Rosh Hashanah, Jews are prohibited from working. Jews do not fast for this holiday and a common tradition is to eat apples dipped in honey to symbolize a sweet new year. Another common practice during this holiday is called Tashlikh which

means “casting off” our sins. Jews usually find a river, lake or flowing water on the afternoon of the first day of the holiday and empty their pockets in the body of water. It is a gesture to symbolize the casting away of our sins.

## Passover

Passover is probably one of the most observed Jewish holidays. It contains primarily historical and agricultural significance because it represents the beginning of the harvest season in the land of Israel. The historical significance is related to the exodus of the enslaved Jewish people from Egypt. The name Pesach means “Pass Over” or to spare. In biblical history, it means G-d passed over the houses of the Jews when he slayed the first born of the Egyptians. In Hebrew Passover is spelled Pesach and it also refers to the sacrificial offering of a lamb in the Temple during this holiday. During this holiday, Jews remove leavened items from their home. The significance of this procedure is to remind us when the Jews left Egypt they did not have time to allow their bread to rise. On the first night of Passover, we have a special meal called a Seder, which carries much significance in terms of the food items placed on the Seder plate. Passover lasts seven days during which time we eat Matza, unleavened bread.

## Rambam’s 13 Principles of Faith

Rambam was a physician born in Moorish Cordoba and lived from 1135 to 1204 C.E. He lived in Spain, the Middle East and North Africa. He is credited with writing the Mishneh Torah, a book of the codes of Jewish law.

1. G-d exists
2. G-d is one and unique
3. G-d is incorporeal
4. G-d is eternal
5. Prayer is to be directed to G-d alone
6. The words of the prophets are true
7. Moses was the greatest prophet, and his prophecies are true
8. The Torah was given to Moses
9. There will be no other Torah
10. G-d knows the thoughts and deeds of men
11. G-d will reward the good and punish the wicked
12. The Messiah will come
13. The dead will be resurrected

## The Ten Commandments

1. I am the Lord your G-d
2. You shall not recognize the G-d of others in My Presence

3. You shall not take the Name of the Lord your G-d in vain
4. Remember the day of Shabbat to keep it holy
5. Honor your father and your mother
6. You shall not murder
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. Do not give false testimony against your neighbor
10. You shall not covet your fellow's possessions

## Talking to Our Jewish Children About G-d

Educating children about religion can be challenging because of its abstract nature. However, one of the principle ideas parents should convey to their children is that different culture and ethnic groups have their own name for G-d. It may be a unique image of G-d, where their G-d can be found, and their own understanding of how human beings communicate with G-d. The important idea here is that experiencing G-d may be a highly personal, sacred process different than our own.

Another parental role is conveying to children that they themselves have an absolute and unwavering belief in the existence of G-d. Parents can describe how this wonderful world, with all of its grand design and order could not have come to be without a master Creator. Here, we begin explaining that some scientific evidence exists for how the world was created, and we can offer other theories accounting for the origins of humanity. It's perfectly fine to introduce competing theories explaining the birth of humankind. However, reinforce that Jews believe G-d created us in his image and that it represents acceptance with unwavering faith. Faith is what drives Jews to be good, to be moral and obligated to fulfill commandments. Parents teach children to be good, and to believe in G-d means to believe in a G-d who insists we be good to one another.

As parents, we inculcate in our children the belief that what they do in this world and in their lifetime is the real measure of a righteous life. By teaching our children how to behave morally, to fulfill commandments and help the needy we instill in them feelings of worthiness, security, and we help them develop a positive self-image. Furthermore, as parents we remind our children that they were created in the image of G-d. Being created in the image of G-d does not mean that G-d has a body. As difficult as it may seem, we need to explain to our children that being created in G-d's image means that they are unique human beings; it speaks to their particularities, their unique and creative talents, their special and unduplicated self, that special spark and gem that contributes to their total unique being and identity, to that special soul within them. The Baal Shem Tov said "There are no doubles" and G-d intended it to be that way—no two human beings are alike.

It may be difficult convincing young children of the observable, concrete and physical presence of G-d. According to Judaism, G-d is nonphysical. This however does not mean or should it suggest that G-d is invisible. G-d is not invisible because invisible implies that G-d has a body which we cannot see. The preferred thinking is that G-d is intangible, without form. Further, G-d is neither female or male. To be male or female suggests a body, and remember, G-d is nonphysical; G-d has no body. One way you can begin to explain this concept to your children is to use the following analogy. Ask your child where love is. He/she may not be able to point to love. All we know is that love is also intangible. We can feel it and know it is a powerful force in our lives; but it isn't located in any one area. So, G-d, like love, works through all of us

The goal is to help children focus on what G-d does—how he is a G-d of action and Judaism is a faith of movement. G-d was not created but is the chief architect-- Creator; and that G-d always was and always will be present in the world. In Judaism G-d has always been, G-d is, and G-d will always be.

The sustainability of our child's belief in G-d comes from parents reinforcing that what we believe about G-d affects how we live our lives, how we view ourselves, others, and the world. Children can be taught that as Jews, we model through our behaviors our Jewishness; activating our desire to help the less fortunate, to be charitable, do acts of kindness, be trustworthy, faithful, and honor the Ten Commandments. By doing so, we demonstrate to our children our trust in the goodness of the world and in how each of us can make a difference in the world. It demonstrates to children that we are not alone, that G-d commands us to behave in this honorable way. It also consistently reminds children that life happens at the level of individual movement, and that right, ethical action creates goodness. The cultural glue uniting all Jews is their duty to action—which reinforces we all belong and are anchored to our Judaism. By aligning our values and attitudes with G-d's expectations of us, we are reminding our children that Judaism obligates us to socially conform to G-d's precepts to lead a righteous life. All of these elements remind children that they are significant instruments of change in the world; that they matter to others and they have the power to make others feel like they matter. Parents can remind their children that they are never alone in the world, that G-d is and will always be present in their life and that G-d loves them absolutely.

## Science and Religion

We have a greater understanding of the physical world, the world we can see, touch and smell, and to a lesser extent, an understanding of the not so visible world which we call the ineffable; the world beyond what we can see. Also, a polarization exists between science and religion. We should teach children the difference between science and religion. Science is the practice of gathering objective data/facts, knowledge and developing theories to help humans control and predict the outcome of their lives, and the occurrence of social events in the social world. The method of science is experimental, a rational process for understanding the mysteries of the world. What we do not understand suggests that there are limits to science.

Religion may be explained to Jewish children as an essential element in their lives, and that it can provide meaning and purpose to their lives. Children need to be taught that it isn't an issue of believing in religion or science, rather an opportunity to harmonize science and religion, to develop an understanding that can accommodate both revelation and the truth of science. The tendency in our culture is to polarize things, meaning it has to be one or the other. As parents we need to stress that accepting both is the preferred attitude. We can explain that science teaches us how the world works and Judaism teaches us how to be moral, determine what is and isn't important and what to hope for in the world.

## The Sociological Attitude Toward Religion

Religion is an institution which provides meaning through a set of beliefs, practices, and rituals that are defined as sacred. It is an institution of shared beliefs and practices created by human beings in response to forces that they cannot understand rationally and that they believe give ultimate meaning to their lives. Parents can explain to their children that Judaism is their culture group and that it unites them as a vital, proud people sharing a common heritage, history, and G-d. In addition, a whole system of belief is available to them to observe and practice. The essential element conveyed here is that Judaism is a faith of action—and that our G-d is a G-d of action who performs miracles.

Another emphasis parents can convey is that Judaism compels us to ask how does my religion function in my life. Judaism functions to provide us with certainty in an uncertain world, it provides us with the propensity to do good, to hope, pray, experience consolation, feel inspired and renewed, and it provides us with compassion and hope as we face life's disappointments. This explanation of the function of Judaism focuses on what religion does for the child rather than what religion is. I am not suggesting that we deemphasize educating our children about what Judaism is, but educating our children about both aspects of their faith is important. Children may struggle accepting that despite having an all loving, understanding and everpresent G-d, there still exist uncertainties in the world. Again, human beings cannot always explain why tragedies, evil, suffering and injustice occurs in the world. Our reliance on science may explain why physical events such as a tsunami or earthquake occurs and thousands of lives perish. However, we're more at a loss explaining why tragedy occurs to good people. Children need to understand that Judaism provides us with ways for dealing with the unknown and that we need to sustain our faith and belief in an all loving G-d. We undoubtedly learn and come to painfully accept that we don't understand everything.

## Judaic Thoughts on Heaven

Traditional Judaism understands that death is not the final, end of human existence and offers some thoughts on the afterlife. It is understood however, that within Judaism there is no systematic, well defined writings for Jews to grasp the concept of heaven, and thus is open to personal interpretation. In the Torah, it is little mentioned and referenced. One reason is because Judaism is primarily focused on the here and now—on our immediate and current lives. The after life in Hebrew is termed “Olam Ha-Ba. Rabbinic scholars assert that notions of the afterlife developed late in Jewish history and that in the Torah, there are references that those who lived as righteous, virtuous life will be reunited with their loved ones. Individuals who were wicked will not be reunited with their loved ones. Judaism also believes in the resurrection of the dead and it is one of Rambam’s 13 principles. According to Judaism, that the resurrection of the dead will occur during the Messianic age, which is referred to as the World to Come. At the arrival of the Messiah, the dead will be resurrected and the wicked will not. The resurrected will be rewarded by living in a world of peace which they helped to create during their virtuous life.

## Theological Ideas of Good and Evil

In our modest attempt to deepen our understanding of good and evil, we must begin by admitting that goodness and evil are abstract concepts that are not absolute. Our eternal anguish connected to living with horrendous evil and accepting that it exists derives from humanity’s fundamental need to control our world. The sobering realization for mankind is that evil was inserted into the world by human disobedience of G-ds admonishment to not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

We begin by admitting that goodness tends to be behavior that is morally positive and evil is behavior that is morally negative. John Stuart Mill’s theory of utilitarianism declared that good is that which provides the greatest happiness for the greatest number. For example, the psychologist Eric Fromm offers the following on good and evil:

Good is all that serves life, evil is all that serves death. Good is reverence for life, and all that enhances life. Evil is all that stifles life, narrows it down, cuts it to pieces. (Fromm, *Creators and Destroyers*)

Further, there is usually no consensus that goodness is intrinsic to human nature—meaning that goodness needs to be socialized through loving parents, the influence of religious teachings, school, etc. In theological terms, one may assert that evil is the result of an imperfect human condition, and that it is an aberration from culture specific norms.

It is unlikely that humanity will ever truly understand or resolve the conflict regarding why an all loving, merciful G-d permits evil. One must concede that although G-d is all loving and powerful, it is not implied that He can do the unimaginable. As much as each of us would like to rewind life and undo past tragedies or unfavorable life events, G-d cannot undo history. It would be out of character for G-d to similarly lie, sin or tempt one to sin. G-d did create humanity in His own image and scripture says that “with G-d all things are possible” (Mt. 19:26). If G-d eliminated evil



from the world, He would not be able to achieve His other goals for mankind. Enabling each of us to exercise the freedom to choose to be in a personal, meaningful and loving relationship with Him would not be possible unless He endowed us with free will. If we elect to commune with G-d, we must be free to choose this personal relationship without coercion. In the end, one concludes that human individuals must be free to either love or turn away from G-d—to love or reject Him. Human beings who reject, disobey or act against the will of G-d are capable of committing evil and imposing suffering on others.

A distinction should be made between evil resulting from the actions of free individuals and evil resulting from natural disasters. Human beings are free agents in a world containing laws forbidding the violation of individual rights, and individuals disobeying laws could commit evil acts. Natural catastrophes such as earthquakes or tsunamis inflicting mass loss can be considered evil acts of nature. In some instances, both conditions occur. For example, flooding and loss of life occurs when contractors disregard building codes/regulations and construct homes that falter during a flood or earthquake.

## The Secular Ideas on Evil

Do you believe in the theory that human beings are born basically good? If you do are you oversimplifying your conception of humanity by exercising wishful thinking? Perhaps you're holding this theory because it enables you to be comforted knowing we are innately good and don't have the propensity for evil.

If you believe that human beings are basically good, then behavioral expressions of good and evil are prompted by an external or social force. These external or social forces could be described as originating from environmental or economic agents, the negative influence of parents, school, television or other forms of media.

If you believe that human beings are basically well meaning and good, how much expression of evil must one show to shake your faith in humanity's basic goodness? In other words, how many thousands or hundreds of thousand of innocent people need to be murdered? A percentage of people, such as teachers and parents espouse the belief that human beings are basically good and don't necessarily feel the urgent need to train and teach children how to be decent, good, respectful and obedient children. The rationale here consists of the following proposition: Why teach and train children what comes naturally to them—what they are innately programmed to express?

A percentage of individuals hold that evil derives from an agent external of people—again, from a social force. These individuals identify institutions or social forces in the environment that exert negative influences on individuals and attempt to modify how they pull for undesirable behaviors in individuals rather than focusing on

modifying the values and attitudes leading to behavioral patterns characterized as evil—meaning we intervene at the individual level of analysis and seek help for the individual.

## Why People Aren't Concerned With Good and Evil

- 1) We don't like reflecting on moral issues because doing so compels us to confront and do something about evil. Remember, once you know someone is evil you may be obligated to do something about it or live with a guilty conscience. Essentially, confronting evil is unpleasant.
- 2) As soon as we confront evil and assume an ethical position we must follow through with a moral judgment/evaluation of the behavior of others. Doing so carries the following unavoidable consequences:
  - a) You subject yourself and are vulnerable to moral scrutiny by others.
  - b) You may be obligated to oppose others' immoral behavior.

So, to avoid being scrutinized and evaluated by others because we oppose evil and immoral behavior we don't make moral judgments about the evil behavior of others.