

1.

Bereshit

Judaism: It's a Lifestyle

Judaism Isn't Content to Lurk in a Corner



Dedicated to Ivan and Janice Zuckerman, in appreciation for their friendship and partnership with JLI and their dedication to bringing the light of Torah to communities across the globe

In the merit of the Torah studied worldwide, may they be blessed with good health, happiness, nachas from their loved ones, and success in all their endeavors.

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Bereshit

G-d creates the world in six days. On the first day, He makes darkness and light. On the second day, He forms the heavens, dividing the “upper waters” from the “lower waters.” On the third day, He sets the boundaries of land and sea, and He calls forth trees and greenery from the earth. On the fourth day, He fixes the position of the sun, moon, and stars as timekeepers and illuminators of the earth. Fish, birds, and reptiles are created on the fifth day; land animals and then the human being on the sixth. G-d ceases work on the seventh day and sanctifies it as a day of rest.

G-d forms the human body from the dust of the earth and blows into his nostrils a “living soul.” Originally, man is a single person, but deciding that “it is not good that man be alone,” G-d takes a “side” from the man, forms it into a

woman, and marries them to each other.

Adam and Eve are placed in the Garden of Eden and are commanded not to eat from the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.” The serpent persuades Eve to violate this command, and she shares the forbidden fruit with her husband. Because of their sin, it is decreed that all humans will experience death, returning to the soil from which they were formed, and that all gain will come only through struggle and hardship. Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden.

Eve gives birth to two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain quarrels with Abel and murders him and becomes a rootless wanderer. A third son, Seth, is born to them; Seth’s eighth-generation descendant, Noah, is the only righteous man in a corrupt world.

INTRODUCTION

Question for Discussion

Look at the list below:

Yoga

Veganism

CrossFit

Surfing

Gardening

Rock climbing

In your own words, describe how these particular hobbies can be more than a hobby, rather an entire “lifestyle.”

I. THE TORAH'S OPENING ACT

What Is Torah? What Is Judaism?

TEXT 1

GENESIS 1:1-5

א. בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ.
 ב. וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תְהוֹמוֹ וְבַהֹמוֹתָיִם וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל פְּנֵי תְהוֹמוֹ, וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם.
 ג. וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר, וַיְהִי אוֹר.
 ד. וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאוֹר כִּי טוֹב, וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ.
 ה. וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאוֹר יוֹם וּלְחֹשֶׁךְ קִרְיָ לַיְלָה, וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד.

1. In the beginning of G-d's Creation of the heavens and the earth.
2. Now the earth was astonishingly empty, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and the spirit of G-d was hovering over the face of the water.
3. And G-d said, "Let there be light," and there was light.
4. And G-d saw the light that it was good, and G-d separated between the light and between the darkness.
5. And G-d called the light day, and the darkness He called night, and it was evening and it was morning, one day.

Question for Discussion

What type of book is the Torah? If you had to give it a subtitle, what would it be?

TEXT 2

ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA, ENTRY FOR JUDAISM

Judaism: Monotheistic religion developed among the ancient Hebrews. Judaism is characterized by a belief in one transcendent G-d who revealed Himself to Abraham, Moses, and the Hebrew prophets and by a religious life in accordance with Scriptures and rabbinic traditions. Judaism is the complex phenomenon of a total way of life for the Jewish people, comprising theology, law, and innumerable cultural traditions.

Question for Discussion

What are your thoughts about this definition? Which particular elements jump out at you? Did you expect them all?

Opening Rashi

TEXT 3

RASHI, GENESIS 1:1

”בְּרֵאשִׁית”. אָמַר רַבִּי יִצְחָק: לֹא הָיָה צָרִיךְ לְהַתְחִיל אֶת הַתּוֹרָה אֶלָּא מִ”הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם”, שֶׁהִיא מִצְוָה רִאשׁוֹנָה שֶׁנִּצְטוּוּ בָּהּ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וּמֵה טַעַם פָּתַח בְּבְרֵאשִׁית?

מִשּׁוּם ”כַּח מַעֲשָׂיו הִגִּיד לְעַמּוֹ לְתַתּ לָהֶם נַחֲלַת גּוֹיִם”. שָׂאֵם יֹאמְרוּ אַמּוֹת הָעוֹלָם לְיִשְׂרָאֵל: לְסָטִים אַתֶּם, שֶׁכָּבַשְׁתֶּם אַרְצוֹת שְׁבַעָה גּוֹיִם! הֵם אוֹמְרִים לָהֶם: כָּל הָאָרֶץ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא הִיא, הוּא בְּרָאָהּ וּנְתַנָּהּ לְאַשֶׁר יֵשֶׁר בְּעֵינָיו. בְּרִצּוֹנוֹ נְתַנָּהּ לָהֶם, וּבְרִצּוֹנוֹ נִטְלָה מֵהֶם וּנְתַנָּהּ לָנוּ.

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi)

1040–1105

Most noted biblical and Talmudic commentator. Born in Troyes, France, Rashi studied in the famed *yeshivot* of Mainz and Worms. His commentaries on the Pentateuch and the Talmud, which focus on the straightforward meaning of the text, appear in virtually every edition of the Talmud and Bible.

“In the beginning.” Said Rabbi Yitzchak: It was not necessary to begin the Torah except from “This month is to you” (Exodus 12:2), which is the first commandment that the Israelites were commanded. Now for what reason did He commence with “In the beginning?”

Because of [the verse,] “The strength of His works He related to His people, to give them the inheritance of the nations” (Psalms 111:6). For if the nations of the world should say to Israel, “You are robbers, for you conquered by force the lands of the seven nations [of Canaan],” they will reply, “The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it (this we learn from the story of the Creation) and gave it to whomever He deemed proper when He wished. He gave it to them, and when He wished, He took it away from them and gave it to us.”

TEXT 4

RABBI YEHUDAH LOEW, *GUR ARYEH*, GENESIS 1:1

אחר ששם 'תורה' אינו נופל אלא על מצות התורה, שהרי לשון 'תורה' הוא לשון הוראה - להורות לנו המעשה אשר נעשה. ולפיכך דוקא תורת משה נקרא "תורה" (דברים לג, ד), מפני שבה כתובים המצות. וכן פירש הרד"ק (ספר השורשים, שורש י.ה.ה.) שלשון 'תורה' הוא לשון הוראה.
אם כן, אין לכתוב בה רק המצות.

The title “Torah” really only refers to the *mitzvot* in the Torah, for the etymology of the Hebrew word “Torah” is founded in “*horaah*—instruction.” That’s why we only use the term for the Five Books of Moses, as in the verse “This is the Torah of Moses” (Deuteronomy 33:4), because that’s where the *mitzvot* are documented. Rabbi David Kimchi also translates “Torah” as “*horaah*.”

Accordingly, the only thing it should document is *mitzvot*.

Rabbi Yehudah Loew (Maharal of Prague) 1525–1609

Talmudist and philosopher. Maharal rose to prominence as leader of the famed Jewish community of Prague. He is the author of more than a dozen works of original philosophic thought, including *Tiferet Yisrael* and *Netzach Yisrael*. He also authored *Gur Aryeh*, a supercommentary to Rashi’s biblical commentary; and a commentary on the nonlegal passages of the Talmud. He is buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery of Prague.

II. THE NATURE OF JUDAISM

The “Terms” of Holy versus Mundane

TEXT 5

RABBI SHMUEL EIDEL'S, *CHIDUSHEI AGADOT MAHARSHA*, TAANIT 10A

כל אלו הדברים למעלת ארץ ישראל נאמרו . . . והוא שהשגחתו יתברך
ברוך הוא, הוא בכל דבר יותר בארץ ישראל ובשאר ארצות, כי הוא
אלוקי הארץ, ועל כן נקראת סתם ארץ, כי חפצו ורצונו בה.

There are many things stated in praise of the Land of Israel. . . .
The main element is that G-d's providence extends over Israel
more so than any other land. That is why it's called “the Land”
without any other descriptor, because G-d wants (*rotzeh*) it.

**Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer
Halevi Eidel's
(Maharsha)
1555–1632**

Rabbi, author, and Talmudist. Rabbi Eidel's established a yeshiva in Posen, Poland, which was supported by his mother-in-law, Eidel (hence his surname is “Eidel's”). He is primarily known for his *Chidushei Halachot*, a commentary on the Talmud in which he resolves difficulties in the texts of the Talmud, Rashi, and *Tosafot*, and which is a basic work for those who seek an in-depth understanding of the Talmud; and for his *Chidushei Agadot*, his innovative commentary on the homiletic passages of the Talmud.

Judaism Makes a Heist

TEXT 6A

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON, *LIKUTEI SICHOT* 10, P. 3

נוסף על כללות העבודה דקיום התורה ומצות עצמן (שזהו ענין "ארץ ישראל" ברוחניות), נצטווה כל אחד ואחד "כל מעשיך יהיו לשם שמים" ו"בכל דרכיך דעהו" – היינו לעבוד את ה' לא רק על ידי שהוא מתפלל ולומד תורה ומקיים מצוותיו יתברך, כי אם גם בכל דרכיו ומעשיו שעושה בכל כ"ד שעות היום, גם אותן שעושה לצורך גופו ובשביל תועלתן הגשמיות; ועבודה זו צריכה להיות בדרגה הכי נעלית, עד שכל עניניו הגשמיים הם בטלים ומיוחדים באלקות, המציאות שלהם נתהפכה לקדושה ו"הגשמיות" שבהם אינה נרגשת אצלו כלל.

Every Jew is charged with a mission of Torah and *mitzvot*, which represent the "spiritual Israel." But beyond that, every Jew is instructed that "all your actions should be for the sake of Heaven" and "Know G-d in all your ways." In other words, we are enjoined to serve G-d not just by praying, studying Torah, and keeping the *mitzvot* but also throughout the entire twenty-four hours of the day—even mundane, bodily things. This type of dedication should be so great that G-dliness saturates everything a Jew does. Their entire life is transformed into a spiritual life, and they don't even feel their mundanity anymore.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson 1902–1994

The towering Jewish leader of the 20th century, known as "the Lubavitcher Rebbe," or simply as "the Rebbe." Born in southern Ukraine, the Rebbe escaped Nazi-occupied Europe, arriving in the U.S. in June 1941. The Rebbe inspired and guided the revival of traditional Judaism after the European devastation, impacting virtually every Jewish community the world over. The Rebbe often emphasized that the performance of just one additional good deed could usher in the era of Mashiach. The Rebbe's scholarly talks and writings have been printed in more than 200 volumes.

TEXT 6B

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON, *LIKUTEI SICHOT* 20, P. 2

אויף דעם איז די טענה (פון אומות העולם) "לסטים אתם": די זאכן וועלכע געפינען זיך תחת ממשלת הגוים, זיינען, על כל פנים, וואכעדיק, טענה'ן די אומות, געהערן צו זיי . . . ובמילא, איז (לויט אומות העולם) די עבודה פון דעם כיבוש – דורך וועלכן מ'איז "מרחיב גבול הקדושה" – אן ענין פון "גזילה".

The non-Jews claim, "This is robbery!" The claim is that matters belonging to the non-Jewish, worldly domain ought to remain in their possession. . . . Accordingly, in the non-Jewish perspective, the notions of "conquering land" and expanding the borders of holiness are outright robbery.

TEXT 7

MIDRASH, YALKUT SHIMONI, TOLDOT 111

”מכרה כיום את בכורתך לי”. אמרו: כשהיו יעקב ועשו במעי אמן, אמר לו יעקב לעשו: אחי, שני עולמות לפנינו, העולם הזה ועולם הבא. העולם הזה יש בו אכילה ושתייה ומשא ומתן, לישא אשה ולהוליד בנים ובנות; אבל העולם הבא אין בו כל המדות הללו. רצונך טול אתה העולם הזה ואני אטול העולם הבא? שנאמר: ”מכרה כיום את בכורתך לי”, כאותו היום שהיו בבטן אמם.

מיד כפר עשו בתחית המתים, שנאמר: ”הנה אנכי הולך למות”. אותה שעה נטל עשו חלקו העולם הזה, ויעקב נטל חלקו העולם הבא.

וכשבא יעקב מבית לבן וראה לו עשו בנים ובנות עבדים ושפחות, אמר לו: יעקב אחי, לא כך אמרת לי שתטול אתה העולם הבא ואני אטול העולם הזה? מנין לך כל הממון הזה שתשמח?

Yalkut Shimoni

A Midrash that covers the entire biblical text. Its material is collected from all over rabbinic literature, including the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds and various ancient Midrashic texts. It contains several passages from *Midrashim* that have been lost, as well as different versions of existing *Midrashim*. It is unclear when and by whom this Midrash was redacted.

“Sell your birthright to me today” (Genesis 25:31). When Jacob and Esau were in their mother’s womb, Jacob said to Esau, “My brother, there are two worlds in front of us—this one and the next. This world has eating, drinking, business, marriage, and family. But the World to Come has none of the above. Would you like to take this world and I will take the next?” This, then, is what the verse means, “Sell your birthright to me today” (lit. “as the day”), namely as of that day we were in the womb.

Esau immediately rejected the notion of Resurrection of the Dead, as the verse states, “I am going to die” (Genesis 25:32). At that moment, Esau took his portion in this world, and Jacob took his portion in the next.

When Jacob returned from Laban’s house and Esau saw his large family and domestic servants, he said, “My brother, did we not agree that you would take the World to Come, and I would take this world? Where did you get all this money to enjoy?”

A Subtle, Nuanced Perspective

TEXT 8

RABBI CHAIM OF VOLOZHIN, CITED IN *KETER ROSH* (ASHER COHEN), CH. 132

אבל באמת אחר מתן תורה אין לזוז מכל תורת משה ומצוות ודברי
חכמינו ז"ל, ושלא להישען על דעת היצר.

ומצינו במדרש שחנוך היה תופר מנעלים, ובכל תפירה כיוון יהודים
ופעל למעלה, ועל דרך זה היה כל מעשה האבות אף הגשמיות, על דרך
"בכל דרכיך דעהו".

וכל זה קודם מתן תורה, או לבני נח גם בזמן הזה - הרשות נתונה לו
לעבוד להבורא יתברך שמו בכל מה שירצה אך לשמו יתברך, זולתי רק
שישמור ז' מצוות.

אבל לנו בני ישראל נתנה תורה גדר וגבול, וכל המעשה נכלל בציווי
ואזהרה, בציווי נייחד כוונתנו להבורא יתברך שמו, וגדר החסידות
לדקדק בהם עד קצה האחרון ולפרוש מאחד משבעים משער האיסור,
וליזהר בכל דקדוקי סופרים ואזהרות שאסור לנו מיום מתן תורה אשר
ציוה ה' והלאה.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin 1749–1821

Talmudist and philosopher. Born in Volozhin, Belarus, Rabbi Chaim was the protégé of Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna (Gra) the most prominent scholar in Lithuania at the time. After the passing of his teacher, Rabbi Chaim established a yeshiva in Volozhin, which is considered the mother of the modern yeshiva system. He authored *Nefesh Hachayim*, an important work on philosophy and kabbalah, and *Ru'ach Chayim*, a commentary on *Ethics of the Fathers*.

Once the Torah was given, we cannot deviate from it and its *mitzvot* to the slightest degree, and we must not rely on ideas supplied by our evil inclination.

The Midrash reports that Enoch would sew shoes, and that with each stitch he sewed, he mentally effected spiritual unifications in the upper realms. Indeed, our patriarchs operated in this manner, producing spiritual achievements with all of their activities, including their physical engagements—a concept similar to that expressed in the directive, “Know G-d in all your ways” (Proverbs 3:6).

However, this was appropriate prior to the Giving of the Torah, and it remains appropriate today for non-Jews. In either case, individuals are granted permission to serve G-d in any way they choose, provided that their worship is directed exclusively to G-d, and that it remains within the parameters of the Seven Noahide Laws.

Not so for us, the Jewish people! G-d has given us the Torah, which sets clear boundaries for everything; each deed or activity is embraced by either a mitzvah or by a prohibition. We direct our intention to G-d through approaching each activity in a manner compliant with the Torah. True piety means being extremely scrupulous to observe all that we are commanded and to keep extremely distant from all that is forbidden. It includes being scrupulous with all the enactments of our sages and similar precautions that were introduced from the day the Torah was commanded to us.

III. “HASHEM IS HERE, HASHEM IS THERE, HASHEM IS TRULY EVERYWHERE”

G-d Owns and Wants Everything

TEXT 9

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON, *LIKUTEI SICHOT* 20, PP. 2-3

אויף דעם איז דער ענטפער: "בראשית ברא אלקים", אז "ממך הכל" – "כל הארץ של הקדוש ברוך הוא היא, הוא בראה ונתנה לאשר ישר בעיניו": דאס וואס די זאכן האבן זיך געפונען (קודם עבודת האדם) אין רשות פון די אומות, פון חול על כל פנים, איז נאר ווייל "ברצונו נתנה להם" – ס'איז געווען דעם אויבערשטנס רצון, אז (בסיבת החטא פון עץ הדעת) זאל עס זיי געגעבן ווערן.

אבער (דאס גופא איז בכדי אז) דערנאך – "ברצונו נטלה מהם ונתנה לנו": דער אויבעשטער וויל אז אידן זאלן צוריק נעמען פון זיי די זאכן און אומקערן אינעם "גבול הקדושה" (ווי ס'איז געווען קודם החטא) דורך דער עבודה (כיבוש) פון אידן.

The rebuttal is in the words of the verse, "In the beginning of G-d's Creation": Everything belongs to G-d: "The entire earth belongs to G-d. He created it and gave it to whomever He pleases." When we work with material matters, they appear to be outside of the jurisdiction of holiness because G-d granted them that jurisdiction. Due to the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, G-d's desire was that mundane matters should appear to be under the jurisdiction of the world.

However, that was by design, so that thereafter, it should be given into Jewish ownership. G-d wants a Jew to take that mundane matter and bring it back into the realm of holiness as it was prior to the sin. This is the Jewish people's mission and task of "conquering the land."

This Is Judaism

TEXT 10

HERBERT WEINER, "THE LUBOVITCHER MOVEMENT: II 'THE ROOT AND THE BRANCHES,' COMMENTARY, APRIL 1957

"*Shalom aleichem*, Rabbi Weiner," Rabbi Menachem Mendel smiled, extending his hand. I protested that after a year of visiting 770 Eastern Parkway I knew that a good Hasid should not take the Rebbe's hand. "We don't have to begin that way," he said, beckoning me toward a chair. . . .

I opened my notebook and sat back in the chair, again conscious of how comfortable and relaxing it was in the Rebbe's office. Then I remembered that this was my last chance, and resolved to ask even the most embarrassing questions in an effort to solve the enigma of Lubovitch. . . .

Would he mind if I started this interview by asking him about the character of a Hasid? Rabbi Menachem Mendel smiled and told me to go ahead. . . . I pressed my question . . . and told him that I sensed a desire in Habad to oversimplify, to strip ideas of their complexity merely for the sake of a superficial clarity. As a matter of fact, I blurted out, all his Hasidim seemed to have one thing in common: a sort of open and naive look in their eyes that a sympathetic observer might call *t'mimut* (purity) but that might less kindly be interpreted as emptiness or simplemindedness, the absence of inner struggle.

I found myself taken aback by my own boldness, but the Rebbe showed no resentment. He leaned forward. "What you see missing from their eyes is a *kerá!*" "A what?" I asked. "Yes, a *kerá*," he repeated quietly, "a split." The Rebbe hesitated for a moment. . . .

Rabbi Herbert Weiner 1919–2013

Born in Boston, Weiner graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1942. During World War II, he served as a radio officer in the Merchant Marine. In 1948, Weiner became the founding rabbi of Temple Israel of South Orange, N.J., a Reform congregation, and served there until his retirement in 1982. Weiner was the author of two books: *9½ Mystics*, and *The Wild Goats of Ein Gedi*, both of which were recipients of the National Jewish Book Award.

The next morning when I returned to retrieve a briefcase I had left in the office, . . . [t]wo of the older students came up to me as I was leaving the office. They had heard that I had spent almost three hours with the Rebbe early that morning, and they wanted to know what I thought now about their Rebbe. Their eyes shone with pride as they awaited my reply. I remembered that the Rebbe had said that the open look in a Hasid's eyes was not naivety but the absence of a *kerá*—a split.

Indeed, I thought, there is no “split” at Lubovitch. It offered its followers a world in which the mind was never confused by contradictions; where life was not compartmentalized; where the tensions between heart and mind, flesh and soul, G-d and His creation were all dissolved in the unity of a higher plan. . . . No, there was no *kerá* in the eyes of the Hasidim who awaited my answer.

TEXT 11

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS,
WWW.RABBISACKS.ORG/COVENANT-CONVERSATION/NITZAVIM/WHY-JUDAISM

In many other faiths, life down here on earth with its loves, losses, triumphs, and defeats, is not the highest value. Heaven is to be found in life after death, or the soul in unbroken communion with G-d, or in acceptance of the world-that-is. Life is eternity, life is serenity, life is free of pain. But that, for Judaism, is not quite life. It may be noble, spiritual, sublime, but it is not life in all its passion, responsibility, and risk.

Judaism teaches us how to find G-d down here on earth, not up there in Heaven. It means engaging with life, not taking refuge from it. It seeks not so much happiness as joy: the joy of being with others and together with them making a blessing over life. It means taking the risk of love, commitment, loyalty. It means living for something larger than the pursuit of pleasure or success. It means daring greatly.

Judaism does not deny pleasure, for it is not ascetic. It does not worship pleasure. Judaism is not hedonist. Instead it sanctifies pleasure. It brings the Divine Presence into the most physical acts: eating, drinking, intimacy. We find G-d not just in the synagogue but in the home, the house of study, and acts of kindness; we find G-d in community, hospitality, and wherever we mend some of the fractures of our human world.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks 1948–2020

Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom from 1991 through 2013. Rabbi Sacks attended Cambridge University and received his doctorate from King's College, London. A prolific and influential author, his books include *Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?* and *The Dignity of Difference*. He received the Jerusalem Prize in 1995 for his contributions to enhancing Jewish life in the Diaspora, was knighted and made a life peer in 2005, and became Baron Sacks of Aldridge in 2009.

KEY POINTS

- » The Torah's opening act is the Creation story.
- » Rashi comments that though the first mitzvah, which came millennia later, should really be the opening act, the Torah begins with Creation to refute those who claim we stole Israel.
- » Many people, even some who are devout and pious, operate with the assumption that G-dliness and spirituality aren't really meant to "mix" with materialism and mundanity.
- » These two pockets of life can be characterized as "Israel" and the "Diaspora."
- » This is the meaning of "you stole Israel": In other words, to take mundane land and proclaim it "Israel" in the spiritual sense is an overreach. What's mundane ought to remain mundane, and what's holy can stay holy.
- » But the Torah begins with the Creation story to impart the following message: G-d created the entire world and He "gave" the mundane land into the jurisdiction of the Jews and Jewish activity. In other words, the purpose of creation is to realize G-dliness in every part of the world, not just the overtly religious and holy.