
Thank You!

In many ways, numerous Jewish professionals and scholars helped with this project. I am grateful to all of them for lending their wisdom and support to this book. They gave of their time, shared their knowledge, and provided invaluable words of encouragement to me to continue and complete this project. They are listed with their position when this book was being written.

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I give credit and thanks to these people for helping make this book a reality. They provided me with hundreds of suggestions for this book, and even though I did not include every suggestion, I carefully considered each and every one. Therefore, any errors or omissions in this book are, of course, my responsibility.

H O W T O

**GET MORE
OUT OF
BEING JEWISH**

E V E N I F :

- A. You are not sure you believe in God,**
- B. You think going to synagogue is a waste of time,**
- C. You think keeping kosher is stupid,**
- D. You hated Hebrew school, or**
- E. All of the above!**

by Gil Mann



Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

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Dedication

This book is dedicated with love to:

My parents Vivian and Arie Mann and Leonard and Fay Ribnick
for giving me Jewish roots and nourishment,

My wife Debbie who is always giving to me
beyond what I ask or deserve, and

My kids: Josh, Nomi, Danny and Shosh
who give me frequent happiness, an occasional sleepless night
and constant reminding of what really matters in life.

Contents

Chapter 1	1
The Birth of This Book	
Chapter 2	15
“What Is Judaism Anyway?”	
Chapter 3	35
“I’m Not Even Sure I Believe in God”	
Chapter 4	57
“There’s No Spirituality for Me in Synagogues and Prayer”	
Chapter 5	83
“I Have a Love-Hate Relationship With the Jewish Community”	
Chapter 6	103
“The Jewish Code of Behavior Is Out of Touch and Out of Date”	
Chapter 7	129
“Hebrew School Was Worthless and Boring”	
Parting Comments	152

A Few Notes About This Book From the Author

I admit this is not your normal book. The unusual title alone may have tipped you off, or maybe it was the friendly copyright notice on page iv. Inside, you will quickly see that there is more that is atypical. For example, this book is both fiction and nonfiction. Plus, most of the book is written in an unconventional format: dialogue. To help you get the most out of your reading, I offer the following brief tidbits.

Who is this book for?

If you are Jewish, there is a good chance you will find something of value in this book. More specifically, this book has something for you if any of the following describe you:

- You chose any of the answers (A through E) in the title of this book,
- You care about being Jewish but have a hard time explaining why,
- You feel proud to be Jewish but are not sure how to instill that pride in your children or grandchildren,
- You feel bad or guilty in any way about your Judaism,
- You're not sure how you feel about your Judaism,
- You're active as a professional or volunteer in a Jewish organization or institution,
- You're in love with a Jewish person, or
- You're just curious about Judaism.

What will you get out of this book?

Everyone is different, of course, but at the very least, you will learn how others see and understand their Judaism. You will likely find that many of your sentiments and questions about Judaism are shared by others. This should give you comfort. If you are a professional or lay leader in a Jewish organization, you will gain some insight into what many “Jews on the street” are thinking. Finally, whether you consider yourself to be actively practicing Judaism or not, you will also likely find some answers and ideas about Judaism that are new and helpful.

How to read this book.

I suggest that you first read chapters 1 and 2. After that, you could read the chapters in any order. Most people have told me that they prefer to read only one or two chapters in a sitting to better digest the dialogue. On the other hand, others have told me they quickly read from cover to cover. I have also been amazed (and touched) by the number of people who have told me they read the book twice—once quickly and the second time slowly. One person even told me he read parts of the book out loud at his Passover seder. You have a lot of options.

What’s the point of this book?

One person who read an early manuscript sent me a note that summed up the point of this book well. She wrote: “This book stimulated me to examine what being Jewish means to me in a nonthreatening way.”

While I hope you have a similar reaction, I want to emphasize that this book is not intended to bring you to any specific Jewish destination. In other words, this book is not meant to convince you to adopt any specific level of Jewish practice, observance, or affiliation. Rather, it is meant to help you start or continue a search of how Judaism can add meaning to your life. This book recognizes that where you decide to go with your Judaism is a personal matter. What is important about this book—and Judaism for that matter—is the journey. Bon voyage!

Chapter 1

The Birth of This Book

When it was over, I had trouble sleeping. Beforehand, I wasn't quite sure what to expect, but I suspected it would be powerful. I was right. Six Jews, five of them complete strangers to me, had agreed to come to a focus group and share their thoughts about being Jewish. They had a lot to say.

I had received their names from friends of friends. Their names led to other names. My phone call to each of them was similar, as were their responses to me. When I made the first calls, I was worried that the topic would be too sensitive. I was tentative:

"Hi, my name is Gil Mann. I got your name from so and so and I'm not selling anything."

Pause — silence.

"What I am doing is writing a book about being Jewish that I'm hopeful you can help me with."

"About being Jewish? What do you mean?" As I feared, the response was suspicion bordering on hostility. Cautiously, I continued.

"I'm inviting five or six Jews who are not actively involved with the organized Jewish community to a focus group, and basically, I want to listen. I want to hear what you think of Judaism. I'll tell you the title of the book, that for now I'm using as a working title, which more or less sums up what I'm doing."

Pause — silence.

"It's called *How to Get Something Out of Being Jewish Even if You Think Keeping Kosher Is Stupid*."

This almost always provoked a laugh or an audible smirk. From this point on, the tension of our conversations evaporated. The person would usually then make a comment like, “That sounds interesting. I think I’d like to come — if nothing else, to hear what other people had to say.”

Six of the first seven people I called said they were interested in sharing what was on their mind. I was astonished at the response rate I was encountering. But this was just the beginning; I was even more amazed at what they had to say and at the candor and intensity with which they expressed themselves.

That first focus group happened to fall on the day after Yom Kippur. Four of the six people who came were not even aware that Yom Kippur had just occurred. I was taken aback. I expected that they might say that they did not attend High Holiday services, but not that it was “just another day in the week.” To me it seemed that even most non-Jews know when Yom Kippur appears on the calendar, yet these Jews did not. In spite of this, these people had very strong feelings and opinions about Judaism and being Jewish.

One particularly powerful exchange occurred when one of the single men who came was explaining that in his entire life, he had been to a synagogue about as often as he had been to a Unitarian church — “a few times.” He said that in his family he was now the third generation of nonreligious Jews and that, though he considered himself to be Jewish, he did not prefer the synagogue over the church, nor could he state what being Jewish meant to him.

He went on to explain that he did not feel strongly about marrying a Jewish or non-Jewish woman. At this point, a woman participant interrupted him. She leaned forward in her chair and said painfully to his face, “If I don’t give my child any religious training, is she going to end up like you?” Her comment was remarkable to me because she was one of the people who did not realize that Yom Kippur had just passed, nor did she seem to care.

That was typical of an evening full of touching and heartfelt comments as well as forceful exchanges that usually were expressions of agreement or enhancement of a statement someone else had made. Several other times, people sharply disagreed with each other.

I had told them on the phone that the focus group would last two hours. After two and a half hours I felt I should at least try to keep my promise to them, and I brought the passionate dialogue to a close.

As I went around the room for their final comments, the room felt heavy and light at the same time. The gist of the comments was: “This is the first time in 20 years that I’ve spoken about some of the subjects we discussed, and I can’t believe how comfortable I felt here tonight, saying these things to strangers, who somehow do not feel that strange to me simply because we’re all Jewish.” After their final comments, they stayed even longer, socializing with each other and asking me questions.

The night ended with a flip comment one of them made that for me was both profound and sad. They were bundling up to go out into a 40° autumn night. As the door opened and a brisk breeze came in, one of them said, “Well, off to the fringe we go.” I can still feel the physical and emotional chill of that moment.

The discussion that night had hit many nerves, not the least of which were mine — which explains why I had trouble sleeping. That evening, I heard a lot of potent arguments, challenging questions, and raw emotion. This book attempts to capture some of what I heard that night and in other focus groups and interviews, and also to provide some answers.

“Affiliated” Jew: A Loaded and Misleading Term

That first focus group, of course, was just a beginning. A total of 12 focus groups were conducted with many types of Jews.* Ten of these groups were

*Six of the focus groups were conducted by the Jewish Life Network, Chaverim Kol Yisrael. I am indebted to them for their help with this project.

conducted before the book was written, and two were with Jewish people who read early versions of the manuscript. In addition, I formally and informally interviewed many dozens of Jews of all stripes from all over the country. Over a period of about four years, I heard over 150 Jews express their sentiments about being Jewish. I should point out that during this process, I never intended, nor do I claim today, that the Jews who I heard be considered a scientific study or sampling.

At first, I concentrated on Jews who were “unaffiliated,” but from the very first focus group found that I had a problem with this often-used term. The problem: Who or what is an affiliated Jew? If you belong to a synagogue but hardly ever attend services, does that mean you’re affiliated? If you do not belong to a synagogue but enroll your kids in a Jewish nursery school, does that qualify as affiliated? Are you affiliated or “un” if you contribute money to a Jewish cause or read a Jewish publication or follow events in Israel but never walk through the doors of a Jewish organization? How do you define a Jew who proudly identifies as a Jew but does not practice any form of traditional Judaism?

So, rather than try to define “affiliated,” or judge the quality of anyone’s Jewishness, I sought to hear from a range of Jews about how they practiced their Judaism and why.

I heard from Jews who belonged to synagogues, volunteered for Jewish causes, and considered themselves very connected to Judaism. On the other side were people like those in that first focus group, who consisted of Jews who have little or no attachment to organized Jewish life. Plus, I heard from many people who were in between. The majority of the people I heard fell within a range of Jews who practiced little or no form of traditional Judaism and did not feel attached at all to Jewish life, to Jews who belonged to a synagogue or temple but did not attend weekly services. The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey seems to suggest that most American Jews fall within this range.

Most of the Jews I heard were within this range of affiliation or practice:

LESS

MORE

Completely unattached
to organized Jewish Life

Belonged to synagogue/temple
but did not attend weekly

During my research, I wanted to hear what these Jews had to say, and consequently I said as little as possible. I received an earful as I gathered information for this book. I had little problem getting them to talk to me. In fact, people seemed to enjoy the opportunity. More than once I heard the sentiment that “This is the first time I’ve ever been asked about what being Jewish means to me.” Or, “No one has ever asked me about my Jewish background or upbringing before.” I almost had more of a problem getting people to stop talking once they had begun.

There was a healthy dose of emotion in what they had to say about their Judaism. For most people, the feelings were mixed. The extent of negative emotion went from apathy to anger. I perceived that the most dominant negative emotions were sadness and confusion.

While harboring these negative feelings, most people simultaneously had positive feelings. These included pride, desire and curiosity to know more, and what I would call an almost innate inner urge to perpetuate Judaism. These conflicting emotions combined with the many things people had to say about Judaism shaped the six themes of this book.

The Themes of This Book

During the focus groups and interviews, six main themes surfaced repeatedly. Together they can be summed up in a central question: “Why be Jewish?” Most striking to me was that this question and these themes were issues for Jews regardless of their background, age, sex, marital status (including intermarrieds), or current level of Jewish connection and practice. Because of this, here I need to make a very important point: This is not a book about the “unaffiliated”—whatever that is. I heard the six themes of this book raised over and over again by all kinds of Jews. So whether you consider yourself to be “affiliated,” “unaffiliated,” or something else, I suspect that some or all of the themes will likely resonate for you as well.

In focus groups and interviews, some people raised all six issues and others raised only one or two of them. Everyone, however, seemed interested in an answer to their personal question: “Why should I and my children carry on Judaism?” To provide answers to that question, the rest of this book is organized in six chapters. Each chapter focuses on one of the six themes that people raised (though there is some overlap between chapters). The six themes are:

Chapter 2. **“What Is Judaism Anyway?”**

Virtually every person I asked to define Judaism gave me a different definition or version of an answer. No wonder there is a “Jewish continuity crisis” in this country; many American Jews are not even sure what Judaism is. They told me all kinds of things such as: Judaism is a religion, it’s a race, it’s an identity, it’s a culture, it’s a faith, it’s a people... it’s confusing! This chapter should eliminate this confusion with a simple yet rich definition that you can live with easily and happily.

Chapter 3. “I’m Not Even Sure I Believe in God”

I was amazed not only that this subject came up as a major issue but also because the topic seemed to dominate so many of the conversations and all other subjects. People repeatedly said, “If my faith is shaky, why should I and how can I be Jewish?” Many people spoke about their questions of faith with great unease. They felt embarrassed. They felt guilty. They felt they were bad Jews. They were comforted to learn that their views were very typical or “normal.” There is also relief in understanding what I call the “Christianization of Judaism.” If your faith is less than rock solid, stop calling yourself a bad Jew. Instead, read this chapter. It should provide you with some comfort and answers as well.

Chapter 4. “There Is No Spirituality for Me in Synagogues and Prayer”

Ouch! This is a tough area, with complaints from here until forever. Responding to these complaints is not easy. I was left with the strong impression that Jewish organizations have a lot of work to do to remedy the issues that were raised. Still, if you have an open mind, this chapter offers some ideas that can help you find spirituality or, minimally, some personal meaning and ways to become a better person through Jewish worship — whether by yourself or with others.

Chapter 5. “I Have a Love-Hate Relationship With the Jewish Community”

While people expressed much disapproval of the Jewish community as being cliquish and elitist, they spent just as much time talking about how they somehow felt membership — or at least they wanted to be included. Stated another way, I often heard during the same conversation: “Why can’t the Jewish community stay out of my personal business?” and also “Why do I find that

I often gravitate to other Jewish people?” This chapter addresses these and other similar questions about Jewish peoplehood to give you insight into why being Jewish includes both a difficult and a wonderful attachment to the Jewish community.

Chapter 6. “The Jewish Code of Behavior Is Out of Touch and Out of Date”

Many people told me they have a hard time relating to the behavior dictated by Jewish law and ritual. No one ever provided them with a meaningful explanation of Jewish ethics and values—the rationale behind these ancient rules and regulations. This chapter shows that these Jewish ethics and values are ingrained in many of us and influence our day-to-day thinking and behavior—regardless of whether or not we are conversant in Jewish ethics or actively practice any Jewish laws. Also in this chapter, there is a good chance you will find that what Judaism has to say about human behavior and human potential makes sense to you. So much so that you may give fresh thought to the relevance of being Jewish today.

Chapter 7. “Hebrew School Was Worthless and Boring”

This is one of the few statements I encountered that almost all Jews seem to be able to agree on. This is ironic and sad, given Judaism’s emphasis on and reverence for learning. Clearly something is amiss in the way we teach Judaism. What can be done about it? There are suggestions in this chapter. In addition, there are some ideas here that should make you feel proud to be Jewish and that should be part of Jewish education.

The Format of This Book

Each of the six chapters that follows is a dialogue with a different person. Because these chapters are dialogues, they do not necessarily end with an obvious conclusion. Instead, the final comments point in the direction of the next chapter's subject. You may wonder why I chose a dialogue format for this book. There are two reasons: first, because I wanted to capture the tone and content of what I heard as closely as possible; and second, because I wanted to make reading this book accessible and easy. The comments I heard from the many people who were kind enough to read this book when it was in manuscript form validated for me that the dialogue accomplished both goals. I hope that you too find it easy reading.

You will see that the chapters begin with a brief introduction and a profile of the person speaking in that chapter's dialogue. As you read the profiles of the six people in this book, you may think you recognize someone you know. This is not a coincidence, because the profiles are fictionized versions of real people and actual comments I heard. The people may also seem familiar because, as mentioned earlier, I found that, regardless of their backgrounds, almost every person I heard expressed similar comments. In fact, a number of times during focus groups people said, "I thought I was the only one who felt this way. It's nice to know that I'm not alone."

I promised all these people that I would not identify them. Instead, the profiles and statements in this book are composites that are typical of the many people and different personalities I encountered. I hope as you read, you often think: "Hey, I know someone just like that... in fact, that sounds like something I might say."

The Responses

Unlike the focus groups and interviews where I just listened, the dialogue in this book includes responses from me. In reality, the responses are also a composite of numerous voices. Many of the responses are based on my thoughts about Judaism. Many others are based on ideas I read or heard from rabbis and Jewish authorities. Most of these people are listed with my gratitude at the beginning of this book.

As I formulated the responses for this book, my thinking was often influenced by other people, with ideas borrowed from many sources. In particular, I must acknowledge that many responses were influenced by four knowledgeable and important modern Jewish thinkers: Rabbi Irwin Kula, Rabbi Harold Kushner, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, and Dennis Prager. I regret that in the dialogue sections of this book, the format does not lend itself well to attributing their ideas and others on a case-by-case basis. I hope all the contributors of those ideas will forgive me. At the same time, I have merged and purged ideas and added my own, so I do not mean to imply that the responses have been endorsed officially by any one person or organization. In sum, then, even though many ideas were contributed by others, the responses should be considered a reflection of my personal conclusions about Judaism.

As you read the responses, I hope you think, “I didn’t know that about Judaism. I’d be interested to find out more.” If that is the case for you, the end of the book offers some suggestions of where you might look.

At the end of each chapter are a few additional responses I call “Afterthoughts.” These afterthought sections are a result of comments I heard from people who read early versions of this book. Over 60 people around the country reviewed versions of this book. If I named all of these people, this section would sound like the Academy Awards. Plus, I would probably leave out someone by mistake. Instead, here I say a large “thank you.” From all of these

wonderful people I heard countless valuable corrections, comments, and questions. In these short afterthought sections, I have tried to respond to some of their comments that I thought others might also have. Also at the end of each chapter, I leave you with some questions relating to that chapter that you may wish to think about.

My Background

Since I am assuming responsibility for the responses, you deserve to know a bit about my background. First, I am not a rabbi. My personal level of observance — like keeping kosher — has varied greatly throughout my life and continues to go up and down. What has remained constant is that being Jewish has always been important to me. Since I was a child, I have almost instinctively been proud to be Jewish — though until recently, I couldn't clearly articulate why. Now I can, because as an adult, I have devoted much time and effort to learning about Judaism, including three years of intensive Jewish study in a program known as the Wexner Heritage Foundation.

I grew up in a non-Jewish suburb of Minneapolis. I attended public schools that were predominantly gentile. In my high school class of 700-something, there were about a dozen Jewish students. My parents' home was not kosher or particularly religious, but we all knew we were Jewish. The two main reasons were my parents. My mom was a Hebrew school teacher and my dad was an Israeli (a very secular one). All the reminding we needed that we were Jewish was hearing my mother and father speaking in Hebrew when they did not want us to understand what they were talking about — which was often.

In addition to the Hebrew spoken by my parents, as I grew up, I was exposed to a lot of Judaism. I visited Israel regularly, attended Jewish camps as both a camper and a counselor, and was a teacher for many years at my synagogue.

I should point out that just because my mom taught Hebrew did not mean I behaved better at Hebrew school than anyone else. In fact, I got into more trouble than my friends. I attended afternoon Hebrew school all the way through high school — my mom made me. Unlike my friends, when I was rowdy (a daily occurrence), after throwing me out of class, my teachers just went down the hall to complain to my mother.

The net result of this upbringing was that my attraction to Judaism was strong enough that while in college, I actually gave thought to attending rabbinical school. But I decided not to for numerous reasons — not the least of which was that I did not like services! (I didn't think they would let me go through six years of rabbinical school and skip all the services.)

Instead, I majored in political science and broadcast journalism. My career began in TV news and eventually evolved into business. In 1983, my wife and I started a company producing computer training video courses that we marketed nationally mainly to Fortune 500 companies and government. The business grew to become an industry leader with over 130 employees and offices all over the world. The success of the company has given me the opportunity to pursue this book — which is a combination of two of my interests: marketing and Judaism.

Marketing has been the aspect of business that has interested me most because I have been intrigued by customers' behavior. I like to know what they are “really” thinking and why. My experience has been that if you ask, they will frankly tell you.

In recent years, as I have sought answers to my many questions about Judaism, I have come to see that the product is quite good but sales haven't been so hot. Consequently, as part of my personal investigation of Judaism, I also became curious to know what other Jews think of Judaism. So I asked. The result of all this questioning is now in your hands.

You

In the midst of the research for this book, I was telling a friend about the powerful and abundant reaction I was receiving from the people who were speaking to me. He said, “You have obviously tapped into a source of energy that was ready to be released.” If he is right, then within these pages will be something of value for you. As I mentioned, minimally, you will likely see that others share some of your views. Optimally, you will find something new and worthwhile in Judaism that can help you answer the question: **“Why be Jewish?”**

If you are currently active in the Jewish community as a lay leader or professional, this book offers you something different. You have likely heard the “continuity battle cry” that Jewish organizations can no longer continue conducting “business as usual.” For any business to succeed, being mindful of customer needs and desires is critical. For you, then, I hope this book provides some guidance as you structure programs and your organization for a strong Jewish future.

An Invitation to You to Stay in Touch

Since this book was first published in 1996 a number of wonderful things have happened because of the strong positive response from readers. First of course, the book has been reprinted numerous times. But in addition to that, a series of developments have allowed readers and I to stay in touch. One of the reasons I am thrilled about this is that the comments have been so rich that a follow-up book with readers’ Jewish issues, questions and comments will result.

At the end of this book are more details about all the developments since this book was first published. But up front, I want to invite you to send me your thoughts and experiences. Who knows? You may be a part of the next book — anonymously of course! You can contact me at:

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I am very interested to hear from you! Thanks, happy reading, and shalom!

Chapter 2

“What Is Judaism Anyway?”

An effective way to start interviews and focus groups, I found, was simply to ask people to tell me about their Jewish upbringing. What rituals, if any, were practiced in your home? What was your parents’ attitude toward Judaism? Did you have a bar/bat mitzvah? What, if any, formal Jewish education did you have? And so on.

Not only were these questions good icebreakers, the answers were interesting and often almost entertaining. I was fascinated to note that in group settings, participants gave rapt attention to each other as Jewish backgrounds and thoughts were expressed. There was often a lot of head nodding as they affirmed similar experiences and sentiments. As they told their stories, many seemed to be struggling with the question of what Judaism has to offer them in this day and age. Put another way, they just weren’t sure they could find any meaning or value for their lives in Judaism.

One place where the head nodding stopped, however, was when people tried to define Judaism. This was a perplexing question to most. Very few had a crisp definition. Since this was such a challenge for most, answering questions about finding meaning and value in Judaism was all the more challenging — in some cases, not possible at all.

You will see this dynamic in this chapter. It is difficult to answer the question “Why be Jewish?” if you have a hard time first answering “What is Judaism?” Therefore, in this chapter, a definition of Judaism is offered that I hope you will find both simple and rich.

Gary

After becoming a CPA, Gary decided to also get a law degree—which he did—while working full time at a national accounting firm, all by the age of 25—which is also when he got married. Now, at 38, he is studying at night school to add an MBA to his resume. His reward for all of this hard work is a high-paying job as a top executive in a fast-growing high-tech company in Chicago.

Gary is intense and driven. Whenever he speaks, he gestures forcefully with his hands. When he listens, his eyes are focused like headlights. By his own admission, he is a type A personality, and his life reflects this intensity.

He is fit and trim, which is not surprising, since he works out or plays tennis at his health club at least four times a week. “I work hard and I play hard,” he says with obvious pride. He’s also very much into local sports as a spectator, provided his Bulls, Bears, or Cubs are winning. If they are losing or even playing poorly, he has no time for them.

He is clearly a forceful, confident, and successful individual. He is also a contemplative and questioning person and wonders if he has accomplished anything in his life that really matters. The one obvious exception to him is his two children... “they matter a lot.” Speaking of his children seems to evoke a softer side of him. He wants to provide his children with everything, but beyond the “material goodies,” as he puts it, like frequent family trips, state-of-the-art PCs, electronic gizmos, and of course, a dog, he and his wife struggle with what to give their children—especially when it comes to being Jewish.

His children are the main reason he thinks about being Jewish at all. He said he was glad to have a conversation with me because “truthfully, my life is quite full as it is. I have not felt a need to give much thought to being Jewish—until recently, that is, because of my kids. I have virtually no Jewish education, so I’m just not sure what to do for my kids. But I do have a sense that I should do something. This is hard for me, though, since my Judaism leaves me mostly frustrated and confused. I certainly don’t want to pass that on to my kids.”

Gary: I’m sick and tired of listening to everyone complaining about continuity and preserving Judaism. Wherever I go, I hear “we’re assimilating... we’re intermarrying...” I say, so what! I’m just not sure I need Judaism in my life. I’m not sure anyone needs Judaism anymore. Maybe Judaism has just outlived its usefulness. Evolution is naturally taking care of Judaism and we’re becoming extinct.

Gil: Judaism is a dinosaur?

Gary: Maybe. I look at it this way. My brother married a gentile. She’s a wonderful person and I love her like a sister. She’s highly ethical and principled, she’s a giving person, and... she’s not Jewish. I see her and others and I’m just not sure what is so special about Judaism. Perhaps Judaism has no meaning anymore. If it did, we wouldn’t be shrinking and disappearing.

Gil: What do you mean by no meaning?

Gary: Well, I’m not sure Judaism offers society anything that can’t be found elsewhere. Personally, when I think of Judaism, spiritually it gives me next to nothing. Culturally, I feel Jewish, though I’m not sure exactly what that means. I have serious questions about all organized religions in the first place. As for Judaism, in my gut I mostly have an empty feeling — with a touch of anger — synagogues, meaningless rituals and prayer, Hebrew school, learning to “chant” for my bar mitzvah, community pressure—I could go on and on.

Gil: Please do.

Gary: All right. I should say up front that there is a part of this whole thing that confuses me. At best, I have muddled feelings about Judaism, and yet for some reason that I can’t understand, I want my children to be Jewish—at least I think I do. I’ll give you an example. My son is 10. The other day, his best friend — who is not Jewish — was over, and I overheard him ask my son if he was Jewish. And my son said, “Not really.” That bothered me. But I can’t come up with a good explanation of why. And since I’m not even sure “why” I

want my kids to be Jewish, I'm certainly not sure what to give my kids, Jewishly speaking.

Gil: Is there anything you received Jewishly when you were raised that you do want to give your kids?

Gary: That is probably at the root of my confusion. I picked up a few things Jewishly that I think I'd like my kids to have. But I'm not sure. I don't think my parents gave me a lot of compelling reasons to be Jewish. Now that I'm a parent, in general, I find I either repeat or rebel from how my mom and dad parented — usually repeat, I suppose — even though I swore I never would. When it comes to Judaism, I am not exactly sure what I am repeating or why.

Gil: So what was your Jewish upbringing like?

Gary: I don't think my upbringing Jewishly was very unique — and parts of it I actually view favorably. My mother was much more into Judaism than my dad. My mom didn't have a lot of Jewish knowledge, but she definitely was a Jewish mama.

Gil: Which means...

Gary: She was into feeding us. Beyond that, she really doted on us — she still does. Even though she was not very knowledgeable and didn't go to the temple except when she had to — like High Holidays and when we were invited to a bar mitzvah — she knew that she wanted us all to go to Hebrew school and to have bar mitzvahs. So we did.

Gil: Where was your dad on all this?

Gary: My dad grew up in a very observant home — kosher and everything. And when he became an adult he rejected almost everything.

Gil: Why?

Gary: I'm not sure how strong his convictions were growing up — though he usually spoke fondly of his home and parents. As he got older, though, he began questioning a lot. I think I'm a lot like my dad in

that regard. The more we questioned our Judaism, the less meaning we found. We both especially didn't like doing things by rote. My father thought Judaism was a relic from the "old country." And the Holocaust was a turning point in his losing interest in Jewish faith. He just could no longer believe in God or the idea of Jews being God's chosen people.

Gil: So how did he act in your home?

Gary: Basically he was indifferent about most Jewish things. Except I remember when I was a kid, he convinced my mom to switch from a Conservative synagogue to a Reform temple. As a rule, he didn't seem to care that my mom was pushing Jewish things—but he never pushed. He would just sort of go along. He did seem to be dragging his feet all the time—but he didn't complain. Like he would always "come along" with my mom and us if we went to the

temple, but I could tell he didn't want to be there. Jewishly, the only thing he did seem to care about was Israel and family holiday get-togethers. Also, now that I think about it, it seems that almost all of his friends were Jewish.

Gil: So what are your strongest Jewish memories?

Gary: One that comes to mind quickly is that my mom and dad were always talking about "the Jewish thing to do."

Gil: What did they mean by that?

Gary: They meant it positively. Like I should get an education and never stop learning. Or I remember my parents were always very

**"My father
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concerned about any disadvantaged groups anyplace in the world. Once I asked why, and they said something like “because we’re Jews. And we Jews know what it feels like to be hated or to be poor and hungry with no place to go.” They always said that the Jewish thing to do is to be a “*mensch*.” The bottom line was I think they meant act ethically. Now that I’m older, I’m not sure I agree with my parents.

Gil: What do you mean?

Gary: Well, I don’t think being Jewish guarantees that a person will act ethically. And I think many non-Jews act ethically. Also, I don’t like some of the “Jewish things to do” — like minding everyone else’s business or guiltling a person into making donations to charity. At the same time, I think I do know what my parents meant. I guess this is another area where I’m left searching for a good explanation for myself—and my kids.

**“My most lasting
memory of my
bar mitzvah is not
the event itself
but being forced
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I hated it.”**

Gil: The “Jewish thing to do” means different things to different people. I’d like to talk to you more about that, but first tell me what else do you remember?

Gary: Like my dad, I too have fond memories of his parents, my grandparents—they were Zayde and Bubbe. They were very religious, but they seemed so comfortable with it. Their house was always warm. And the food was great — except for the sponge cake. Boy, my grandmother made some incredible chopped liver—if that could be Judaism I’d be in heaven—and about 20 pounds heavier.

Gil: In a way I think it is.

Gary: Chopped liver? What?

Gil: It's kind of a little theory of mine. I'll tell you about it in a second. But first, finish telling me about your memories. You seem to have some pretty negative feelings about the synagogue.

Gary: You're right, though I didn't start out that way. One of my fondest memories as a little kid was going to the synagogue with my Zayde. "The Shul," my Zayde called it.

Gil: So why are you so down on synagogue?

Gary: Well, that was when I was a little kid. I was about six when my Zayde passed away, and then I stopped going to his shul. Since then, synagogues have felt meaningless to me — formal, almost antiseptic. This includes my parents' synagogue and their temple, and almost every other one I've visited.

Gil: What was your bar mitzvah like?

Gary: My most lasting memory of my bar mitzvah is not the event itself but being forced to go to religious school so I could have a bar mitzvah. I hated it. I don't remember learning anything. They tried to teach me to read and chant Hebrew. But that was hopeless. Then I had to memorize everything off of a tape. I could barely do that either. But somehow I did — sort of. My dad used to drop me off at Saturday school on his way to his work or his golf game, and I remember thinking at the time, "What's the point of this bar mitzvah? This is so stupid." The best part of my bar mitzvah, besides the presents, of course, was getting to quit Hebrew school and have a normal afternoon like all the rest of the kids. Also, my dad let me join him for golf on Saturday.

Gil: Had I started golfing at that age... no, never mind... I would still be terrible. Anyway, that brings you to your teenage years. What Jewish memories do you have about them?

Gary: I went one year to a Jewish summer camp, which I enjoyed. But I must say I don't remember anything that was especially Jewish about the camp, except we used a few Hebrew words and sang some Hebrew songs. I remember services were completely boring. Of course, all of the kids were Jewish, and we liked camp because we all thought we were adults—at camp it was okay and cool to get away with that adult shtick. Plus we were starting to notice the opposite sex. The whole environment was exciting and new. You know: songs, food, sounds, nature, dance, libido — not necessarily in that order.

Gil: Now you've teased me. What about dating?

Gary: Sorry, it's not that exciting. I tended to get involved in long, serious relationships — one of them lasted four years — but never with a Jew. In fact, I didn't date Jews. Though the crazy thing is that the first Jew I did date I married. I'll tell you something else that's weird. I often find that when I'm traveling around the country for work and I meet a Jewish person, I automatically have this unusual bond — even though I don't lead a “Jewish” life.

Gil: Why do you think that's weird?

Gary: Well, like I said before, for the most part, I think Judaism is meaningless today. That's why I think it's shriveling away. At the same time, for some strange reason, I find I'm often drawn toward another Jewish person in kind of an unspoken way — even though we both sort of think Judaism is meaningless. That's how I met my wife.

Gil: For a person who finds Judaism meaningless, you seem to have fairly strong feelings.

Gary: To be honest, when I take the time to think about Judaism, I feel confused. I just don't find good answers. But it's just not that high a priority, so I usually don't bother to think about it.

Gil: But you obviously have thought about “your Judaism” at least occasionally. What made it a priority at those times?

Gary: I gave the most serious thought to my being Jewish seven years ago when my father became ill and passed away. You know, I had a fair amount of contact with the rabbi, plus I was giving a lot of thought to life and death. And I guess, similarly, when I became a parent, many of the same thoughts came to mind. Both events raised a lot of issues in me.

Gil: Like what?

Gary: Well, my youngest child is starting nursery school. And she is asking me the same questions her older brother used to ask — like why does God do this and why does God do that. And I’m finding that I’m giving her the same answers I was told... even though I’m not sure I believe what’s coming out of my mouth. I tell her I’m not sure—but still I have to tell her something. And my son will be 13 soon, and my wife is saying she would like him to have a bar mitzvah — even though her Jewish upbringing is similar to mine. And even though my bar mitzvah was mostly a bad experience, for some reason, I guess I also want him to have a bar mitzvah. I’m realizing that I’m making my kids Jewish and I’m not sure why.

Gil: Any guesses?

Gary: The best answer I can come up with is that I don’t want to break the chain of Judaism. But survival for survival’s sake is not good enough for me. I don’t feel comfortable with that answer because I’m not sure Judaism has meaning anymore.

Gil: Tell me, how are you defining Judaism?

“To be honest, when I take the time to think about Judaism, I feel confused. I just don’t find good answers. But it’s just not that high a priority...”

Gary: That's a hard question. Mostly I think Judaism is a religion. But it's also kind of a culture or race of people too, I guess.

Gil: That's how many people describe Judaism — including many non-Jews. But it's really not very accurate.

Gary: Wait a minute. How do you know? Are you some kind of rabbi?

Gil: I'm not a rabbi at all. I'm a person like you who also has had many questions about Judaism. I like to think of myself as a modern person who believes in science and equality and democracy and all the other things we "sophisticated" 20th-century people believe in. My experiences with Judaism growing up have been different from yours, but still, over the years, I've had some serious doubts about whether Judaism has any meaning today.

Gary: So why didn't you just say, "The heck with it?"

Gil: I couldn't. Even though my parents' household was not very religious and my parents didn't keep kosher, still our house had a very strong Jewish identity.

Gary: What do you mean?

Gil: Well, my dad grew up in Israel and I was born there.

Gary: I never would have guessed.

Gil: I wouldn't expect you to — I came to the States when I was a few months old. For all intents and purposes, Garrison Keillor and I look and sound like Minnesotans — because we are. We both like camping, fishing, and have agonized over the Minnesota Vikings losing four

"...survival just for survival's sake has never been a very good reason to be Jewish to me."

Super Bowls. Unlike Garrison, though, I have no Lake Woebegone in my background. What I have is more like Jewish woe. My dad was

born in Europe, and both my parents had large numbers of aunts, uncles, cousins, and other relatives who died in the Holocaust. Between that and Israel, being Jewish has always been an important part of me. Still, like you, survival just for survival's sake has never been a very good reason to be Jewish to me. Then about when I turned 30, I met a rabbi who said to me, "What are you going to tell your kids when they are teenagers and they say, 'Dad, why should we be Jewish anyway?'"

Gary: What did you say?

Gil: I hemmed and hawed and came up with some kind of weak answer that I don't even remember. I do remember that I knew at that moment that, for myself, I needed and wanted to find an answer that was better than to avenge Hitler. I also realized that I wanted my kids to be Jewish, but beyond that I was not sure why. My recollection is that the only answer I could come up with was that somehow Judaism had lasted thousands of years — even though I had trouble finding meaning in it for today. So maybe...

Gary: So maybe the time has come for it to evolve out of history.

Gil: Well, I did wonder: Maybe Judaism's time has come — and gone? But before I jumped to that conclusion, I knew that over the centuries, Jews much smarter than I am must have asked many of my same questions. After all, modern philosophies, sciences, and forms of government didn't begin in the last 10 years. A lot of people must have concluded that Judaism does have meaning or it would not have survived to this day.

Gary: How can you be so sure?

Gil: I wasn't sure, but I decided that before I passed on or junked Judaism, I owed it to myself, my kids, and all of the people who preserved Judaism for centuries to at least investigate. In other words, before the garbage truck made its pickup, I wanted to be sure I understood what I was throwing away.

Gary: What do you mean by “investigate”?

Gil: For me it has meant asking a lot of questions and taking classes. It has also meant reading. Luckily — though I now realize it’s not luck — there are a lot of wonderful people and books with good answers. That’s not to say I’ve found all the answers I’m looking for — I expect I’ll have questions until my dying day. But for the most part, I’ve found answers to many of my questions about Judaism that I’m comfortable with.

Gary: Like what?

Gil: Like I think Judaism does have meaning. I understand why I want Judaism for me and my kids.

Gary: Really? That’s nice to hear. Then it’s my turn to ask you, how are you defining Judaism?

Gil: The best I can come up with is that Judaism is a way of life.

Gary: Come on, that’s it? The result of all your questioning? You have got to have more to say than that. Whole books have been written on the subject.

Gil: Elaborating on what I said is easy, but still, what I said is the simplest and best definition I’ve come up with: Judaism is a way of life. It’s more than a religion and it’s not a race.

Gary: In that case, you had better elaborate a little.

Gil: Most of what I’ve read says that the Jewish way of life or if you prefer, the Jewish way of living revolves around three areas. I call them E.S.P.

Gary: E.S.P.?

“I think it’s racist thinking that Jews should only marry Jews — that’s repulsive to me.”

Gil: That's right. The E stands for ethics. The S stands for spirituality and the P stands for peoplehood. One famous Jewish thinker described them as: behaving, believing, and belonging. Within the Jewish tradition, each component of our E.S.P. is sacred.

Gary: If they're all sacred, how is this different from what I said, that Judaism is a religion?

Gil: It's different for a couple of reasons. First, to say that Judaism is a religion is far too limited a definition, because Jews are supposed to act and live ethically regardless of whether or not they have faith in God.

Gary: What about being a race? By the way, I think it's racist thinking that Jews should only marry Jews — that's repulsive to me.

Gil: It would be repulsive to me too — if Judaism was a race. Lots of people think Jews are a race. Anti-Semites love to call us a race — but it's simply not true. A person of any color can be a Jew — just look at a city street in Israel to confirm that. Anyone can become a member of the Jewish people — otherwise how could people convert to Judaism? You can't convert to being a Caucasian or any other race. You can be born a Jew or you can choose to become a Jew, but it has nothing to do with what you look like. Maybe what throws people is that one of the three “sacred” parts of being Jewish is to think of other Jews as family members — again regardless of your or their faith in God.

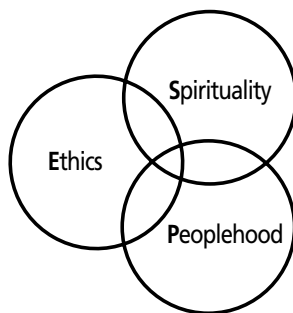
Gary: I'm confused. You keep using the word *sacred*. It sounds like you're saying Judaism is not a religion and it is a religion.

Gil: I'm saying that Judaism is a religion and more. Maybe I should be more clear about the word sacred. In our tradition, Jewish ethics, spirituality, and peoplehood are each deeply respected and revered. Each is considered greater than us. What's confusing is that they each stand alone and they are also connected to each other.

Gary: How can they stand alone and also be connected?

Gil: That's a fair question. I played with this problem on paper and came up with this diagram and definition that explains what I mean. This is how I define Judaism: Judaism is a way of life consisting of these three separate sacred components: E.S.P. — ethics, spirituality, and peoplehood. They overlap like this... like the Olympic rings.

Judaism = A Way of Life
Consisting of E.S.P.:



Gary: I think I'm tracking with you, but you'd better say a bit more.

Gil: At first glance, this might seem complicated, but it's really not. It's like three interlocking pieces of art. Each piece or circle stands alone. Together, they add to each other's beauty. I think of it as richness. Judaism gives you a lot of wonderful options for finding meaning. At least it does for me.

Gary: Like what?

Gil: You can choose to enter the Jewish way of life through any of these circles. And from each circle you can access the other two circles. You can even spend most of your time in one of these circles and still be considered a Jew.

Gary: What do you mean?

Gil: Well, today I think most Jews most easily sense their Jewishness in the peoplehood circle. In other words, by feeling that they belong to a

people or a community. Even the most unaffiliated Jews seem to feel this sense of belonging if there is a hint of anti-Semitism in the air.

Gary: I agree with that, especially if the anti-Semitism is widely publicized or comes from the mouth of someone famous, or if the subject of the Holocaust comes up.

Gil: *Even without anti-Semitism, I think the peoplehood circle is the easiest to access and to find some meaning for yourself. But there are still two other circles. You can find meaning in the Jewish code of ethical behavior — like how Jews are supposed to treat a disadvantaged person — or as your parents used to say, “the Jewish thing to do.” Finally, and the hardest for me, you can also find it through your belief or spiritual searching.*

“Even the most unaffiliated Jews seem to feel this sense of belonging if there is a hint of anti-Semitism in the air.”

Gary: Let me get straight what you’re saying. You’re saying that the Jewish way of life consists of any or all three of the E.S.P. components: ethics, spirituality, and community, or as you put it, “peoplehood.” This sounds both simple and complicated.

Gil: *The simple part is that in Judaism there are just three components, as you said. The complex part is that you can choose to emphasize or deemphasize any or all of the three and still be considered a Jew. Plus, because the circles intersect and overlap, you can end up with a number of combinations that give Judaism meaning.*

Gary: I’m not following you. Give me an example.

Gil: *Okay. For me, directly entering the spirituality circle is a challenging thing to do. It’s hard for me to understand and relate to God. On the other hand, I have an easy time entering the peoplehood*

circle. I mean, it's easy for me to feel I belong to the Jewish people. Sometimes, through my feeling of belonging to the Jewish people, I can also access the spirituality circle. A good example is attending a large Jewish rally or community celebration. For me, there is often an aura about these gatherings that is powerful and beyond explaining. To me it feels spiritual.

Gary: Maybe that's part of the chain of Judaism I was talking about.

Gil: *Could be. Here, I'll give you a different kind of example — this one about the ethics circle. Judaism says we're supposed to do nice things for other people — like visit someone who's sick. Even though I certainly do not enjoy going to the hospital or, worse yet, a nursing home to see a friend or relative, something about making the effort is uplifting — at times I'd even call it spiritual. And if I am visiting a Jewish nursing home, I can also feel that I am part of the peoplehood circle. I can feel all three circles overlapping.*

Gary: So are you saying that peoplehood or ethics can lead to spirituality?

Gil: *Depending on the person, they might. My point is that, alone or together, they are each considered sacred. Plus, they each can lead to or overlap one or both of the other two circles. Alone or together they can provide meaning. Like remember I said that in a way chopped liver is Judaism?*

Gary: I remember I didn't know what you meant then, and I still don't.

Gil: *Chopped liver is part of our peoplehood, part of our culture, part of the way Jews as a people do things. Of course, it's just a little part — a little part of the all-encompassing three intersecting circles that form the Jewish way of life.*

Gary: I wouldn't call chopped liver meaningful.

Gil: *Neither would I — by itself. But each little part contributes to the Jewish way of life, like a mosaic. It might take a little imagination, but I can find meaning in the small parts. For me, it takes no imagination*

to find meaning in the three large components that make up Judaism. In fact, the more I look at Judaism, the more I find for my life.

Gary: That’s nice — for you. I’m not sure I care to look so much. I don’t have a need to get to where you are with your Judaism. My life seems quite fulfilling and meaningful the way it is, not to mention busy. Plus, I don’t think Judaism is the only answer.

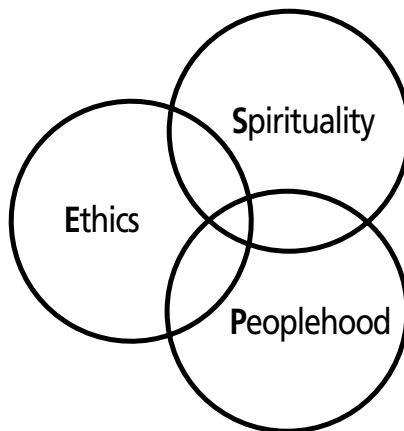
Gil: *Judaism is definitely not the only answer. I won’t even say it’s the best answer. But I will say, I’ve found that it’s a good answer — a very good answer. An answer with a proven and amazing track record of making a positive difference in the world — and it belongs to us, it’s ours. You certainly don’t have to pursue Judaism if you don’t want to. But you did say that you are struggling over what to give your kids.*

Gary: That is true, and perhaps now I can at least provide them with a definition of Judaism. But I’m still not sure I would feel comfortable passing that on since I still have many other unresolved questions and issues about Judaism.

Key Points to Hold Onto

Chapter 2: "What Is Judaism Anyway?"

Judaism = A Way of Life
Consisting of E.S.P.:



- Each circle is sacred in Judaism.
- You can enter any of the circles to access the other two.
- You can find yourself Jewishly in one circle, or where they overlap.

Afterthoughts

The strongest reaction I heard from readers of this book when it was in manuscript form was positive feedback about the E.S.P. circles in this chapter. The gist of the comments was: “I finally understand what Judaism is, thanks to those circles.”

One of the goals of the circles, and indeed this whole book, is to show that, regardless of your level of Jewish practice, understanding, or knowledge, there are a number of ways to enter Judaism. To underscore this goal, the next four chapters are organized using the circles. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the spirituality circle — the most difficult circle to access for the majority of the Jews who spoke to me. Chapter 5 concentrates on peoplehood, and chapter 6 examines the ethics circle.

Readers of the manuscript told me that organizing the book using the circles was helpful to them. I hope it is for you as well. Several of those readers asked me how the circle diagram makes Judaism any different from any of the other great religions. There are several responses. First, the diagram is designed to show simply what Judaism is — not to show how Judaism is different from other religions. This book does not try to be a course in comparative religion.

That point aside, though, Judaism is different. There are differences from other religions within each of the circles. From what I have learned, the biggest difference may be the peoplehood circle itself. An example I have given much thought to is the tragic assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Many Jews, and even the general media, expressed shock that a Jew killed a fellow Jew. To me, that shock says something about Jews as a people. I have never heard that kind of shock expressed when a Moslem killed another Moslem or a Christian killed another Christian. Why? I believe the main reason is the uniqueness and sacredness of peoplehood in Judaism. But I am getting ahead of myself — the chapter on Jewish peoplehood is later in this book. As you can see, each of the circles offers plenty to think about.

Another important comment I heard about the circles was from a woman who told me she felt like going to her mother with the diagram and saying, “See, Mom, I am still Jewish, even if I don’t go to synagogue.” She also volunteered, however, that she realized she could use the diagram to “wimp out” on or rationalize her Judaism. “For example,” she joked, tongue in cheek, “I could say I have Jewish relatives, so I qualify for the peoplehood circle, therefore I am Jewish. I know that’s not a legitimate thing to say,” she said. “So, seriously,” she asked me, “what level of Judaism is really practicing Judaism?”

As I mentioned in my introductory comments to you, I am not attempting to answer that question for you in this book. Further, I do not want any of the thoughts contained in these afterthought sections (or anywhere in the book, for that matter) to be perceived as preachy or heavy-handed. Instead, please receive these thoughts as my personal point of view, which I offer for your consideration.

In answer to the question, what is a “correct” level of Judaism?, I respond by saying that this is a personal decision everyone makes for him- or herself. You can answer that question for yourself far better than I can. I hope you find some ideas in upcoming chapters that help you answer the “correct level” question for yourself. I would only suggest following Shakespeare’s advice: “To thine own self be true.”

Questions From This Chapter You May Wish to Ponder

- Where do you usually find yourself on the E.S.P. circles that make up the Jewish way of life?
- Have you found comfort or discomfort in the different circles? Why?