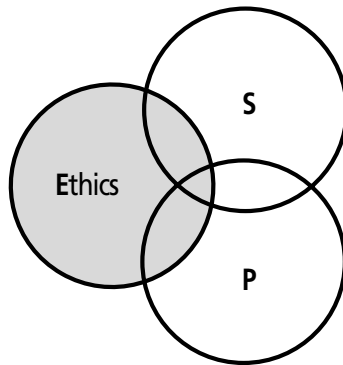


Chapter 6

“The Jewish Code of Behavior Is Out of Touch and Out of Date”



Jewish ritual and Jewish law are two of the last places most Jews today would look for guidance in conducting their day-to-day behavior: what to wear, what to eat, how to act at work, what to say to a friend, child, parent, and so on.

These are the kinds of decisions that consume most of our waking hours. Most people who spoke with me said that, for them, Judaism does not play much of a role in such matters. How could it? For the challenges and decisions that a modern person has to face, much of what Judaism has to say is out of touch and out of date for most of us, most of the time.

Or is it? How do you decide right from wrong? Does Judaism influence any of your decision making? This chapter explores how Jewish ethics and values influence the behavior of many Jews — even those whose formal Jewish education was terrible or nonexistent.

Also, in reviewing the relevance of Jewish thinking about how Jews should behave, this chapter looks at the rationale behind Jewish laws, ethics, and values. This rationale may both surprise and appeal to you.

Judy

Corporate law was her calling, and she has excelled in all aspects of her legal practice. At 46, Judy has become one of the most respected partners at her large firm. She graduated from Yale Law School and, upon graduation, steadily moved up the ranks of her profession. Currently, she is also an officer in her state's bar association. "I'm passionate about law — and that's not only because my husband is also a lawyer," she said with a laugh. "Seriously, I love the logic of law and the discipline it imposes, and at the same time, I love the challenge of working with the law to deal with situations that the law didn't exactly anticipate — which seems to be almost all situations." She thinks it is a shame that lawyers have been the subject of so many jokes and scorn "because almost every lawyer I've met has been a person of high integrity and honesty."

She is proud that Judaism has always placed a high value on its legal tradition but added, "in spite of that respect, for the most part, the Jewish code of law seems outdated and unnecessary to me. Modern democracies have systems of law that more or less seem to keep society civilized." Beyond that, she feels very comfortable with her Jewishness, though she does not practice a high level of observance. She did not have a bat mitzvah and said Judaism did not seem particularly important in her family, though they lived in a Jewish neighborhood. "In forming my Jewish identity, I would cite my years in my synagogue's youth group and a college summer program in Israel as pivotal and positive experiences for me."

She is a poised and secure person who speaks assertively. Listening to her, it is easy to imagine her speaking with authority to a judge or jury. Looking at her, you would never guess that she has been married almost 25 years and that she is the mother of three teenage children. They belong to a synagogue but only attend on the High Holidays or if they are invited to a bar mitzvah.

This, she explained, is because “in or out of the synagogue, I have to say that, except for the value of tradition, I find Jewish ritual life more or less meaningless for me.”

Judy: I definitely consider myself to be Jewish, but I don't lead my life by Jewish law. I don't feel I have a need for Jewish law. I'll concede that I'm not very well versed in Jewish law. But I'm comfortable with that level of knowledge since my behavior is governed very well by a much more up-to-date system: American law.

Gil: That may be the case, but I would suggest that your behavior is probably also a product of Jewish law.

Judy: Well, I suppose you're right. There are Jewish things I do. My kids had bar mitzvahs, the boys were circumcised, we always go to Passover seders. That sort of thing.

Gil: That's not what I meant. I am talking about day-to-day behavior that is distinctly Jewish.

Judy: I hate to generalize, but I suppose there is some behavior that Jews seem to have in common with Jews.

Gil: What are you referring to?

Judy: Well, at the risk of sounding like an anti-Semite, I find Jews are critical and argumentative and controlling. But at the same time, on the plus side, I also think Jews are inquisitive, question the status quo, and are passionate. It's really two different ways of looking at the same behavior.

Gil: I've heard that kind of sentiment before. Like I've heard people say that Jews are nagging and neurotic and phobic. A more generous description I've also heard is that Jews are caring, family-centered, and alert to danger — understandably.

Judy: I guess beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. A person who loves Jews could cite the same behavior that an anti-Semite uses as

ammunition. Though I can think of a pro and con that don't have flip sides. On the pro side, I'd put creativity and humor and a love of learning. On the negative side, I'd put materialism.

Gil: Do you think that Jewish materialism is different from gentile materialism?

Judy: Probably not. Now that we're talking about it, I must admit that many of the ardent "antimaterialists" of the counterculture seemed to have been Jews. See, that is why I did not want to generalize. Still, there does seem to be some "Jewish behavior."

Gil: It does sometimes seem to me that Jews act this way or that. But I agree with your hesitation to generalize. It's not fair or right to think like that. After all, there are Jews I like and Jews I don't like — because of their individual behavior, not because they are Jewish. I would say the same of non-Jewish people.

Judy: So wait a minute, if that is the case, how is any of this behavior a product of Jewish law?

Gil: Well, the behavior of Jews varies a lot. Just look at the State of Israel or the Jews in your town. The degree to which people observe Jewish law also varies a lot. Still, I say that Jewish behavior is a product of Jewish law because Jewish law is a product of Jewish ethics and values. Those ethics and values have remained consistent and have been passed on for countless generations. After reflecting on the hundreds and hundreds of Jews I've met in my life, I've reached the conclusion that those values guide and influence a lot of Jewish behavior — even though I think many Jews today are probably unaware that Jewish ethics are behind a lot of their day-to-day behavior.

Judy: I don't understand what you mean. There's almost something insulting about that statement.

Gil: I meant no offense. Maybe I should have said that all people are influenced by their values — though on a regular basis, people seldom think about what values are behind their behavior. Our

behavior is kind of “programmed” by the ethics and values we learn from our culture. I have a friend who calls this our “cultural DNA.”

Judy: Cultural DNA?

Gil: It really just means that we get our ethics and values from the people around us — our families, our ethnic background, our country. They are passed down from generation to generation. It’s not genetic, though, like the term DNA would imply. It’s really learned behavior that gets taught from one generation to the next. Then those ethics and values become part of us.

“I think many Jews today are probably unaware that Jewish ethics are behind a lot of their day-to-day behavior.”

Judy: That makes sense in theory, but in real life do you really think that happens?

Gil: Yeah, I do. This is how it was explained to me: We learn the majority of our values as kids. Some are obvious, some are not. We pick them up when our parents and teachers tell us stories about our people or culture. Those stories teach and reinforce values and ethics that are usually quite old. Every culture has a master story made up of these unique stories.

Judy: Master story? I don’t understand.

Gil: Every child in a culture usually knows the master story by the time they are 10 or so. In American culture, for example, all kids learn early on that our American master story includes chapters or unique stories about the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving, the Revolutionary War, the Wild West, the Civil War, being a “superpower,” and so on. From these stories we get values and ethics that guide the way many Americans see themselves and the world.

Judy: So are you saying that American cultural DNA would include values that are taught like independence, freedom, strength, and Yankee ingenuity? Do you mean to say that these values learned from the American master story then influence the way all Americans act?

Gil: *Not all Americans, but in general, yes, these are some of the values many Americans have learned to hold dear—even though, as I said, day to day we’re not really conscious of these values. At the same time, we’re also influenced by all the other cultures and subcultures and the individual families that we belong to. They all have their own unique stories too.*

Judy: But you just said that each of us is influenced by values from more than one culture. If that’s so, don’t you think it’s difficult to generalize about how Jews behave?

Gil: *I think generalizing about how Jews behave is difficult and unfair. That’s why I said it’s more constructive to look at cultures and ethics that influence behavior. I do feel comfortable saying that Jewish people have some collective ethics. We have a rich culture of stories and an equally rich set of values and ethics that flow from those stories. They deeply influence us—some people more than others, of course.*

Judy: I’m Jewish and I don’t even know what stories you’re talking about. How could that deeply influence me?

“I’ve never thought about getting any Jewish values from the Passover story before. Frankly, to me the seder has always been mostly a bore.”

- Gil: There are a number of Jewish stories I bet you do know. One story in particular that almost every Jew knows is the one we tell about ourselves every spring during the Passover seder.*
- Judy:** That we were once slaves in Egypt? How does that influence anything I do today?
- Gil: I'll give you an example. I have a Jewish friend who was telling me about a group he proudly supported. It's a social justice group that provides lawyers free of charge to poor people. While telling me this, he threw in, "Coincidentally, most of the lawyers there are Jewish." I said to him, "Do you really think that was a coincidence?"*
- Judy:** What does that have to do with the exodus from Egypt?
- Gil: A lot. There are a number of basic Jewish values that are deep within us from the Exodus story. First, we care about justice — about people treating other people unfairly. Second, we care about the poor and the downtrodden. I recently learned that the Bible mentions helping the stranger 26 different times, often reminding us of our experience in Egypt. I think one reason is to teach the value that Jews should be sensitive to the pain of any person who is disadvantaged. We also care about freedom. And a huge value Jews have picked up from the Exodus story is optimistic hope. In fact, the word "Hatikvah," which is the national anthem of Israel, means "the hope."*
- Judy:** I've never thought about getting any Jewish values from the Passover story before. Frankly, to me the seder has always been mostly a bore.
- Gil: That may be, but if you think about it for a second, our people have been telling the same Passover story for 30 centuries — sometimes that's how long my parents' seder seems to last. But the point of the seder is to tell the story. Why do you think that is? I think it's because, if a people tell the same story every year, over and over again for 3,000 years, the ethics in the story sink in — deeply, and that is the intention.*

Judy: That does make sense. I mean, Americans have been telling the story of Thanksgiving for just a few centuries, and every school kid knows the American value of religious freedom.

Gil: *When cultures tell and retell their stories starting with young children, the stories have great power. They are loaded with very influential ethics and vitamin C. Seriously, I realized how powerful the ritual of telling the Passover story is when I read in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey that participating in a Passover seder is one of the most widely observed Jewish practices in America — even among Jews who are not strongly committed to Judaism.*

Judy: Really? Passover must be more compelling than I realized. But other than the Passover story, what Jewish stories are you talking about?

Gil: *You probably know most of the fundamental story. A lot of the Jewish story is in the Bible.*

Judy: The whole Bible? That's a lot to study.

Gil: *That's why Jews are supposed to study the Bible. But you can find many Jewish values just by looking at the most famous Bible stories. There are the early stories of Adam and Eve and Noah's ark. From them, among other things, Jews learn the value of all life and the importance of the environment.*

From the story of the founding families — Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, and so on — we learn the high value we place on our children and families (and also how difficult families are to manage). Skipping way ahead, the prophets like Isaiah, Elijah, and many others taught all kinds of ethics — like looking out for the disadvantaged and speaking out against wrong and corruption, to name a few.

“I don't think a person needs to be Jewish, or any religion, for that matter, to lead an ethical life.”

Judy: Time out. Are you saying we Jews get all of our ethics and values from a collection of Bible stories that are thousands of years old?

Gil: No, that is just a part of our master story. Jumping ahead in the Jewish story, the Diaspora experience gave us a number of values that reinforced or altered values we picked up in the Bible. We also picked up new values, like a deep respect for learning. In this century, the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel have taught us many things, like the importance of being strong in order to take care of ourselves and the challenge of the moral use of power.

Judy: I guess I do know these stories. I’ve never thought of them in terms of imparting values to me.

Gil: Most Jews know the stories. But I don’t think many Jews think very often of the “Jewish values” that they have picked up from these stories. For that matter, I never did either until I learned about master stories. But the more I’ve thought about it, the more I think that our Jewish cultural DNA is a good explanation of why there are so many Jews involved in organizations fighting for human rights, the environment, social services, social justice, universities, hospitals, children’s medical centers. You could go on and on. As if this activity is not enough, the Jewish record of philanthropy has virtually no equal in the Western world.

Judy: When I receive mail from these organizations, I do get a good feeling when I see Jewish names on the letterhead. There often seem to be a disproportionate number of Jewish names.

Gil: Those names are just one example. I believe our Jewish master story touches us deeply by teaching us our sense of ethics.

Judy: But there are non-Jews involved in these organizations also. I don’t think a person needs to be Jewish, or any religion, for that matter, to lead an ethical life.

Gil: Neither do I. I would never say that Judaism is the only source of ethics in the world. At the same time, I would say that a lot of what

Western people call “ethical behavior” comes from the Jewish religion. Going a step beyond that, I don’t think people realize how much their sense of right and wrong has been heavily influenced by thousands of years of Jewish ethics.

Judy: Don’t you think that’s a pretty bold thing to say?

Gil: Not really. For example, take some basic Jewish ethics that I think most people would agree with. You shouldn’t murder innocent people. You should give to charity. If you’re married, you shouldn’t sleep around. You shouldn’t steal. You should treat animals with kindness. You should honestly pursue justice.

Judy: What are you doing, just reading the Ten Commandments?

Gil: Not exactly, but pretty much. Can you think of any ethics more Jewish than the Ten Commandments?

Judy: But almost everybody believes them today.

Gil: That’s my point. In the West today, we have inherited a basic sense of right and wrong that was originally based on Jewish ethics.

Judy: Well, if we have all inherited these ethics anyway, why do we need to attach “Jewish” to it anymore?

Gil: Many people don’t, but I think that’s a shame because we should be proud of that huge contribution we have made to the world. I’d also say that there is a lot more to Jewish ethics than just the Ten Commandments. I believe the Jewish system of ethics offers the world a lot more than a basic sense of right and wrong.

Judy: To that I have to say that being Jewish is no guarantee of ethical living. Nothing makes me angrier than watching Jewish people profess to pray and be righteous in the synagogue who then leave the doors and act unethically in their regular lives. Or they are prejudiced, using words like *shvartzes* and *goyim*. That’s hypocrisy — it sure does not make the world a better place.

Gil: According to what I've read, that's definitely not how Judaism says we should behave. It makes me angry too, not to mention embarrassed. I call it anti-Jewish. The rabbis called that kind of behavior desecrating God. I once read a story the rabbis tell of an observant jeweler who is engrossed in his daily prayer when a customer comes to his shop. The customer sees a gem and offers the jeweler 100 shekels for it. But the jeweler does not respond and continues to pray. The customer offers 200, then 300, and then in exasperation yells, "Four hundred shekels is my final offer!" The jeweler does not respond to any of the offers. Finally he finishes praying and tells the customer, "The gem is yours for 100 shekels." The customer is shocked. And the jeweler responds, "Before you came to my shop, I would have been pleased with a price of 100. If I were to take advantage of you because you became frustrated, my prayers are of no value." This behavior is admired by the rabbis.

Judy: Legally speaking, from my point of view, the jeweler could charge the 400 shekels that the customer was prepared to pay and he would be acting within the law. The customer was not a victim of any legal fraud or misrepresentation.

Gil: Under the American system of law.

Judy: That is correct.

Gil: So what do you think is the basis of the American system of law?

Judy: In the final analysis, it is what we all learned in grade school, that all people are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

"Nothing makes me angrier than watching Jewish people profess to pray and be righteous in the synagogue who then leave the doors and act unethically in their regular lives."

Gil: That is certainly what I've learned. And as much as I embrace those values as an American and feel lucky to be an American, I also embrace the basis of Jewish ethics and laws, which I think is quite different.

Judy: Then I'll ask you, what do you think is the basis of Jewish ethics and law?

Gil: The pursuit of goodness.

Judy: That's it?

Gil: Simply put, that's it. Some people might prefer to say that the basis of Judaism is the pursuit of holiness. Either way you put it, the ultimate goal is the same: to make the world a better place. Judaism says the way to do that is to make people good.

“The ultimate goal is... to make the world a better place. Judaism says the way to do that is to make people good.”

Judy: If that's true, then again I say, why do you need Judaism? There are a lot of gentiles and secular humanists who are good people.

Gil: I wouldn't argue with that. But I like the Jewish system of ethics because I like what Judaism says about life. Plus, I think Judaism has a pragmatic and wise attitude about human nature.

Judy: Okay. You have intrigued me. What does Judaism say about life?

Gil: In most everything I've read and learned about Judaism, two main ideas about life keep coming up. One is an emphasis on life in this world — as opposed to the afterworld. The other is an emphasis on justice. They are closely related actually.

Judy: I don't see the connection.

Gil: I should say that Judaism does speak about an afterworld, but the thrust in Judaism is how we behave in this world. Which leads to the emphasis on justice. I think Judaism recognizes that life is not fair. Some people have good fortune, some do not. Some are sick, some are not. Every time I flick on CNN, I’m reminded that life is not fair. So Jews are told to work on making life more fair or more just — for everyone in the world.

Judy: That “sounds” real nice — like the beauty contest winner who said her hobbies are world peace. Who could argue with any of that? But frankly, to me that just sounds like lovely rhetoric.

Gil: That leads to the other aspect of Judaism I said I find attractive: Like you, Judaism has a realistic attitude about human nature.

Judy: Thank you for the compliment. But I’m not sure why I received it.

Gil: What I meant is that you and Judaism understand that talk is cheap. If you want results — and Judaism wants a more just world for results — you had better not count on rhetoric.

Judy: If you’re going to wait for faith to move people, you’re also going to wait a long time.

Gil: I completely agree — and so does Judaism. That’s one of the reasons you can be a Jew and still have doubt about your faith in God. In the words of one rabbi, “Action is the touchstone of Judaism.” Notice he did not say “faith.” Judaism cares more about your behavior than your belief. Which again gets back to the Jewish attitude about human nature.

“Behavior is more important in Judaism than belief. Judaism realizes that faith is difficult for many people.”

Judy: Well, you have certainly tantalized me. What is this “Jewish” attitude about human nature?

Gil: It’s pretty simple really — it’s about human potential. Judaism says that we humans have the potential to be animal-like or divine.

Judy: The animal part is clear, but divine?

Gil: We can be “above” animals. We have a conscience. We can choose good over evil. We can create. I know this is going to sound high and mighty, but when we use our conscience and choose to do and create good, this is considered being “holy” in Jewish eyes.

Judy: So the Jewish idea is that we have the potential to be good?

Gil: The answer is yes, but. This gets back to the Jewish attitude about human nature. Judaism says people have the potential to be good — but without laws, don’t count on it happening.

Judy: But what if a person does not believe in God or is not sure?

Gil: That’s why Judaism has laws. As I said a moment ago, behavior is more important in Judaism than belief. Judaism realizes that faith is difficult for many people. So Judaism says go ahead and search for faith. But while we’re looking around, or even if we give up, Judaism says we’re supposed to act like decent people... to obey Jewish laws of behavior — regardless of our faith. Another way to look at it is that Judaism tells us to act decently whether we “feel moved” to or not. I think the world would be a better place if everyone did that.

“To use the words of the song, “Where is the love?” Judaism is about obligation. Where is the compassion in Jewish law?”

Judy: You might be right, but I don't see how Jewish laws would make that happen. I mean, the laws of Judaism go on and on; they never seem to end. I think human potential and justice are great ideas, but Jewish laws seem so onerous, one obligation after another. You can't do this and you must do that. What about a little love and compassion? Christians seem to be so much more concerned with that than we are.

Gil: I could see how you might say that, but as I've looked into Jewish laws, I've found over and over again that the Jewish pursuit of justice is very much driven by compassion.

Judy: If that's so, it isn't obvious to me. Give me an example.

Gil: An example that really blew me away has to do with the Jewish law about distributing tzedakkah to the poor. First, Judaism says there is no justice in having poor people and people with plenty. So to make the world more just, we should collect and distribute tzedakkah.

Judy: That means charity, right?

Gil: Yes and no. Tzedakkah is usually translated to mean “charity” — but actually the word comes from the Hebrew word for justice — tzedek. Giving tzedakkah in Judaism is an obligation by law. On the other hand, the word charity comes from the Latin word caros, which means love or endearment. Giving charity is voluntary, based on being moved by your heart to give.

Judy: That's my point. To use the words of the song, “Where is the love?” Judaism is about obligation. Where is the compassion in Jewish law?

Gil: Well, if you think in practical terms, you will have a lot more money to give to needy people if you obligate people by law to give tzedakkah. For the givers, that's not necessarily fun, but it's very loving of the needy.

Judy: Hmm, so you're saying to look at the motivation behind the laws —as we lawyers would say, the spirit of the law which in this case, you claim, is compassion.

Gil: *In many cases. The example that blew me away is even more striking —at least it is for me. Jewish law says that you should give more money to a rich man who has lost everything than to a poor person who never had anything.*

Judy: What? How is that compassionate? That seems almost cruel to the poor person.

Gil: *That was my reaction too — until I heard the explanation, or as you put it, the spirit behind the law. Based on American laws and values of equality, that does seem cruel. But the Jewish law in this case is based on who is in more pain, who is hurting more. And the rabbis felt that a rich person who had lost everything was suffering more than someone who never had anything. Like I said, that explanation just didn't jibe with my sense of values, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the rabbis may have thought differently about equality than I do, but they were motivated by compassion.*

“What about all the... laws of keeping kosher? ...They're based on outdated health concerns. How does that make people achieve their potential for good?”

Judy: It's interesting that the rabbis who wrote that law would try to put themselves in the shoes of the rich and the poor like that. Especially since I imagine most rabbis would not have known what having wealth would feel like.

Gil: I suspect you're right. On top of that, they wouldn't know what a rich person who became poor feels like inside.

Judy: Other than to know that it must feel terrible. That really is empathetic on their parts. Even though I'm not sure I would reach the same conclusion they did, I can see how their thinking is compassionate.

Gil: Over and over, I've found that compassion and justice are intertwined in Jewish law. Judaism says that if we follow the law, we're elevating ourselves. If our actions are guided by these laws, we're on the road to achieving our potential for good — or as some would say, our potential to be holy.

Judy: What about all the obligations and laws of keeping kosher? Those laws seem so foolish. They're based on outdated health concerns. How does that make people achieve their potential for good? And what does that have to do with compassion?

Gil: I had also always thought that keeping kosher was based on health, trichinosis, indigestion, and who knows what else. When I did some checking, though, I found out that this is a widely held misconception. I even found a magazine describing this myth of keeping kosher in an article called “Soul Food Not Health Food.”

Judy: Health is the explanation that I've always heard. So what is keeping kosher about?

Gil: The best explanation I've read is that the ideal behind keeping kosher is the same ideal behind most Jewish ethics and laws — to elevate us and maximize our potential to be good — with compassion behind it all.

Judy: I still don't see what that has to do with what we can eat or not eat or how we should eat.

Gil: The laws of keeping kosher are Judaism's way of elevating the act of eating. Have you ever watched a nature show where bigger, stronger animals rip apart a weaker animal and thought, “That poor animal — life is not fair.”

Judy: I have thought that. But that's life, I guess. Big fish eats little fish.

Gil: *In the animal kingdom that's life. But Jews are not supposed to be like animals. We're supposed to realize that killing an animal is not just. When we do kill, we're supposed to be compassionate and do it in a painless manner.*

Judy: I've heard that kosher slaughtering is cruel.

Gil: *There are people who think that. That's a controversy today in the Jewish world. But the whole reason there is a debate in the first place is because the Jewish goal is to avoid suffering and pain. This is not something animals think about when they are killing their prey. Plus, unlike the animal kingdom, we're not allowed to kill and eat any creature weaker than we are — which would include all animals.*

Judy: So why are some animals okay to eat and others not?

Gil: *No one knows for sure what the reason is. I've read a number of explanations. Most have to do with elevating us and making us more compassionate.*

Judy: For example?

Gil: *Well, one person I know who keeps kosher told me that when he keeps kosher, he has to think a lot about what he is eating. He likes that because it reminds him at every meal and snack of how lucky he is to have food and to be healthy enough to eat. Taken far beyond that is an interesting explanation I read, which said that the Jewish ideal is that we should be vegetarians.*

Judy: How does that explain that Jews can eat certain animals?

Gil: *The explanation says that Judaism believes killing animals isn't right. Even worse, to me, is the gruesome and cruel practice described in the Bible of ripping off and eating parts of a living animal. While seeing this as wrong, Judaism also realizes that asking everyone to be a vegetarian was not realistic. So the compromise is*

that we’re restricted from eating some animals — and we can never eat a living animal.

Judy: I can see the advance, but I still don’t see how you get to vegetarianism.

Gil: The Jewish thinking is that if we’re conscious of everything we eat, as opposed to the way animals eat — they kill whatever they want and routinely eat living animals — eventually, we would conclude that eating and killing of any animal is wrong. Then, hopefully on our own, we would decide to become vegetarians.

Judy: How wonderful that would be if everyone were a vegetarian. Too bad our desire for meat is so great. I do admire those who can go without, though personally I can’t resist a good steak once in a while. Still, that’s an interesting explanation. If you accept it, I can see how there is a connection between keeping kosher and ethics.

Gil: This explanation is consistent with other things I’ve learned about keeping kosher. Like I learned that eating standing up is considered not kosher because we’re acting like animals. Again, we’re supposed to elevate ourselves.

Judy: It’s a good thing animals can’t order from drive-throughs. I think I’m getting the idea.

Gil: Even though we share much with animals, Judaism says we’re different because we have a conscience. So here in the laws of keeping kosher we’re reminded that we have the ability to choose good over evil — that we have the potential for good.

“A group of rabbis ruled that the grapes picked by oppressed Chicano workers were not kosher. In effect, the rabbis were saying that eating those grapes was unethical.”

Judy: I don't think keeping kosher will guarantee that a person will be good.

Gil: Me either, but this is another place where I think Judaism is pragmatic. Jews are supposed to always think about their potential for good. What better time to remember this than when we eat — something we all do, all the time? For example, I often eat standing up. Since learning what Judaism has to say about it, when I eat standing, I often find that I think about the Jewish teaching on the matter. It might only be for a fraction of a second, but I still think about it.

Judy: Do you then sit down?

Gil: All the diet books say I should too. Sometimes I do, but even when I don't, my consciousness has been raised — and I think that's the main point.

Judy: I don't think I would think about it.

Gil: That's what I thought, but I do find myself doing it anyway. I wouldn't be surprised if you find the same thing happening to you. I'll give you another example. Some years ago, a group of rabbis ruled that the grapes picked by oppressed Chicano workers were not kosher. In effect, the rabbis were saying that eating those grapes was unethical. That's because keeping kosher is ultimately about ethics. I still think about that story often when I eat grapes.

Judy: I think I might now as well. I've never thought of the laws of keeping kosher in terms of making me a better person.

Gil: One way I remember is that the word kosher has become part of American slang. If you look it up in Webster's Dictionary, it means proper or correct, as in "That deal was kosher."

Judy: I never thought of kosher like that before. Now that you mention it, though, I've heard many people — Jews and non-Jews — use the word kosher to mean acting properly or ethically or "above board."

Gil: That’s at the core of all Jewish law. It’s designed to make us better people. There are large bodies of law about how to behave ethically in business, how to treat the widow and the orphan, giving tzedakkah, caring for the ill, grieving families, and on and on. You name it, Judaism has a law about it.

Judy: Some of that sounds great, but it seems that a lot of that law is out of touch and meaningless in today’s world.

Gil: Some of it is. For example, there are a number of laws about making sacrifices in the ancient temple. But most of the laws I’ve looked at have compelling rationales. Even for the laws that seem to be relics or irrelevant in the modern world, the spirit behind them has a lot of meaning. For example, I’ve heard good explanations of the spirit behind laws like keeping the Sabbath or eating matzah on Passover.

Judy: So are you telling me that you observe all of those laws?

Gil: No, not even close. But I think about the laws I do know, I often try them or parts of them, and I’m interested in learning more. Most of what I’ve learned has made me proud of our tradition — even though I recognize I’m not observing a lot of Jewish laws.

Judy: Don’t you feel like a hypocrite?

Gil: No, I feel like a serious Jew. I actively struggle with what I think is the right thing to do, the wrong thing, and in between. I like the idea of trying to become a better person. I really like the Jewish idea that we humans have tremendous potential for good.

Judy: But still, to achieve your potential seems almost impossible. It seems Judaism gives you a choice of becoming a perfectionist or a hypocrite.

“To achieve your potential seems almost impossible. It seems Judaism gives you a choice of becoming a perfectionist or a hypocrite.”

Gil: Judaism recognizes that we humans are not perfect — and never will be. At the same time, we're told we have the potential to be better — so we should try to elevate ourselves.

Judy: It still seems to me that if, for example, you're obeying some rules of keeping kosher and not others, that's hypocrisy.

Gil: I had a teacher once who said obeying Jewish law is like obeying traffic laws. He said you should always strive to uphold traffic laws — even if sometimes you might speed. Plus, he pointed out, there is a difference between speeding at 95 mph and 70 mph. If you truly strive to uphold the law but sometimes break some laws to some degree, don't think of yourself as a hypocrite... think of yourself as being human. At the same time, of course, keep trying to do better.

Judy: I suppose there is something to be said for that. So often it seems like the choice is to observe or violate the law.

Gil: But most of the time life is not so black or white. I do my best to use Jewish values, ethics, and laws as navigational tools on the road to being a good person — even if I may break some traffic laws.

Judy: I guess your attitude is realistic. I will admit I do break some laws to some degree, but in general I still consider myself to be a law-abiding citizen.

Gil: Even though I know I fall far short and violate many laws, I strive to be a law-abiding Jew for the same reason I strive to be a law-abiding citizen — all in all, I believe in the system. I really like the core values and ethics that are the foundation of the Jewish system.

“I do my best to use Jewish values, ethics, and laws as navigational tools on the road to being a good person — even if I may break some traffic laws.”

Judy: I think I probably do too — though I’m not sure I knew that before. I never realized how ingrained these values and ethics are in me. I think you may be right that my being Jewish or my Jewish master story has affected a lot of what I think is right or wrong and what I think is important — not to mention what I think tastes good — I must say the idea of a hamburger and a glass of milk grosses me out. I also like what you have told me about the Jewish attitude about our potential for good.

Gil: After all is said and done, striving to realize our potential for good is ultimately what I think being Jewish is all about. I like that. If everyone did that, what a world we would live in. When I combine this goal with a system of ethics and laws that is based on compassion and justice, I’m proud to be Jewish.

Judy: Maybe the Jewish philosophy and system of striving to be better people is why I’ve wanted to pass Judaism on to my kids. I don’t think I was consciously aware of that before. From what I know, I still prefer the American system of values and laws. But there appears to be much more to the Jewish system of laws and ethics than I discerned before. I could see merit in learning more about them.

Key Points to Hold Onto

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

- Jewish behavior varies a lot. What remains the same are the Jewish values and ethics that influence that behavior.
- All groups, including Jews, have a master story that imparts values and ethics to their members. These values are taught through the generations and influence behavior.

Key Points to Hold Onto (continued)

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

- The Jewish master story has imparted many values to many Jews. Some of those values are an emphasis on: justice, families and children, care for the disadvantaged, freedom, hope and optimism, speaking out against wrong, reverence for learning, and the importance of being strong.
- The Western world has inherited a basic sense of right and wrong that is largely based on Jewish ethics.
- Judaism says people have the potential to behave like animals or like the divine.
- The basis of Jewish ethics and law is the pursuit of goodness. To realize our potential for good, Judaism relies on laws.
- Judaism cares more about behavior than belief — so Jews are expected to behave with decency and obey laws regardless of their level of belief or nonbelief in God.
- Judaism recognizes that life is not fair and consequently emphasizes justice.
- The Jewish pursuit of justice is based on the values of love and compassion — though that spirit of the law may not be obvious by looking literally at Jewish law. The laws of giving *zedakkah* and keeping kosher are examples.
- If you break laws while striving to uphold them, think of yourself, not as a hypocrite, but as a serious Jew who is not perfect or divine — you are human with much potential for good.

Afterthoughts

There is one very important misconception about Jewish behavior that I think is worth mentioning again here. It is the misconception that somehow Jewish behavior is not authentic if faith in God is weak or absent. Stated as a question: Can a person really behave Jewishly if they don't believe in God? Our rabbinic scholars had this to say on the subject in the Talmud, their revered collection of Jewish law: God is quoted as saying, “If only my children would forget about me and keep my laws.” To me, the reading of this passage is clear: Judaism places proper behavior before belief. Whether you believe in God or not, Judaism expects you to act like a *mensch* — with decency.

Of course, you could then ask, What is decency? Judaism has much to say about this subject, and this chapter purposefully did not get into a lot of specifics. There are literally so many volumes of Jewish thought about decent behavior that you could spend the rest of your life studying and never finish.

For example, a short (500-plus-page) collection of Jewish ethics and ideals for everyday living called *Voices of Wisdom* (edited by Francine Klagsbrun) offers hundreds of passages. Just to give you a little sampler, here are some of the entries: Controlling your Temper, Striking a Balance Between Humility and Arrogance, The Value of Friendship, Returning Lost Property, Forgiving Your Enemies, Getting Along With In-laws, Stern vs. Permissive Discipline, Physicians' Responsibilities, Student-Teacher Relationships, Responsibilities of Employers, The Ethics of the Marketplace, Attitudes Toward War, Showing Kindness to Animals, Placing Life Above Laws, and Rights of the Accused.

You get the idea. They almost sound like the names of articles you would see on the covers of popular magazines at the grocery store. Some of the media now seem to be into ethical behavior; in fact, they have coined the phrase “a random act of kindness” to highlight rare examples of kind and decent behavior. I've been struck by this phrase, as I imagine our rabbis over the ages would be, because Judaism says kindness and decency should be

routine, not random. Judaism is about making our lives civilized through “regular acts of kindness.”

As I read examples in Ms. Klagsbrun’s book of behavior that our rabbis and other Jewish thinkers thought should be decent, civilized, “regular acts of kindness” — I was not startled by their thinking (though I can’t say I agreed with all of it). Most of their suggestions I more or less expected to find. This is because these thinkers were guided by the same Jewish ethics and values that I have gleaned and embraced as I have grown up. I believe most Jews have picked up and adopted many of them as well.

Speaking for myself, I find the ethics and values of Judaism inspiring and pragmatic. In particular, I am referring to the values of: striving to make the world a better place, pursuing goodness, pursuing justice, and treating all living creatures with compassion. Not only am I attracted to these values, but also — as I daily watch human cruelty and savagery on the news or read of yet another immoral dealing in politics or business — I find these ethics as badly needed and relevant in our day as ever.

Questions From This Chapter You May Wish to Ponder

- As you reflect on your own upbringing and your personal master story, what people and stories influenced your attitude and values about:
 - getting an education,
 - treating your parents,
 - helping those less fortunate than you are,
 - working ethically?
- Was there anything in what you learned that you can attribute to being Jewish?