

## Conclusion

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So you have read all these emails. What are the writers seeking and saying? They're certainly not apathetic about Judaism. I believe that these writers are expressing a desire for Judaism to provide guidance and meaning for their lives.

While the writers ask their questions in a Jewish context, they reflect universal questions asked by people of all faiths. They express a desire for answers to great human faith and existence questions: How do I lead an ethical life?, What is ethical?, Is there a higher Force?, How do I connect to this Force?, How do I connect to others?, Why are there tragedies?, Why does evil exist?, and so on. Ultimately, they ask: How do we find meaning in our short little lives?

My focus has been Judaism, so in this conclusion, I won't speak to these questions for other faith systems. Still, as I discuss Judaism, I hope that there are ideas here that hold value for adherents of other faiths as well.

Can ancient Judaism provide what people are asking for and respond to the challenges of modern life?

I emphatically answer Yes! However, much work must be done. The emails in this book, taken together, show evidence of how the world has changed, and how Jews and non-Jews have changed.

How should Judaism respond to these changes? An email sent to me essentially asked that question. For this book, I've written a conclusion that is an in-depth response to that email and is also a reaction to all of the email I've received. My response addresses what I think Judaism and Jews must do to have a bright future in this rapidly changing world.

## Is Judaism Keeping Up with the Times?

*Dear Gil:*

*The gist of my personal Judaism is on page 15 in the Sim Shalom prayer book. Instead of mourning about the loss of the Temple, the sage comforts his younger colleague by saying that God does not need animal sacrifice any more, but wants “gemilat chesed” acts of loving kindness — visit the sick, bury the dead, help your neighbors to rise up — without thought of reward.*

*I have a personal relationship with God. The biggest problem with some of Rabbinic Judaism is to me, continuing to build fences around the Torah, until lay people can no longer reach it. I reject the fences, and personally tear them down for myself.*

*Instead of daily praise of God for drowning 30,000 Egyptians in the Red Sea, we should say thanks for the modern miracle of 1948, the emergence of the State of Israel, which I witnessed, and know to be a real miracle.*

*When Rabbinic Judaism keeps up with the times, and changes, I may agree with them.*

*P*

Dear P:

You obviously take your Judaism seriously and I salute you. Being a serious Jew is not easy. I'll say more about this challenge later, but first I'd like to address three important questions raised by your email:

1. Is Judaism keeping up with the times?
2. How can Judaism be relevant and accessible?
3. Can Judaism evolve in a changing world?

To answer the first question, I'll use a business scenario. Imagine that 75 years ago, Procter and Gamble discovers a miraculous ingredient that eliminates tooth decay. They incorporate this ingredient

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in toothpaste, call the toothpaste “Godsend,” and introduce it to the marketplace.

The toothpaste is a disaster. The taste is bitter, and something is wrong with the tube and users get toothpaste all over themselves. To make matters worse, people are offended by the name “Godsend.”

After a year of dismal sales, Procter and Gamble convenes their board of directors, consisting of their corporate counsel, their banker, and CEOs of other large *Fortune* 500 firms. The company reports that the customers are idiots and management has decided to spend millions of dollars to educate customers using the advertising campaign slogan: “You don’t know what is good for yourself.”

Big surprise: sales get even worse. After another year goes by, P&G reconvenes their board of directors and reports that management has underestimated the stupidity of the customers. To fix this problem, management has decided to add guilt to their advertising campaign. So now customers will be told: “You don’t know what is good for yourself and YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELF!”

This situation, of course, is absurd. What would Procter and Gamble really do? They would not wait a year. Within weeks or even days of sales not meeting projections, instead of convening their board of directors, they would convene focus groups and hear directly from customers why they were not buying.

Rather than bringing in their corporate banker or lawyer, they’d bring in their product people and say, “Keep the miraculous ingredient, but make the toothpaste taste good! Sweeten it up. Add some mint.” They’d bring in their packaging people and say, “Fix the tube!” Finally, they’d bring in their brand people and say, “Change the name!”

Seventy-five years later, Procter and Gamble would have “Crest.” Yet as we enter a new millennium, the Jewish community is experiencing “crisis” because, although the first scenario is ridiculous, there are parallels of similar behavior in the Jewish world.

Demographic studies of the Jewish people show that Judaism is in trouble. Many Jews have stopped buying “the product.” Statistics

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show that huge numbers of Jews are opting out or barely participating in Jewish life. For example, most Jews do not belong to synagogues. Those who do belong, seldom attend. Jews are marrying non-Jews in ever-increasing numbers, (estimates are in the 50 percent range). About two thirds of these intermarried couples are not raising their children as Jews, (as I mentioned in the chapter on conversion). These trends are a demographic time bomb that has been called the "continuity crisis." In response, blue-ribbon committees, task forces, and panels have been convened to study Jewish identity and continuity.

Who sits on these committees? The CEOs of Jewish institutions: executive directors, principals, rabbis, and the most committed lay leadership in Jewish life, who sit around the table and say, "The customers don't know what's good for them... Judaism is good for them!"

I've purposefully exaggerated the Jewish scenario, and I don't mean to tarnish the efforts of these dedicated people. In fact, I must say that in my own city, I was Chairman of our Jewish Federation's Identity and Continuity Committee. From serving on these types of committees, I know that many initiatives have resulted that have been fruitful and praiseworthy.

### **Is Judaism Out of Touch?**

Yet I'm concerned that the voices of "Jews on the street" are not being heard. Too often they are discounted or ignored altogether by leaders of Jewish institutions (synagogues, Federations, Jewish Community Centers, schools, etc.). Often the voices are dismissed as being "out on the fringe."

I disagree. Since 1996, when my first book was published, I've heard from thousands of Jews of every stripe and level of commitment, including very involved Jews. The issues they raise and their hunger for meaning are similar — often identical. For example, I've often heard the complaint that synagogue services are boring and meaningless, from both non-attendees and those who regularly attend services. Airing peoples' voices was one of the main reasons I wrote this book.

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These voices lead me to conclude that Jewish institutions are not adequately aware of what's on the minds of Jews and consequently are not sufficiently responding to the way Jews live today.

A true story that dramatically demonstrates what I mean is told in the book *The Jew in the Lotus* by Rodger Kamenetz. The book describes a meeting between the exiled Dalai Lama of Tibet and seven prominent Jewish rabbis and scholars. The Dalai Lama invited them to come to India to teach him "the secret of the Jews." He wanted to know how the Jews had survived for thousands of years while living in exile.

The seven share much wisdom with the Dalai Lama. They decide among themselves that they would ask little of him in return, with one exception. Many new adherents of Buddhism from the west were born Jewish (the book calls them JUBUs). The rabbis gently say to the Dalai Lama that losing these Jews is painful and a loss to the Jewish people. The gist of his response was: I already tell students not to abandon their home tradition—but you must make sure there is something offered to them at home.

Today the phenomenon of Jews neglecting, straying from, or totally discarding their Judaism is well documented. And then there are huge numbers of Jews who proudly consider themselves to be Jewish, may even join synagogues, but really don't practice much Judaism. Why are so few Jews committed to Jewish life? In my experience, the main reason is that they don't find enough that is compelling about Judaism to make the effort. For many Jews today, Judaism consists of practices, rituals, and beliefs that are at best cumbersome, at worst, outdated, meaningless, and foolish.

### Relevant Judaism

I believe one word should guide the thinking of all who care to perpetuate Judaism: *relevance*. Judaism's teachings must be relevant for dealing with real-life, day-to-day problems and issues.

After all, why does a "seeking" Jew travel to India to learn more about Buddhism? That's the extreme case. Why would a "run of the mill" Jew search on the Internet for information about Judaism?

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They are craving ESP — Ethical guidance, Spiritual nourishment, and a sense of belonging to a community or People (I believe most people crave these basic human needs).

When Jews seek these needs outside of Judaism, or outside the walls of conventional Judaism, ask skeptical questions, or simply do not participate in Jewish life, too often the response I've heard from Jewish lay and professional leadership is a variation of these comments:

"What's wrong with these people?" Or "We'll just concentrate on the core that is interested." I'd summarize this attitude with the following marketing slogan:

"Judaism only on our terms, only on our turf!"

Can you imagine a company succeeding with this kind of attitude? For example, if only 15 percent of a synagogue's membership regularly attends services, my question is not, "What's wrong with 85 percent of the members?" I ask, "What's wrong with the services?"

In the non-profit world, somehow this seems to be a bold approach! But like my Procter and Gamble example, if you ran a company that had a great product but most customers were not buying, would you say, "What's wrong with them?" Would you be happy with a puny market penetration? Of course not! You would go out and try to understand your customers. You would ask how they lead their lives and you would listen attentively. With this understanding, you would then sell your product in a way that shows them how the benefits can match their needs.

Some critics call this approach "pandering," "watering down," "dumbing down," or weakening Judaism. What weakens Judaism, in my view, is when Jewish institutions and leadership are out of touch with Jews! Making Judaism accessible, understood, and relevant strengthens Judaism! My goal is far from watering down Judaism. I seek to enrich Judaism by clarifying what it teaches, explaining the benefits, and urging people to take Judaism seriously.

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### Marketing Judaism

Some might respond, "You can't equate Judaism to a product... and toothpaste, of all things!" My response is that Judaism is obviously not a tangible product like something you buy at the drug store. A nontangible analogy would be to think of a teacher standing before a class. The teacher is the seller, the knowledge is the product, and the students are the customers. In the case of Judaism, the product is a way of life consisting of Ethics, Spirituality, and Peoplehood.

For those who would say, "You can't use a business model for Judaism," I suggest they read the Harvard Business School's Study of the Willow Creek Community Church (January 23, 1996, No. 9-691-102). In fact, this study should be required reading for any Jewish lay or professional leader.

The study describes the remarkable growth of the Willow Creek Church of Barrington, Illinois. Listening to members and potential members drove this growth, or as the study states, "knowing their customers and meeting their needs." The results: In 1975, the church started with about 100 people. By 1991, services were drawing close to 14,000 people per weekend, with 5,000 of them returning a second time during the week for another service. The church cultivated a volunteer corps of 4,500 people and had annual revenues exceeding \$12,000,000.

Harvard clearly viewed Willow Creek Church as a "business" that sold a "product." Do I equate Judaism with toothpaste that fights tooth decay? Of course not! I consider Judaism to be an infinitely greater and more noble product—literally a Godsend. Judaism is a most remarkable product that fights human decay. Why aren't more people buying this fabulous product?

I know that Jewish institutions are becoming increasingly mindful of their customers. Creative, innovative, and collaborative programs are now common: Jewish college students have been given free identity-forming trips to Israel, some synagogues are experimenting with music and other creative services, high-caliber and expertly marketed adult study series have been formed, and there are many other examples. But from my perspective, the pace and range of innovation is far from enough. The Jewish people and the world are changing. Jewish institutions must keep up!

## The Evolution of Judaism

As you noted in your email, the loss of the Temple forced Judaism to change. Many scholars and books discuss this period of Jewish history, so a few words cannot capture what transpired. Still, here is a brief summary.

Over 2,000 years ago, the Jewish world faced a challenge that changed Judaism forever. A calamity of epic proportion occurred: Jews were cast out of their country into the Diaspora and the Temple was destroyed. The Temple had been a major focal point of Jewish life. Seven days a week, sacrifices were offered to God at the Temple. Three times a year, as commanded in the Bible or Torah, there were national pilgrimages to the Temple.

Suddenly, the Jewish country and Temple were gone. Over the next centuries, the most learned Jews — rabbis, sages, and teachers — exerted their influence and leadership and essentially saved Judaism. These scholars articulated Torah, oral law, and commentary into a written code of law called the *halacha* (which means “the way”) that covered literally every aspect of human existence. These laws filled many volumes. To master this information, Jewish education became highly valued. The brightest students became rabbis. The word *rabbi* actually means “my teacher.” The most educated and wise rabbis became judges of the law. Over time, the rabbis evolved into the leadership of the Jewish people.

During Judaism’s evolution from the Temple Era to the Rabbinic Era, the core values and beliefs of Judaism were successfully preserved. To use the Procter and Gamble analogy, the rabbis preserved and repackaged the essential ingredients of Judaism (Ethics, Spirituality, and Peoplehood) for the “new” Jewish marketplace that no longer had a Temple and lived in the Diaspora. For close to 2,000 years, the Jewish people followed this new system called Rabbinic Judaism (some also call this *Halachic* Judaism.)

But in our modern day and age, this is no longer the case. Most Jews on the planet today do not use or consult Jewish law or rabbis as a part of their everyday life, nor do they have any interest in doing so. The few who do for the most part are Orthodox — and they are only about 10 percent of the world’s Jewish population.

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### The Next Major Era of Judaism

So what is to become of Judaism? I agree with scholars who assert that Judaism has evolved into a new third era. This assertion is not a value judgment about whether Jewish law is good or bad or whether or not Jewish sages were wise. Instead, this assertion is an observation: The reality is that there's a major disconnect between the way most Jews live today and Rabbinic Judaism. How should individuals and Jewish institutions respond?

Some say the solution is obvious: Jews should just return to observing Jewish law. That may be desirable to some, but it's not very realistic. It's about as likely as Jews sacrificing animals in a Temple again — though a few still desire that too.

Others might respond by saying the problem is not new. Being Jewish has always been difficult, and the pressure to assimilate and be like everyone else has always been part of Jewish history. This, in effect, is the story of Chanukah.

The world today, however, is very different than at any time in history. There have been at least six radical and interwoven changes in the last century (for the most part, in the last half of the 20th century) that today monumentally influence the Jewish people and indeed the whole world:

1. **Mobility:** Almost all Jews alive today live in a country other than the country of their great grandparents. This modern exodus is many times greater than the Biblical exodus from Egypt. In addition, the way people regularly move from city to city today is a smaller ongoing exodus.
2. **The Holocaust:** The post-traumatic shock of losing a third of the Jewish people deeply affects Jewish and non-Jewish thinking, especially in matters of Spirituality (attitudes toward God) and Jewish Peoplehood.
3. **Establishment of Israel:** What should a free Jewish state be? This historic work in progress poses endless challenges, among them: Who is a Jew? How do democracy and theocracy coexist? How does a people that has been powerless for 2,000 years, ethically use its newfound power? What does a

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Jewish homeland mean to the Diaspora? How does realization of the dream of a Jewish state impact Jewish theology, messianic thinking, prayers, holidays, etc.

4. The shrinking of the globe: Today, knowledge and travel are quickly accessible to an unparalleled percentage of the Earth's population.
5. The empowerment of women: Women in the West have unprecedented rights, education, and opportunities. As a subset, Jewish women are perhaps the most educated and influential women in the world today — for that matter, in all of human history! Today, Jewish women routinely are esteemed professors, doctors, lawyers, rabbis, judges, legislators, businesspeople, members of a myriad of other professions, and volunteer leaders. Some of the most successful innovations in the Jewish world today come from Jewish women: prolific writings, new and inspiring Jewish liturgy and music, new programs, and institutions such as the Jewish Healing Centers. Unleashing the talents of 50 percent of the Jewish people bodes well for a Jewish future.
6. The liberation of the Jews: Jews today can more freely choose where to live, work, attend universities, participate in government, and join organizations than at any time in history, (though anti-Semitism, especially outside of North America, is active and dangerous.) Jews also have great freedom of choice in deciding how, or even whether, to practice Judaism, another religion, or no religion.
  - 6a: Intermarriage: A significant aspect of Jewish freedom that deserves special mention is the loving embrace (literally) of non-Jews, such that intermarriage today is commonplace. The long-term effect of these marriages is not known, but there is little question that they will impact the future of Judaism.

A sociologist or historian might add to or subtract from this list. But taken in total, the result is that Jews today have realized their dream of freedom. The emancipation of the Jews has come a long way. Jews are now free to roam physically and spiritually as never before — although the memory of threat or actual threat is seldom far from

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Jewish consciousness. Jews today have a range of choice from the Dalai Lama, to fundamentalism, to atheism, and everything in between.

New non-Jewish options and opportunities for Jews are so available and tantalizing today that, ironically, the realization of the freedoms Jews have dreamed of for centuries threatens the very existence of Judaism.

### **The Sovereign Self**

The net-net of all this choice is that attempting to impose religion (or any beliefs or behaviors) on adults living in freedom is difficult. Modern technology is only increasing this challenge. The Internet, email, blogs, iPods, satellite TV and radio, cable TV, TiVo, podcasts, DVDs, CDs, and more give us unprecedented access to limitless choices and the freedom to tune in or tune out whatever we want. This trend will only grow.

All of this freedom and choice has given birth to the concept of “the sovereign self” — meaning that each person today is their own king or queen. We rule our own lives. Professors Arnold Eisen and Steven Cohen have written that the idea of the sovereign self can be seen in Judaism today as Jews, perhaps now more than ever, are deciding for themselves how (or if) they will live as Jews. The freedom individuals have today also partially explains why so many non-Jews write to me asking for explanations about Judaism, including regular inquiries about conversion.

When every individual is a sovereign, institutions in society have an enormous challenge to command the allegiance of members. As for Jewish institutions, they must strive as never before to “earn” their authority and prove their worth to individual Jews. No longer can the Jewish community dictate or use collective guilt to pressure individuals to “behave!” Jewish institutions are not dealing with loyal subjects.

Consequently, they can’t expect “the people” to come to them. Institutions must actively go out there and “get the people.” If what Jewish institutions offer isn’t relevant, accessible, and beneficial,

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Jews will simply choose to attend or do something else — they'll "vote with their feet."

### The new era: Freedom Judaism

I feel confident that the Jewish people will survive. If for no other reason, because there will always be anti-Semitism and Jews have learned to use this adversity to strengthen themselves. Plus, there will always be a segment, albeit a small percentage, that will maintain traditional *Halachic* or Rabbinic Judaism.

Mere survival, however, is not enough. For Judaism to thrive in this age of freedom, choice, and the sovereign self, we cannot depend on anti-Semitism to band Jews together or on a small minority who religiously uphold *halacha*.

We live in a new era, that I call Freedom Judaism — typified by the Internet, a world of freedom, access, and choice. For Judaism to thrive in this era, the benefits of being Jewish must be so compelling that people freely choose the Jewish way of life. A person who converts to Judaism is known by the beautiful term "Jew by Choice." In this era of Freedom Judaism, really every Jew is a Jew by Choice. Judaism needs to respond and adapt to this age of the sovereign self, where little can be imposed on people.

This is particularly difficult for a way of life that relies on rules, standards, obligations, and subservience. Some will respond, "We can't just break, bend, or discard rules to accommodate every popular whim of the people. If we do, Judaism will deteriorate!" or "You can't have Judaism where everybody chooses whatever they want."

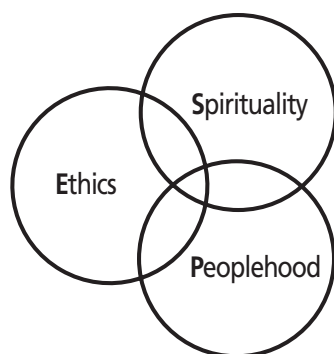
My reply is: I share this concern, but Jews are already picking and choosing what they want! My area of America Online was called *Judaism Today: Where Do I Fit?* As I've read all the email people have sent me, I've thought a more realistic name for the area should have been: *Me Today: Where Does Judaism Fit?*

The email in this book and demographic statistics of Jewish practices show that Jews today are effectively saying, "I will customize my

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own Jewish identity by choosing what I deem relevant and rejecting the irrelevant." Author and radio host Dennis Prager half jokes that, nowadays, every individual Jew thinks he or she has the genuine or correct recipe for Judaism, believing that "Everyone who practices Judaism to the right of me is a fanatic, everyone to the left of me is a Gentile." Put another way by Rabbi Leon Morris, the 5 million Jews in America today represent 5 million denominations of Judaism!

### Preserving the ESP Essence of Judaism



Institutions may try to fight this independence or they can deal with this reality. This will require open minds, creative thinking, and hard work. As when the Temple was destroyed, Jewish leadership again needs to look to the core interlocking values and beliefs of Judaism — Jewish Ethics, Spirituality, and Peoplehood — and find ways to perpetuate this essence of our tradition.

How? The answers could fill books and articles and hopefully will. Rabbi Larry Hoffman has said that at the front of the sanctuary of many synagogues, emblazoned in Hebrew, are the words: "Know before whom you stand." Hoffman quips jarringly that the words could read: "We've always done it this way."

Jewish institutions today can not afford this kind of attitude. Leadership must creatively find as many ways as possible to help Jews access, understand, and benefit from Judaism. In other words: Make Judaism relevant!

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With this in mind, at the end of this chapter, I've provided a number of suggestions for Jewish institutional leadership. They are under the following headings: Providing Relevant Content, Delivering Programs That People Will Want to Attend, Making Jewish Education More Compelling and Effective, and Additional Innovations and Opportunities. I hope that the ideas I've provided will be widely read, copied, shared with leadership, and discussed.

### A Partnership

While the suggestions I provide mainly focus on institutions, for Judaism to flourish in this new era of Freedom Judaism, a partnership is necessary between responsive institutions and serious individuals. Unfortunately, most Jews today had a poor, dogmatic, or nonexistent Jewish education. Too often, what they are left with does not make for a very compelling case for Judaism.

The result — to use a phrase a Jewish professional once told me — is that for many Jews today, Judaism is akin to a “leisure time activity”, squeezed in occasionally between work and play. But Judaism is meant to be more like a pair of glasses through which you see work, play — and everything else for that matter. This may seem overbearing, but personally speaking, by learning about Jewish thinking and practice, I've discovered the joy and even spiritual power of connecting to a wisdom tradition that existed for generations before me and will continue for many after.

Please understand me here: I'm not saying that all Jews should start keeping kosher and become ritually observant. What I am saying is that the Jewish way of life does require commitment.

That does not mean participation has to be a burden. It should be enriching. I've made clear that Jewish institutions need to make Judaism more relevant, accessible, and beneficial. At the same time, I must also say, that if you want Judaism to provide you with ethical guidance, spiritual nourishment, or a sense of belonging, you have a big role to play. A partnership goes two ways. I don't think it is fair to ask an institution, a rabbi, a spouse, a parent, or anyone else to provide you with Jewish fulfillment unless you are a willing and serious partner.

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This requires effort that may not always be easy. But many worthwhile things in life are also not easy — such as work or personal relationships. We engage in them anyway though, because the benefits are worth the effort. We also know that these pursuits require time and serious commitment. Making Judaism meaningful to you is similar.

A good place to begin is your home. Some would argue that the home is the most important institution of all. Making your home Jewish can mean many things, from having and using Jewish ritual items, art, and books to personal Jewish practices.

Another part of being serious about Judaism is learning. If you don't understand something, be emboldened by the email you read in this book. Ask your own ESP questions and seek answers — find out what Judaism says, read books, take classes, and acquire knowledge. I've included a short list of resources at the end of this chapter to assist you.

An easy and friendly place to start is a website I've created called [www.BeingJewish.org](http://www.BeingJewish.org). Here, you will find many "hands-on" ideas and resources designed to show relevance and meaning in Judaism. I hope you'll visit!

I want to make one more important point for individuals living in this age of the sovereign self. Judaism has always emphasized the importance of community. An integral component of being a serious Jew means caring about the Jewish people and indeed all people. This means being willing to volunteer your time, money, and commitment to others. Although this is definitely an obligation, not only do I think the Jewish requirement to give to others is good, I have found it to be personally fulfilling.

### **I'm Optimistic**

I'll end by saying that I love being Jewish. I think Judaism is relevant. I don't think Judaism is perfect or the only valid way of living in the world. I enjoy learning from other systems, discovering wisdom there, and also learning how Judaism differs and why.

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In the course of my learning, I've concluded that Judaism is a good system—a very good system. Throughout history, Judaism has had an extraordinary track record of contributing good ideas and people to the world. I believe in the potential for ancient Judaism to continue to offer much to our modern world.

The email I have received from Jews and non-Jews shows me an intense hunger for and curiosity about Judaism. In this high-tech, complicated, and impersonal world, when faced with life's challenges, these writers are yearning for guidance on how to behave, Transcendence to have faith and believe in, and ways to connect and belong. In other words, they are looking for Ethics, Spirituality, and Peoplehood. In addition, my sense is that most Jews are proud to be Jewish. When I combine this with the remarkable history of the Jewish People to persevere, create, and evolve, I'm optimistic about a vibrant Jewish future.

Before signing off, I want to say that the suggestions I've made need not be efforts of Jewish "oy." They can be a source of Jewish joy. Jews have somehow always found a way to smile and even laugh in the face of suffering. If we were able to smile during pain, we certainly can find ways to do the same during this exciting time of opportunity.

There's much work to be done, but I feel lucky to be alive during this era and to have a chance to contribute. I hope I've made a bit of a contribution through these pages.

I am grateful to you and all who have sent me email.

Today! [Thank you]

Gil

P.S. I welcome comments about this book or any other matter. Send email to [GilMann@BeingJewish.org](mailto:GilMann@BeingJewish.org). Perhaps your email will appear in a future column or another book — anonymously of course. Thank you!

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## Some Resources to Further Explore Judaism

### Books

*How to Get More Out of Being Jewish Even if:*

- 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, published by Leo & Sons Publishing

My first book was based on interviews and focus groups with all kinds of Jews seeking to find out what they do and do not practice in their Judaism and why. You can read this entire book in just a few hours and I guarantee you will find new and valuable information about being Jewish here. YOU CAN DOWNLOAD THE BOOK FOR FREE at [www.BeingJewish.org](http://www.BeingJewish.org).

*To Life!* by Harold Kushner, published by Little, Brown and Company

A very readable, sensible, and enjoyable explanation of Judaism, by the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. This book is especially good for anyone who had a bad Hebrew school experience.

*The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism* by Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, published by Simon & Schuster, Inc.

A skeptic's guide to Judaism that answers questions such as: Why do we need organized religion? How does Judaism differ from Christianity, Marxism, Communism, and Humanism? and seven more tough questions.

*Unsettled: An Anthropology of the Jews* by Melvin Konner, published by Penguin Group

This history of how Jews have been impacted by the world and vice versa is fascinating, insightful, and sometimes controversial. The author is a vivid storyteller, who is passionate, honest, and

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brilliant. Konner's personal Jewish journey and questioning adds a valuable dimension to the book.

*Jewish Literacy* by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, published by William Morrow and Company, Inc.

This book contains 348 brief entries on the essentials of Judaism, organized by subject. This plain-English and entertaining book is a tremendous source of knowledge. Looking up one entry, it's easy to get caught up reading one after another — it's like eating Frito Lay potato chips — bet you can't read just one!

*It's a Mitzvah! Step-by-Step to Jewish Living* by Bradley Shavit Artson, published by Behrman House

If you think the Jewish code of behavior is outdated, this book will change your mind. It offers hundreds of modern, meaningful, and practical ways to practice Judaism — from protecting the environment to helping the homeless. It covers traditional ritual practices as well. As a bonus, it is filled with wonderful photos.

## Internet

There are thousands of Jewish "places to visit" on the internet. One way to start is to go to the Jewish search engine: [www.maven.co.il](http://www.maven.co.il)

Here are six Jewish websites I recommend:

[www.BeingJewish.org](http://www.BeingJewish.org)

This is my website. Here you'll find practical, friendly information to help make Judaism relevant for your modern life. All of my past Jewish Email columns are posted here. Topics covered on the website include spirituality, intermarriage, holidays, conversion, parenting, cooking, environmentalism, and more. The site is designed to help you easily access the Ethics, Spirituality, and Peoplehood of the Jewish way of life. PLUS YOU CAN GET A FREE DOWNLOAD OF MY FIRST BOOK HERE! Please come visit.

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[www.myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com)

Want to learn more about Judaism or find some “how to” information? You’re in luck. A lot of resources have gone into this site to provide you with information (and even courses) on a myriad of Jewish topics. Major categories include holidays, lifecycle, text, ideas and belief, culture, daily life, practice, and history. This site offers something for everyone — whether you’re insecure about your level of Jewish knowledge or want to add to your knowledge base — and you can learn from the comfort of your own home.

[www.jewishfamily.com](http://www.jewishfamily.com)

This is a great Jewish online magazine you may want to check out produced by Jewish Family & Life. It has articles about parenting, answers to children’s questions about Judaism (like “Can I visit Santa at the Mall?”), interviews with famous Jews, areas about food, travel, etc. You can also interact with the magazine and other readers through your computer.

[www.convert.org](http://www.convert.org)

If you know somebody who is interested in converting to Judaism — or you simply want to learn more about Judaism — this welcoming site is a great place to start. Here you will find information about the differences between Judaism and Christianity, how to deal with sensitive relationship issues, the names of over 70 rabbis of all denominations who perform conversions, and much more.

[www.interfaithfamily.com](http://www.interfaithfamily.com)

Well-known today is the phenomenon of Jews marrying non-Jews. This website candidly addresses the challenges faced by intermarried families and their extended families (like in-laws and grandparents). The site offers a Jewish perspective while respecting the faith of others. Look here for resources and links covering many topics like religious holidays, lifecycle events, outreach programming, and more.

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[www.Jewish.com](http://www.Jewish.com)

This general Jewish site has a wide range of Jewish information covering many aspects of Judaism. Some of the topics you can pursue here are holiday information, Ask A Rabbi, recipes, book reviews, Jewish news, and more. They post many columns I have written in response to questions readers have emailed to me. To find these columns, enter "Gil Mann" in their search feature. They also have a Jewish store as a part of their site so you can find Jewish gifts for yourself or others.

## Some Ideas for Jewish Leadership

Dear lay or professional leader:

Before offering one word of suggestion, I say thank you. The job of leading a Jewish institution is too often thankless. Professionals usually could have made more money by pursuing a career in the for-profit world. The work of a volunteer is obviously not even on the pay scale.

The motivation is not financial, but instead, to make a difference, to make a contribution that will positively affect others. I know this firsthand, after years of volunteering in non-profits and finding myself surrounded by *mensch*s — very decent human beings who are trying their best to serve others.

The saying “no good deed goes unpunished” is often true for the well-intentioned leaders and volunteers of Jewish non-profits. So, again, I must begin any comments with thanks. I know you want your institutions to succeed and to provide for others.

## Responding to a Changing World

Jewish institutions face a delicate balancing act in this era of Freedom Judaism, an age of choice and the sovereign self. They must simultaneously lead the flock and be led by the flock. This may sound like a contradiction, but many successful companies that sell products do just this. Think of how Apple introduced the iPod. They were responsive to customers while at the same time “driving” the marketplace. That is, they led and convinced prospects that the company’s product was worthy of being chosen.

For Jewish institutions to do this requires a difficult examination of the standards, laws, rituals, and norms of Jewish behavior. Some will be maintained, some will be changed, some will be eliminated, and new ones will be created. This has always happened in Judaism and continues to happen today. Look at intermarriage, for example. Each decade seems to bring different standards and norms for Jewish/non-Jewish marriages in general society and Jewish life.

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In the Rabbinic era of Judaism, *halacha* (which, again, literally means “the way”) provided definitive traffic laws that guided Jews as they traveled the Jewish way of life. But today most Jews do not observe these laws. In this era of freedom and choice, *halacha* cannot be imposed on Jews. A more realistic application of *halacha* is not as enforceable traffic laws but as a guidance system, more of a compass or GPS for navigating through life.

I know such an idea upsets some, but I believe Jewish and world evolution is forcing these changes upon us. As part of this evolution, we will need to harness 2,000 years of Jewish wisdom and practice, together with additional knowledge that humans have learned about the world and life. Then we must infuse the Jewish way of life with rituals, rules, and institutions so meaningful and relevant that Jews will say Judaism is worthy of continuing. Ironically, part of this evolution includes re-adopting some rituals that were discarded earlier. This too is happening in Jewish life today.

With that said, the suggestions below are not meant as a critique; they are meant to help. I hope they will be read in this spirit. I base these suggestions on three bodies of knowledge. One is what I’ve learned from the thousands of people who have spoken to me via email, focus groups, and audiences where I’ve lectured. Second, I base these suggestions on what I learned in my successful business career as an entrepreneur. Finally, I rely on my experience as a volunteer in non-profits for more than 25 years.

I do not maintain that these suggestions are a panacea or amazing breakthroughs. They are meant to spur thought. I hope they will be copied and used as a blueprint for discussion. Even more so, I hope they will be implement and modified based on feedback from the customers.

### **Institutions Must Be Nimble, Responsive, and Relevant by Doing The Following:**

#### **Providing Relevant Content:**

- New programming and institutions must be developed to address the relevant issues people grapple with on a daily basis.

## Sex, God, Christmas & Jews

Here a few programming ideas: ethics in the work place, healing and hospice centers, parenting and grandparenting skills, hands-on social action, community *mitzvah* or *gemelut hesed* [kindness] days, Judaism and environmentalism, Jewish art, and cooking projects and much more.

- New Jewish life-cycle rituals need to be developed for milestones and life events of today: examples are graduating from college, recovering from an illness, dealing with addictions, struggling with fertility issues, getting a driver's license, a major career move, moving into a new home, and retirement.
- Options need to be developed to address the reality that when it comes to spirituality, "one size does not fit all." Different people resonate to different expressions of spirituality. There is a broad range of preferences for such things as Hebrew, English, silent meditation, folk singing, organ, other instruments, dancing, traditional *davening* [Yiddish for praying], and more. In addition, we need multiple forms of expression for different affinity groups, such as young parents, older parents, bereaved, healing, singles, seniors, teens, men, and women.
- Prayer books should be more user-friendly and relevant. One of the best prayer books I've ever seen was for kids, filled with inspiring pictures and color. Why aren't adult prayer books like this? In addition, more contemporary and meaningful prayers are needed. Focus groups with end users (not scholars) should be conducted to gauge impact on worshippers.

### **Delivering Programs That People Will Want to Attend:**

- Programming decisions should be driven more by the question: What will "they" (the customers) attend? as opposed to What do "we" want to offer? This requires creativity, but does not mean the content must be fluff!
- To learn what "they will attend," requires asking, really listening, tailoring programming, testing, modifying, and more listening. Surveys, focus groups, evaluations, and ongoing feedback mechanisms must be built into programming efforts.

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- A human and personal invitation should be a part of reaching out for and then maintaining participation.
- There must be great sensitivity to people's insecurities about their Jewish competence, knowledge, and personal background. Nobody likes to feel dumb. We must be mindful that, in contrast to their Jewish knowledge, most Jewish adults are highly educated and competent in their careers.
- Scheduling and marketing of programming must be practical about the many competitive demands for people's time and attention. Think of your own busy schedule. How much time do you usually have available—one hour, two hours max? Then add commuting time. With all of this in mind, program packaging should revolve around these questions:

*What obstacles to participation can we remove?* Examples: Frequency and length of programs, babysitting, convenience, formality, and dress code, etc. Costs, tuitions, and dues deserve special attention here. The expense of being Jewish is one of the biggest barriers to participation in Jewish life and needs to be seriously addressed by leadership.

*What benefits can we offer?* Examples: You will learn and be able to harness x, y, and z to improve your life. You will receive fun, food, and spiritual and/or intellectual stimulation. You will see or meet friends, be welcomed into a warm community, etc.

- Turf must be shared. For example, nurturing spirituality is not exclusively the domain of synagogues. Institutions and professionals should look for ways to collaborate and eliminate competition when delivering Ethical, Spiritual, and Peoplehood programming.
- Programming must be delivered in creative new places: outdoors, at malls, at places where people work and play, in homes, and in retreat centers. As an aside, retreats and *Shabbatons* [group Sabbath getaways] have huge potential. Although they are a big and inconvenient time commitment, anyone who has attended can attest to their power!

## Sex, God, Christmas & Jews

### **Making Jewish Education More Compelling and Effective:**

- The thrust of education for children and adults must shift to emphasize teaching “Why be Jewish?” much more than “How to be Jewish.” For example, we should be teaching kids why they would want to *become* a Bar or Bat Mitzvah much more than teaching how to *have* a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. For adults, we should teach *why* they would want to observe rituals, not just *how*. There are many fascinating explanations. Most Jewish adults have never heard them (for example, explanations and theories of the “whys” behind keeping kosher).

In other words, we should be teaching the ethical underpinnings that motivate Jewish behavior and ritual... the spirit of the law, not just the letter. If we do, people may find more “spirit”uality in Jewish practices and ethics.

- Education resources should be shifted from kids (pediatric Judaism) to parents and other adults. Educating a parent, future parent, or grandparent offers twice the bang for the buck, as this education then flows down to the kids. Plus, as Rabbi Harold Kushner says, the “stuff” of Judaism is adult material.
- Jews and non-Jews should be encouraged to learn with each other. We all need to better understand how we’re different, how we’re the same, and why.
- Pay for teachers should be increased. For this profession to attract the best and the brightest, salaries and benefits must be competitive with those of other valued professions.
- Education for rabbis and other Jewish professional should include training in market research, active listening, public speaking, and effective teaching techniques.

### **Additional Innovations and Opportunities:**

- Jewish summer camps—a research proven success story—must have increased capacity and affordability. Studies show that less than 10 percent of Jewish kids go to summer camp and most

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camps have waiting lists. Also, more overnight camps need to offer 2 week options.

- Homes should be made into Jewish institutions. Tools, resources, and teaching must be created to help people make their homes their Jewish castles. This includes guiding people to acquire Jewish art, ritual objects, and a library. In addition, training should be provided so that in the comfort of their own homes people can learn to: better celebrate Jewish holidays, Shabbat, recite meaningful blessings, cook, and live Jewishly in ways that they can understand and find relevant in their lives.
- Media (such as radio, cable, satellite, and podcasts) should be used more effectively. Technology today allows us to laser in on specific audiences with specific content. We can and should target these audiences with what they want. Again, this requires genuine listening, understanding, and responding.
- The Internet should be further exploited. The anonymity, ease, speed, and low cost of the Internet offer opportunities to connect, educate, donate, and more.
- Israel/Diaspora relations need strengthening. Every possible opportunity to have Diaspora Jews and Israeli Jews exchange people, programs, ideas, and just plain old friendship should be pursued. To give just one example, there should be a large-scale high school foreign exchange program. Kids could live for a month or a quarter with a host family with other teens and then switch countries.
- Conversion should be encouraged. This is controversial in the Jewish world, but my experience is that Jews by Choice are a terrific asset to our people. At a minimum we should be more welcoming to those who have converted.
- Outreach to intermarried families must increase. A friendly welcome to these couples and their children should be the mantra in the Jewish world. The beauty, depth, warmth, and wisdom of Judaism should be on display to them.

To any professional or lay leader of an institution who looks at this list and responds, "We already do that," I say, *kol hakavod* [honor to

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you]! Do more! Show others! To those who say, “We can’t do that,” I say, come up with alternative ideas.

To those who say, “You can’t put all the burden on Jewish institutions. What about the responsibility of individual Jews?” I agree! I wrote in the conclusion of my book that what is needed is a partnership between responsive institutions and serious individuals. And I said in no uncertain terms that individual Jews need to be responsible for finding meaning in Judaism and not put the onus on anyone else or on institutions.

At the same time, if institutions don’t adapt to our changing world, they run the risk of becoming ex-institutions. I will leave you with the following challenge that was once posed to me by Rabbi Irwin Kula: Imagine the synagogue, school, JCC, Federation, etc., that opened up across the street from yours... and puts yours out of business. What would they be doing?

I challenge you to imagine what they would be doing — and then lead your institution to do just that, so that you will thrive, as will Judaism.

*Kol Tuv* [all good wishes],

Gil Mann

P.S. I invite you to my website [www.BeingJewish.org](http://www.BeingJewish.org), where you can find additional ideas and resources to use in your institution. I hope you’ll come visit and I welcome your email!

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## A Note to Educators

Dear Educators:

Teachers hold a special place in my heart as my grandfather, mother and wife were all teachers.

With this in mind, I've been especially touched over the years to hear from many teachers who have told me that they have used my books and columns in their classrooms. Some have even sent me emails that students wrote as a result of classroom discussions. At least one of those emails is in this book.

I have been honored to know that teachers have used this material and I want you to feel free to reprint and use any material in this book. There are many additional columns that did not appear in this book. These archived columns can be found at [www.BeingJewish.org](http://www.BeingJewish.org) (look under Jewish Email.) Also, you can download my first book for free there. All of this material is available for your use as well.

My only request is that you tell people where you found the material and invite others to visit the website.

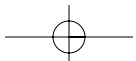
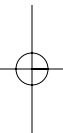
Please feel to email me at [GilMann@BeingJewish.org](mailto:GilMann@BeingJewish.org) with suggestions on how others might use this material or any other comments. I read every email sent to me and promise to respond — at a minimum to let you know I've received your email.

Respectfully yours,

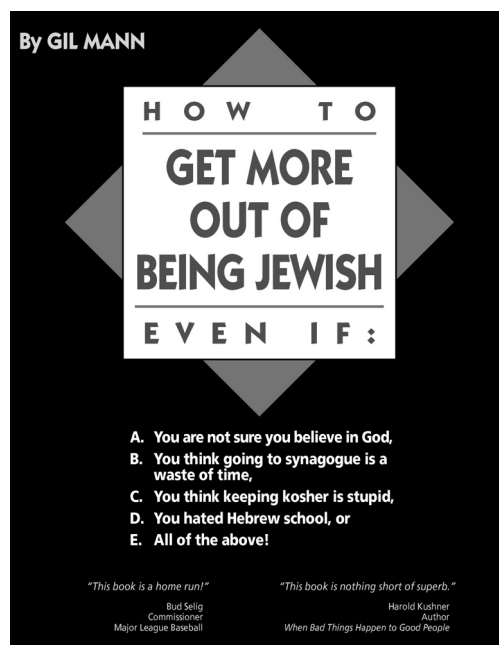


Gil Mann

PS Even if you are not a professional educator, please feel free to copy, use, and pass on material in this book and on my website.



## Praise for Gil's first book:



"In these modern times, how can Judaism help me to find meaning in life? This non-threatening book will be a great aid to many as they search for answers to that question... Covering profound and difficult Jewish questions, yet written in an extremely easy to read and accessible style."

—Jewish Book World

"There are many books on Judaism written from every possible point of view, but I have never seen anything like this. This is a marvelous piece of work."

—Rabbi Herb Friedman

"This [is] a wonderful book for readers who are struggling with numerous questions about Judaism. The book is thought provoking even to those who believe they have a grip on what Judaism means to them."

—The Kansas City Jewish Chronicle

"This book gave me the permission to continue my Jewish searching... and not feel guilty."

—Anonymous reader

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