

Introduction

Help Me Please...

The email began arriving immediately. People were anonymously pouring their hearts out to me. Daily I'd sit at my computer, reading the unbelievably candid feelings, thoughts, and questions that were being sent to me by strangers. Every day I was startled anew. People were openly sharing extremely personal challenges in their lives and questions about faith, God, spirituality, and religions.

One day, when I logged on to the Internet to hear my PC announce, as usual, "You've got mail!" I saw that I had received an email with an unusual subject line: "From a female Job" (in the Bible, Job was a man whose faith was tested through tragedies).

I clicked on it to open the most staggering email I had ever received. Here is what she wrote to me (as with all the email in this book, I've left most punctuation and grammar unedited):

Subj: From a female Job
Date: 06-03 17:52:08 EDT
From:
To: GilMann@aol.com

Dear Gil:

I am a 49 year old woman. In my short lifetime I have had or continue to have Epilepsy, Lung Problems, Blood Clots, Heart Problems, and six years ago I had a mastectomy of my right breast. My family is fine and we have had our successes. My husband has overcome his own disability to rise in the ranks of his profession while my children do well in school and on their own.

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I now face the added crises of a secondary cancer in my lymphic system. I am in 3rd or 4th stage of cancer. I need help but am finding a hard time in believing in prayer the power there of or the reason for it. I am an ethical jew and have found ways to believe in God. That is now tenuous but I am hanging in there. But to pray I cannot and when others say can I say a Prayer for you I have to say yes but remember your prayers are for you not me. I will be fine and I know I will be up and down but I need to resolve my issues

with prayer Help me please

Yael

My hebrew name shalom

I sat frozen, staring at the screen. Her email was so intimate, honest, and raw. While Yael's email was especially powerful, many of the emails I was receiving left me awed by the people "out there" and that they were contacting me. They so wanted to share experiences and questions with me. How could I best help them? How could I best share these yearnings of "people on the street" with professionals and organizations? How should I harness this energy I had tapped into to achieve the most good?

On the Internet there are many "Ask the Rabbi" and "Ask the Doctor" type sites, yet the people emailing me knew that I was not a rabbi, psychologist, social worker, etc. I discussed my email with a rabbi who worked for an Ask a Rabbi site and he suggested that perhaps people wrote to me precisely because of who I'm not. I do "not" represent a movement, a philosophy, an ideology, or any political or clergy position.

My response has been to try to assist those who contact me by providing information, answers, and other resources. I also encourage writers to further ask their questions—in person—of local professionals and others.

Email and My Life

The email I was receiving was part of a personal evolution that began when I decided to leave the business world. After receiving a degree in journalism, I started my career writing and producing TV news. In the '80s, my wife and I founded a video-based computer training business. To make a long story short, the company grew rapidly, we sold it, and I began to volunteer full time, working primarily in Jewish non-profits. My business and journalism career taught me a great deal about listening and responding to the public, so when volunteering at non-profits, my efforts were usually focused on an aspect of marketing.

I was pleased to be able to contribute my time in this fashion because I believed I could be helpful to these institutions. On top of this, I've always felt passionate about being Jewish. My feelings for Judaism were so strong that in college I considered going to rabbinical school. (I opted not to go, in part because I was not fond of services and did not think they'd let me go through six years of rabbinical training and skip all the services.)

After a few years, my experiences while I was volunteering, combined with my sentiments about Judaism, led me back to writing. In 1996, my first book was published. That book has perhaps the longest title in the history of English literature. It is called:

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!*

The title may sound flippant, but the book was serious. It was the result of listening to about 150 Jews in focus groups and interviews. In my volunteer work in Jewish non-profit organizations, I was regularly frustrated to see how out of touch those of us who work in these organizations seemed to be with the people we strive to serve — our “customers” so to speak. I wanted to hear these customers and understand them better. So I sought to listen to Jews “on the street” and hear directly from them how they felt about their

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Judaism, and also, to try to provide them with relevant answers in plain English.

The book was extremely well received. So well, in fact, that it spawned an area of America Online called "Judaism Today: Where Do I Fit?" that followed the themes described in A through E of the book's title. (I should point out that I do not make money from my writing or lecturing.) When the area was launched in 1997, I posted an announcement that I'd be collecting any email I received for possible publication and that I would not reveal the identities of the writers. As I wrote in the first paragraph of this book, I immediately began to receive email from all kinds of people, including, to my surprise, many non-Jews. Eventually, I created my own website called www.BeingJewish.org. The statistics on my website — with its obvious Jewish name — indicate that I have had visitors from more than 100 countries, including, to my amazement, many of the Muslim countries of the Middle East. These visitors from the Middle East have also emailed questions to me.

I was committed to answering every email that came in, which sometimes left me writing until two o'clock in the morning. In the exceptional case of Yael, the female Job, we exchanged many emails, spoke by phone numerous times, and I connected her with professional resources in her community that she came to rely upon. Ultimately, I met her and her husband in their home in Canada. This book is dedicated to her because, by contacting me, she changed my life. Her questions of faith in the face of severe life challenges have inspired and motivated me. I've been so moved by her that I carry her first email with me in my calendar. Thanks to her, I came to truly appreciate that "on the other end" out there in cyberspace are real people who are grappling with significant probing questions and life challenges.

Finger on a Remarkable Pulse

While the extent of the relationship I developed with Yael had no equal, my life has been intertwined with many others who have written. Some who wrote simply wanted to vent, and I thanked them for sharing their thoughts with me. Many wanted to know if

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Judaism could offer guidance for a modern-day challenge in their lives. Others had questions about some aspect of Judaism. Some had general faith or religion questions or a desire to know the differences between Judaism and other religions. Often I was able to answer their questions based on my knowledge of Judaism. Other times, to answer their question, I sought expertise from rabbis and Jewish scholars. On a regular basis, I referred people to rabbis, other clergy and professionals, social service agencies, books, organizations, websites, and electronic message or bulletin boards where they could further pursue the matter they had raised.

Many writers thought the issue they had on their mind was unusual or unique. Some of them were right, but more often than not, I found patterns in the email and I could see similar issues raised by many. Frequently, emails ended with the sentiment "Thanks for listening." This phrase, but far more so, the content of these emails, made me realize that I had my finger on a remarkable pulse — a living rhythm of emotions, thoughts, attitudes, and experiences.

I decided that more people needed to see what I was seeing. Individuals needed to see that the issues and questions they often silently kept to themselves were shared by many others. I wanted to champion their voices. Leaders of institutions needed to hear these voices and be more responsive. I also sought to express my conviction that Judaism can and should be relevant.

I began selecting one email per week, which I edited to conceal the writer's identity. I'd then respond publicly in an "Email of the Week" column that appeared online. Here are the titles of some of these columns:

Where Was God on September 11?
Did You Hear the One About the Jew...?
I Am Catholic and Dating a Jewish Guy
Body Piercing, Tattoos, and More!
Why Do Jews Argue So Much?
I Will Not Circumcise My Son!

These columns generated even more email from readers who reacted with opinions, their experiences, and often additional questions.

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In 1999, I began to release my column to Jewish newspapers. Many papers began to run the column called *Jewish E-Mail*. Now when I released a column, nearly 200,000 copies of it were being distributed by newspapers across the United States and Canada. A number of websites also began to feature the column. I regularly heard from teachers who told me they were using the columns in their lessons. (By the way, I hereby give teachers and others permission to copy material in this book; please just reference that you found it here.)

Because of my work, I also began to receive many invitations to lecture, and I've spoken in more than 70 cities across North America. To reach even more people, I've decided to publish these columns and some of the additional follow-up email that people sent in reaction to my columns in the form of a book.

My intent in sharing the email in this book is threefold. First, by reading what others have written, I hope you will feel empowered to voice your questions, doubts, issues, and opinions — constructively and in forums on and beyond the Internet. Second, I hope this email helps professionals, institutions, and organizations to better reach, understand, and serve the “people” — some of whose voices may not be heard through conventional channels. Third, I hope the email in this book can help build bridges between Jews and non-Jews, so we better understand our differences and the many thoughts, emotions, and life challenges we all share in common.

Before diving into the email, I need to say a few words about the people who write to me. The only way I can know anything definitive about people who write is if they volunteer information about themselves — which, as you will see, they regularly do. Statistically, there is no way of knowing the breakdown of the people who write to me. Often I can read between the lines to discern patterns, but this is far from scientific. I am able to say that the writers are of all ages, from teens to seniors, and seem to be fairly equally divided between male and female. The nature of a person's comments or questions does not necessarily reveal their background or current type of religious practice or nonpractice.

Although the majority of people who write to me are Jewish, I regularly hear from non-Jews. Non-Jews who write often make a point of telling me they're not Jewish and what religion (if any) they

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practice. I was concerned that opening myself up on the Internet could lead to anti-Semitic hate email. Happily, over the years, I've received only a handful. In fact, almost all the email I have received has been respectful and positive in tone. They have been a pleasure to read and have reflected to me, a genuine desire to understand.

As for the Jews who write, I hear from every kind. I would like to emphasize that this is **not** a book about "the unaffiliated" or Jews on "the periphery." The Jews who write to me come from all the major Jewish denominations (Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Reform), and I also hear from Jews who are secular, atheists, and do not affiliate with any movement. Some write in part because they're not sure exactly how to define their Jewish identity.

Confidentiality: The Emails in This Book Are ANONYMOUS!

I must make several important comments about protecting the identities of the writers of all the email you will read in this book. I regularly indicate to those who write to me that I might select their email for anonymous publication in a column or book. To further conceal writers' identities, I've changed details in the emails. The names of the cities have been changed, and the writers' names and initials have been removed. If you do see a name in an email, it is a fictitious name. So if you think you recognize someone in this book, that is purely a coincidence. There are three emails in this book where the writers' actual names added special meaning, and I used those writers' names with their permission and noted that the name is authentic.

Here are a few additional editorial comments. Although some emails were edited for brevity's sake, most of the grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation were left as is, to preserve the flavor of the email. This also applies to the subject line which is worth noting as you read. Typical of "email etiquette," much of the writing is often "blurb-like" incomplete sentences or fragments, full of grammatical errors. Whenever Hebrew or Yiddish terms are used, I've provided translations in brackets like these [translation].

A very important point I must make is that this book includes some email responses that may contain incorrect factual information, as

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well as ideas I personally reject. Their inclusion in this book does not imply my endorsement!

With all this in mind, here are a few examples of emails, first from Jewish writers:

Subj: Why be Jewish
Date: 07-26 00:48:36 EDT
From:
To: GilMann@aol.com

A Catholic woman dating my son told him that he was so fortunate to be a Jew, and shame on him because he didn't appreciate his heritage. She told him to become more spiritual, as he was spending all his time working.. She bought him tefillin [phylacteries — ritual prayer object] for a birthday present. He uses them every day, has become shomer shabbat [an observer of the Jewish Sabbath laws], and is kosher because he is a vegetarian. In May, at age 33, he married under the chuppa [wedding canopy]. And I am the proud mother-in-law of a Russian Jew who appreciates him for everything he is!!!! Imagine, a Catholic made him a better Jew. Thanks for listening

Subj: Jewish???
Date: 03-21 21:08:47 EST
From:
To: GilMann@aol.com

Dear Gil:

I was always taught from my mother that I was Jewish... I went to a conservative synagogue in Atlanta for a few years... quit when i was sixteen... (My father was not Jewish.) Here I am 49 years old, married Hispanic, had 5 children, not raised jewish (even though one became a doctor?) I read all of Chaim Potak's books, wanted to seek out jewish community... thank G_d for

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computers now I can... Don't know why?? I guess blood is thicker than water!!! Send message if you have any thoughts on the matter

[Editorial note: As in this email, you will see in this book that some Jews write the word *God* with a space, underscore, or hyphen between the G and d, because of a tradition to prevent the name of God from being accidentally disposed of or erased.]

Subj: Judaism in a secular world
Date: 08-10 23:33:57 EDT
From:
To: GilMann@aol.com

Dear Gil,

I am a college bound Jewish girl who is nervous about how strong my faith in Judaism is. I have attended Jewish Day school all of my life, but yet I am not sure about my beliefs... in God especially. I know Hebrew to an extent and am aware of the Jewish holidays, prayers, and biblical laws. However I am not sure how I truly want to practice my Judaism. I love the morals and values I have been taught, but I still am confused about how I can find my place in judaism (or my particular way of maintaining my Jewish identity in a secular environment which I have never fully encountered... I am scared). Can you assist me?

Subj: Thank you
Date: 06-15 01:18:18 EDT
From:
To: GilMann@aol.com

Dear Gil:

I was approached today by some Christians who claimed "Jesus was the only way for salvation," and they asked me "What my

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chances of going to Heaven are?" and I replied "90%." I continued to go on and stated "I believe that I am a good person and enhance humanity with my deeds." I never knew this was part of being Jewish. Both of my parents are Jewish (Although my father states he is an atheist) and I went from being an atheist to agnostic to a believer. I am a social worker and working with substance abusers in the Army, I gained my spirituality because there I realized that there is a force more powerful than myself. I am proud of my Jewish ancestors, but I don't know whether I will be religious. Thank you for putting Judaism in a better perspective for me. Take care.

Subj: why do i want to be jewish?
Date: 07-26 00:57:10 EDT
From:
To: GilMann@aol.com

dear sir

i am a holocaust survivor and i paid my dues for being jewish. I AM JEWISH SIMPLY BECAUSE I WANT TO BE. AFTER THE WAR ,I COULD HAVE LEFT JUDAISM AND GOTTEN LOST IN THE CROWD OF THE WORLD AND I COULD HAVE NOT BE BLAMED, AFTER THE HOLOCAUST EXPERIENCE. HOWEVER I DECIDED TO STAY JEWISH BECAUSE I WANTED TO BE JEWISH.

NETZACH ISRAEL LO YESHAKER
Name (signed in Hebrew)

[This last Hebrew line is from *Samuel I, Chapter 15: Verse 29*. The verse is commonly understood to mean: the Eternal One or the Eternity of Israel is not false.]

That gives you a flavor of the variety of Jews who write to me. When non-Jews write to me, again, I only know if they're not Jewish when they volunteer the information, which, as I said earlier, they often do, as in these typical emails:

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Subj: Jesus
Date: 09-30 12:54:31 EDT
From:
To: GilMann@aol.com

Dear Mr. Mann,

I am a christian and have been trying for the past six months to understand why the Jewish people don't believe in Jesus. I've read books, talked with my pastor and others who aren't really sure or have they're own philosophy. I'm hoping you could shed some light on this concept for me. I really appreciate any response you can give. Thank you.

Subj: Judaism
Date: 07-22 21:21:04 EDT
From:
To: GilMann@aol.com

Hi!

I have been recently baptized in Christianity. Throughout the preparation I was never sure if I believed in most of it. I don't believe I'm a real Christian. I have just too much disbelief. There were just so many things I wanted to change about Christianity and where emphasis was put. But here's the problem. I have no idea what to do. I want to learn more about Judaism and maybe convert one day. How would I come about this? Plus I have no idea how I would explain this to my family, friends, etc. especially since in June I was baptized. Thanks for listening. I appreciate it much.

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Subj: israel
Date: 09-30 01:27:34 EDT
From:
To: GilMann@aol.com

Dear Gil:

Hi there How Are You

I am visit jewish web site and i get ur e-mail from there

My name is M. i am a Muslim from Jordan

I want to ask u why sharon do this?

did he forget that we are arabs 300 milyon and israel just 5.

i dont mean that we will make a war but he must return to

1967 borders

we accept israel

u know what i am sending u cuz i think that u r a good person

dont forget that we can kick israel out but. but i belive that if this happend it's not good for all

and i dont know what i can told u but plz reply this e-mail

and if u can fix this problem plz try cuz every one will lose

Initialed

Subj: Conversion and Problems
Date: 05-09 14:22:25 EDT
From:
To: GilMann@aol.com

My greatest desire is to convert to Judaism. Everything I've read, discussed, observed and explored about Judaism touches me in very spiritual, ethical and social ways. It is a way of life which I feel can best demonstrate my belief in God and my desire to improve the human condition.

My "problem" is that I am gay. And the reality of Torah [the Hebrew Bible] and Halacha [Jewish law] on that issue seems

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insurmountably complicated and complete. How does one resolve such an issue?

I wish you could feel the desperation, loneliness and hopelessness that I am feeling about my quest for spiritual nourishment and community. And in my heart I know a vast majority of people in the world, not just Judaism, would be only happy if I was no longer here to be “a problem.” Is this how the Jews of Europe felt in WW2? Maybe that is why I feel so drawn to Judaism... the sense of being an outsider, who has so much to offer the world, if only the world could see beyond one simple, private part of who I am. But how can I ask centuries of belief, practice and tradition to bow and change for me? How insignificant I feel.

The Amazing and Mysterious Internet

As you can see I hear from quite a potpourri of people with heartfelt thoughts and questions. Why do they write to me? I believe they do so because I am safely available to them, open to their thoughts, and because they’ve got something on their mind or something to get off their chest. They’re also writing, because they can — thanks to the far-reaching abilities of the amazing and mysterious Internet.

Never in the history of humanity have we had the abilities the Internet gives us to access information and communicate with each other. Further, you can become a one-person broadcaster of your ideas to the world through blogs, podcasts, product reviews, message boards, and the like. Anyone with access to a computer can participate regardless of sex, age, race, religion, income, education, occupation, interests, appearance, expertise, abilities, or disabilities. And no one need know any of the details about your life unless you choose to divulge the information. For purposes of this book, I’ve taken all the emails I have received at face value, assuming that the people who have written to me have been truthful.

One aspect of the Internet has special importance for this book: You can be anonymous. Because of the ability to surf incognito, being on

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the Internet is an activity unlike any other in society. Surfing the Internet is like attending a giant masquerade party, but the experience is even more shrouded and suspenseful; you never know who or what you might discover. No one knows who you are, where you are, or what you are. To add to the adventure, this party goes on 365/24/7 with participants popping in and out at all hours.

Because of all these factors, the Internet gives people unprecedented ability to connect with each other and even create virtual communities. However, I would never suggest that the Internet is a substitute for live, in-person, physical connection and community. The Internet is unique and different.

A Modern-Day Talmud

My mother came up with an insightful observation about the realities of interaction and communication on the Internet. I was showing her some online message boards where people were reacting to things that others and I had written about Judaism. I explained to her that the way an electronic message or bulletin board works is similar to an old-fashioned paper bulletin board. A person posts a comment on some subject (anonymously if they wish). Others then may react by posting a comment of their own. This provokes even more responses as the new comments stimulate even more ideas from other readers. But unlike an old-fashioned bulletin board, on an Internet board, a huge quantity of information can be easily posted and accessed.

After reading a number of postings, my mom said, "This is a modern-day Talmud", (the great collection of Jewish law and commentary). The Talmud's many volumes are a compilation of centuries worth of Jewish sages' teachings. These sages explain law, detail, and nuance in the Bible. The first comments in the Talmud are from the earliest sages. These original comments then generated additional commentary from succeeding scholars who read and debated earlier points. This second commentary then spurred subsequent comments from later sages, and so on. I told my mom that one big difference from the Talmud is that on the Internet, anyone can participate in the dialogue—you need not be a scholar

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or have any other station in life, other than a workstation connected to the Internet.

In the Talmud, as on the Internet, you quickly learn that there is seldom “one truth” or explanation for anything. Instead there is earnest searching by many people, often in a most personal way. On the negative side, the potential for hateful, dangerous, dishonest, and unhealthy thought and behavior exists on the Internet. On positive side, the Internet is a wondrous place to grow and learn with others or by yourself. Reactions from others can come in “real time” (instantly) or many months or years later.

In summary, the unique characteristics of the Internet have made my interactions with people endlessly intriguing and rewarding. By sharing some of these interactions with you through the pages of this book, my hope is that you will resonate with the answers, questions, issues, and emotions that are expressed. I invite you to email your thoughts to me through my website: www.BeingJewish.org.

How This Book Is Organized: ESP

If I were to summarize all of the questions people—Jews and non-Jews—have submitted to me, I’d reduce them to this: How can Judaism be relevant to a modern person? Or, put differently: Can Judaism help me navigate through my modern life?

For this book, I’ve selected the columns that generated the liveliest responses. To organize these responses in a way that would be helpful to readers, I decided to borrow something many have told me was helpful from my first book: *How to Get More Out of Being Jewish....* The book began with a chapter called “What is Judaism Anyway?” I started with that chapter because during interviews and focus groups for that book, I found that few could come up with a crisp answer to the question: What is Judaism?

My experience online has further reinforced my conclusion that most people have difficulty defining Judaism, so I decided to write a column in response to a typical email asking me for a definition.

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Little did I know when I wrote and published this column that it would help me organize this book some day:

Is Judaism a Religion or a Race?

Dear Gil:

I have a very simple question, is Judaism a religion or a race? I know it may be a dumb question but I have asked a few Jews I know and they all give me different answers. I am not Jewish, I'm African American, but my great-grandfather is supposedly Jewish. I just want to know if it is possible to have "Jew" in you, like it's possible to have Italian or Indian.

*Thank you,
L*

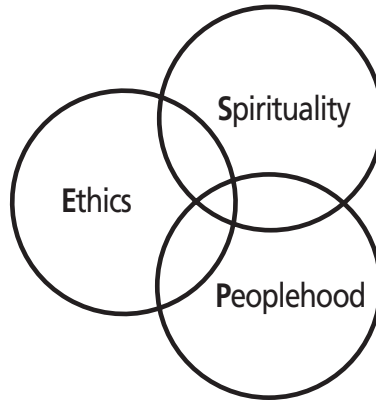
Hi L:

Your question is not dumb at all! A lot of people including many Jewish people have a hard time coming up with an answer, as you have already discovered. There is much to say on this subject of WHAT IS JUDAISM ANYWAY? But here, I'll try to give you a brief answer:

My answer is: Judaism is much more than a religion and is NOT a race. I define Judaism as: A way of life.

The Jewish way of life consists of three things that I call E.S.P. E stands for Ethics, S stands for Spirituality and P stands for Peoplehood. I draw them like overlapping Olympic rings as you can see in this graphic.

Judaism = A Way of Life Consisting of ESP:



In Judaism, each of these circles is considered sacred. The interesting (and confusing thing for many) is that a Jew can live in any one of these circles and never enter the other circles. Plus you can enter the other two circles from any one circle. In addition, the circles overlap so you can simultaneously live Jewishly in two or all three circles.

This can be confusing, but really it is kind of simple. For example, when I say that Judaism is much more than a religion, I mean that even if you do not believe in God you're not disqualified from being a Jew. For example, Hitler sure did not define Jews by their Spirituality! He cared about Peoplehood. In addition, Jews are supposed to behave Ethically whether they enter the Spirituality circle — that is, whether they believe in God or not!

Here I want to say a word about the Peoplehood circle: according to Jewish law, to be considered Jewish by birth, your mother must be Jewish. (Many Jews say either of your parents can be Jewish — but I won't get into that here.)

HOWEVER! Judaism is NOT a race — though our enemies love to call us a race. Any person of any race is welcome to convert to Judaism. if Judaism were a race; you could not convert to become a Jew. Nobody can convert to become another race — but anyone can convert to become Jewish. There are Jews of all races and colors

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— for proof, just look at a city street in Israel. I want to make an important point here: Many people (including Jews) think the emphasis on Jews marrying other Jews is repulsive racist thinking. I'd be repulsed too... if Judaism was a race... but it is not. Again, Judaism is a way of life.

The ESP of the Jewish “way of life” is all encompassing. There is no aspect of life that's not included in Ethics, Spirituality, Peoplehood, or a combination of them. There is much more that can be said about the E.S.P. circles of Judaism. In fact, you could write a whole book on the subject. I did! Hope this brief summary helps!

Gil

To reiterate, the reason I think so many people have a difficult time defining Judaism is because a Jew can live Jewishly in any one of the three circles and never touch the other circles. Plus, a Jew can move from circle to circle during their life — or even during a day. At any given moment, a Jew can live in one circle or another or live in a place where the circles overlap.

Here is a story that illustrates what I mean. I was giving a presentation about Jewish Spirituality near Norfolk, Virginia, home of the largest U.S. naval base in the world. A fellow raised his hand and said, “I'd like to share an example of how Jewish Peoplehood and Spirituality happened to me in a most powerful way.”

He explained that he had been an Army helicopter pilot for 12 years and had fought in Operation Desert Storm — the Persian Gulf War of 1991. While he was in Saudi Arabia, he was prohibited by military order from outwardly showing that he was Jewish. That meant he could not wear a Star of David, a *mezuzah* [a pendant worn by some Jews or placed on the doorposts of Jewish homes as a sign of Jewish identity] or a *chai* [the Hebrew word for life] pendant. He was even advised to remove the word Jewish from his dog tags!

Anti-Semitism? No. The reasons were to protect the Jewish soldiers should the Iraqis capture them and also because the Saudis were sensitive that non-Muslim soldiers were on Saudi soil defending the

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holiest sites in Islam: Mecca and Medina. (The latter reason is part of what provoked Osama Bin Laden to terror.)

December rolled around and this soldier received an envelope marked TOP SECRET! The big secret? There was going to be a Chanukah party! The Jewish soldiers in his division and the neighboring division were invited. He described how he gathered in the middle of the Saudi desert about 300 kilometers from anywhere with about a dozen other Jewish soldiers to celebrate Chanukah. Then he hastened to add, "I'm not an observant Jew, I'm not a religious guy, I'm not even sure I could say the blessings over the candles. But when a Jewish chaplain arrived after driving across an empty desert to be with us, lit the menorah candles with us, said the blessing, and then served us potato latkes and gefilte fish, it was one of the most powerful spiritual Jewish experiences of my life... in part because I was there in Saudi Arabia with my fellow Jews."

This is a dramatic example of how Jewish Peoplehood and Spirituality can overlap and occur at the same time. In my experience, most Jews live with an awareness of the Peoplehood circle... a feeling that there are differences between them and their non-Jewish neighbors and that they share things in common with other Jews. Even the most nonpracticing, disconnected Jew feels the Peoplehood circle if an anti-Semite gets on the media and attacks Jews. The response from them or almost any Jew is, "Hey! You are talking about me and *my people* and I don't like what you are saying!" Having a sense of the other two circles — Spirituality and Ethics — is not as obvious for most Jews.

No matter where on the diagram Jews find themselves living, the ultimate goal of Judaism would be for all three of these circles to overlap, one atop the other, at all times and appear as a single ring rather than Olympic rings. When they do, a Jew feels a connection to Jewish Ethics, Jewish Spirituality, and Jewish Peoplehood simultaneously. This is much easier said than done.

This leads me back to this book. I can categorize all of the questions, comments, emotions, and searching that have been emailed to me into one, two, or all three of the following categories:

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- **How do I behave? How can I find *Ethical* guidance in Judaism...** from an ancient tradition and way of life that could not have anticipated the challenges and complexities of modern life?
- **How and what do I believe? How can I find faith and gain *Spiritual* nourishment from Judaism...** in a high-tech world that runs on science and offers many competing spiritual options, from Buddhism to communing with nature?
- **How do I belong? How can I understand and connect to Jewish *Peoplehood*...** in a world where most people are not Jewish?

Behaving, Believing, and Belonging, “the three Bs,” are the three components of the Jewish way of life according to the twentieth-century scholar Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. I call the three components ESP. Traditionally, Judaism has called them Torah, God, and Israel. Whatever you call them, every aspect of Jewish life can fit into one, two, or all three of the circles.



Sex, God, and Christmas

The three major sections of this book therefore are Ethics, Spirituality, and Peoplehood. In each section, the chapters are based on an email someone sent me and a public response I wrote in my

Introduction

syndicated column. As I mentioned earlier, after my columns were published or posted online, they generated follow-up emails from other readers who reacted to the original email or my response.

In this book, then, after each column, you will see a cross-section of the follow-up emails that I received after people read my column. They are a response to my response. Something of a modern day Talmud, as my mother would say, though the writers and I are not rabbis and sages. Again, I invite you to respond as well by emailing me through www.BeingJewish.org.

Sometimes the writers of follow-up emails offered words of support or advice to the original writer, which I often forwarded to the original writer. Other than that, most of these additional emails have never been seen by anyone else before now. At the end of each chapter, I offer some closing thoughts in a section called: Concluding Thoughts to Copy, Cut, Paste and Save.

In the section on Ethics, you will find chapters that deal with behavior — for example, sexual behavior. The Spirituality section has chapters that relate to belief in God and accessing spirituality. The Peoplehood section examines what “belonging” means by exploring such issues as the celebration of Christmas. Of course, sex, God, and Christmas are just a few of the many topics covered under the headings of Ethics, Spirituality, and Peoplehood.

Because the topics of many columns touch more than one of the three circles, they could easily be placed in one section or another. This is not really a problem, though, since Judaism does not make a clear distinction between the circles. In other words, the goal of Judaism would be that Ethics, Spirituality, and Peoplehood should always lead to each other in a kind of endless feedback loop. Put differently, ideally, at all times Jews are supposed to behave ethically, motivated by belief in God and a sense of belonging to the Jewish people.

That’s in theory, anyway. In practice, for most Jews, this does not happen very often or at all. Sometimes only one circle is involved, sometimes two (as in the story of the Jewish soldier in Saudi Arabia), and sometimes all three. So as I tried to decide which column belonged in which section of the book, I was faced with an editorial

Sex, God, Christmas & Jews

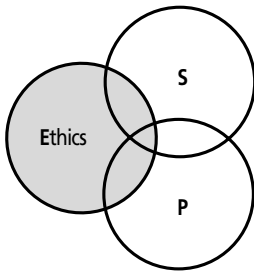
challenge. For example, the column about Jews getting tattoos could appear in both the Peoplehood and the Ethics sections. So I'll tell you up front that many of these editorial decisions are not clear-cut.

But this editorial challenge is similar to the challenge of leading a Jewish life. Life is not easily compartmentalized. Neither are the issues facing a person trying to make the ancient way of life of Judaism relevant to and compatible with the modern world. Many questions that people ask may seem new and indeed they are. Many others deal with the basic human condition and really have been asked in one form or another for thousands of years by Jews and non-Jews. Either way, this book attempts to give voice to the people out there and their questions. At the same time, the book attempts to show Judaism's relevance and ability to answer modern-day questions... asked in a new and most modern of ways: via the Internet.

To Get the Most from Your Reading

I'd like to make one final point before you begin reading the columns and emails I've been describing. Many people are loose when using labels to describe Jews. They use terms such as observant, religious, secular, affiliated, unaffiliated, core, periphery, Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox. From my work online, I've come to the conclusion that these labels are misleading, loaded, narrow, and often not helpful. Again, this is not a book about Jews disconnected or unaffiliated from Judaism. Rather, the email shows a hunger expressed by Jews of all kinds, as well as non-Jews, for Judaism to provide understanding, meaning, guidance and relevance.

So whether you are Jewish or not, please read on, with an eye for what you have in common with the people who have written and for how you differ. As I've read the thousands of emails I've received over the years, I've tried not to be judgmental. Instead, I've tried to invest my energies in understanding the writer. In the process, I've learned a great deal about others and myself. I hope the same holds true for you.



Section I: Ethics

Going online for help when making decisions is routine: deciding about stock or financial questions, researching a medical issue, choosing a hotel in another city, finding the best air fare, doing homework, etc.

But these are nuts-and-bolts issues. Do you look to the Internet to help decide ethically what is right and what is wrong?

In our day to day lives, we're challenged by many ethical questions: how to treat friends, enemies, acquaintances, strangers, employers, employees, customers, parents, children, relatives, animals, the environment, our society, our community, and so on. In grappling with these kinds of issues, we look for ethical guidance from our upbringing, the laws of the land, our religious background, and our personal faith system.

This section is about the phenomenon of people searching for this kind of guidance on the Internet. There are many places on the Internet where one might look — religious websites, chat rooms, "Ask a Rabbi" features, and so on. This section describes situations where someone was struggling with a dilemma, wondering about their options, or torn between choices, and approached me via email to pose a question or share their opinion.

Some writers were torn between a choice offered by the freedom of a western democracy and a differing choice suggested by Judaism — for example, the freedom to tattoo and pierce one's body. Or they may have been confused between different choices offered within Judaism — for example, different intermarriage practices in the various Jewish religious movements. Others may simply have been curious about a given situation and wanted to know what behavior

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would be ethical according to Judaism—for example, asking about Jewish sexual conduct.

I've found all this probing most intriguing because so much has been said and written about Jews abandoning Judaism. Some of these Jews write off ancient Judaism as having nothing relevant to contribute to a modern world. After all, today, unlike "the olden days" when the ethical guidelines of Judaism were first articulated, women have a different place in society, we have electricity, cars, refrigeration, modern medicine and science, etc. Many conditions of modern life bear little resemblance to the days of old when rabbis and sages promulgated most Jewish law—law that was based on Jewish ethics. Given these changed conditions, is it any wonder that some would contend that Judaism is out of date and out of touch?

My experience writing, lecturing, and communicating online leads me to a different conclusion: many Jews and non-Jews, regardless of their level of faith or religious observance, are interested in knowing what Judaism has to say about modern life situations. The emails in this section are evidence of this. They show that although Jewish ethics may be thousands of years old, many people today still seek guidance from Judaism. These emails are from people who at a minimum want to understand and at a maximum want to incorporate Jewish thinking about ethical behavior into their lives.

These emails speak to the following: How should I behave? How can I find ethical guidance in Judaism... from an ancient tradition and way of life that could not have anticipated the challenges and complexities of modern life? Each chapter in this section is a life situation or challenge that asks these questions in a different form. Here are the chapters in the Ethics section:

Bizarre Jewish Sex?

Can Jews Donate Their Organs?

I Will Not Circumcise My Son!

Body Piercing, Tattoos, and More!

Jews, Blacks, and Prejudice

Are Jewish Teens Immoral Today?

My Rabbi's in Love With Me and I'm Married!

Unknown Things About Rabbis