

On Being a Jew, Part 4

Obedience

We wrapped up our last session by considering the main points of Sabbath observance and kosher laws to understand their influence on Jewish life. We didn't cover every detail, and trust me, there's more we could have discussed. In this session, we will move on to explore other aspects of Jewish daily life and how they impact the lives of Jews.

But before we proceed, I want to clarify a point raised during our discussion. Laws and rules are created to be followed, usually for the overall betterment of society or the safety of its citizens. Our highways have speed limits to protect us. Are they always obeyed? Take a short trip of just a few miles, and I guarantee you'll see at least one person speeding, probably you, and likely by a significant margin.

Apply that observation to Christians and our spiritual walk. We are called to "walk in the Spirit," but do we always do so? Nope. That is one reason God set up 1 John 1:9: we try, and we sometimes succeed, but eventually we disobey the "rules" and fall into some moral failure.

Regarding the Jews and their observance of these rules for living life, many follow them very strictly. Some believe they do, but they actually cheat. Others don't even try, much like many Christians, including those who consider themselves observant. Matthew (and other apostles) showed that those who strictly follow these rules, like the Pharisees and Scribes, often become very arrogant and judgmental.

These "rules for life" were originally divinely inspired in the Torah. We see them first in Genesis, and they are expanded upon in Deuteronomy. However, the rules were very broad and lacked detail. Then came the Oral Torah and the Mishnah, commentaries that provided structure and detail to the rules. Were these additional rabbinical rulings divinely inspired? Some, as simple elaborations of the originals, were, but others perhaps were not.

My point is that rules exist and are followed by imperfect people with sinful natures; therefore, we can expect but never fully achieve 100%

compliance. That isn't an excuse for breaking the rules, but rather a reality of living in a fallen world.

The Family

Rabbi Donin views the family as key to leading a obedient and prosperous life. He introduces the topic like this:

“The family is the core of Jewish society and a center of its religious life. If the home is strong in Jewish values, stable, and healthy, then all Jewish life and its institutions—religious, educational, social, etc—will be alive and vibrant. And if the home is weak emotionally, morally, and spiritually, all else will soon mirror that weakness. The religious laws pertaining to family life, therefore, occupy a major part of Jewish religious codes. These cover every aspect of Jewish life, from its outward appearances to its most intimate relationships.”

Rabbi Donin believes these are based on the following foundations as the core principles of Jewish laws in this area.

- Respect for each individual's integrity and feelings as a human being within the family.
- Fostering a peaceful and harmonious relationship among all household members.
- Recognition and acceptance of each family member's different roles.
- Maintaining spiritual purity and a wholesome attitude in the sexual relationship between husband and wife, as well as between men and women in general.

Unfortunately, many Jews today are unaware of the ideal of holiness embedded in Jewish tradition. This Jewish ideal aims to elevate both the individual and society, fostering happiness and meaningful living for the greatest number. Judaism has never intended for people to find happiness by satisfying immediate desires or physical urges at the expense of higher values. Allowing unrestricted gratification is seen as a crude and vulgar surrender to human weaknesses, reducing the human being to the level of an animal. Unfortunately, in modern times, we see increasing failures in Jewish families because these laws are less widely observed.

Husband and Wife Relationships

Jewish tradition acknowledges that having children is a main goal of the family.

Genesis 9:7 “And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it.”

It fulfills the Divine purpose and makes us partners with the Almighty in the ongoing process of creation. Some Jewish authorities say the minimum number of children is two; others say at least one of each sex.

Marriage has its own validity beyond just procreation. Probably the most important aspect is its sanctity.

Genesis 2:18 Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”

This was said before Genesis 9:7 (above) and its command to “be fruitful and multiply.” This call to fellowship and to help one another is presented as the first and main purpose of marriage. There is no greater blessing than to go through life with a “companion” whose skills and talents complement your own.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament strongly condemn all forms of lewdness, harlotry, promiscuity, and adultery. They also condemn incestuous sexual unions, homosexuality, and sodomy as abominable. However, the Bible speaks highly of the beauty of a man and a woman in the sanctified union of marriage.

Even in Jewish marriages, there are times when sexual relations are forbidden, such as when the wife begins her menstrual period until the end of her “clean days” following menstruation. Usually, this period lasts about twelve days, during which the woman is in a “state of separation (*niddah*).” During this time, she is forbidden to her husband.

Several possibilities have been suggested for this:

- To develop self-discipline for those moments when passions and urges overpower reason. The Jewish concept of holiness requires such strength.

- Considerations for the wife, including her emotional state or physical condition.
- This separation reduces boredom and routine at home and keeps the honeymoon's romance and tenderness alive. Each month brings a fresh sense of expectation and excitement.
- Each partner is allowed to rest without feeling guilty.

The end of the period involves a ritual bath for the wife, called a *mikvah*, a Jewish purification bath. When the Temple was still standing, the priests also took a *mikvah* before performing their duties. Converts to Judaism also participate in the *mikvah* ceremony as a sign of spiritual cleansing.

Prior to the ritual *mikvah*, the woman will take a bath to remove any dirt from her body. The ritual *mikvah* then follows shortly after.

While it is recognized that a mikvah offers hygienic and medical advantages, its main purpose *is spiritual*. As Christians, we might see this ritual as symbolizing the washing away of our sins at the Cross. When physically and ceremonially cleansed spiritually, the wife returns to her husband.

Jewish family life cannot take place without a *mikvah* in the community. It can proceed without a synagogue, but the *mikvah* is essential. In modern Israel, when a *kibbutz* is established, the *mikvah* is built first, followed by the synagogue.

Honoring Parents

Exodus 20:12 Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

Leviticus 19:3 Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father...

You might recognize this as one of the Ten Commandments, specifically Number 4. Showing disrespect to parents is equivalent to disrespecting God. Exodus 20:12 makes it clear that honoring your parents with proper respect will lead to blessings.

Some general principles for guidance:

- If the father or mother disagrees with what is in the Torah, then it is the wishes of the Father in Heaven that take priority, for he is also their Father and deserves their respect. Logical, right?
- Even if a parent ignores the Torah, a son or daughter must never speak to that parent angrily or arrogantly.
- Anyone who curses a parent or brings shame to one is himself cursed by God. “Cursed be anyone who dishonors his father or his mother” (Deuteronomy 27:16).

There is one exception: if the child and parent disagree on something, such as the child wanting to go away to study Torah because it is better and the parents object, or when the child wants to marry someone of their choice in a manner that is not against religious law, and the parents object, the child is not required to obey their objections.

(I’m going to use this one!) Grown children of aging parents have a duty to clothe, feed, shelter, and care for them. You don’t see that much anymore. When I was growing up, it was common for a household to have three (or even more) generations: the children, their parents, and an aging grandparent or two. Today, we send Granny off to an assisted living home. She may receive better care, but often she loses her family.

One is duty-bound to honor one’s parents even after their death. Both sons and daughters contribute to charity in memory of the deceased and by living lives that honor those who gave birth to and raised them.

The Children

It is well known that Judaism emphasizes the importance of education, but less well known is what Judaism actually means by it. The Hebrew word for education is *hinukh*. It doesn't just refer to formal schooling. The word literally means “consecration” and involves training a child for life, not merely providing an education.

The primary objective is to:

1. Instill moral and ethical values of the Jewish heritage.
2. Actively observe the Torah’s commandments.

3. Encourage active study of the Torah, Talmud, and other Jewish sources.
4. Create a strong sense of identification with and concern for all Jewish people.

Only then is there concern for broad secular training and education to earn a living. Emphasizing the latter at the expense of the former provides only a small part of the total education called for by Jewish tradition.

Given their history, it's clear that the four points above are not only vital to their culture but also essential for their survival.

Divorce

Like Gentile marriages, there can be conflicts in Jewish marriages, enough conflict that the couple finds living together difficult or even impossible. Of course, conflict is not the only issue that can ruin a marriage. Infidelity and other moral problems can also damage a marriage. The Torah allows for the bonds of marriage to be dissolved through divorce.

The Hebrew word for this is *get*. A religious marriage is consecrated “according to the Law of Moses and Israel.” It is not dissolved by the state and the decree of some judge, but must be severed as it was established: “according to the Law of Moses and Israel.” (That said, the state assumed jurisdiction over it because Christianity had no provision for it in its religious statutes.)

Jewish divorce proceedings are carried out by a Jewish court composed of three rabbis knowledgeable in the laws of marriage and divorce. The entire process can take as little as an hour and a half, during which the couple is questioned by the court. After the proceedings, a tear is made in the divorce document, signifying that it must never be used again.

The woman may not remarry for ninety-two days. That is to remove any doubt regarding paternity should she conceive right away.

The Ceremony of Release.

Deuteronomy 25:5 If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her.

⁶ And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

When the wife becomes widowed or divorced, her brother-in-law is required to marry her in order to produce an heir for that man's name, thereby continuing his line. This practice is called a levirate marriage. The brother-in-law can refuse to marry his sister-in-law and exercise his right to decline. In that case, the wife is free to marry someone else.

The "ceremony" formalizing this is rather interesting.

Deuteronomy 25:7 And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.'⁸ Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him, and if he persists, saying, 'I do not wish to take her,'⁹ then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, 'So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.'¹⁰ And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, 'The house of him who had his sandal pulled off.'

Abortion and Birth Control

Interestingly, abortion is permitted under Jewish tradition, specifically therapeutic abortions—those performed to save the mother's life. The stage of pregnancy does not matter. Jewish law favors preserving the mother's life. The status of the fetus is not equal to that of the mother.

Rabbinic authorities agree that abortions for convenience, economic reasons, or other personal motives are strictly forbidden. This rule applies from conception. The fetus is not considered a living soul until birth. However, it is considered potentially alive, *and* ending that potential is regarded as a serious offense.

Opinions vary on this issue. Some rabbinic authorities contend that in cases of incest, fetal deformities, or situations where the child might be born with deformities or psychological disorders, abortion is allowed even if the mother's life is not at risk.

Birth Control

As long as families intend to fulfill the command to “be fruitful and multiply,” managing the spacing of births is not an issue. There is no objection to the use of the “pill,” since it does not constitute the “destruction of the seed.”

Signs of the Covenant

As I mentioned earlier, almost everything in a Jew's life is meant to remind them that they are special to God and that they were chosen for a purpose. That purpose was to serve as a testimony to the entire world. To do this, they had to demonstrate holiness by following the Law of Moses. The Gentile world was supposed to see this special relationship and the blessings that resulted from it, and be drawn into it. Assuming, of course, the Jews met those divine standards.

Because they had to demonstrate this holiness solely through human effort, which put them at a disadvantage, the Lord provided “help” to remind them of their obligations to Him. Almost everything we’ve examined so far was meant to make them holy, show that to the Gentiles, and remind them of their duty to be holy. We will now look at some additional physical items designed for that purpose.

Tefillin

You have probably wondered about this. We’ve seen on TV and maybe even in real life, Jews wearing a small black square box on their foreheads that is so small it looks almost cartoonish. Some of you might have also noticed similar small black square boxes on their upper arms, held in place by leather straps wrapped around the arm and down to the fingers. These are known as the *Tefillin*, which is translated as *phylacteries*. They are two small, black leather boxes containing parchment scrolls with Torah passages from Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Phylacteries are worn by observant Jewish men (and some women) during weekday morning prayers, strapped to the left arm and forehead as a sign of dedication to God.

Key details about phylacteries include:

- **Purpose:** They serve as a reminder to keep God’s commandments and of the special covenant God made with Israel, close to the heart and mind—quite literally.
- **Components:** The set includes the *shel yad*, which means arm or one compartment, and *shel rosh*, which means head or four compartments.
- **Usage:** Typically donned by Jewish males after their Bar Mitzvah (age 13) during weekday morning services. They are not worn on Shabbat or holidays.
- **Biblical Basis:** Based on commandments in Exodus 13:1–10, 11–16, and Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 11:13–21.
- **Significance:** The term originates from the Greek *phylakterion*, meaning "safeguard" or "amulet".

The Tefillin are made of leather from only kosher animals. Two straps secure them to the head or arm, as appropriate. The straps wrap around the arm seven times, with specific knots and placements symbolic of the bond between God and the Jewish people.

The following passages serve as the foundation for observing these two distinctive Jewish symbols.

Exodus 13:1 The LORD said to Moses, ² “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.”

³ Then Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten. ⁴ Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. ⁵ And when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this service in this month. ⁶ Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and

on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LORD. ⁷ Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen with you, and no leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory. ⁸ You shall tell your son on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.' ⁹ And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt. ¹⁰ You shall therefore keep this statute at its appointed time from year to year.

Exodus 13:11 "When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, ¹² you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD's. ¹³ Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. ¹⁴ And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. ¹⁵ For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.' ¹⁶ It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes, for by a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt."

Deuteronomy 6:4 "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 11:13 "And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹⁴ he will give the rain for

your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. ¹⁵ And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full. ¹⁶ Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; ¹⁷ then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you.

¹⁸ “You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ¹⁹ You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ²⁰ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, ²¹ that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.

Jesus mentions them in Matthew 23, and not in a positive way.

Matthew 23:1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, ³ so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. ⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For **they make their phylacteries broad** and their fringes long ...”

He accuses the Pharisees of demanding holiness from the people, while their own “holiness” is superficial and merely for show.

Mezuzah

The Mezuzah is similar to the Tefillin and serves a similar purpose. *Mezuzah* is the Hebrew word for doorpost. It is a small scroll of parchment with two Biblical passages written on it: Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21, as seen above, which are also used in the Tefillin. These scrolls are placed in a small container and affixed to the entry doorposts of Jewish homes

built for permanent residence. This excludes tents. They are placed on all entry doors.

The Mezuzah clearly marks the home as Jewish. For the Jew himself, it serves as a reminder to both himself and his household that this is a household of the Divine Presence, with all the duties to follow His call to holiness as outlined in the Torah.

Tzitzit and Tallit

Numbers 15:37 The LORD said to Moses, ³⁸ “Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. ³⁹ And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. ⁴⁰ So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. ⁴¹ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the LORD your God.”

The Tzitzit are tassels attached to the four corners of a garment, the Tallit, which is often used like a shawl over the head and shoulders. These garments are not required to be worn during the day because they are “a tassel for you to look at” (v. 39). The purpose of the tassels is to “remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God” (v. 39-40).

Once again, the Jew is reminded of what he is called to be and not to follow his “own heart and his own eyes.” The implication of failure is stated in verse 39, that without this reminder, he is likely to let his passions override his obedience to the commandments.

A devout person will also have a small Tallit. This four-cornered garment, which fits over the shoulders and covers the chest and back, is usually worn under a shirt.

As you can see, time and again, the Jew is called to obey the commands of the Torah. To fulfill that calling to holiness, he is surrounded by ritual and physical reminders to do so. The goal is always to portray the Jew as someone with a special relationship with God, and for the Gentile to envy that bond and be drawn to the God of Israel.