

# On Being a Jew, Part 5

Last session, we left off with our examination of the “signs of the Covenant,” as they relate to the Jews, including social practices and customs that identify a Jew. We will continue this theme in the final session of “On Being a Jew.”

## Prayer

Prayer is the clearest and most meaningful reflection of a person's relationship with God. As Rabbi Donin points out concerning prayer,

“In its highest and most sincere levels, it is a service of the heart and constitutes one of the many ways by which love of God is expressed.”

The earliest prayers recorded in Scripture were informal and unstructured. Prayer, in its ideal form, should be spontaneous, expressing what the heart feels in words. Prayer is having a conversation with God. Though rote prayer is discouraged, the general format should include praise to God and thanksgiving, followed by personal petitions.

The New Testament includes a saying in First Thessalonians 5:17: “Pray without ceasing.” Confederate General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, a very religious man, found it difficult to understand how “without ceasing” could be applied to life. The answer to Jackson’s dilemma, and for the Jews a few thousand years earlier, was the same. The idea was not about formal prayer with a clear beginning and end, but more like the earliest form of prayer mentioned above, in that prayer should be spontaneous, unstructured, and informal—a *conversation* with God. Even though informal, the process should still show respect for God’s person. Prayer should reflect one’s faith and ongoing personal relationship with God. Today, we might describe that as being free from personal sin and *in fellowship with* God. In such a state, the believer can talk with God continuously—“without ceasing.”

## ***Prayer Replaces the Sacrifices***

For Jews in the diaspora, formal prayer has become their substitute for central Temple worship. According to the Torah, sacrificial services were limited to the Temple Mount, and it was forbidden to offer sacrifices

elsewhere. With two centuries without access to the Temple Mount and a Temple — and thus no sacrifices — Jews turned to prayer as an alternative.

Prayer services should be conducted in environments that promote focus. Appropriate and respectful conduct is necessary during prayer, including refraining from unnecessary talking, avoiding distractions, and avoiding levity or playfulness. In essence, proper decorum must be maintained.

Every Jew is required to recite the Shama (Hear, O Israel) twice daily.

**Deuteronomy 6:4** “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. <sup>6</sup> And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. <sup>9</sup> You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The Shamah is not technically a prayer; it is a *declaration of faith*.” It is an expression of unity with God and the Jew’s obligations to Him.

### ***The Minyan***

For public prayer to occur, at least ten male Jews must be present. This is called a *minyan*. Females, male children under thirteen, and non-Jews cannot qualify for a quorum, but they can participate once the quorum is met. Women are exempt from scheduled religious services because of their primary roles as wife and mother, which may prevent even their participation.

The word *minyan* literally means “a number” or “a few.” The concept of ten comes from Numbers 14:27, where it says, “How long shall this wicked congregation grumble against me? I have heard the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against me.”

That may not seem remotely relevant, but it originates from the rebellion in the wilderness when the ten spies returned with their negative report that led to this rebellion.

Any number less than ten is not considered a community, as mentioned elsewhere in the Torah. For example, Abraham's bargaining with God about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:16-33.

**Genesis 18:32** Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of **ten** I will not destroy it."

## God's Name

God's name must not be used in vain. The term refers to the misuse of God's Name: "Taking the Lord's name in vain" (Exodus 20:7) means using His name irreverently, for wicked purposes, or falsely claiming His authority.

To avoid showing disrespect, when reciting prayers, reading passages, or simply referring to God, a Jew would avoid using Adonai (the Lord) except during prayer and when reciting blessings. In conversations or when quoting passages, the term *HaShem* (The Name) is used instead.

## Head Coverings

The head covering is not required by the Torah, but it was a Roman custom for slaves to wear one as a sign of their status, a practice dating back thousands of years. Free men went bareheaded. The Jews adopted this to signify their role as servants of the LORD. For them, it was a sign of reverence for God.

The head covering is a skullcap known as a *yarmulke* in Yiddish and as a *keppah* in Hebrew. The Yiddish term "yarmulke" is often interpreted as deriving from the Aramaic *yira malka*, meaning "awe of the King."

Beyond its light weight and convenience, this type of head covering has no formal religious significance.

It is primarily worn by men to signify reverence for God, humility, and acknowledgment of a higher power. It functions as a constant, tangible reminder of faith, Jewish identity, and commitment to religious, behavioral, and ethical principles, symbolizing acceptance of Divine sovereignty. Wearing a *kippah* prompts the wearer to uphold a higher

standard of conduct, acting with honor and awareness of their spiritual purpose.

## Personal Grooming

**Leviticus 19:27** “You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. <sup>28</sup> You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD.”

**Leviticus 21:5** They shall not make bald patches on their heads, nor shave off the edges of their beards, nor make any cuts on their body.

By connecting Leviticus 19:27-28 to Leviticus 21:5, it was concluded that Torah prohibits the cutting of the beard of one’s face using a razor blade or a knife. Technically, only the five corners are forbidden. This includes the chin, the area just above it, and the area just below the ears.

This law also prohibited tattooing and other forms of self-mutilation, practices common among the heathen.

This clearly influenced the traditional style of Jewish grooming, which is why we see the classic image of a full-bearded Jew.

Only with the advent of electric razors that use a scissors motion to cut facial hair rather than slicing like a knife or traditional razor has the observant Jew been able to appear clean-shaven. This difference allowed religious authorities to grant this exception. A bearded face is often seen as more pious.

The statement from Leviticus 19:27, “You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard,” was seen by Hasidic Jews as prohibiting the complete removal of the sideburns. The dangling side curls are most noticeable on young boys whose beards are not yet fully grown.

## The Synagogue

The word comes from the Greek *sunagōgē*, meaning “together again.” It is called a *shul*, meaning “school” in Yiddish. It is generally referred to as *Beit Knesset*, which means “house of assembly.”

Synagogues are used for prayer, study, gatherings, and the reading of the Torah. The entire Torah (Pentateuch, or Five Books of Moses) is traditionally read in weekly portions during services over the course of a year.

In the main sanctuary or in smaller chapels, Jews gather for religious services and ceremonies, such as weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs, choir performances, and children's plays. Synagogues often also include study rooms, social halls, administrative and charitable offices, classrooms for religious and Hebrew studies, and spaces for community events. They frequently display memorial, historic, or modern artwork alongside items of Jewish historical significance or exhibits about the synagogue itself.

The synagogue was often the only public building in a community, so it was frequently used for public meetings and gatherings concerning community affairs. Like local churches today, they also serve as the community's social welfare agency, collecting funds and distributing charity to those in need.

**Psalm 82:1** God stands in the congregation of the mighty ...

The Sages interpret this passage as meaning that the Divine Presence resides in the synagogue. Prayer in the synagogue is considered to have greater merit than anywhere else.

Though the synagogue serves many purposes for the Jewish community, Rabbi Donin emphasizes, "The synagogue is only an instrument of Jewish faith."

Interestingly, the functioning of the synagogue does not rely on a clergy. All elements of the religious service are performed by laypeople. Although many synagogues hire a rabbi, it is not a requirement.

The extent to which a synagogue truly represents Judaism mainly depends on the quality of the people managing it, whether rabbis or laypeople, as well as the caliber and dedication of the congregation itself.

Synagogues function as independent institutions. They serve as local communities for local Jews and are not overseen by any higher authority. While they are typically governed by a local elected group of officers

according to the “Codes of Jewish Law.” For their ritual practices, nothing prevents a synagogue from setting its own policies and procedures in both ritual and general matters. Orthodox Jews, however, feel compelled to strictly follow the “Codes of Jewish Law” in their rituals and practices. Some synagogues are members of national associations that operate solely on a voluntary basis and lack enforcement powers.

My personal observation is that, like Christianity, the Jewish faith is divided into various “denominational groups” that follow different practices and beliefs, with some being much stricter than others.

## Seating for Men and Women

Many synagogues, especially within Orthodox Judaism, have a designated area for women called the *ezrat nashim*. These sections are separated from the men’s seating by a partition or *mechitzah*, which can be a balcony, curtain, or wall. This separation is intended to promote focus during prayer and is a common feature of traditional Jewish worship spaces.

## Ritual Items

Every synagogue must contain the following basic religious items:

- Holy Ark (*aron kodesh*) — a cabinet or recess in a wall where the scrolls of the Torah are kept. It is usually placed against or in a wall that faces Jerusalem.
- Eternal Light (*ner timid*) — a lamp positioned above and slightly in front of the Holy Ark. It burns continuously, and symbolizes the Biblical command in Exodus 27:20—“And you shall command the children of Israel that they bring you pure oil of pressed olives for the light, to cause the lamp to burn continually. <sup>21</sup> In the tabernacle of meeting, outside the veil which is before the Testimony.” This pertains to the Tabernacle and, later, the Temple, but it is also applied to the synagogue.
- *Bimah* is a raised platform where the reader or cantor leads the congregation during services. The ark typically sits on a nearby table from which the Torah is read.

Some congregations may have additional sacred items for their services, such as a candelabrum (*menorah*) or other Jewish religious or historical artifacts that celebrate events in Jewish history.

## Synagogue Personnel

The staff responsible for managing the synagogue typically includes the following:

- **The Rabbi** — or *rav*, as he's called in Hebrew — is the spiritual leader of the community. He should be thoroughly trained with deep knowledge of the Torah. His personal faith and piety form the foundation of his authority. He must not only teach the Torah and the Jewish way of life but also serve as a role model and provide leadership. He must personally embody the values and practices of the faith he aims to inspire in his congregation.
- **The Cantor** — or *hassan*, as he is called in Hebrew — is the congregation's emissary. He leads the congregation in prayer and may be called upon to assist the rabbi in weddings and funerals. He also has other duties related to music and choral services in the synagogue. He should uphold the same high moral standards and serve as an example to the congregation, just as the rabbi does.
- **The Sexton** — or *shamash* — is a religious official responsible for various duties in the synagogue, such as overseeing daily services and maintaining the ritual items. He sometimes serves as the Torah reader. He must be knowledgeable in Jewish studies and possess good character.
- **The Gabbai** — assists the board of directors (modern times), manages the synagogue's finances, sets fiscal policies, and oversees the congregation's general affairs.

## Special Occasions in Life

### ***Births***

Interestingly, the Jewish position on the subject of the imputation of the "Original Sin" to a child at birth is that it does not exist, and children are born pure and free of sin. They refer to a prayer from the Talmud that says, "O my God, the soul that you gave me is pure, You created it, You fashioned it, You breathed it into me."

Of course, that is not the doctrinal position of Christians who cite 1 Corinthians and Romans.

**1 Corinthians 15:22** For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

**Romans 5:19** For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Back to The Jews... They believe that the "pure" child will accumulate sins over a lifetime, and that parental guidance significantly influences their offspring's behavior, especially through early training.

### ***Naming Children***

Male children are named during circumcision (more on this later), and females are named in the synagogue the week after their birth.

The full Hebrew name includes *ben* (son of) and the father's name. Daughters are called "*bat*" (daughter of) followed by the father's name.

In the Diaspora, children are usually given Gentile names on their civil birth records. They are also given additional Yiddish or Hebrew names to strengthen their connection to the Jewish community and the Hebrew faith.

### ***Circumcision***

**Genesis 17:9** And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.  
<sup>10</sup> This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.  
<sup>11</sup> You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup> He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, <sup>13</sup> both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the

flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

This ritual is called the *bris or brit* in Sephardic pronunciation and means covenant. The word for circumcision is *milah*; therefore, we have *brit milah*, meaning “covenant of circumcision.”

The individual qualified to perform the *brit milah* is called a *mohel*. They are observant Jewish men and women who have received thorough training to carry out circumcisions.

The *brit* must be performed on the eighth day, even if it falls on a Sabbath or Yom Kippur. It is carried out during the day. Only if the child is sick, premature, or if medical opinion suggests that circumcision could be dangerous, may the *brit* be postponed.

It is a religious ceremony celebrated with joy and gladness, often accompanied by a festive meal.

### ***Bar Mitzvah & Bat Mitzvah***

A boy reaches his religious majority on his thirteenth birthday according to the Jewish calendar. The girl reaches her religious majority on her twelfth birthday.

These are known as a *Bar Mitzvah* and a *Bat Mitzvah*. The words mean “subject to the commandments,” indicating that a person reaching this age is no longer considered a minor under Jewish law.

To celebrate coming of age, males often participate in synagogue services by reading from the Torah, but since women are separated from men and have no roles in the services, some synagogues find ways to honor and celebrate their coming-of-age.

This is a festive occasion, often celebrated with anything from a small gathering with refreshments to a festive meal, but without turning it into a gala like a birthday party, considering its religious significance.

### ***Marriage***

A modern Jewish wedding ceremony today is somewhat different from that of the time of Christ. Like the older ceremony, a marriage has two

parts: the Betrothal, or Sanctification, and the Marriage. With the signing of the marriage contract, the couple is considered married. They were “sanctified,” set apart for each other. This was followed later by the marriage ceremony and celebration afterward.

This differs from the ancient system outlined below:

1. **The bride** was usually chosen by the father of the groom.
2. **A bride price was set**—the agreed-upon amount was called a *mohar* in Hebrew.
3. **The bride and groom are engaged to each other**, known as *kiddushin* or betrothal. The betrothal legally obligates the couple in a marriage contract, even though they do not live together.
4. **A written document called a *ketubah* is created.** — The *ketubah* is the marriage contract that details the bride price, the promises of the groom, and the rights of the bride.
5. **The bride must give her consent.**
6. **Gifts were given to the bride, and a cup called the cup of the covenant was shared between the bride and the groom.** — The rite of betrothal (*erusin*) is completed when the groom gives something of value to the bride, and she accepts it. At this time, the cup of the covenant was shared, and marriage was sealed between the bride and the groom with the drinking of wine.
7. **The bride underwent a *mikvah* (water immersion), a ritual of cleansing.** — *Mikvah* is a ceremonial act of purification by immersion in water and signifies a transition from an old way to a new way. In the context of marriage, it represents leaving an old life behind and starting a new life with your spouse (Genesis 2:23-24; Ephesians 5:31).
8. **The bridegroom departs to his father's house to prepare the bridal chamber.** — Before he leaves, he will make a statement to the bride. "I go to prepare a place for you; if I go, I will return again unto you." This is the same statement Jesus made in John 14:1-3 before He ascended to His Father's house in Heaven.
9. **The bride was consecrated and separated for a time while the bridegroom was away building the house.** — Before the bridegroom could retrieve his bride, the groom's father had to be satisfied that the son had completed all preparations. Meanwhile,

the bride was to wait eagerly for the return of the bridegroom, who could come at any time, even in the middle of the night.

10. **The bridegroom would return with a shout, "Behold, the bridegroom comes," and the sound of the ram's horn (*shofar*) would be blown.** — The bridegroom comes to the bride's house ***but does not enter and calls (shouts) for her to come out***, and the two return to the prepared bridal chamber for the honeymoon.
11. **The bride and groom will go to the wedding chamber, or *chadar*** in Hebrew, where the marriage will be consummated. They will stay in that wedding chamber for seven days. At the end of the seven days, the bride and groom will come out of the wedding chamber.
12. **Finally, there would be a marriage supper for all the guests invited by the bride's father.** — On the wedding day, the bridegroom is portrayed as a king and the bride as a queen. The bride and groom emerge from the wedding chamber to join the marriage festivities.

### ***Wedding Ceremony***

The tradition of not using rings with diamonds and other precious stones is rooted in an age-old practice to prevent any possibility of fraud, which could legally invalidate the marriage. There should be no suspicion that the bride agreed to the marriage because of the rings' value or that the stones were fake to deceive her.

It is customary to break a small glass at the end of the ceremony to remember the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed in AD 70. The broken glass represents the incompleteness of Israel's religious restoration.

An awning-like covering over the couple during the ceremony, called a *hupah*, symbolizes the completion of the marriage. A celebratory meal follows the ceremony.

### **Death**

The traditional Jewish customs around death and mourning mainly focus on honoring the deceased and comforting the bereaved.

Some rules concerning mourning:

- To emphasize the equality of death, the dead are dressed in white robes after the body is carefully washed.
- The deceased male is wrapped in a *tallit* whose fringes (*tzitzit*) are rendered “invalid,” indicating that earthly requirements no longer apply.
- Embalming is prohibited, with the blood regarded as part of the body and to stay with it.
- An open display of the deceased in the casket is usually discouraged and viewed as disrespectful.
- Cremation is forbidden. Burial must take place in the earth.
- When cremation occurs, the ashes should stay in the urn or be scattered at sea.
- Autopsies are discouraged unless truly necessary, with restrictions on disturbing or removing tissue.
- Burial should occur as soon as possible after death. Delaying beyond the next day is only allowed if you are waiting for close relatives who need to travel.
- Burying the dead on the Sabbath or the first day of festivals is prohibited.
- Those responsible for caring for the body should be among the most pious and worthy members of the community.
- Tearing garments by mourners is a customary way to show grief. The torn clothing is worn all week except on the Sabbath.
- Mourners do not sit on regular-height chairs but on low hassocks, nor do they wear leather shoes; instead, they wear cloth slippers.
- Males refrain from shaving or cutting their hair. They do not bathe or engage in sexual activities. They may wear fresh, clean clothing as needed.
- This *Shiva* period lasts for seven days, excluding the Sabbath and feast days.
- Following the burial, the mourners’ first meal may not be their own prepared food, but should be prepared by friends or family. This meal often includes a hard-boiled egg, known as the “Meal of Comfort.”

## Conclusions

It is crucial to recognize that under the Mosaic Covenant and the laws for living outlined in the Torah, God was demonstrating His Holiness and emphasizing the need for humanity to meet that same standard. It was also meant to make people aware that meeting these requirements is impossible for humans alone. Despite constant reminders around them,

touching every aspect of their lives, it should have shown Israel that they couldn't reach the required standard apart from God.

Then came the Church age, with the Holy Spirit's universal indwelling in believers, and that changed everything. But the lesson objective of demonstrating that mankind needs God did not change. Now the believer has access to the power of God through the indwelling Holy Spirit. However, the “key” to access did not change; righteousness was still required, a righteousness only available through faith in Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit.