

Introduction to Judaism

Lesson 4

Core Beliefs, Traditions, and Spirituality

A. Core Beliefs

1. The Ten Commandments. Given at Sinai through Moses. The first two commandments the people heard directly from God. All Jewish souls were represented at Mount Sinai.
2. 613 Mitzvot (commandments). We believe in a revealed morality. All of life needs God's discipline. We don't determine what is good. God has told us what is good.
3. The Talmud. An oral explanation of the Torah. This was also given on Sinai and was passed down orally from generation to generation. The Bible is difficult to understand. This is why it was given with an explanation. (What is stealing?)
4. We believe in and have great reverence for those who have gone before us. Unlike in science we believe that previous generations were greater than us and we defer to their judgments and ideas.
5. Why are there so many laws? Can't we just live a good life? Judaism has a specific definition of what *good* means. A person is influenced by his own actions (the soldier's story). We are given an opportunity to sanctify every action in our lives by following the traditions and commandments.
6. Is there a list of what Jews believe? Maimonides' 13 principles of faith. There are other lists, but Maimonides' list is the most accepted and comprehensive. Many people recite the list each day after morning prayers.

B. Tradition

1. Mesorah – Giving over from one generation to the next. Ideas and interpretations were passed down orally from rabbi to student under the supervision of the leader of each generation.
2. Maimonides lists the 40 generations from Moses to Rabbi Ashi (500 AD who completed the redaction of the Talmud). Each rabbi or prophet was responsible for guiding his generation and making sure the transmission was not broken. Eventually it was written down because the people were so scattered that the oral transmission was in danger of being forgotten.
3. Why are Jews so attached to tradition? We believe that those who came before us were of greater spiritual stature than us and that they understood more than us and so we have great reverence for the previous generations and we try to follow in their footsteps.
4. Does this mean that since my father wears black socks I too have to wear black socks? No, we do not follow blindly things which have no meaning. We follow because God gave each one of us a personal invitation at Sinai to be part of his covenant. We do things because God told each one of us to do these things personally at the revelation at Sinai.

C. Spirituality

1. What is the purpose of creation?
2. Is this world all there is?
3. How can I access the spiritual dimension of this world?
4. What is my purpose in this world?
5. What is the meaning of my relationships with others?
6. Does my existence matter?
7. Why is life so difficult?
8. Does God care about what I do?
9. How can I fulfill my own spiritual needs?

Can I answer all these questions? Do I need to have answers to all these questions?

Jews believe that all of life is an opportunity to surmount spiritual challenges. While the physical world dominates our lives, because that is what we see and feel, it is the world's spiritual dimension which is the purpose of creation. The physical world we see is really a curtain behind which the true world is hidden. All of the challenges we face are opportunities for spiritual growth. A human being is not like an Angel. Angels are static spiritual beings without any opportunities for growth. A human being, on the other hand, is capable of ascending to great spiritual heights or falling to tremendous spiritual lows. We can elevate ourselves or diminish ourselves through the choices that we make. When we do something good we become different from who we were before and the same is true if we sin. So all of creation was made for us to wage a spiritual battle with the tools that we have been given in this world.