

My Judaism: A Practical Spiritual Guide

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Introduction

This is a book for open-minded adults who are interested in a serious rational introductory discourse about a Jewish perspective on how to live a good life.

The beliefs and traditions of the Jewish people - collectively known as Judaism - contain much wisdom that may help you live a good life. In this book we will introduce a perspective of how to use Judaism to live life well and cover the basics of some of this wisdom.

"How to Live Life"? What?

As we live life, from time to time we ask ourselves: how does one live a 'good' life? Not just what would define a good life, but what are the actionable steps to take to make life be that way.

We look for guidance and rules. We turn to our families, to our friends, to our elders and wise ones. We find wisdom in science, in experience, and in spiritual traditions such as Judaism. Most tend to follow their parents and their communities, but the wisdom is open for all.

This wisdom helps us with the only thing we can do: choose how to live our life. This is not a theoretical problem; we have no other option but to make our choices, both those of the mundane everyday and of the strategic. We can make them mindlessly or mindfully.

When making choices mindfully, one source we often use is our traditional wisdom, passed down through the ages. From father to son to grandson, from mother to daughter to granddaughter, each generation does its best to teach its young ones how to live life well.

With time, we try to formalize these methods. Wisdom is shared between families; oral tradition is codified into text. We might make a list of "good ideas" and "bad ideas" for our children, to assist them in their life without us. Our children, with time, will turn into adults and pass on this wisdom to their own children. Perhaps with their own embellishments, additions, or emphasis.

Some traditions of wisdom-passing stay strong. Judaism is one of them. Over thousands of years, wisdom has been passed on through the generations. This wisdom has been passed on both in text (The Bible) and orally (The Oral Torah).

As time goes on, interpretations for the wisdom and how to apply it gradually morph, diverge, and mutate. The world itself changes as well, and it is not always immediately clear how to apply the wisdom of 3,000 years ago to present day. One grandfather's letters of wisdom to his grandchildren would be interpreted wildly differently by different grand-children; this divergent effect across millenia naturally leads to even less consensus.

Wise thinkers over the years have pondered the accumulated wisdom and offered their own interpretations, which have themselves turned into part of the collective wisdom passed on. By now, we have a giant corpus of "original" texts such as the Bible, and additive commentary such as the Talmud, the Gemara and the Mishna. The commentaries are much like this text you are reading right now: a commentary about Judaism, which has turned into part of Judaism, which is a prescription for how to live life.

And so the Jewish people have been passing down and generating collected wisdom on how to live life through generations. One can choose the extent to which one agrees with the original ideas, as well as the faith they put in the generated commentary over the years. In practice, this faith ranges from blind adherence to disgusted repulsion. I suggest to approach Jewish wisdom, similarly to other domains of knowledge, with an attitude of skeptical openness: to read the ideas, and see if they make sense to you. It is my opinion that accepting ideas blindly just because they are popular with a group of other people is not a reasonable way to go about, nor is treating venerated old men as an infallible source of authority. In my life, I have found that considering an idea on its own merits and the way I find it resonates with my own experience is a better approach, and this is the approach I suggest for the Jewish wisdom as well.

We will discuss some Jewish ideas for how to live life. Once again, I suggest the reader and thinker approach with openness and skepticism: do not believe things in your life just because somebody else claims so, but be open to hearing new ideas, for that is a good way to learn, grow, and ultimately live a better life.

Why Specifically Judaism?

Judaism does not have a monopoly on wisdom. Men and women all over the world have worked over the ages to collect wisdom and pass it to the next generations. All over the world, these efforts have brought us what is known as "Western Philosophy" (from Plato and Socrates to Hume and Kant), "Eastern Philosophy" (Confucius, Lao Tzu, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism), and so on (Islam, Christianity, and others). Similarly, the Jewish people developed and maintained their own wisdom: Judaism.

Most philosophy (from Greek, "Love of Wisdom") tends to spread within geographical and cultural constraints. Most philosophies also rely on - and/or prescribe - a certain set of beliefs about how the world works. Lastly, it is possible to "believe" only a subset of a set of beliefs. Simply consider the wisdom your own parents have passed on to you, in whatever manner. You inevitably adopt some parts of it, reject some parts, and modify some parts. Your children will do the same to you; theirs will do the same to them.

Judaism is traditionally primarily inherited: one self-fulfilling assumption within Judaism is that "Jewishness" is passed "genetically", by birth. Since most Jews accept this proposition, it becomes true by definition: Jews teach their children that they are Jews as well, and so the children grow up believing they are Jews, which makes it true.

There is no a-priori reason to follow specifically Jewish wisdom more than any other wisdom. A neutral reader might be curious about the wisdom within Judaism and decide it resonates with them. Many people self-define as Jewish (usually, because their families are Jewish and they themselves have been brought up as 'Jewish'). Once one self-defines as Jewish, and/or one's

life is already integrated with other Jews, one often finds oneself living a 'Jewish' life already, without having even thinking about it.

This is my personal case: I am clearly Jewish, and this 'fact' would be consensually agreed on from everyone from Hitler to ultra-Orthodox Jews and anyone in between. I am Jewish, and I lead a Jewish life, and interact to a large extent with other Jews, as I always have. Regardless of my theological convictions, "Judaism" in whatever sense is inevitably a part of my life, in the practical sense. That's just how things are. Things could be different, and I could change them, but I do not have a strong reason to do so.

And so, to whatever extent Judaism is part of my life anyway, I might as well understand the wisdom that is within it.

Understanding Jewish wisdom does not preclude wisdom from other faiths. That would be foolish. Wherever wisdom is found, it can be adopted and used; it would be silly to ignore good ideas just because somebody else's grandfather came up with it. A wise Jew can and should use wise ideas from Buddhism, from Kant, and from Jesus Christ himself, who was himself a curly-haired Jew from Judea (Palestine), who gave commentary about how to live life according to his non-orthodox understanding of the Jewish faith, just like yours truly.

So the 'reason' for studying specifically Judaism is because it might entail wisdom you would find useful, or interesting, especially if your life is already affected by Judaism. Many Jews like to talk about Judaism.

One might say that the first rule of Judaism could be to discuss it. That might be something you enjoy. If you do not enjoy it, why are you reading this in the first place?

The Bible

Judaism often relies on the Bible (The Old Testament) as one of its sources of wisdom. There is significant historical debate on the particular details of who wrote the Bible, when, how, and why. It is my opinion that this is interesting from a historical point of view, but immaterial from the point of view of using the Bible as a guide for life. The most realistic assumption, in my point of view, is that the Bible is an amalgamation of stories passed on down generations, an attempt to collect wisdom and history at the time. Similar to a family tree, or a collection of stories by one's grandfather.

I, personally, have a book of stories told by my own grandfather, about his life. Some of them may contain some embellishment. Such is the nature of stories. The value of stories is not in their historical accuracy; the value is in their contribution to my ability to live a good life. In this regard, taking the Bible at face value is clearly preposterous. On the other hand, so is judging the Bible. A 3,000-year-old text will not be as advanced as a modern text, in any subject. Over the last thousands of years, we humans have advanced in physics, chemistry, biology, zoology, psychology, sociology, and so on. We have also advanced - in some ways - in figuring out how to live a good life.

And so we can look to the Bible for wisdom, but we should not assume its content is wise; we can judge the Bible as outdated, but we should remember that the effort to pass on wisdom through generations is hard. Lastly, we should be humble with ourselves: man always thinks he knows best, and this often turns out not to be the case. It might be worth considering the letters and stories of our ancestors, and to try to understand what they were trying to tell us.

God

Life and existence are a beautiful mystery to be celebrated.

The human brain is limited. As far as we can tell, we cannot ever truly understand the beautiful mystery of life and existence. However, we can appreciate it and be grateful for it. We can even worship it. The beautiful mystery of life and existence is amazing.

This word, God, will henceforth refer to life, the Universe, and everything. To this crazy weirdness of “being”; to consciousness, to physics, to reality, to all there is. This thing, that we do not completely understand. Newtonian or Quantum or String Theory, a Big Bang or a series of Turtles or a Computer Simulation. Consciousness and feelings and thoughts and experiences and meaning; joy and pain and love and life. Whatever “it” is, we don’t quite understand what’s going on, but this beautiful mystery of life and existence, all we can experience and all there is to be grateful for - we shall name it God.

God is not humanoid in shape. God does not have a beard. S/he does not sit in the sky. S/he certainly does not have an opinion on sex, gay people, masturbation, war, and so on. God does not experience humanoid emotions, except for the sense in which one might describe an ‘angry’ sea: poetically, not literally. For God is not a human; ‘God’ is the beautiful mystery of existence and reality. That is what the word ‘God’ *means*. That is what it always was meant to mean.

People who do treat God as a human-like creature are missing the point like a sailor attributing real emotions to the sea.

Many interpretations of Judaism rely on the assumption that God is a human-like figure. I reject this interpretation, and see no reason to believe so. Worse, this odd idea prevents serious discourse of the beautiful parts of religion. In this text we will try to avoid even discussing this assumption; too much time has been wasted on this silliness. In order to have a productive and constructive theological discussion - from which real value arises, not idle wonder on the nature of the cosmos - we must move forward with the assumptions that what seems to exist indeed exists, and what does not seem to exist does not exist. To this extent, we will assume in the remainder of this text that 'God' refers now, and has always referred, to a respectful deference to reality, and not a Zeus-like character.

For those readers who would like further pointers on the controversial topic of the nature of God, we refer to literature on Pantheism and the work of the 17th-century Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who helped popularize this concept.

God's Name

One core teaching of Judaism is the importance of being present in the moment. We cannot know the meaning of life, and all we can do is live a good life: the prime directive of living a good life is being present in the moment. (We will explore this concept further later on.) This concept has also been discovered by other faiths, notably Zen Buddhism. In the original Judaism, this was embodied by the name given to God. Yawheh, יהוה, comes from the Semitic root ה.ו.י./י.ו.ה., which is the root for “being”, conjugated to mean “it will be the present”. The future will feel like right now, since life always feels like “right now”, and all we can ever do is at most be present in moment. We can see how the wisdom of Zen is the also the (original) wisdom of Judaism, since mystics from different faiths discover the same universal truths. This is an illustration of why we should learn inspiration from all wisdoms, not just Judaism. Being conversant in spirituality helps us understand and improve our own.

And so our ancestors have tried to tell us, by a meme of the name of holiest of all holies: The future will be just like now. Enjoy the moment. Jehovah; Yawheh; יהוה.

The Ten Commandments

As story goes, Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, approximately 3,300 years ago. At this time, the Torah had not been given to the Hebrew people (the Jews). They did not have a code of laws by which to live their lives. Imagine that! How would one know what to do? Confusion might have abounded, like a child without a parent, school or society to educate them on how they should behave for their own good.

Moses 'received' a list of ten rules from life ("God") that he inscribed for the Jewish people.

Follow these rules, he said: this is how to live a good life. These rules are, in modern language:

1. The only 'God' is the life and reality of existence.
2. Do not worship other, physical "Gods" other than reality.
3. Do not disrespect God and the world.
4. Make sure you rest on Saturdays.
5. Respect your parents.
6. Don't murder.
7. Don't commit adultery.
8. Don't steal.
9. Don't lie.
10. Don't be jealous of other people's houses, wife, life, and possessions.

Hopefully you, the reader, see the wisdom in these rules for life. You can adopt some of them, all of them, and/or any other rules for life. But you gotta admit, these are pretty good rules. Not because a man in the sky said so, just because... they make sense. Specifically, they make

sense to YOU, in the same way that you probably know that washing your hands is good for hygiene and health. What could be more obvious, right? This wisdom of washing hands is a very new piece of wisdom in the West, less than 200 years old. It turns out wisdom always seems "obvious" in retrospect; Moses was just figuring it out 3,300 years ago. He noticed that some patterns of behaviour are better, and some are worse. He coded this list and said here you go, here's your "code of conduct"; do *THIS*. And because it is not always easy to explain the logic behind everything and anything, these may have been given as 'commandments', the same way a parent would command a child's behaviour, or a government would command a population, to behave in a way best for them.

We remind the reader that all of the above is not a concrete historical claim; these are stories, and the value of stories is in what we take from them.

The Sabbath

Life tends to make us feel busy, overwhelmed, and there is always more to do than there is time to do it. We often find ourselves rushing, always trying to do more, get more done, make ends meet. Many adults tend to not take significant time to relax, and this leads to stressful lives, not to mention lives that are not as pleasant as they could be. In short, many of us do not ever rest, or at least do not rest enough. We always think we will rest "sometime in the future", but that future sometime gets filled up with the pressing concerns of that moment, or of its own future. We find ourselves always busy, never resting, never truly in the moment.

One strategy a person might employ to increase their quality of life is to schedule in advance time to rest. By marking time on your calendar, you can be sure that you will at least commit that time to rest. The rest can be reading, meditating, playing, eating, socializing, and so on.

Judaism recommends resting at least once a week, on Saturday (the Sabbath), as well as on Holidays such as Passover and Rosh HaShana (the Jewish new year). It further recommends committing to this rest, as to not be tempted to try to squeeze in more work or other errands during ostensibly "empty" time. Incorporating rest into your life schedule is necessary both for long-term optimal performance and for long-term well-being.

It often seems that without strict commitment to time allocated for rest, we do not rest enough, which is one good reason to commit time for resting. For everyone's sake, it is beneficial if most of us rest at the same time; this allows us to be working at the same time (which increases productivity) and to rest together (which is beneficial from a social and family point of view). If every person rested on a different day, we would be hard-pressed to socialize during our rest

(since some of us would be busy) and hard-pressed to work during productive hours (since some of us would be resting). By having everyone rest on the weekend and work during the week, we can achieve better cohesion.

The nature of what constitutes "rest" is debatable. For some, rest and leisure might involve electronics (such as TV and computers) or combustion (such as motor vehicles). Others might claim that in practice these tools tend to lead to work and stress more than relaxation and rest. Electronics and combustion are examples of powerful tools whose mere availability suggest using them for powerful purposes, which themselves demand either dedicated attention and effort or mindless stupor. In either case, one might claim this is not truly quality *rest*, which misses the purpose of resting in the first place. Perhaps we would benefit from once in a while - perhaps, one day a week - truly resting; during this time, avoiding tools associated with other activities might lead to a type of rest we do not find otherwise.

However, the point of avoiding work, electronics, combustion, and so on is to rest - not the avoidance itself. When the avoidance itself becomes more of a nuisance than a blessing; when it becomes harmful to our quality of life rather than facilitating beneficial rest, then it is of no use to us. There is a delicate balance to be found, often personal and circumstantial, in how exactly to best rest on the Sabbath (and in general). Jewish thinkers over the ages have given this matter substantial thought and commentary. Clearly, Moses did not have an opinion on smartphones or online TV shows; but modern Jews must make up their mind on issues like this, or whether spending the weekend on social networks or driving their cars constitutes rest.

Some Jews prefer not to rely on their own judgement, and instead defer to other Jewish thinkers. As in other domains, there is merit in deferring to expert thinkers, and there is merit in making up your mind about your own particular situation.

It is my opinion that the best kind of rest is spent without external distractions of the type afforded by electricity or combustion, the type that both enables and forces one to be fully present in the moment, interacting with the people and environment immediately around them.

The salient point regarding observing the Sabbath is the observance that without committing in advance to strict measures to ensure we truly get our rest, we might find ourselves eternally preoccupied with distant distractions, catching up on work and emails, driving and programming, stressed and busy. Setting boundaries for ourselves can be beneficial; figuring out how to decide what your personal boundaries should be, as any individual decision, is inevitably up to you.

Kosher

Jewish people tend to maintain a particular type of diet: abstaining from eating pork, shellfish, and other animals; not mixing dairy and meat products; and other various restrictions such as observing a specific type of slaughtering of animals. These foods are referred to as "kosher" foods; the habit of maintaining this diet is named keeping "kashrut".

The historical origins of this dietary point of view are a scholarly topic. Some theories point to the perceived health benefits of this diet during Biblical times; others point to an assumption of divine instruction, or a social convention. While the historical origins are interesting, present-day Jews should ask themselves of the benefits that maintaining a particular diet might confer for themselves.

A valuable perspective on maintaining this relatively arbitrary diet is the arbitrariness itself, and the reflection it generates. By committing to a set of rules, not for a concrete practical benefit but rather semi-arbitrarily, we find ourselves in a situation where we ask ourselves and each other why exactly we do this. This generated reflection permeates our awareness, sparking a more mindful life. Why do we eat what we eat? In general, why do we do what we do? Are we just twigs in a stream, carried by the forces around us, or do we choose to consciously craft our life into a good one?

Being mindful of our thoughts and our lives does not necessarily require keeping a particular diet. Keeping the diet is simply a constant reminder for us to maintain this awareness. We are what we eat; in both our being and our diet we can be mindless automatons, or conscious

drivers. By forcing ourselves to be ever-mindful of our diets, we hope to constantly remember and remind ourselves to be mindful of our lives in general.

Keeping Kosher is thus a useful trick, not a goal in of itself.

Nothing disastrous will happen to you if you do not keep kosher; this can be evidenced by snacking on bacon and observing how the sky does not fall. Keeping kosher might just make your life better, in the way that you want it to be better. Is that not, after all, the goal?

A common objection is to wonder why one must specifically keep the Jewish dietary preferences. The answer is that first of all, it is incorrect that one "must" do so. Clearly, one can eat whatever one likes. Try it for yourself; this is easily verifiable. So you do not "have" to keep kosher; you may choose to do so, or to not do so. In either case, the choice is yours.

Similarly to any other choice, you inevitably make a choice, and live with the consequences. You may make your choice based on your personal analysis of how these actions will affect your life, or you may defer to others, but this deference will still be your choice.

The benefit of sticking to an arbitrary *Jewish* diet is that it is now part of a collective effort. This makes it both easier in the logistic sense, as well as an enjoyable social activity, and something to bond over. Most Jews are aware of the concept of keeping kosher, and it is less foreign to them. If you are in the business of being mindful of your life as well as connecting with your Jewish community, keeping kosher is one strategy which accomplishes both.

The matter of how much exactly to keep kosher, or what the particular 'laws' of kashrut are and why, are similar to interpretations of how exactly to observe "resting" on the Sabbath and holidays. The particular details do not matter any more than that they serve their ultimate purpose, to help you live a better life.

However, life shows us that without committing to specific rules, we will gain no benefit from this strategy. Clearly observing nothing of kashrut rules will not serve to keep us mindful; on the other extreme, eating only food personally prepared by Moses himself in order to make absolutely sure we keep 100% of kashrut is too extreme as well.

For each individual, the perfect balance is not trivial to find. The Bible books specify some laws: the historical veracity of these rules, their author's original intent, and the interpretative commentary in the millenia since are all matters of ongoing research - this very text being one example of such research.

If one chooses to follow a kosher diet for mindful, social, or religious reasons, one must choose what flavor of interpretation one follows, and why. One may follow the literal scriptures in the Bible, any of the historical commentaries, or choose for oneself.

In any case, constructing the rules in the way that works for you. One might search to find a balance between health, tastefulness, social inclusion, logistics, and a constant mindful reminder that paying attention to what you do can help you live a better life.

Bon Appetit and Bete'avon.

Kippa

The amazement of the world around us is often lost on us in the moment. God - the beautiful mystery of existence - is lost in the hum-drum of daily life and the pains and distractions of the day-to-day. Traffic and taxes and headaches; fights with your family and friends; health issues and your boss and push notifications on your phone, and so on. We are hurrying, always hurrying, with scant a reminder of how insignificant our problems are in light of the awesome expanse of the universe.

Those lucky enough to have gone to a planetarium may have had the spiritual experience of being exposed to just how awesome and endless our universe is; of how trivial whatever we are worrying about is, of how great God (the Universe) is.

Wearing a kippa is a constant reminder of this. It is a constant reminder that there is a great world above us and all around us; that our particular concern of the moment, and all of our lives, are not a trouble to be worried about, but a dance to be enjoyed. That everything is ok and let's have a good time; God is great and the Universe is magnificent and that these are both the same thing.

There are other tools as well to maintain this awareness and remember. Some people get tattoos, for example, and that can be a good constant reminder as well.

So you do not **have** to wear a kippa, but you may choose to do so. One reason to choose to do so is for exactly this constant spiritual reminder. As a side benefit, the kippa is an external

signal to others around you that you are a Jew, you are a believer, and you, too, know and remember that our lives and problems are not significant enough to worry about too much.

Life is short and God is great, and wearing a kippa is a good way to both remember this and share your opinion with others, especially other Jews.

Blessings

Being grateful for things in your life makes your life much better. Practicing gratitude is an extremely beneficial habit which is encouraged by many spiritual and scientific traditions around the world throughout history, including Judaism.

Judaism encourages practicing gratitude over small things and the large, and suggests specific blessings to practice gratitude together. When eating a loaf of bread, one might say "Bless this God/world, for creating this bread out of the ground", as an expression of gratitude for having this bread exist, and for us to be able to enjoy it. Truly, isn't this world awesome? God bless, Ja provides, the Universe is great, and we are thankful for it.

We may choose to be thankful, and express so, for every small thing. To be grateful and thankful for waking up in the morning, for the daily cup of coffee, for the bus arriving on time, for work providing sustenance, for a warm meal at lunch, for a friendly face in the evening, for a glass of wine at dinner, for a warm shower before dinner, for a soft bed at night. For everything. Practicing gratitude is one of the healthiest and best things one can do for one's well-being, and Judaism encourages this strongly.

You do not 'have' to do this, of course, and the specific manner in which you choose to do this does not necessarily affect the benefits you get from it. It is simply a good idea, for we all have things to bless for - at the very least, every morning you wake up, every positive social interaction, and every food or drink you ingest. Gratitude is salt for life.

Some practices of gratitude Judaism encourages include gratitude for waking up, for existing, for sex, for surviving a difficult ordeal, for bread, for being who you are, for wine, for fruit, for vegetables, for resting. You get the idea. Judaism suggests specific prayers for each of these blessings; these are meant to help us practice our gratitude, without having to think up exactly how to express it ourselves. You do not have to recite the exact phrase the way it appears in any text; the benefits of expressing gratitude are significant no matter the exact manner.

Similarly to rest, however, one might find it hard to remember to always express the gratitude, even to themselves. Life is busy and we tend to be distracted and forget to be grateful for things until it's too late and they are gone.

As with other beneficial practices, committing oneself to the practice - to the point of 'having to do it' - simply helps one make sure that they do it. If you make a promise to express gratitude, you might do it more often, and you would benefit from that.

Again we are confronted with the issue of who exactly are we expressing gratitude to. If one does not believe that a humanoid creature has created the earth and supplied the bread, then who are we grateful towards? It is my opinion that this is immaterial. The Jewish texts refer to thankfulness and blessings towards God; as we have explored above, God is a placeholder name for life, the universe, "and everything". We can be grateful for things, even if there is no-one to give thanks to for it. We may simply count ourselves fortunate and lucky. This is not as catchy, though, as we are used to talking to other humans, not to the world. Thus the classic prayers are often expressed as towards a receiving 'God' who 'gives' us things. This is, in my view, just a figure of speech. God is the world, the world "gives", and we can be thankful for it.

Washing Hands

Judaism encourages washing one's hands.

This was written in the Mishna, which was published approximately 2,000 years ago (~300 A.D.). Once again the historical origin is debated: what did the original authors and commentary-givers mean by this? Why did they specify we should do so? The truth is it matters less what they meant, as we can consider the merit behind keeping our hand hygiene by ourselves.

Indeed, around the 19th century, the Western Scientific tradition has agreed that keeping our hands clean (and washing them) is a very good idea. Before eating, after using the restroom, and before doing anything sensitive. It is likely that the original Jewish thinkers were coming from the same understanding, that maintaining hygiene is generally a good thing, and empirically leads to a better life. Most importantly, as people living in the 21st century, we can keep up this practice, as we are well aware of its benefits.

If you do not already espouse strong hand hygiene, Judaism suggests your life would be better if you did. If you do, you should know that you are already participating in what has been a Jewish lifestyle recommendation for thousands of years.

Family & Education

Family and education are both important themes in Jewish life, and are stressed throughout a person's life and community. Traditionally, families gather for a *Shabbat* dinner on Friday nights, light candles to signify the day of rest, and spend much of the Shabbat together. Multiple families are encouraged to share this tradition together, thus strengthening the bonds of each family and of the community. The importance of education is similarly stressed, and Jewish people are heavily encouraged to invest in their education throughout life - both the religious, spiritual education, as well as a practical, material education. Both of these contribute to Jewish people's historic success in matters of business and finance.

More importantly, these habits are just good for you in the most basic of senses - they are pleasant. Maintaining strong family ties is good for you, and your family are the people most likely to stick with you years and generations into the future. Education is similarly very beneficial for a good life, and can be both the meat and the salt of an intellectual mind.

Eat your greens, stay in close touch with your family, get a good education. It will quite likely be very good for you.

Israel

Israel is a political entity created by Jews to preserve the Jewish people, in the geographical location which historically has always been the home of the Jews. The religious views on the state differ between Jews. Many Zionist Jews view Israel as an important political entity to provide safety for the Jews of the world, as unfortunate political history has proved endlessly that Jews tend to be persecuted everywhere. Other Jews believe that the Zionist state is antithetical to what Jews 'should do'; yet another group of Jews living outside of Israel, including in the United States, are more indifferent, showing various levels of support to Israel but not viewing it as the crux of Judaism.

Israel is a fascinating political entity, strongly intertwined with Judaism, and hosting a myriad of Jewish lifestyles. If you are interested in maintaining a lifestyle full of Jewish aspects, living within a Jewish-dominant society, you might consider moving to Israel for a period of time. If you wish to support this lifestyle without living in it, you might consider supporting Israel externally, either financially or politically.

Rosh HaShana (Jewish New Year)

Judaism has its own non-Christian lunar calendar. According to this calendar, the Jewish New Year (Rosh haShana, "Head of the Year") falls usually in September or October. This time period is used to reflect on new beginnings, and the often-cyclical nature of our life. Every beginning implies an end; every end implies a new beginning. During this holiday, as with others, Judaism encourages spending time with family, and committing to resting and being fully present in the moment. You don't have to do this, but if you do, you might enjoy it. It's a good excuse to meet with your family and celebrate new beginnings and ends, similarly to the Christian New Year which is traditionally celebrated on January 1st.

Yom Kippur

Ten days after the new (Jewish) year begins, Judaism suggests celebrating a day of atonement, known as "Yom Kippur" ("day of atonement"). Judaism suggests at least once a year to practice meditating on the things we have done wrong in the last year, and to ask for forgiveness from those whom we have wronged. We are not guaranteed to receive forgiveness from those whom we have wronged, but Judaism suggests that having a communal period during which we reflect on our wrongs (both towards other individual people toward the world at large) and actively ask for forgiveness makes us better both as individuals and as a community.

Perhaps you too will find benefit in making sure you find at least one day a year to reflect on your wrongs and ask forgiveness from those whom you yourself believe you have wronged. You may join the Jewish practice of doing this in the days leading from The Jewish New Year to the Jewish Day of Atonement. There is perhaps not a special value in doing this on a specific date, other than the fact that it makes sure you do it at least once a year, and together with others. Otherwise, would you ever do it?

Yom Kippur (the day of atonement) is considered a super-sabbath in the aspect of abstaining from work, including any electricity or combustion. Once a year, Judaism suggests to focus solely on soul-searching, both alone and together with family and community, and not on any diversion. We can always escape our souls, but perhaps there is wisdom in once a year doing deep reflection instead.

Passover

In the springtime, Jews celebrate the holiday of Passover. This holiday is meant to commemorate the Jews fleeing slavery in Egypt circa 2,500 B.C. The Holiday consists of many traditions meant to remind us of the difficulties of life during slavery. As with many historical claims, historians are divided on the factual authenticity and details of what transpired.

Mindful people might ask themselves, regardless of the historical truth, what value can we make from these stories? Some might suggest that reflecting on the value of freedom is quite beneficial. Freedom in all senses, physical, political, spiritual. The story of Passover discusses the Jewish slavery, and how "God" allowed the Jews to transgress the painful divide from slavery to freedom. In the story, the Jews fled so fast that they did not even have time to wait for their bread to fully bake (leaven), and so they ate unleavened bread (not fully baked bread), known as "matzah".

To commemorate our own freedom rather than take it for granted, Jews practice a week of not eating any baked bread during Passover (just like the Jews in the historical story). This ritual helps us remember: freedom is not to be taken for granted. Every one of us should consider themselves as if they themselves had to flee from slavery, and be grateful that we are living in freedom today.

Traditionally, Jews gather and have a Passover feast (with no leavened bread, of course) together. The value of the community, the free Jewish community together, is quite important. It is an enjoyable event, which Jews all over the world - no matter their situation in life - make efforts to celebrate together with other Jews.

This tradition helps Jewish people stay in close contact with each other, grateful for our individual and collective freedom, and cognizant of our fortunate place in history.

Other Holidays

In the interest of brevity, this book will not be an exhaustive list of all major Jewish annual events. Following the pattern outlined above, the interested practitioner may educate themselves on any of the following (or other) holidays, their traditions and historical meaning, and glean for themselves the practical takeaways to celebrate life, both as individuals and as families and communities.

Some additional major holidays and their traditions include *Hannukah* (the holiday of light), *Sukkot* (the holiday of harvest and voyage), *Shavu'ot* (the holiday of the Rules of the Torah), *Purim* (a holiday of celebrating survival, gifting, and partying), *Tu Bi'Shvat* (the holiday of nature).

This book is not an exhaustive resource on all Jewish traditions, and additional information can be found with the author or elsewhere.

Monotheism

In what today seems obvious, the Jewish was groundbreaking in denying the faith in multiple Gods. While other spiritual traditions believed in many "Gods", the Jewish faith was the first to introduce the concept that there is only one God, the God of everything. This was done by Abraham, the first man who (according to the Bible) believed in the One "God/Universe", and the Jews are his descendants. To the educated reader, this probably seems obvious, but consider that competing spiritual faiths had different spiritual views, contending multiple humanoid Gods ruled the world; consider the stories of the Greek pantheon of Gods.

Thousands of years later, Jesus Christ (a Jew from the area that today is known as Israel and Palestine) would start a tradition that would be known eponymously after him, which follows the same spiritual belief in One God, centered around love from "God/The Universe". Six hundred years later, Muhammad would start a similar spiritual belief centered around surrender to "God/The Universe".

The Abrahamic tradition was the first to have the wisdom to recognize that the world does not have "Gods", but rather to view the world as a single reality, which is the way most of us view it today, at least in the Judeo-Muslim-Christian world.

Top Thinkers

As mentioned, the Jewish tradition is heavy on introspection and research of how to live life, including analyzing older texts and introducing new commentary and interpretations of other thinkers. In many ways the tradition of relying on accumulated generational knowledge and the

ongoing communal dialogue is similar to Western and Eastern philosophies expanded throughout the millennia, with various schools of thought and interconnected philosophies. In this manner, this book is an exception, as the author has chosen not to rely on the authority of specific historic individuals, but to leave the present-day relevance of the various traditions up to the interpretation of the reader. You may choose for yourself what parts of Judaism make sense to you.

Summary

In this book, we have covered some basic wisdom of the Jewish faith, and how it might help you live a better life. We hope you adopt what you find works for you and live the best life that you can. This book does not begin to be exhaustive nor authoritative; it is best viewed as a taste, a perspective and invitation to learn more.

Judaism attempts to cover many more domains of life, and suggest how to approach them to live your best life. You might choose to which domains in your life you would like to apply Jewish wisdom, and to which domains you would prefer to apply wisdom from other sources, including your own personal experience or science. Different sources of wisdom would always be in harmony rather than conflict, suggesting practical approaches that might help you live a good life.

If you are interested to learn more about Judaism and what wisdom you can find it to help you live a good life, we encourage you to reach out to your local Jewish friends and ask them to share what they know with you, such that you can discuss together and improve your lives together. You may also access Jewish teachings, texts and commentaries, strengthened by the perspectives you have hopefully gained in this book.

Communal discussion and study of how to live a good life is a major aspect of devout Jewish life.

To quote one great Jewish thinker, 'Hillel the Elder', the entirety of the Torah can be summarized into "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*" Indeed - wise words to live by.