

The (Jewish) Lessons of (My) Life

When you reach the venerable age of seventy, as I have, you look back critically on your life. What have I learned? What have I contributed? Did I do what I was supposed to do? What did I do right and what did I do wrong? Your mind drifts towards ultimate questions: What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of the universe? I would like to try to answer some of these questions for myself.

Judaism teaches that the purpose of life on earth is to prepare ourselves for the afterlife – the World to Come. We do that first by studying the Torah (which includes, of course, the Talmud, the Midrash, the classical commentaries, etc.) and second, by following its ethical and ritual commandments.

There are 613 commandments in the Torah. At first I thought: Should I try to stack up my life against each of 613 commandments in 13 hours? Then I concluded I would quickly lose my audience, so I decided to summarize.



The Talmud [Makkot 24a] recounts how kings and prophets tried to extract the essence of the Torah in a few words:

-[King] David... reduced the [613 commandments] to eleven [principles]...
Lord, who shall ... dwell in your holy mountain? He who walks uprightly, does what is right, speaks the truth in his heart; does not slander nor harm his neighbor nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor; who despises the vile but honors those who fear the Lord; who keeps his oath, who does not lend at interest, nor takes a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be shaken... [Ps. 15]

-[The prophet] Isaiah... reduced them to six... He who walks righteously, and speaks uprightly; who does not profit from fraudulent dealings, who does not take bribes, who closes his ears when slander is spoken, and shuts his eyes from contemplating evil: He shall dwell on high... [Isa. 33:15-16]

-[The prophet] Micah... reduced them to three... It has been told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God... [Micah 6:8]

-Again ... Isaiah reduced them to two...: Keep justice and perform righteousness... [Isa. 56:1]

-[The prophet] Amos ... reduced them to one... Seek [God], and you shall live... [Amos 5:4]

-[The prophet] Habakkuk [also] ... based them all on one [principle]... The righteous shall live by his faith. צדיק באמונתו יחיה [Hab. 2:4]

The last one means that faith in God leads to following His commandments.

Many centuries later, in the Talmud, Hillel issued his famous golden rule:
What is hateful to you, do not do to another person. That is the whole Torah.
The rest is commentary. Now go and study it. [Shabbat 31a]

In the Bible, Kohelet (that is, Ecclesiastes) is a rich man looking for satisfaction. He tries drinking, women, music, philosophy, but nothing works. All is meaningless, all is vanity, all is wind, and there is nothing new under the sun. In the end, he says that only the Torah is worth pursuing:

The sum of the matter, when all is said and done, is: Revere God and observe His commandments! This is the whole [purpose of] man. [Eccl. 12:13]

He concludes that purpose and fulfillment are found in practicing Judaism.

Beyond the commandments, God tells us in the Torah:

Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh ani, HaShem elokechem.

You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy. [Lev. 19:2]

[You shall be] *Mamlechet kohanim vegoy kadosh* – a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. [Ex. 19:6]

What does that mean? What is holiness? A Google search for the word “holiness” yields 30 million returns, including a sidebar that says, "Looking for holiness? Find it at ebay.com." (Good luck.) With so many returns, you would think the meaning of the word is well-known. But there is no firm definition. Nachmanides, writing in 13th-century Catalonia, offers an interesting approach:

[The Torah] permits intercourse between husband and wife, and the eating of kosher meat and wine. This might allow a person to act in a lewd manner with his

wife [perhaps even in public], gorge himself with meat, inebriate himself with wine, and use vulgar language as much as he desires. The Torah does not forbid any of these things, and he would be allowed to be a vile, disgusting person with the permission of the Torah. [So] "You shall be holy" means ["Restrain yourself even with what is permitted."] [Ramban on Lev. 19:2]

So, for the Ramban holiness means doing everything that is permitted in moderation. I resonate to this definition.

More generally, Judaism has two types of commandments: Ritual commandments and ethical commandments. **The ritual commandments preserve Judaism. The ethical commandments make Judaism worth preserving.** You need both. If you think you can do away with one set or the other, Judaism will not survive.

Now let me compare all this to my own life.

In the Talmud, the great Hillel said: To fulfill the commandment to be fruitful and multiply, you must get married and have a boy and a girl. [Yevamot 6:6] Check, I did that. I even threw in an extra boy for good measure!

I always stayed far away from the big three "sins" of Judaism: Idolatry, adultery and murder. As for the "lower" sins, I might have buzzed around a couple on occasion, but they were no more than peccadilloes. What I was mostly guilty of are sins of omission, not sins of commission. There are things I should have done, or done more of, but didn't. They did not suit my personality. To quote Ecclesiastes again:

No one in the world is completely righteous, only doing good and never sinning. [Eccl. 7:20]

But my favorite quote on the subject comes from the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism, a pious man if ever there was one. He is quoted as saying:

When a person gets up in the morning and looks at himself in the mirror, he thinks, "I am basically a good person. I have my faults. I have my foibles. I am not perfect. But I am more good than bad."

"I am more good than bad." I like that.

What did I learn in my seven decades? My life is like a check mark. It went slowly downhill while I was growing up in Egypt up to the Six-Day-War in 1967, then it went slowly uphill after I left Egypt at age 18 and it kept going up. I learned from both segments. Here are the top twelve lessons I learned and their connection to Judaism.

Lesson Number 1 - People are not rational.

Emotions run history. In my personal life, I frequently felt my position was airtight, ironclad, that I had all bases covered and all possible arguments answered – and I lost my case. In my professional life, whenever clear, concise, logical analysis was pitted against politics, politics won.

Historians always like to present leaders as cool, calculating and rational, making moves only after a careful cost-benefit analysis. They don't. But historians feel they *have* to make sense of history.

Consider antisemitism, an age-old disease. It is not rational. Jews are very useful people and have contributed enormously to the welfare of the world. Jews are only one-fifth of 1% of humanity, yet they get one-third of the Nobel prizes. So they get Nobel prizes at a rate more than 150 times larger than their small numbers would suggest. Their inventions would fill books: From vaccines against polio, hepatitis, cholera and bubonic plague; to the laser, the ballpoint pen, Google and Facebook. And they are always at the forefront in matters of justice and civil rights. You would think people would be happy to have them around, that they would protect them and encourage them to continue their work! But, sadly, the opposite is frequently the case. Jews are often persecuted, dispossessed, expelled and slaughtered.

Actually, their success is the very thing that fuels antisemitism. Envy is a most irrational reaction. Consider the story in the Torah of Isaac, the first person born Jewish:

Then Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped ... a hundredfold... And [he] became very wealthy ... He had flocks, ... herds, and large numbers of servants. And the Philistines envied him. [They] stopped up all [his] wells ... and filled them with earth. And [the king of the Philistines] said to Isaac, "Go away from us, because you are much stronger than we are." And Isaac departed from there... [Genesis 26:12-17]

Now, Isaac gave the Philistines jobs and reflected wealth. But they were too envious of him. Antisemitism will continue as long as the Jews are successful.

Another example is the fact that many, perhaps most, people want to be big fish in small ponds, because it strokes their egos. They should want to

be small fish in big ponds, so they can learn and grow to be bigger and better fish, rather than remain stunted in small ponds.

I am rational, perhaps too much so. One of my heroes is the Jewish philosopher and rabbi Maimonides, who lived some 850 years ago:

- He was Sephardic (that is, of Spanish origin) and so am I.
- He lived and worked in Egypt, and that's where I was born and grew up.
- His Hebrew name was Moshe (Moses) and so is mine.
- He was a rationalist, and so am I.
- He was a scientist of sorts, and so am I.
- He had very strong opinions, and so do I.
- And, oh yes: He was Jewish, and so am I.

Now, contrary to what many people believe, “rational” does *not* mean “one who does not accept anything without proof”. All logical processes must begin with premises that are accepted without proof. Without these unquestioned premises, there is no reason or logic. Reason and logic are only the tools by which one goes from premises to conclusions. These premises are unquestioned. In mathematics they are called axioms. Change them and you get a different mathematics, which is just as valid. It has been done. In Judaism, these axioms are the Torah.

Lesson Number 2 - People do things for selfish reasons.

This is not really as bad as it sounds, because that reason may be just to feel good inside, to feel wanted, appreciated, and remembered. But, technically, this is still a selfish reason. In the Jewish tradition, every person has a good inclination and an evil inclination. But, unlike other traditions, Judaism teaches that the evil inclination can be a good thing!

The Midrash says:

Can the Evil Inclination be “very good”? That would be extraordinary! Yes, [because] without the Evil Inclination, no man would build a house, take a wife, beget a family, and engage in work.

So said [Ecclesiastes]: “And I saw that all labor and all achievement in work was the result of man's envy and rivalry with his neighbor.” [Eccl. 4:4]

[Genesis Rabbah 9:7]

This suggests that we achieve things to show off and gain the admiration of others; to have more money or possessions; to “get the girl” (or the boy); to do better than our neighbors; to be ahead of the competition; to win prizes; to exercise power; to show those who said we would never amount to anything; or to leave worthy deeds behind, so we are remembered after we die.

None of this is altruistic. But without these incentives, we would not achieve anything. There would be no progress. If that is the way we are wired, so be it. We must accept it and make the best of it.

Lesson Number 3 - People are afraid of change.

People prefer the devil-they-know to the devil-they-don't-know. Fear of change makes us continue to work in jobs we hate, stay in bad relationships, or even continue to use outdated and inferior equipment.

During the biblical Exodus, many Israelites, faced with the uncertainty of the desert and of a new way of life, regretted life in Egypt and wanted to go back, in spite of their enslavement and in spite of all the miracles they witnessed. In my lifetime, I witnessed and experienced the pain of uprooting from modern-day Egypt. I was only 18 when I was forced out, but my elders continued, to their dying day, to wax nostalgic about their life in Egypt.

Leaders are always older and most resistant to change. Sometimes they are right and sometimes they are wrong, but they can always be counted on to resist change. Here are some examples from our history:

- The rabbis counseled against fighting Greek oppression. They were wrong. We won. This is the story of Hanukkah.
- The rabbis counseled against fighting Roman oppression. They were right. We lost the Temple, the land, and much of our independence.
- The rabbis counseled against leaving Europe when Naziism was on the rise. They were wrong. As a result, most European Jews were murdered in the Holocaust.
- The Lubavitcher Rebbe counseled his people not to move out of New York when relations with the Black community turned sour. He was right, tensions went down, and Chabad is still based in New York.
- My father did not want to leave Egypt. He believed things would get better. He was wrong. Things got worse.

Lesson Number 4 - Do only one thing at a time.

There are two reasons for that: Improving the chances of success and increasing enjoyment.

The first reason: Success. Rabbi Akiva advised that if you try to accomplish too much, you end up accomplishing nothing. [Based on Rabbi Akiva in Sifra Metzora Parshat Zavim 5 -- לא תפסות מרובה, לא תפסות]

The Talmud says:

There is a general principle that one does not perform commandments in bundles. [Sotah 8a]

And also:

One who is engaged in a commandment is exempt from performing another commandment. [Sukkah 25a]

As they say, “Jack of all trades, master of none.”

The second reason: Enjoyment. Each activity must be experienced exclusively and given maximum attention. That way, if something goes wrong with one activity, it does not spoil another activity. For example, don't eat a good meal while watching TV. (But one can make allowances for snacks. ☺) Another is: Avoid two-track relationships: Your doctor should not be your friend, your significant other should not be your business partner, your lawyer should not be your relative, your boss should not be your spiritual advisor, your teacher should not be your creditor, etc. The reason is that when a problem develops with one track, you lose both tracks.

Judaism is against many forms of mixing. Our Sages said:

אין מערבין שמחה בשמחה *En me'arvin simchah besimchah*

Do not mix rejoicing and rejoicing. [Moed Katan 8b]

This means: Do not try to enjoy two different things at the same time. This is why no weddings are allowed on Shabbat. Shabbat must be enjoyed in its own right and a wedding must be enjoyed in its own right, so make them two separate occasions.

Also, we can't mix milk and meat in our food, we can't mix wool and linen in our clothing; we can't sow a field with two different kinds of seeds; we can't plough with two animals of different species; we can't mix the holy and the secular in our activities, etc.

Ecclesiastes summed it up well, as usual:

לֹכֵל זֶמֶן וְזֶמֶן לֹכֵת לְכָל־חַפֵּץ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. [Eccl. 3:1]

Lesson Number 5 - Avail yourself of all permitted pleasures.

Judaism may frown on extravagance, but it does not approve of asceticism.

[Nedarim 10a, 22a; Taanit 11a] The Talmud warns us:

A man will have to account [to God] for the allowed pleasures he failed to enjoy.

[Kiddushin Y 4:12]

So, in the next life, God will ask us: Why didn't you have as much fun as you could have?

The Talmud also asks, rhetorically:

Hasn't the Torah forbidden enough already that you want to forbid other things to yourself?! [Nedarim Y 9:1]

I was never an ascetic, but I was too anxious, and I feared the future too much. As a result, I enjoyed the present less than I could have.

Lesson Number 6 - Know your limits.

If you don't, then the Peter Principle will apply: You will rise to your level of incompetence and remain there for the rest of your life, doing bad or mediocre work. This Jewish story is frequently told:

Before his death, Rabbi Zusya said, "In the World to Come, I will not be asked:

'Why were you not Moses?' I will be asked: 'Why were you not Zusya?'" [In Martin

Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*]

Be the best that you can, but don't try to be more. As President Abraham Lincoln said, "Whatever you are, be a good one."

I applied this principle by avoiding all management duties in my life and career. Most people want to keep getting promoted until they become director, president, chief, overseer, head honcho, big boss. I didn't, for two reasons. First, I didn't want the job. What I really enjoyed was doing the real work, not telling people what to do and evaluating them afterwards. Second, I knew I would not have been good at it. I would have been impatient with subordinates and would have ended up doing the work myself.

So: "Know your limits". Some people preach the opposite: "Always aim higher", but I disagree. When you are promoted up to your level of incompetence, you do mediocre work and stop being useful.

Lesson Number 7 - Don't expect anything from anybody.

The reality is that nobody owes you anything. I myself never expected anything. That way, I was never disappointed. Sometimes I got things (and it was a genuine and very pleasant surprise), and sometimes I didn't (and never even thought about it). I know it's hard to make yourself feel that way, but I was blessed with that natural inclination.

Lesson Number 8 - The greatest feeling is getting things long desired.

All my life, I looked for many things I was exposed to as a child or young adult. It could be little things: A song, a book, a show, a food item, a magazine, etc. When I found them, decades later, it was a small joy every time. The pace of re-acquaintance picked up when the Internet came of age. Now I am sad because my list is very close to being entirely fulfilled. I pity the rich who never have that joy. I am happy I was not born rich. I like to say: "Hell is having everything you want, all the time."

Lesson Number 9 - Whatever you can accomplish, do it with all your strength while you are able.

This is a direct quote from Ecclesiastes (again!):

כָּל אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכֹחַךָ עֲשֵׂה [Ecclesiastes 9:10]

In my case, I should have, but didn't. Since a very young age I was in love with mathematics and physics. I always wanted to work on basic research problems in theoretical physics. However, when the time came, I gave priority to job security and became a government defense analyst. Because of my background as a refugee, an immigrant and a Jew, I craved stability and security.

At first I convinced myself that I could do both. I would come home from work, have dinner with Joan, then neglect Joan and go in the back room to work on physics. I was able to do it for five years and I published a dozen papers. Then, I didn't have time to do it anymore. Two more children came and the workload became heavier.

I don't know if I would have become what they call “a good physicist”, but I did become a good defense analyst, at least judging by the high awards I received that my colleagues did not get. I am sure some will say, “If *he* is the best there is in government, heaven help us!”

Lesson Number 10 - Family is very important.

I always felt close to my large, extended family. Back in Egypt, we all lived within a square mile of one another. Then we were forced out, went to many different countries in different continents, and slowly lost touch. Twenty years ago, I searched for my relatives on the Internet and was determined to have them come to my house for the Passover seders. One year Spain came. One year Italy came. One year Venezuela came. One year Australia came. I am still connected with them and the computer shortens the distances.

Lesson Number 11 - Studying Torah is very important.

I did. The Talmud emphasizes its maximum importance:

These are the [most important] things ... Honoring father and mother, practicing loving deeds, and making peace between people. But the study of Torah is equal to all of them put together [because study leads to practice]. [*V'talmud Torah k'neged kullam*]. [Peah 1:1, Shabbat 127a, Kiddushin 40a, Tanhuma Yitro 14]

Lesson Number 12 - Studying secular subjects is also important.

I did that too. As I mentioned, math and physics were my favorite subjects. The Midrash tells us there is wisdom to be sought among all those who study the world around us:

If someone tells you there is wisdom among the nations, believe it... But if he tells you there is Torah among the nations, do not believe it. [Lamentations Rabbah 2:13]

I always experienced quite a thrill when I saw that the most complicated things in the world derive from simple equations, simple principles. Understanding the laws of physics and solving intricate problems always had me in awe and made me appreciate how “smart” God is. This is what Einstein called “cosmic religious feeling”. It has to be experienced to be understood. As poet John Gillespie Magee put it:

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth...
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

Thank you for your attention.