

🔗 The Mitzvah Initiative – Worksheet – Reasons to Do/Not Do Mitzvoth 🔗

Based on a list prepared by Dr. Jay Stern in Syllabus for the Teaching Of Mitzvah (USCJ Commission on Jewish Education, New York, 1986) the following are reasons that people might choose to engage in certain mitzvot. Compare your list to this. What is on this list that is not on yours? Do you find them to be compelling reasons to observe mitzvot?

1. Superstition, resulting from the fear of what might happen if God is not properly propitiated.
2. Familial pressure, such as the desire to please one's parents, or conversely, "far die kinder" in order to provide one's own children with some religious mooring.
3. Conviction that this is a good method of maintaining one's Jewish identity, far less superficial than organizational involvement alone.
4. Creation of a satisfying life style, there being good evidence that observant Jews enjoy lower incidences of such undesirable events as divorce and drug abuse.
5. Habit. Do not downplay this reason, since life would be incredibly complex if we had to analyze each situation afresh, never relying upon habituated responses to recurring situations.
6. Halakha: A belief that halakhic responses are what God demands of the Jews. Halakha is the response to the revealed Divine Will.
7. Love of God: As an expression of our love of God, performing mitzvot.
8. Community: We are part of a Jewish community and mitzvot help connect us.
9. Create a welcoming environment for other Jews: Mitzvot like kashrut make it possible for other Jews to be comfortable in our homes.
10. It is "the right thing to do"
11. Art of Life: Judaism provides a structure that gives meaning to life on a daily basis.
12. Marking time: There are a number of different ways we mark time in our lives – birthdays, anniversaries, etc. Judaism and mitzvot gives us this opportunity.

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On the other hand, there are a number of reasons not to do mitzvot – some are corollaries to the previous, but others resonate deeply with our congregants as well. Compare your list to this. What is on this list that is not on yours? Do you find them to be compelling reasons not to observe mitzvot?

1. Belief in God does not necessitate it: God doesn't need us to do mitzvot.
2. Sources for meaning: Mitzvot are not particularly meaningful.
3. Spirituality: Mitzvot do not enhance spiritual life
4. Divine Commandedness: If we do not believe that the Torah was written by God, then the mitzvot are human creations – why do them?
5. Many of the mitzvot do not make any sense
6. Even the rabbis say that there are not reasons to do some of them. Because God said so is not enough for me.
7. Too much information: the details of mitzvot detract from getting closer to God.
8. Education: I don't know the correct way to do it.
9. Family: It has never been our practice to do mitzvot.
10. Community: there is no social pressure to observe mitzvot, when there is social pressure

views. On the one hand, it is not co-extensive with the Jewish people, nor on the other, is it restricted to those who observe the Law unchanged.

Catholic Israel is the body of men and women within the Jewish people, who accept the authority of Jewish law and are concerned with Jewish observance as a genuine issue. It therefore includes all who observe the law, whether formally Orthodox or Conservative or neither. The character of their observance may be rigorous and extend to minutiae, or it may include modifications in detail. Catholic Israel embraces all those, too, who observe Jewish law in general, though they may violate one or another segment, and who are sensitive to the problem of their non-observance because they wish to respect the authority of Jewish law.

Moreover, Catholic Israel is vertical as well as horizontal, that is to say, it includes the generations gone before, whose lives and activities have determined the character of the tradition transmitted to us. Their practice cannot permanently bar the way to growth, but it must necessarily exert influence upon our decisions regarding changes from accepted tradition. They cannot exercise a veto, but they must not be deprived of a vote.

That past generations should play an important role in determining the content of tradition for the present is not astonishing. The sales of "Gone With the Wind" were many thousands of times greater than that of "Hamlet," but the perennial appeal of the latter is more significant of its place in English culture than the "best-seller" qualities of the former. Catholic Israel is universal in time as well as in space.

In spite of widespread impressions to the contrary, Catholic Israel, those within the pale of normative Judaism, was never a monolithic mass, a homogeneous body. The divergences between Hillelites and Shammaites, the distinctions in custom between Palestinian and Babylonian custom, the differences among rationalist, mystic and traditionalist in the Middle Ages down to the *Hasid* and the *Minged* in modern times, all these were often far-reaching, both in theory and in practice. Only the passing of time has blurred the lines and softened the acerbities of controversy.

The character and limits of these differences may be illustrated by two historical instances. Talmudic Judaism had its strict constructionists as well as its liberal interpreters, who greatly extended the scope of the Biblical text. The more liberal exegesis of Akiba generally prevailed over the stricter methods of Ishmael, yet the latter had a by no means inconsiderable influence upon Jewish law. When, however, centuries later, a group of strict constructionists, the Karaites, arose, who denied the entire validity of Talmudic law, they forfeited their right to determine the development of Rabbinic law.

Variations within Catholic Israel always existed. For obvious reasons, they are more marked today than in the past. Catholic Israel is no single, homogeneous group. It has its conservatives and its liberals, as has the American electorate. It is, however, restricted to those who

Excerpt from Robert Cordis, 'Authority in Jewish Law', 1944

THE UNFOLDING TRADITION: JEWISH LAW AFTER SINAI

It need hardly be emphasized that this conception does not read any Jew out of the Jewish fold. It merely declares what should be self-evident, that only those should have a voice in determining the character of Jewish law who recognize its authority. Reform and secularist Jews will continue to select on a purely personal basis certain customs from the pattern of Jewish living that appeal to them. But since they deny the authority of Jewish law, they naturally cannot expect to be consulted in its development. It is true that in recent years, these groups have approved growing numbers of Jewish practices, a tendency eminently to be welcomed and encouraged. But the judgment of the Sages has particular relevancy to our problem.

CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

The conception of Catholic Israel, here proposed, sheds light on the process of change and development and the technique by which these changes are to be legitimized.

Changes in Jewish observance can become part and parcel of Jewish law only if they emanate from Catholic Israel, from those who accept the authority of Jewish law and not from those who, for whatever reasons, have broken with it. Thus the Prohibition Amendment was repealed not by the activities of the Capones and the Schulzzes, but by the attitudes and behavior of law-abiding American citizens who opposed Prohibition. At the beginning, a small group of dissidents object to a given law, slowly they persuade others to adopt their opinion. When they increase in numbers, the enactment becomes a dead letter and ultimately disappears from the statute books.

This process of change and development in Jewish law is to be traced, not only during the great creative periods of the Bible and the Talmud, as modern Jewish scholarship has revealed, but even in the abnormal and chaotic history of the modern period. Before our eyes, radical changes are taking place, and this among those who live by Jewish law. The laws of *shatnez* and the prohibition of interest are virtually inoperative among traditional Jews, as is the formerly widespread custom of wearing a beard. Shaving, in spite of the five prohibitions involved, is almost universal, even without the shaving powder and the electric razor. The observance of the dietary laws today is generally accompanied by a willingness to eat dairy foods or fish in nonkosher eating houses. Recent inventions have created new problems of observance, and corresponding reactions, on the part of Sabbath observers. The telephone tends to be quite widely used (for social purposes), the radio and television perhaps a little less, and electric lights perhaps a little more. Yet increasingly, these acts are being performed by Sabbath observers. All these and similar modifications have occurred without guidance or even a conscious principle, but the principle does exist. It is Catholic Israel at work, who, if they are not prophets, are the descendants of prophets. (Pes. 66b.)

This recognition of Jewish law as the expression of Catholic Israel explains the fact that what was forbidden at one time and properly so

may become permitted at another and with equal justice. For new conditions and attitudes impinge on the lives of men and accordingly modify the outlook and the practices of Catholic Israel. When East European Jews a century or more ago objected to the shorter, "German" coats of the *Miskilin*, it was not mere obscurantism, but a recognition that the surrender of the traditional Jewish garb was a symbol of a break with Jewish tradition. But as time went on, the new mode penetrated into traditional circles as well, and it now became innocuous.

Without presuming to decide here the Halachic issues involved, it is clear that some warrant for instrumental music in the synagogue may be found in Jewish tradition. Non-Reform circles were adamant in their objection to the innovation in nineteenth century Germany because they recognized that its introduction was directly a *hukat bagoy*, an aping of foreign customs; a conscious effort to pattern the synagogue after the Protestant Church. That factor is by no means negligible even today, but now when a traditional congregation introduces an organ it may be presumed to imitate some contemporary Jewish and not necessarily a Christian model. Of course, the decision with regard to such a step involves many considerations of a non-halachic character as well.

If Jewish law is a constantly developing organism, wherein does its continuity lie? Precisely in its organic character. It has been pointed out that every living body is constantly engaged in breaking down and replacing its cells, so that within seven years, not a single cell remains unchanged in a human body. If this be true, how can we describe ourselves as identical with the personality we were eight years ago? The answer is obvious: Identity really means continuity, and continuity is preserved because the changes are gradual; we do not rise one morning to discover that every cell in us is new!

The process of growth is slow, it has its stresses and conflicts. By its very nature, every general law will work hardships in exceptional cases that require amelioration. But it remains law because we believe it to be binding and its observance or violation to entail consequences of good or evil.

FROM MINORITY TO MASSES

Having redefined Catholic Israel as those elements of the Jewish people that recognize the authority of Jewish law and are sensitive to the problem, we cannot overlook the ominous change that has taken place in modern times, in the ratio that Catholic Israel bears to the Jewish people as a whole. That Catholic Israel could be identified by Frankel and Schechter with virtually the entire Jewish people was due to the fact that until recently the two groups were practically coextensive.

Today, Catholic Israel in our definition represents only a minority of American Jewry and with the destruction of the European center, perhaps of world Jewry. A democracy in which only a fraction of the electorate is interested in the government is in grave danger, and the present status of Jewish religious life in America is equally intolerable.

In fact, a theoretical question may be raised as to the right of a minority to arrogate to itself the title of "Catholic Israel" and then undertake to "legislate" for the majority. If the final authority is vested in the Jewish people and Jews do not observe Jewish ritual, does not their practice or lack of practice become the modern standard of the Jew? Practically and theoretically, then, the concept of Catholic Israel as consisting of a minority is subject to challenge.

The answer lies in the conviction, and in the will behind that conviction, that the present status of Jewish observance is, or must be made, only temporary. To quote an analogy from American expertise, we are now at the frontier stage of Jewish life in America. Every American is familiar with the frontier towns that sprang up all over America, particularly in the wake of the Gold Rush and similar mass movements. In these mushroom towns, the basic moral practice of American society was observed by a small and often impotent minority. Drunkenness, murder, gambling and sexual license were often widespread. Had the social behavior of these Western towns been perpetuated, it would have meant the collapse of the accepted moral code of America.

Instead, a contrary process took place. The minority gradually was able to institute law and order, and its standards ultimately became dominant. Where did a minority draw the authority to enforce its standards upon the majority? It derived it from the knowledge that its attitudes had the sanction of the entire American people, of whom it constituted an outpost. The weight of that authority ultimately prevailed, even though it was temporarily embodied in a minority. As Lincoln pointed out in his attack on the concept of "popular sovereignty" as expounded by Douglas, Americans would never have admitted the right of Mormons to practice polygamy in the territory they occupied as a majority. It is, of course, undeniable that the frontier spirit, as Professor Turner has stressed, exerted an abiding influence upon the American character and institutions, but the pressure of American life as a whole proved decisive for the frontier towns.

The analogy with the present status of Jewish life in America is striking. "Each man does what is righteous in his own eyes" is as valid a description of our age as of the days of the Judges. Pretending that the present chaos in Jewish life and observance is "the American way" and seeking to justify it or at least to acquiesce in it under some high-sounding formula are sheer self-deception, of which true spiritual leaders dare not be guilty. It may be granted that current American-Jewish practice will influence our future code of observance in many ways and must therefore be taken into account. But it is undeniable that there is need of reviving the mass of traditional Jewish rituals by interpreting them in the light of our modern attitudes and ceaselessly campaigning for their observance.

Therein lies a fundamental challenge of the current crisis to the Jewish spiritual leadership of today, one which has been unconsciously neglected. But the functions of the Rabbinate are not exhausted merely in agitating for Jewish observance. We must not only