

Study Guide

INTRODUCTION

The book begins with a discussion of what it means to have books influence our lives. Holtz, of course, is talking about a specific group of books—the great classics of the Jewish tradition. *Finding Our Way* is an exploration of the possible connection between books and lives. The author quotes the great German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, who says that in our times learning must move from life to Torah rather than from Torah to life, as it once did. That is to say, living in modernity (or even in “post-modernity”!) we need to develop a different relationship to the Jewish tradition than did our ancestors. The chapter lays out three different ways that reading the Jewish classics can speak to us today: It can give us a sense of the pleasure of reading, a connection to those who came before, and a discovery of personal meaning. Each, the author argues, has its own rewards.

Questions:

1. The introduction explores the concept of *Torah lishmah*—learning for its own sake, a core idea of rabbinic Judaism. How do you understand this idea? How is it like or unlike other kinds of activities that might be done for “their own sakes,” such as art or music or exercise?
2. Holtz discusses the idea of “cognitive” emotions from the educational philosopher Israel Scheffler. Does that idea have any resonance in your own life? Have you experienced the

- pleasure of learning a difficult thing? Have you ever had that experience within the context of Jewish study?
3. Jewish study, Holtz argues, also helps us feel a sense of connection to those who came before us. Study helps us trace the lines on the family tree of the Jewish people. How much is this connection to the Jewish past a motivation for your own learning? How might this same sense of connection work for those who have converted to Judaism? Does your own experience of Jewish study ever make you feel connected to specific individuals or time periods in the past? In what way?
 4. The third idea that Holtz brings here is that study of Jewish texts can help teach us a kind of wisdom. The books of the past offer insights that can speak to us quite directly today. Can you think of any times in which you have experienced that kind of personal connection to Jewish learning? In what ways has this happened to you? In what ways do the texts of the past need to be reinterpreted in order to allow this to happen?

CHAPTER ONE: TRADITION

Surely, there is no idea more central to Judaism than that of tradition, but Holtz begins by pointing out that tradition is only one way of connecting to religion; far more powerful, perhaps, is the route of experience. Having a spiritual experience, feeling connected to God, is deep and immediate. But experience fades over time. It turns into memory. Tradition is, in part, a way of keeping powerful experiences alive over time. It is what follows upon the original experience and helps make it meaningful in the present. Tradition is that which is “handed down.” For Judaism, that something is, most centrally, the handing down of “Torah.” But what is that Torah and what does it mean to pass Torah from generation to generation? By looking at a number of important texts from the Jewish tradition, Holtz tries to grapple with these matters in Chapter One.

Questions:

1. Holtz distinguishes between “experience” and “tradition.” Do you think that such a contrast makes sense? Is he arguing that one is more important than the other? What is your own point of view on this question? Why do you think that he explores the issue of experience at all—couldn’t he have written a chapter about tradition without ever having to talk about experience?
2. Holtz argues that people today are ambivalent about the idea of tradition. As much as they want it, they also don’t want any restrictions on their personal freedom. They don’t want anyone telling them what to do. Do you agree with his analysis? What is your personal view about the positive or negative aspects of “tradition”?
3. The text on pages 20–21 is a well-known passage from the Talmud. Why do you think that this story is particularly popular in our time? Do you think our ancestors would have viewed it differently from the way we understand it?
4. The text on pages 22–23 is interpreted by Holtz to mean that the rabbis understood that there are a variety of legitimate readings of tradition. Is it possible that having so many interpretations means that we don’t have a single, coherent tradition at all? Might this lead to the breakdown of tradition? Could this multiplicity of views be seen as a strength? In what ways?
5. What does the story of Moses being taught by Rabbi Akiva add to this discussion? Where does authority lie? What might we learn about our situation today in regard to tradition?
6. The quotation by Jerome Bruner is used in conjunction with one final text in this chapter. How do the contemporary quotation and the classic text work together? What might it mean for you to view tradition in ways that Holtz presents it? What does it mean to have respect for the past, but not to be wholly subservient to it? In what way could tradition be an ongoing “conversation” between the past and the present? Do you find such a view comforting or lacking in stability?

How do you feel about the power, authority, and meaning of tradition?

CHAPTER TWO: HOLY LIVING

This chapter is devoted to the realm of Jewish practice—what does it mean to live a Jewish life and, in particular, to observe the mitzvot, the commandments of traditional Judaism? Holtz begins by looking at the idea of holy living and examining the classic Jewish notion that all realms of life are in fact “religious.” Such a life, he argues, is very powerful, but also very demanding.

He then turns to the literature in Judaism that deals with “reasons” for performing God’s commandments. How are the commandments justified? What is the rationale behind them? Holtz points out the complicated views about these questions within the tradition. As an example, he looks at the case of the *lulav* and *etrog* (palm branch and citron) that traditional Jews shake during rituals associated with the autumn harvest festival of Sukkot. There is a large body of literature that explains these actions in the traditional texts, but Holtz is interested in the “non-rational heart of ritual” and how that affects us. The latter part of the chapter deals with the question of commandments and commander—how can one approach the mitzvot if one has doubts about God as the one who has commanded us to perform them? The author suggests different ways to address this question.

Questions:

1. Do you find Holtz’s comments about the demands of living a holy life to be provocative? If Judaism has always endorsed the notion that its beliefs apply to all realms of life, do you feel that his concerns about the difficulties of this emphasis are misplaced?
2. Do you think that the literature giving “reasons for the commandments” might be useful for your own approach to Jewish observance? Does Holtz’s idea about the power of the non-rational in performing mitzvot strike you as helpful?

How does his example of the *lulav* and *etrog* help illuminate this point of view?

3. How does the idea of observing the commandments work in your own life? How would you respond to the question of the relationship between God as the commander and the matter of doing the commandments in our own lives? How do the ideas raised at the end of the chapter help address questions that people may be concerned about?

CHAPTER THREE: BEING SERIOUS: FIRST THOUGHTS ABOUT GOD

This chapter is the first of two in which the author tries to help us think about God in a world of modernity. He begins by pointing out that in the past the existence of God was a given—people had both the witness of tradition (that is, the many statements in the Bible and later sources about God) and the experiences of their own lives. People viewed the world through God-infused glasses and saw God’s presence in many different ways. Holtz shows that the assumptions of our world are very different. He compares the way we might see things to the way that a tribesman from Africa might. As we think about God, therefore, we need to consider the preconceptions of our culture, but, he argues, that doesn’t mean that our ancestors were wrong! What we need to do, Holtz asserts, is to commit ourselves to honesty (that is, not saying pious platitudes when we don’t really believe them) and to have, at the same time, an openness to the possibility of experiencing God in our own lives.

Questions:

1. Do you find Holtz’s ideas about the paths of tradition and experience in regard to belief in God to be helpful? In what way does this point of view help organize the way you think about the nature of religion and theology?
2. He uses an example of a tribesman arriving from Africa and looking at our world to explain the way that our culture helps form the very nature of our experiences. Does this analogy

- help make this idea clear? In what way is the tribesman's world more "rational" than our own?
3. Holtz interprets the talmudic text that begins on page 74 as a call for us to be honest in the way we talk about God. How do you make sense of this text and what it is trying to say? Do you feel that Holtz's approach to it is a useful analogy for our time? In what way do you think people are honest or dishonest when they talk about God?
 4. Holtz argues that it is important to think about ways that the ancient texts of the tradition may offer an insight into a world of truth. He quotes the sociologist of religion Peter Berger on page 78 to help elucidate this point. Do you find this point of view helpful as you think about questions of God and religion? Is there comfort and wisdom that we can take today from the texts of the tradition's past?

CHAPTER FOUR: GOD

Chapter Three explored two classic foundations for belief in God: experience and tradition. In Chapter Four, Holtz begins by discussing the third traditional path to belief—the path of reason. He looks at a variety of texts, both modern and traditional, that see the "order" in the universe as a sign of a divine creator. Holtz then suggests that what we need to adopt is a sense of mystery about our existence, a realm "of the unknown, the unexplainable, that every once in a while will startle us into awareness."

But, he points out, to say that there is mystery does not necessarily mean that there is God. He then goes on to propose ways that we might find hints of the realm of the Divine in our own world. He turns to texts from rabbinic literature about the soul and its connection to the essence of God and links those ideas to the notion of consciousness that we might see in the writing of the contemporary neurologist Oliver Sacks. Holtz asserts that viewing the world as either merely materialistic or religious is a matter, to a large extent, of our own choice. We can, in essence, *choose* to look at the world as a spiritual domain.

The chapter concludes by looking at a set of very powerful midrashic texts that contain varied metaphors for God. Holtz

suggests that these texts give us a sense of the variety of approaches found within Jewish tradition, and, more importantly, we learn that our understandings about God—if we are open to them—can change and grow over the course of our lives.

Questions:

1. Do you find the scientific or ecological approach to God—the approach through reason—to be personally meaningful? Have experiences in nature added to your own religious worldview? If so, in what way?
2. Holtz emphasizes that the idea of “mystery” is crucial to a spiritual perspective. Do you find that idea significant or appealing?
3. Does the notion of soul or consciousness, as explored in this chapter, give you a sense of a dimension of reality beyond reason? In what way might it be a useful rubric in thinking about God or the realm of the spiritual?
4. How do you view Holtz’s idea of choice and his assertion that we can choose a religious point of view? Do you think that is possible? Do you think “being religious” is in some way an inbred, almost genetic disposition? How might Holtz answer such an objection to this notion of choice?
5. Toward the end of the chapter, the texts talk about the way God might be understood differently by each individual. Is that concept a challenge to traditional understandings? Does the existence of a variety of metaphors for God in Judaism help you connect to the idea of God? How might you understand the statement by Peter Abbs quoted on page 106?
6. Does the idea of change and growth in one’s relationship to God strike you as a helpful or meaningful idea? Does it resonate in your own life experience?

CHAPTER FIVE: THE HEART’S WORK

In this chapter the author focuses on the topic of prayer. How might we find meaning in the act of prayer? What ways of thinking might help us? Holtz points out that a distinction might be made between the act of praying and the prayers that we find in

the written liturgy or prayer book (the siddur). While many of us might understand an impulse to pray out of a spontaneous sense of need or joy, connecting ourselves to the prayer book may be much more difficult. Unlike other texts (such as Bible or Talmud) the siddur requires us to speak the words as if they are our own. Holtz lays out four different ways of helping us connect to the prayer book and to prayer.

Questions:

1. Do you find the conflict between *kavanah* (intention) and *keva* (the fixed liturgy) to be one that you have encountered in your own praying? If so, how have you tried to address this issue for yourself?
2. Holtz introduces a term he calls “mental editing”—“tuning out the noise of those phrases that don’t touch us or that we disagree with.” Do you ever find yourself engaged in that practice? Can you give an example of how it might work for you with the prayer book?
3. A second approach is what Holtz calls “focusing” on the values of the siddur. Here we are not “editing out” matters that are problematic for us in the prayers, but we are using the prayers as a way of honing in on our deepest values. Look through a prayer book and find a prayer that you can study. How might you find an expression of values in that prayer? How might such expression influence the way you live during the day, after saying this prayer?
4. A third approach is what Holtz calls “associative reverie,” a moment of reflection touched off by a personal association one has with the words one is praying. He quotes a line from Abraham Joshua Heschel: “the imaginative projection of our consciousness into the meaning of the words.” This is a more emotional and less intellectual approach to prayer. Try to imagine praying in this fashion. Take a specific prayer and see how it might work or try out this approach the next time you are in a prayer service.

5. Finally, Holtz talks about “beyond the words” experiences in prayer. Have you ever had such experiences? Are they connected to music, as he suggests, or to other elements of praying? How would you describe these experiences? What brings them about?

CHAPTER SIX: THE CIRCLE OF COMMUNITY

Holtz, in this chapter, points out that we tend to think of the world of the “religious” as dealing with matters of the spirit, addressing issues connected to prayer and God, the celebration of festivals, and the rites of mourning, childbirth, and marriage. But in Judaism, he argues, the realm of mitzvah, commandment, pertains equally to the interpersonal and communal elements of life. How we treat our fellow human beings is not in the realm of some separate domain of “ethics,” but is deeply embedded in the fabric of Judaism. Holtz takes as his primary example in this chapter the very human question of how one deals with someone whom we know has done wrong. What does it mean to confront another person, to rebuke someone else for doing wrong? Under what circumstances must we do such rebuking? What are the cases in which rebuking should not be done? And if one is going to rebuke another, how must that rebuke be offered? The rabbinic texts of Judaism deal with these questions at great length and with insight and subtlety. Holtz walks us through a number of those texts in this chapter.

Questions:

1. According to the author, why has a separation developed in the way people think about the world of “religious matters” and the realm of ethical behavior?
2. How does the fact that Judaism considers the arena of the interpersonal as a setting for mitzvot (*mitzvot bein adam l’havero*) change our view of religion?
3. How would you characterize the differences between Ibn Ezra’s reading of the biblical section from Leviticus and Rashi’s interpretation of the same biblical text?

4. Rebuke might be aimed at making the other person be a better person, or it might have, as its motivation, helping the rebuker feel better. Which of these views speaks most to you?
5. What about the method of rebuke—how do the rabbinic sources teach us to give rebuke? What situations can you imagine in which these approaches might be used today?
6. When are we not allowed to rebuke?
7. How might knowing the idea of *hokheah tokhiah* (“You shall surely rebuke”) help create a better sense of community? Can you see the positive and negative aspects of this in your own world?

CHAPTER SEVEN: A WORLD OF JUSTICE

In this chapter the author looks at rabbinic texts about giving *tzedakah* (charity). His concern here is not to outline the many rabbinic sources about this key mitzvah, but rather to choose, as an example, one very specific challenge in giving charity, something that many of us have confronted almost daily: What do we do about beggars on the street? How do we decide to whom we give help? Are there circumstances in which we *must give*? Are there circumstances in which we are permitted not to give—and why? Those of us living in large metropolitan areas are often confronted by beggars asking for handouts. Even though we may give money to charitable organizations that try to help the homeless, it is still very difficult to turn down another human being who has approached you for help. Nonetheless, we also suspect that some beggars don't really need our help or are taking advantage of our better natures. Is there a way to use the classic Jewish sources to help us think about these issues? Holtz examines a number of texts that deal with beggars who deceive and tries to use them as a way to help us think about how we might live today.

Questions:

1. In what ways can you understand Maimonides's statement about our requirement to help the poor (page 167)? Is this a

- standard that you think we can live up to? How does it challenge our societal views in America today?
2. Turn to the text about R. Hanina on page 170. Do you feel sympathetic to R. Hanina? Do you feel he is being exploited? Do you feel sympathy for his wife? What are her motivations?
 3. Holtz uses this text as a way of saying that we are justified in making discriminations among the beggars—that it is not unreasonable for us to say no under certain conditions. How does he make that argument?
 4. How would you contrast R. Hanina with Mar Ukva (page 172)? Why does Mar Ukva decide not to question the legitimacy of the beggar that his son has seen? Is he a gullible fool? Is there another way of thinking about Mar Ukva and his views on *tzedakah*?
 5. Which of these two rabbinic figures do you identify more with? Why?
 6. Do you think, as Holtz argues, that looking at texts such as these helps us determine our own views on how to deal with an issue like beggars on the street? What is your own view on how we should behave? What issues are not addressed in the classic Jewish sources?

CHAPTER EIGHT: HOLY LAND

This chapter explores our sense of relationship to the Land of Israel. It begins by looking at a variety of rabbinic sources that make a point of emphasizing how important it is for Jews to live in the Land of Israel. It then looks at the way that Israel has infused so much of Jewish liturgy—it is literally always present in the minds of observant Jews. The author asks us to consider the ways that Jewish life has a kind of power in the Land of Israel that is different from what we might experience in the Diaspora. The latter part of the chapter looks at the way Jewish sources can deal with some of the more disturbing aspects of Israel today, namely the great deal of internal dispute within the Jewish community itself. Exploring the destructive aspects of this kind of internal strife forms the backbone of the rest of the chapter.

Questions:

1. As a person who lives outside of the Land of Israel, how do you feel as you read classic texts about the centrality of living in Israel? Have you considered moving to Israel as an option in your own life—why or why not?
2. How do you read the complex story of Kamsa, Bar Kamsa, and the disastrous party? Who do you think is to blame for the consequences of what happened? Are there any characters that go blameless? If we read this story as a kind of metaphor about the causes of the Temple's destruction, how might it still speak to us now? Do you see any parallels to our own time?
3. The famous story about Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and Vespasian is one of the cornerstones of the rabbinic sense of origins. Yohanan's decision to leave the city and to found an academy at Yavneh allowed for Judaism to survive the destruction of Jerusalem. Do you feel Yohanan was right in not staying in the city? As a leader shouldn't he have stayed till the end? What was his goal in leaving? How do his actions come to save the Jewish people?
4. The chapter ends by reflecting on a reconciliation between tradition and modernity within the Jewish people. How might we be guided by stories such as that of the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai (page 209)?

CHAPTER NINE: GROWING

This chapter sums up some of the main concerns of the book by focusing on the role and importance of studying Torah. *Finding Our Way* has been an exploration of the ways in which reading Jewish sacred texts can address key issues in our lives today. Holtz tries to investigate, in greater depth, the very nature of such study. Is it instrumental? Is study more or less important than the practice of Judaism? Who can engage in such study and at what time in their lives? By looking at a series of rabbinic texts, Holtz tries to deal with these and other related questions.

Questions:

1. In what ways do the texts quoted in the opening pages of this chapter (pages 212–15) try to deal with the question of the purpose of studying Torah? Is such study “instrumental”? Is *Torah lishmah* a “pure” activity—and in what ways is it bound to be tainted with more instrumental concerns? How do the rabbis respond to these issues? What are their agreements and disagreements?
2. The texts on pages 216 and 218 look at the dangers of living in a place without Torah. What might constitute such a place in our time and in our world? In what ways are our decisions about where to live influenced by considering how much Torah is in this place? In what ways should they be? How have you addressed this question in your life?
3. The latter part of this chapter deals with various aspects of “growing” through the study of Torah. It challenges us to place learning at the heart of our concerns and it tries to offer guidance about how to pursue that path. Have you ever felt that learning Torah as an adult presents certain impediments or discouragement? What advantages might there be in adult study that you might not find in learning Torah earlier in one’s life? How can you overcome a feeling of inadequacy in the light of the vastness of the Jewish tradition, and how much there is to learn?
4. What does it mean for you to “grow” within Torah and engage in the dynamic relationship with tradition that Holtz proposes?