

The Open Judaism Project

A Study Guide and Syllabus

FINDING YOUR PLACE IN THE JEWNIVERSE

The Open Judaism Project is dedicated to the proposition that all Jews have the right and responsibility to find their place in the Jewniverse—the universe of modern Judaism.

Open Judaism posits that there is a place at the table for all of us. There is a place for believers, atheists, and agnostics. There is a place for those who are sure that God exists, sure that God does not exist, or not sure at all. There is a place for those who call themselves religious or secular, sectarian or skeptic.

But Open Judaism goes further. There is a place not only for all Jews, but for all Judaism. There is a place not only for Jews who are traditionalists, but for traditional Judaism; for not only atheists, but for atheistic Judaism; for not only for Jews who are agnostic, but for agnostic Judaism. There is no one authentic Judaism, but many forms of Judaism that serve the Jewish people.

Open Judaism is inclusive, egalitarian, Big-Tent, pluralistic Judaism.

If you agree that making an informed choice about who you are is better than making an uninformed one, this project is for you.

If you are curious about what the Torah says, and also about what modern Judaism has to say about some of the big questions of life, this project is for you.

If you are “spiritual but not religious” or “religious but with questions” or “proud to be Jewish but wish I knew more” or “seeking my Jewish home” or “looking for greater Jewish depth,” this project is for you.

The Open Judaism Project is about empowerment through education.

Based on this book, the Open Judaism Project consists of twelve lessons covering the gamut of contemporary Jewish thought on God, Torah, halakhah, ethics, identity, soul, prayer, inclusion, and Israel.

The explicit goal of the Open Judaism Project is a greater understanding of the remarkably diverse spectrum of Jewish thought that exists today. Its implicit goal is to emerge with a deeper identity and connection to Judaism and the Jewish people.

It has been said that if the rallying cry of our ancestors was “Let my people go,” the call of our generation is “Let my people know.”

Welcome to the Open Judaism Project.

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PREFACE: DEFINING OPEN JUDAISM

1. On Open Judaism (pp. ix–xvi)

What is the basic thesis of Open Judaism?

2. The Origins of Open Judaism (pp. xvi–xxii)

What are the three basic religious responses to the modern world?

3. Believers, Atheists, and Agnostics (pp. xxiii–xxv)

What is the working definition of believer, atheist, and agnostic in this book?

4. The Need for Open Judaism (pp. xxv–xxvi)

Why do so many Jews see themselves as “Jews of no religion” or “just Jewish”?

First Survey: What Do I Believe?

1. Am I a believer?

2. Am I an atheist?

3. Am I an agnostic?

4. Am I affiliated with a denomination?

5. Am I a spiritual person?

6. Am I a religious person?

7. Am I similar to my parents religiously?

8. Do I have a strong connection to Judaism?

9. My most memorable religious experience was . . .

10. My most urgent question about religion is . . .

INTRODUCTION: TWO WORLD VIEWS:
ATHENS AND JERUSALEM

1. Our Bifurcated Lives (pp. xxix–xxxv)
In what ways are our lives guided by different worldviews or values?
2. Athens and Jerusalem: Theism and Humanism (pp. xxix–xxxv)
What are the key elements in the two worldviews?
3. Jewish Agnosticism (pp. xxxv–xxxvii)
What is Jewish agnosticism?
4. Judaism as a Civilization (pp. xxxvii–xl)
What was radically new about Mordecai Kaplan’s thought?

Second Survey: Where Do I Live?

1. Do I live a bifurcated life?
2. Which side of this life is dominant?
3. Do I live in Athens or Jerusalem?
4. Am I comfortable in suburbia?
5. Has my residence changed over time?
6. Do I have family, friends, colleagues, or acquaintances who live differently from me?
7. Do I agree that religious agnosticism is a legitimate third way?
8. Does this third way appeal to me?
9. What factors have made me who I am culturally and religiously?
10. How do I express my secular life and my religious life?

1: ABOUT GOD

1. God for Believers (pp. 1–15)
What are the primary metaphors, or roles, of God in Jewish tradition?
2. God for Atheists (pp. 15–23)
What is the distinction between hard and soft atheism, and pantheism (as understood by Spinoza)?

3. God for Agnostics (pp. 23–39)

What is religious naturalism and how did Mordecai Kaplan express it Jewishly?

What is a theology of protest?

What is the Jewish feminist critique of Jewish theology?

Third Survey: What Do I Believe about God?

1. What metaphors most speak to me about God?
2. Which of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles do I accept?
3. What traditional propositions about God are most significant to me?
4. Are the origins of my faith more a result of my head or my heart?
5. Does Jewish mysticism appeal to me?
6. Does Spinoza's pantheism appeal to me?
7. Does the deism of some of America's founding fathers appeal to me?
8. Does the religious naturalism of Mordecai Kaplan appeal to me?
9. Can I accept the limited God of Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*?
10. How has Jewish feminism affected my views of God?

2: ABOUT THE SOUL

1. Soul for Believers (pp. 41–49)

What do the Torah and the Talmud and the siddur teach us about the essential nature of human beings and eternal life?

2. Soul for Atheists (pp. 49–54)

How does Martin Buber's "I-Thou" philosophy relate to the soul?

How is Sherwin Wine's "natural transcendence" spiritual?

3. Soul for Agnostics (pp. 54–60)

How does Mordecai Kaplan understand the immortality of the soul?

How have the non-Orthodox movements evolved to accommodate a variety of viewpoints?

Fourth Survey: What Do I Believe about the Soul?

1. Do I accept the basic distinction between body and soul?
2. Why has the immortality of the soul been so important historically?
3. Is this subject, and spirituality in general, important to me?
4. Does the soul have eternal life in a world-to-come?
5. Is there judgment of the soul after death?
6. Will there be a Messiah, or Messianic Era, in the end of days?
7. When have I experienced an “I-Thou” encounter?
8. When have I experienced a moment of “natural transcendence”?
9. What do I believe will happen after I die?
10. In what ways do I celebrate my spiritual life, and how can I enhance it?

3: ABOUT THE TORAH

1. Torah for Believers (pp. 61–68)
What is the traditional understanding of the giving (revelation) of the Torah?
2. Torah for Atheists (pp. 68–72)
What is the humanistic understanding of Torah, both for true atheists and those open to the religious-naturalistic approach of Kaplan?
3. Torah for Agnostics (pp. 72–85)
What is the “third way” of understanding Torah and its revelation?
How have Reform and Conservative Judaism expressed this way?
How does traditional study of Torah compare to the source-critical approach?

Fifth Survey: What Do I Believe about Torah?

1. How do I feel during the procession and reading of the Torah in synagogue?
2. What is the role of God (if any) in the composition of the Torah?
3. What is the role of Moses and others in the composition of the Torah?
4. How do I understand Kaplan's statement, "The truth is not that God revealed the Torah to Israel, but that the Torah has . . . revealed God to Israel"?
5. How is the Torah inspirational to me, and how is it not?
6. What examples of the evolution of Judaism are most significant to me?
7. How do I understand the statement, "I cannot conceive of an imperfect revelation of God, nor can I conceive of a perfect record of that revelation"?
8. What importance does Torah study have for me?
9. How have new women's voices influenced my view of Torah?
10. How, ultimately, does Torah unite us, and how does it divide us?

4: ABOUT HALAKHAH

1. Halakhah for Believers (pp. 87–92)
Why according to traditional Judaism is halakhah binding and unchanging but subject to interpretation?
2. Halakhah for Atheists (pp. 92–97)
What is the role of the commandments for those who do not believe in a Commander?
3. Halakhah for Agnostics (pp. 97–106)
What is the significance of autonomy, personal and communal, for a liberal view of halakhah?
How has the Reform view of the commandments evolved over time?

What is the key difference between the Reform and Conservative views of halakhah?

Sixth Survey: What Do I Believe about Halakhah?

1. What commandments of the Torah do I fulfill?
2. What commandments of the Torah do I not fulfill?
3. Does my Judaism require that Jewish law (halakhah) always be observed?
4. In what ways do I exercise autonomy in my adherence to halakhah?
5. In what ways does my community exercise autonomy in our adherence to halakhah?
6. With which platform of Reform Judaism do I most agree and with which most disagree on this matter?
7. What is my opinion about the Conservative statement on halakhah?
8. Do I most agree that halakhah has absolute authority, continuing authority, or conditional authority?
9. Regarding who is a Jew, what interpretation of Jewish law do I follow?
10. What are the most important commandments in my life?

5: ABOUT JEWISH IDENTITY

1. Jewish Identity for Believers (pp. 107–11)
In what sense are the Jews the Chosen People in traditional Jewish thought and why is it central?
2. Jewish Identity for Atheists (pp. 112–14)
Why do humanists and others urge that we let go of the Chosen People idea?
3. Jewish Identity for Agnostics (pp. 115–27)
What is the mission of the Jewish people according to liberal Judaism?
How have views of Jewish identity evolved in the Reform and Conservative movements?

What is the debate over who is a Jew about, and what are the stakes?

Seventh Survey: What Do I Believe about Jewish Identity?

1. Is Judaism more a religion or an ethnicity?
2. Do I believe the Jews are the Chosen People? Why or why not?
3. Why is it a good idea to keep or let go of the Chosen People idea?
4. What does it mean to be a holy people?
5. Is holiness intrinsic (inherent) or ascribable to people, places, and time?
6. What do I see as the mission of the Jewish people?
7. How do I express my own Jewish identity?
8. What is my definition of who is a Jew?
9. What do I think about the idea of a “common law” Jew?
10. What should be the Jewish identity and normative practice of the Jewish state, especially regarding Jewish marriage, conversion to Judaism, Sabbath observance, and the Law of Return?

6: ABOUT INCLUSION

1. Inclusion for Believers (pp. 129–39)
What are the teachings and the limits of inclusion in traditional Judaism regarding women, intermarriage, and same-sex marriage?
2. Inclusion for Atheists (pp. 139–42)
What did the controversy between the Humanistic and Reform movements reveal about the limits of inclusion even within liberal Judaism?
3. Inclusion for Agnostics (pp. 143–59)
What journey have the liberal movements taken toward inclusion of women?
What journey have they taken regarding inclusion of interfaith families?

What journey have they taken regarding the LGBTQ community?

Eighth Survey: What Do I Believe about Inclusion?

1. How is my Judaism and Jewish identity different from that of my parents and grandparents?
2. What historical and social forces have shaped my Jewish identity?
3. What is the status of women in my community, and what work needs to be done?
4. Do I agree that Jews and non-Jews should marry in a Jewish wedding and that rabbis should perform these ceremonies?
5. Do I agree that gay people should marry in a Jewish wedding, and that rabbis should perform these ceremonies?
6. Should synagogue membership be open to non-Jews without restrictions?
7. Should Jewish rituals be open to non-Jews without restriction?
8. What are the remaining challenges toward inclusion in our community today?
9. Should the Reform movement be open to admitting Humanistic congregations?
10. Is “messianic Judaism” (Jews for Jesus) beyond the border of Jewish inclusion?

7: ABOUT ISRAEL

1. Israel for Believers (pp. 161–70)
How is the Land of Israel central to traditional Jewish thought?
2. Israel for Atheists (pp. 170–75)
How did Israel’s secular Zionists envision the Jewish state in their writings and in the Israel Declaration of Independence?
3. Israel for Agnostics (pp. 175–84)
How has the Zionism of the liberal Jewish movements evolved over time?

What is progressive Zionism and how does it support and challenge Israel?

Ninth Survey: What I Believe about Israel

1. What is my emotional connection to Israel?
2. What are Israel's greatest accomplishments?
3. What is a Zionist?
4. Do I see myself as a Zionist, and of any particular persuasion?
5. What is my personal responsibility to Israel?
6. What aspects of the Israel Declaration of Independence resonate with me?
7. Am I a progressive Zionist?
8. What are Israel's greatest challenges?
9. What should the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora be?
10. Should Israel be publicly criticized, and if so, how?

8: ABOUT ETHICS

1. Ethics for Believers (pp. 185–93)
What are the key commandments of justice, compassion, and faith in the Torah?
2. Ethics for Atheists (pp. 193–99)
How do humanists differ from traditionalists in ethical reasoning in general, and in reference to significant social issues like abortion and euthanasia?
3. Ethics for Agnostics (pp. 199–206)
How does liberal Judaism attempt to synthesize divergent views on ethics in general and abortion and euthanasia in particular?
What common ground do Jews share regarding the perfection of the world and self?

Tenth Survey: What I Believe about Ethics

1. Where do I get my values from?
2. What commandments of justice from the Torah are most important to me?
3. What commandments of compassion are most important to me?
4. What commandments of faith are most important to me?
5. How do I decide most ethical issues?
6. What is my view of abortion?
7. What is my view of euthanasia?
8. How do I help make the world a better place?
9. How do I help make myself a better person?
10. What are the greatest ethical challenges facing our country and me?

9: ABOUT PRAYER

1. Prayer for Believers (pp. 207–12)
What is the daily, weekly, and yearly obligation of prayer in traditional Judaism?
How is the traditional siddur structured and what does it reveal theologically?
2. Prayer for Atheists (pp. 212–16)
What is the humanist case for secular prayer and its critique of theistic prayer?
3. Prayer for Agnostics (pp. 216–29)
How do the liberal movements of Judaism try to combine traditional and contemporary prayer?
What new understandings and language has feminism brought to prayer?

Eleventh Survey: What I Believe about Prayer

1. What has been my experience of prayer?
2. Do I feel an obligation to pray?
3. What are my feelings about prayer in Hebrew?

4. What prayers of the siddur are most meaningful to me?
5. What contemporary prayers are most meaningful to me?
6. What changes in traditional liturgy should be made?
7. How do I feel about the feminist critique of prayer?
8. What is the power of prayer?
9. Why are many Jews averse to synagogue prayer?
10. What can be done to reinvigorate prayer?

CONCLUSION: CHOOSING YOUR JUDAISM

1. Judaism for Believers (pp. 231–34)
What are the most important tenets of traditional Judaism according to the summary in this book?
2. Judaism for Atheists (pp. 235)
What are the most important tenets of humanistic Judaism?
3. Judaism for Agnostics (pp. 236–40)
What are the most important tenets of liberal Judaism?

Twelfth Survey: Choosing My Judaism [First complete the exercise on pp. 234–36]

1. What have I learned about traditional Judaism that I did not know before?
2. What have I learned about humanistic Judaism that I did not know before?
3. What have I learned about liberal Judaism that I did not know before?
4. What do the various streams of Judaism have in common?
5. In what ways do the various streams most differ?
6. With what stream of Judaism do I most identify?
7. In what ways do I borrow from different schools of thought?
8. What would I describe as my Jewish credo?
9. What religious challenges do I see as I look ahead in my life?
10. How can I contribute to Judaism and the Jewish people?