

MOMENT MAGAZINE'S ASK THE RABBI COLUMNS

For many years, Moment magazine has published a column called "Ask the Rabbi," in which several rabbis of different denominations consider difficult topics. Rabbi Greenberg's "Ask the Rabbi" responses from 2006 through 2014 are excerpted and collected here.

June 2014: What does the Torah teach us about addiction?

MODERN ORTHODOX

The Torah is a Torah of life and is committed to a lifestyle that sustains a sound mind in a healthy body. There is a mitzvah, "*V'nishmartem me'od le'nafshotaychem*"—"You shall carefully guard your life" (Deuteronomy 4:15). Addiction violates this norm because it drives us to behaviors that jeopardize health and—as in the case of drugs—may cause death.

In addition, the Torah is committed to free will. People acting under duress are acquitted of violations. Being compelled by addiction robs a person of his or her freedom of action; therefore, he or she lacks moral responsibility, and this undercuts the moral and ethical life.

The Torah does not offer a direct diagnosis of addiction or a specific course of action for a cure. However, the disciplines and tempered life of *halacha* are designed to give structures of meaning and sensible limits that support a free, non-addicted, moderate way of living. It is widely known that traditional Jewish temperate drinking—such as serving wine on religious and happy occasions—rather than total abstention lowers rates of alcoholism and overindulgence.

In particular, Shabbat—a day when we are commanded to desist from work—is designed to prevent addiction to work, or workaholism. In conjunction with counseling and help in confronting problems, this way of living may reduce addiction.

*Rabbi Yitz Greenberg
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April 2014: Does Jewish law or tradition offer any guidance on contraception?

MODERN ORTHODOX

Judaism's highest commitment is to life. Its goal is to repair the world to the point where life wins out over all its enemies (like oppression, war, sickness). To assure the continuity of life, the Torah instructs humans to have children, to "be fruitful and multiply." This mitzvah can be fulfilled minimally by having two children. But the Talmud suggests that parents should keep going because "[God] created the world not to be void, but to be settled"—that is, filled with life (Isaiah 45:18). If parents leave behind three or more children, then the world will be filled with more life. Creating family and having children comes ahead of contraception.

Judaism is equally committed to advancing the quality of life. Therefore, if the couple wants to wait until they establish their relationship in marriage, or to accommodate professional training and advancement needs, or to space the children to better raise and educate them, I would affirm the use of contraception—though more haredi Orthodox rabbis tend to disagree on this.

Finally, contraception is always morally and religiously preferable to abortion as a form of birth control, and contraception to protect health is always a mitzvah. As a result of historic traditions, Jewish law prioritizes female over male forms of contraception and chemical methods over barrier methods such as condoms and diaphragms. The bottom line is: Use contraception in the service of life.

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2014 February: In what ways, if any, do science and Judaism conflict?

MODERN ORTHODOX

It all depends on the approach. In recent centuries, fundamentalist believers have focused on the conflicts, claiming that science is undermining our sacred texts and that one must therefore uphold God's authority by rejecting scientific views. (See under: Evolution versus Creation.) The Lubavitcher Rebbe rejected geology's assertion that the earth was billions of years old—explaining that the fossils were implanted in nature by God when the earth was created thousands of years ago. Ultra-Orthodox Jews, and now many centrist leaders of yeshivas, have rejected biblical criticism and historically critical approaches to *halacha* as forbidden because, they believe, these approaches undermine the belief that every word of Torah is given directly by God and not subject to change.

I offer an alternative view. Maimonides believed that Nature, i.e. the world, is Exhibit Number One of God's existence and presence. To understand the nature of Nature is to understand the divine creative power and elements of its wisdom and values. Therefore, in his magnum opus *Mishneh Torah*, in the opening book *Sefer Mada*, he explains physical creation by making

physics and astronomy elements of the holy Torah—that is, ways of studying and learning about God and God’s Torah. In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides further explains that the Book of Revelation as expressed in Nature cannot conflict with the Book of Revelation which is the written and oral Torah. After all, they have the same Author. When they appear to conflict, humans should use their reason and judgment and reconcile the Torah’s teaching with the best—that is, the most credible—science of the day. While Maimonides affirms that the final word must go to God and religion, he insists that it is a mitzvah to use our reason and (re)interpret the Torah—even drastically—to make it accord with the truth as best established by human reason. In other words, he argues that the truth and authority of the Torah should not be predicated on know-nothingism, ignorance or lack of scientific understanding. To which I say: Amen.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg
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2013 December: Are there times when a rabbi must express his or her political opinion from the pulpit, even if it is likely to spark controversy?

MODERN ORTHODOX

Yes, there are moments when a rabbi must speak out from the pulpit—whether on a political question or on a spiritual/moral/religious one—even though this will spark controversy or even strong backlash. Rabbis are meant to be spiritual, moral and communal leaders. If they never challenge their congregants, they are not leaders. They are *schleppers*—or panderers. On the other hand, if they are clueless or overdo this confrontation—if they cannot judge the limits of their people—they may lose their congregation, or even their job. The classic statement on this issue is Rabbi Israel Salanter’s: “Any rabbi whose congregation never considered firing him [her] is no rabbi. Any rabbi whose congregation does fire him [her] is no mensch.”

I can’t write a general description in advance that will identify the moment when it is mandatory to speak out no matter what the cost. But, as with pornography, I will recognize it when I see it. I believe that rabbis with genuine stature have an inner compass that tells them: Now.

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2013 September: Is Judaism good for women?

MODERN ORTHODOX

Judaism is the primary source of the concept that every human being has dignity and equality because all are in the image of God. This ethical foundation—modulated through Christianity, Islam, modernity and democracy—is the primary basis of the claim (now on the march throughout the world) driving the growing practice of treating women as full human beings of equal value to men. That is good for women.

On the other hand, Judaism itself compromised with reality and accepted women's status as secondary in accordance with the cultures in which Jews lived. Women were subject to sale (in the biblical period) and to the husband's authority and sole power to grant divorce (in the rabbinic period). They were excluded or restricted from public leadership roles from the rabbinic period down to modern times. That is bad for women. Traditional religious Jews provide the largest bloc of resisters to women's full equality and dignity in contemporary Jewish culture.

In short, the correct question is not: Is Judaism good for women? (the answer is yes) but rather "Is Judaism good enough for women?" The answer is: Not yet.

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2013 July: Should Jews be for or against the right to bear arms?

MODERN ORTHODOX

In principle, Jews should be for the right to bear arms. The tradition teaches that self-defense is a right—in fact, a mitzvah. In practice, Jews should restrict—ideally, prohibit—carrying guns because this is a life-threatening practice. (Such a sharp distinction between principle and practice is a very Talmudic approach.)

Judaism's highest value is life. To save a life, it is a mitzvah to override 610 of the 613 commandments in the Torah. It is prohibited to keep a dangerous animal or pet in the house because it may harm or kill someone. If there is a place at the home where people are at risk of death by falling, the law of Maakeh requires building a parapet or protective enclosure to guard life. Conclusion: bearing arms, i.e., keeping guns in the house, should be outlawed.

To be fair, many people keep guns because they hunt. In the old days, when hunting was a source of food, one could defend the practice. Even then, most Jews looked down on hunting as incompatible with Jewish values. Today, when hunting is mostly a recreational sport, it surely violates the laws of reverence for life and *tzaar baalei chayim*—not to cause pain to other living creatures.

True, the right to bear arms is established and protected by the Second Amendment. However, this right was set up in reaction to the behavior of the English monarchy, which oppressed Americans, extorted their taxes, imposed soldiers on the local population and tried to crush their move for independence. Today, democracy is so entrenched that there is no chance the government would act despotically in these ways. The police and the army protect people and work for them. Under these circumstances, the right to bear arms should have been repealed long ago. The entrenched insistence on gun possession is overlaid with elements of paranoia and conspiracy thinking, which represent danger to a civil peaceful society. And in general, Jews do not do well in societies marked by conspiracy theories and paranoia.

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2013 May: What are our obligations as Jews toward the animals we use, live with or eat?

MODERN ORTHODOX

Our behavior should be guided by the fundamental point—the Jewish attitude to life. Judaism treasures life; it teaches that God is the Source of life. God loves and delights in life and wants more of it (Genesis 1:20, 22, 24, 25, 28; 9:1-7). All life, then, should be experienced as dignified—and treated with reverence and respect. The laws start with *bal tashchit*—not to waste. Wasting something is a statement that it is of no value. *Bal tashchit* applies to all created things. Living creatures deserve an even higher level of respect—hence the prohibition of cruelty to animals (unless needed to save a higher, i.e. human life).

The higher the form of life, the more reverence it must be shown. Therefore, the Torah favors vegetarianism (Genesis 1:29). Kashrut represents a compromise with the real world in which meat is permitted with restrictions (Genesis 9:1). The higher the form of life we eat, the more stringent the kosher restrictions. In the Messianic age, when the world is perfected, vegetarianism will be universal (Isaiah 11:6-7).

An ox which serially attacks or kills a human is to be put to death (Exodus 21:28ff). But first there must be a judicial inquest (*Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 2a*) because killing such a high form of life is a serious step. An ape is to be treated as an almost human form of life (*Tosefta Hullin*).

In sum, we owe respect and reverence to the animals we use, live with or eat. The only limit is that the respect comes second to reverence and care for human (that is, the highest form of) life.

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2013 March: In counseling people about end-of-life care, what Jewish principles have you found most valuable?

MODERN ORTHODOX

To the patient and family, I say: Since every human being is in the image of God, then all humans are of infinite value. The dignity of the living sick person is not compromised by the proximity of death. It follows that every moment of life is infinitely valuable, so it is worth every cost and effort to try to extend or save a life. Still, it is no mitzvah to push for treatment that only torments the patient and burdens or breaks loved ones. If intervention will only add suffering and pain in a hopeless situation, then less is more.

To the caregivers and rabbis, I say: Try to give hope and support to the family. They are suffering along with the patient. Be aware that they are only human, so try not to push them beyond their capacity. Communicate to the patient and the family that God/Shechinah is with them—sharing their pain, tasting their tears. Even when the doctors can no longer help and the family's reach is not long enough, HaShem is holding the sick person's hand. "The High and Lofty One who dwells in eternity is [particularly] present with the person being ground down and with the troubled in spirit." [Isaiah 57:15]

To all, I say: There is nothing more painful than losing a loved one. Yet this is the fate of all human beings. Do not give up hope in a world to come where a future reunion in spirit is possible. Know that "love is stronger than death" (Song of Songs 8:6). You will discover that your mutual love continues after death. Then you will realize that despite the fierce pain and devastating loss, the undying love was worth it.

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2013 January: Does Jewish Anxiety Have a Theological Basis?

MODERN ORTHODOX

Jewish religion teaches that finite human existence is part of a continuum in which Infinite Being (God) and spirit also exist. The finite human cannot really grasp the true nature of the Infinite God. Yet they are deeply connected and lovingly related. How to do justice to both? This tension is at the heart of the religious life and is a source of great and constant anxiety. Yet Judaism refuses to end the dissonance and thus reduce the anxiety. It neither teaches that

mortal existence is an illusion to be transcended (as Buddhism and Hinduism do) nor declares that the spiritual/infinite is an illusion (as modern materialism does).

Another source of anxiety: Judaism teaches that the world will be perfected and that every life action must be reshaped toward that ultimate goal. Yet Jewish law also demands respect for life and the world as it is. Changes should be incremental. One may not ride roughshod over people or the status quo. So Jews are constantly torn between revolutionary impulses and conservative behaviors. While some Jews cut the tension by coming down on one side or the other, most live in the tension between the two poles.

Jewry—the people of Israel—is defined in the Torah as the people “who wrestle [constantly] with God and with people” (Genesis 32:29). And although Jacob was assured that Israel will prevail, after 4,000 years there is still no relief.

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2012 November: What makes someone a "real" rabbi?

MODERN ORTHODOX

I studied and received rabbinic ordination in Boro Park, Brooklyn, in a European refugee yeshiva made up mainly of survivors of the Holocaust and of Russian internment camps in Siberia. In their tradition, and my family's, “rabbi” was a title earned on the side by study of classical rabbinic sources; it was not a professional degree. I had no intention of entering the rabbinate. I earned a Ph.D. in modern intellectual history and planned to be an academic historian.

In 1961, I belatedly encountered the Holocaust—spiritually, morally, existentially. Trying to come to grips with the Shoah took over my life. I concluded that I wanted to serve the Jewish people, not work in an academic, “neutral” setting. There was a need to wrestle theologically: Could one go on believing in God? Could one go on teaching the covenant and its promise of world redemption? I wanted to work on healing the world, starting with helping Christians repent for two millennia of degrading and hating Jews, then building a new relationship between the two faiths. Finally, I wanted to help build a Jewish community that would take power in order to end Jewish victimization but would exercise that strength morally and humanely.

In the end, the only setting that would allow me to pursue all this was the rabbinate. Thus, reluctantly, and in an almost unplanned way, I backed into becoming a practicing, i.e. a “real,” rabbi.

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2012 September: Is Democracy a Jewish Idea?

MODERN ORTHODOX

Democracy is not a Jewish idea—if you mean that Judaism taught the world the idea or that Jews practiced it first, as they did with monotheism. Democracy was not practiced in biblical times or in the diaspora, although, in the Middle Ages, lay people in the Jewish community had more input in their government than their Christian neighbors had in theirs. However, some fundamental building blocks of democracy are derived from Judaism. The tradition's core concept is that every person is created in the image of God. According to the Talmud, this means that every person has the intrinsic dignity of infinite value, equality and uniqueness. Those dignities are honored best in a democracy.

The Torah taught that there should be equality before the law and that the king (or any ruler) is not above the law. Add to that the central Jewish messages of liberation for the slaves, the right to rest on Shabbat for all persons of whatever rank and station, laws that frame and guide the society (as with our Constitution) and the obligation for society to assure the basic needs of the poor through tzedakah, and you have the basis not only of democracy but of a welfare state.

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2012 July: Are We Hard-Wired to Believe in God?

MODERN ORTHODOX

Some evolutionary biologists argue that humans are hard-wired for belief in God. Jewish religious language offers three other explanatory metaphors: 1) Human beings have a mission. The search for purpose has been planted in them by an infinite God/Creator who has a plan to perfect the world (tikkun olarri). The instinct for purpose motivates humans to seek out the divine plan and participate in it 2) As life in human form becomes more Godlike in its understanding, it seeks meaning. As civilized humans move beyond the elementary struggle for existence, they strive to find their place in nature and their calling in this life. This leads to God. 3) God has planted in humans a capacity and drive to pursue a higher purpose. This leads humans to seek out a relationship to the hidden but ever-present Creator in whose infinity all life is grounded.

There is also a Jewish "wireless" version. The Lord created the human being—man and woman—"in the image of God" (Genesis 1:26). The image of God is in harmony, in rhythm and resonance, with the God whose image it is. The human soul is constantly sending out homing signals—until it hones in on the same wavelength as the Divine and connects to God.

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2012 May: Will It Matter to Jews If There Is a Mormon President?

MODERN ORTHODOX

A Mormon president: Is it good for the Jews? It all depends on how you define the Jewish good. If a Mormon is elected, it will show that voters continue to deemphasize a candidate's religion as a factor; this improves the chance that a Jew will be elected president someday. Also, Mormons—like evangelical Christians—have become strongly and emotionally pro-Israel. Finally, Jews were influential in the birth of Mormonism. Joseph Smith, the founder, was inspired by his reading of the Old (as well as the New) Testament. Christianity grew out of Judaism, claiming that God had extended a new covenant; it sees itself as rooted in the Jewish *brit* while carrying on many of its messages in a new way. Mormonism likewise presents a new covenant growing out of the Jewish and Christian covenants but carrying the messages in new ways.

Theology aside, the main impact of a Mormon president on the Jews will be in his economic, social and cultural policies. If you believe that the conservative agenda is correct—whether in economics, attitudes to government or cultural issues, ranging from women's status to global warming—then this Mormon president, if elected, will be good for the Jews. If you prefer the liberal agenda—more steps to reduce inequality, higher taxes, more regulation, more help for the unemployed and the needy and for the environment—then this Mormon president will not be good for the Jews.

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2012 March: Are Jews Still Expecting a Messiah?

MODERN ORTHODOX

By continuing to live as Jews, all Jews are stating that the Messiah has not yet arrived. Jewry pledged at Mount Sinai and elsewhere that as long as the world is not totally redeemed, we will go on with our testimony as Jews. As long as there is poverty, hunger, oppression and war, the world is still not perfected. We maintain this against the Christian claim that the Messiah has arrived and against secular messianic redemptive movements (Nazism, communism, socialism) that claim they have brought the true, final perfection. This continuing testimony of “not yet” is why would-be world redeemers have hated and persecuted Jews.

After great catastrophes, many Jews lifted their level of expectation because of the need to rebalance the world toward the victory of the good. In this post-Shoah generation, some Lubavitchers and followers of Rav Abraham Kook were convinced that the Messiah had arrived or was almost here. Unfortunately, all celebrations have been premature.

It would appear that secular Jews have renounced belief in the Messiah. But I believe that the choice to continue living as a Jew is the statement “I still believe the world will be perfected” and, by implication, “I will work to bring the Messiah.”

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2012 January: What does it mean to be pro-Israel today?

Orthodox

A comprehensive pro-Israel stance would recognize that the Jewish state is the chief expression of the Jewish return to history and history-making. It has taken on responsibility for Jewish fate and the Jewish future. Israel is a remarkable, nay, miraculous reaffirmation of Jewish life and creativity—particularly in the face of the death blow inflicted by the Holocaust. Furthermore, Israel is a vital democratic society (with all the human limitations and flaws of such). Despite being under siege since its birth, its ethical standards match or top those in the democratic West and are quantum leaps ahead of its neighbors and non-state enemies in the Middle East.

Despite its excellence, Israel is beset with enemies who seek to destroy it. It is the object of a fierce international campaign meant to isolate and delegitimize it. Israel needs all the friends and support it can get. Therefore, the tent of friends of Israel should be as wide open as possible—to include even friends who severely criticize it, its settlement policies, its approach to peace negotiations or its internal treatment of Arabs, women or other minorities. All critics should be free to speak, as in any democracy. An atmosphere of free debate, even if it allows unfair or one-sided criticism, increases respect for the cause of Israel.

In general, critics should be welcomed as friends, for one of the responsibilities of a friend is to criticize and thereby improve a friend (Leviticus 19:17). However, if critics deny Israel’s right to exist, or adopt a double standard gone wild (such as charges of apartheid or ethnic cleansing), they show that they are enemies. They should be critiqued and rejected, for they are accessories to attempted genocide.

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2011 November: According to Judaism, are there fundamental human rights?

Modern Orthodox

There is a standard gambit in response to this question: Judaism does not talk about rights (that is, it does not use the language of entitlement); instead, it focuses on duties (what we owe to God and to fellow human beings). I believe that this conventional wisdom is mistaken.

Traditional sources do not use the language of rights because such concepts were unknown in ancient times. However, the Torah and Talmud speak of fundamental dignities which confer the equivalent of rights. These biblical and post-biblical sources strongly influenced the early modern thinkers who shaped the emergence of democracy and constitutional rights. Specifically, the Torah states that every human being, male and female, is “created in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27). The Talmud derives three fundamental dignities of every human being in the divine image: Infinite value (“Saving one life is equivalent to saving a whole world”), equality, and uniqueness (Sanhedrin 37a). Honoring these dignities involves granting all the rights and ethical treatment that constitute the sum total of democratic rights. Equality yields equal treatment before the law and prohibition of discrimination, tyranny and slavery. It implies the right to be treated respectfully and to have equal access to education and information.

Infinite value brings with it the right to economic justice and economic security, access to adequate medical treatment and the obligation to provide welfare and tzedakah for the poor. Uniqueness implies the right to education and freedom of speech. In the end, the Messianic vision—a world of no poverty, hunger, war or oppression—is the (projected) universal actualization in the real world of the rights conferred by these intrinsic dignities.

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2011 September: What is the greatest sin for which the Jewish community should atone?

Modern Orthodox

American Jewry has the usual range of good deeds and sins—committed by groups, organizations and local communities—for which it must self-analyze and correct. There are also

millions of individuals with their own sins for which Yom Kippur demands repentance. However, I do not believe that there is some great sin of which the community as a whole is guilty.

Some left-leaning or universalist Jews charge that the community is selfish: It is not doing enough for the rest of humanity. The community could do more. (Who or what could not?) Still, I believe that the community is legitimately focused on its own needs. At the same time, it is concerned for the rest of the world, probably at a higher level than most of the groups in America. This is expressed in philanthropy, in lobbying Washington and state governments and in volunteering. The best proof that the charges are exaggerated is that many of the people making the charge are themselves doing great things for the rest of the world.

Some right-leaning or particularist Jews charge that the community is not investing enough in education, is not looking out enough for its own self-interest and is hell-bent on assimilation. I too would like to see a greater investment, but I reject the claim that the leadership of Jewry wants acceptance and integration *über alles*. This was true decades ago. It is no longer the situation.

Charging the community with an overall great sin may be the closest approach to a great sin these days. It constitutes *lashon hara*, speaking maliciously—about the Jewish community.

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2011 July: Do Jews Believe in an Afterlife?

Orthodox

Belief in the afterlife—a world to come in which the righteous get their true reward and the wicked get their deserved comeuppance— is a central teaching of traditional Judaism. This belief stems from the conviction that a loving God would not allow injustice to win. When the facts of life did not fit the Bible's emphasis on reward and punishment in the here and now, this faith in the afterlife was emphasized. In the Middle Ages, when Jews suffered so much while enemies ruled the world, the stress on the world to come grew stronger. Some religious teachers taught that this life is "unimportant," and that one should live only to be worthy of eternal bliss. This view spilled over into asceticism and less respect for the body and material activity.

Early modernizers reversed direction. They validated Judaism and dismissed Christianity by insisting that Judaism is interested only in doing good in earthly life. Christianity was criticized as otherworldly, repressive and dreaming only of getting to heaven. It was described as cruel for condemning people to eternal damnation. This modern one-sided emphasis on mortal life robbed Jews of the profound consolation of eternal life and justice for all who suffered unjustly and innocently.

What is needed is the classical Jewish ability to hold both sides of a tension. Such a Judaism would inspire people to find God in the secular, to unite body and soul, to work for tikkun olam (repairing the world) in the here and now. At the same time, it would uphold the reality of the spirit and the immortality of the soul. This faith offers the consolation of a final reunion—with those we have loved and lost and with the El Maleh Rachamim, the Infinite God of Compassion.

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2011 May: What advice would you give if your child told you he or she was gay?

Modern Orthodox

Assuming that this coming out was a considered decision and a mature conclusion on the part of my child, I would say the following:

My heart goes out to you. As you were raised as an Orthodox Jew, you already know that since the time of the Torah, homosexuality has been condemned in our community, especially in more traditional circles. While treatment is improving, I fear that you will face much rejection and hostility, and I wish that I could prevent it or protect you.

Nevertheless, if you live your life this way, I would hope that you would apply the Torah's other guidelines for sexuality to your own practice. Sex should not be casual or promiscuous. It should never be exploitative or abusive. Sexuality should express relationship and love; the deeper the sexuality, the deeper the relationship that it should express. You should try for the Jewish ideal, which remains family and creating/nurturing life via children (by conception or adoption). This is a great joy and a fulfillment in life.

Your mother and I love you very much as a total person. This feeling has not changed with your announcement.

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2011 March: Should Jews Pay Taxes?

Modern Orthodox

It is said that only two things are inescapable: death and taxes. On death, there is a firm, distinctly Jewish position: Judaism is against death. We are commanded to “choose life” every day in all that we do. Our goal is to fill the world with life.

It’s harder to oppose taxes. They have been levied in every age and by every form of Jewish association, be it national state, segregated minority or local community. In the Bible, there is a tithe for the poor, a tithe for the Levites, *terumah* and gifts for the priests and shekel payments for communal sacrifices. In medieval times, there were taxes within the community on foodstuffs and mandatory *tzedakah*. There was no history of progressive taxation, although that development fits the goal of Judaism to create a just society; such taxes were adopted in the modern State of Israel.

Although the Torah recognizes private property and upholds its rights, it does not have the fierce anti-tax tradition that is so prevalent in America today. That attitude sees government as the problem. On the contrary, says Rabbi Hanina: “Pray for the well-being of the government; for were it not for fear of it, each person would swallow the other alive” (Pirkei Avot 3:2). The tradition does oppose unjust taxation—just as it opposes governments that oppress people or show unjust favoritism.

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2011 January: An Eleventh Commandment, Anyone?

Modern Orthodox

The Ten Commandments summarize the primary message(s) of Judaism. This classic statement deserves to be studied and dealt with in its own terms. Adding a commandment to make it more contemporary would be like painting a full smile on the Mona Lisa to make her more appealing; or maybe I should say, like painting a mustache on her— since any addition would be more like graffiti than an upgrade.

However, for more than 3,000 years, every generation has added new interpretations, nuances of meaning and arranging applications. What would I add to illuminate this core text? I would preface it with the fundamental principle of the whole Torah on which all 613 commandments (not just the Ten) are built: that every human being is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27 and 5:1). This means that every person should be treated as having in finite value (creating, nurturing or saving a life is worth unlimited expenditure of time and money), equal (in status and in opportunity) and unique (to be served, listened and responded to). This principle should be articulated as a commandment: It is a mitzvah to create and raise an image of God, to uncover dignities in everyone, and to link the image to its Creator and Ground, i.e., God. To actively pursue this mitzvah is to practice the Ten Commandments.

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2010 November: Who Is Your Favorite Biblical Character?

Modern Orthodox

David the King reminds me that Judaism is a continuing covenant of redemption. Unretouched by rabbinic tradition, David is a martial chieftain—very different from the educated, intellectualized “suit” we think of as the quintessential Jew. Fearless, even reckless, the teenage David squared off against Goliath, a giant warrior. Warm and generous, David lived alongside his men. Being clever and cunning, David once acted like a crazy man to get the Philistines to let him return to Israel. Loving people deeply, he established one of the great friendships of all time with Jonathan, Saul’s son—although the prince should have been his rival. That same passionate nature led him into an affair with Bathsheba, including arranging for her husband to be killed in battle. Yet when the prophet spoke truth to power, David confessed his guilt instantly. That God-fearing spirit led him to write some of the greatest lyrics ever of religious faith, the Psalms. He forgave enemies for the sake of peace, although his last instructions to Solomon were to take revenge for him. In short, David was a force of nature—a hot-blooded, hot-tempered, deeply human poet, soldier, leader. They don’t make them like they used to.

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2010 September: What Does Judaism Say About Love?

Modern Orthodox

“Love makes the world go round”—that is Jewish wisdom. According to Kabbalah, God created the world because love needs another to love. Three times a day, traditional Jews say in the Ashrei prayer: “God is good to all [in the world because] God’s mother love extends to all God’s creatures” (Psalms 145:9). So consuming is God’s love that Hashem brings a flood to wash out evil and start again. But Hashem also promises never to do that again and instead enters into a covenant to accept humans as they are. With all of their flaws, God partners with humans to build a perfect world (tikkun olam). We are called to return God’s love. Says the Torah: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.” All commandments and rituals are meant to express our love for Hashem. In the Jewish ideal, every person finds the unique one destined for him/her to love totally (body, emotion, mind) to

become fully human and together create and nurture more life. Such a love can mature through life—and beyond. “Love is stronger than death” (*Song of Songs* 8:6).

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2010 July: Is There Such a Thing As Asking Too Many Questions?

Modern Orthodox

Don't you know that the first time God addresses a specific human being (Adam) in the Torah, he asks a question? “*Ayeka?* (Where are you?)” The first time God addresses a murderer, he asks, “Where is your brother Abel?” The first time that Abraham addresses God, he asks, “...What can you give me seeing that I am going to die childless?” Isn't this because the great principle of Jewish faith is that we are to imitate God? Don't you know that Moses, our greatest leader, found his calling by asking a question: “Why doesn't the (burning) bush burn up?” Aren't the Torah's stories all about giving us great human role models to learn from? As we try to understand the implications of the Holocaust (and of Israel and of Jewish life after the Shoah)—especially Jewry's affirmation of life and moral responsibility—don't you realize, as Elie Wiesel says, “[A response] is not a lesson; [it] is not an answer. It is only a question.”? Don't you know that a good question is always more evocative and instructive than a good answer? So why ask: Do Jews ask too many questions?

*Rabbi Yitz Greenberg,
New York, NY*

2010 May: What Does it Mean to Be Jewish Today? What Do Jews Bring to the World?

Modern Orthodox

For almost four millennia, Judaism has taught that this world is not a random cosmos, but a world of order and unity, ruled by natural laws—because it is a creation. Its invisible, but omnipresent, creator (whom we call God) sustains it. The creator asks humans to join in a covenant (partnership) to work together to repair and perfect the world (*tikkun olam*). The people Israel and the Torah came into existence to fulfill three functions: 1) to teach this message to the whole world; 2) to lead in creating a model community that lives by these principles; and 3) to work alongside other groups, religions and nations to achieve *tikkun olam*.

Because this goal cannot be accomplished in one lifetime, the covenant is between the generations. Each generation moves this world forward as far as it can and must educate and recruit the next generation to take up the task. To be a Jew today is to join in this covenant, knowing that you are working for the partnership that has had the greatest influence of all on human history—but whose mission is not finished.

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2010 March: What Does Judaism Teach Us About Envy?

Modern Orthodox

Rabbi Israel Salanter wrote that to fulfill all the commandments, a person must have “every human quality—and its opposite.” Human emotions are not intrinsically good or bad but depend on how they are expressed. Envy that drives one to begrudge others and covet what they have violates the Ten Commandments. Generally in halachah, if one thinks evil but does not act on it, it does not constitute a violation. However, the Torah rules that being envious is a sin. Destructive envy grows out of failing to internalize that one is a valuable image of God, so one sees worth in external possessions. Presumably, the Torah prohibits this feeling, because it leads inevitably to sinful action. Furthermore, such envy will eat you up alive: “Envy, lust and pursuit of honors shorten a person’s life” (Ethics of the Fathers 4:28). On the other hand, envy can be channeled for good. When rabbis strive to outdo each other in understanding Torah, the Talmud comments: “The envy of scribes/scholars [of each other’s accomplishments] increases wisdom” (Baba Bathra 21 A).

Constructive envy is like a good drug with potentially dangerous side effects; in the end, the Talmud instructs us to be content with “our portion.”

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2010 January: What is the Rabbi’s role in Modern America?

Modern Orthodox

We are living through a historic shift in the role of rabbis. As higher education spreads to the

masses, people become more secular. Religion (or faith in God) will not disappear, but God is more hidden in this new world. The religious action will be in “secular” activities. Examples: uncovering God’s presence among the poor and oppressed and bringing them faith-motivated social justice; healing the body—the physical icon of God’s presence—by working with the miraculous genetics and bodily systems to cure illness; establishing just and loving relationships with family, friends and all humans because we “fear God” and honor the image of God in every person; giving over information to enable people to make good judgments in everything they do. In the past, people turned to rabbis for authoritative answers from the tradition. Now people feel competent to apply values to their daily work and to their secular (but actually religious) activities. If the rabbi claims authoritative and definitive knowledge and demands obedience, he/she will have little credibility. Nor will threats be effective—i.e. that God has decreed certain actions/rituals and will punish non-compliance. The wise rabbi will shift from stressing institutional authority to serving as teacher, from decider to enabler and seek to persuade by the power of wisdom and to influence by personal role model. Many will serve in non-synagogue settings. Enabler/teacher, role model, conduit of God’s presence—this is the rabbi’s role in the age of secularism.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg
New York, NY

2009 November: What is a “Self-Hating Jew”?

Modern Orthodox

The self-hating Jew is primarily a modern phenomenon. In the Middle Ages, Jews were surrounded by hostility. However, they maintained a high degree of self-respect because, living in ghettos, they were mostly shielded from the degradation. They were also buoyed by a rich inner life and caring community.

In the modern period, Jews mixed freely and were constantly exposed to the majority’s opinions and media. Individual Jews, separated from the community, illiterate Jewishly, lacking in positive experiences, had no resources to repel anti-Semitic degrading images and sometimes internalized others’ contempt. One notorious case was Otto Weininger, an Austrian Jewish psychologist/philosopher who self-hated to the point of converting to Christianity and writing a philosophical justification of anti-Semitism. He followed the logic of his self-loathing (apparently feeling that he could not shake off his Jewishness) and committed suicide at age 23. Nazi thinkers drew upon his writings. In recent years, the term has been politicized by certain Israeli public figures who have used it to stigmatize Jewish-American government officials who did not support right wing policies. This usage should be stopped. The reality that some deracinated Jews fall into this category is sad enough; the term should not be bandied about promiscuously or turned into a political weapon.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg
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2009 September: When Does Life Begin?

Modern Orthodox

Human life is created in the image of God. Jewish ethics and halacha spell out the behaviors owed to a human being— ranging from not to kill and not to harm to feeding when hungry and loving the other human being as yourself. Is an embryo entitled to all the dignities of a human being? If the answer is yes, then abortion should be prohibited. In general, Orthodox law is against abortion unless the fetus directly threatens the mother's life—in which case, it is a mitzvah to protect the mother's life by aborting the baby.

As with most traditional sources, I believe that life begins at conception. However, I also believe that life is not fully developed until the baby is born and proves to be viable. The embryo has the dignity of being potential but not fully formed life.

A significant number of Orthodox rabbis take this position—especially in light of the Talmudic statement that up to 40 days, the embryo is considered water/ liquid and not life. Therefore, they (and I) are more supportive of the possibility of an abortion to protect the mother's health or well-being over a wider range of threats such as nervous breakdown or deep depression. The bulk of Orthodox rabbis also do not equate abortion with murder of a viable human being, which is the gravest sin of all.

Of course, upholding the potential human life (=fetus) demands caring, protecting, feeding, respecting both the embryo and the mother.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg
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2009 July: Are tattoos and body piercings taboo?

Modern Orthodox

Ever since Biblical days, tattooing the body was associated with idolatry and magic— in particular with the worship of chthonic (underworld) deities (Leviticus 19:26-31). The specific objection was that tattooing defaces the body that (like the soul) is considered an image of God. Maybe tattooing as permanent defacing is also connected to the ways that slaves were marked as inferior beings. And Nazi behavior should put the practice beyond the pale. When Nazis tattooed numbers on Jews, the message was: You are things, to be used and liquidated for Nazi profit. Tattooing seems to be in some vogue today as a cosmetic/artistic way to individualize the body. For some Jews, this may be fashionable. Yet I read once that most women who remove tattoos eliminate the name/sign of a former husband/lover/boyfriend,

which suggests that tattooing often still indicates that a person belongs to someone else. Jewish faith is not opposed to beautifying the body because there is a covenantal partnership between God and humans to improve God's world (*tikkun olam*). By restoring tradition and memory to every Jew, Jews could serve as a role model to all on how to beautify—not deface—the precious body every person is given to live a unique existence beautifully.

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2009 May: How Should Jews Treat Their Arab Neighbors?

Modern Orthodox

Some traditional Jews (including the late Meir Kahane) point to Maimonides urging that Arabs be treated like the conquered Canaanites and repressed with a strong hand. I appeal to Maimonides' view that even though it is legally permitted to hold slaves, the hallmark of a Jew is kindness.

Israeli Arabs' equal rights are enshrined in Israel's Declaration of Independence and Basic Laws. Although in practice there is not full equality, Israel is working on this. Constant terrorism requires security actions that make life difficult for Palestinians. But there's no choice. Israel has resisted giving in to legitimate anger and has acted better toward the Arabs than any other power in the world would have under these circumstances.

In Gaza, Israel has shown remarkable restraint. Although individual lapses have occurred, the IDF has minimized civilian casualties. Civilians were urged to move out before army attacks, but Hamas fighters embedded themselves amidst civilians. (Hamas also hoped for accidents where their people would be killed?to hand them propaganda "victories.")

One factor in Israel's ability to stay ethical is the constant review and criticism of its policies worldwide. However, rabbinic critique should be responsible. One-sided criticism is a sin; it constitutes collaboration with the shocking worldwide attempt to delegitimize Israel and justify its destruction.

We should validate firmness and self-defense combined with self-control while remaining open to peace and preserving the dignity of the other.

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2009 March: What Ethical Lessons Can Be Learned from the Bernie Madoff Scandal?

Modern Orthodox

For the most part, the tempest of breast beating in the Jewish community over the Bernie Madoff swindle is not called for. The investors were neither reckless nor greedy. Madoff exploited friendship networks and country club connections, presenting himself as a conservative investor and involved Jewish philanthropist living a respectable family life. What Madoff did was dastardly and ruinous; thousands will be deprived of needed help. If guilty, he should go to jail and be disgraced. But his victims should not be blamed, nor should they blame themselves. He exploited the best values of the Jewish people to get away with a swindle. But what is the lesson? Not to trust Jewish philanthropists? Not to admire people who are involved in charity work lest they be crooks?

Historically, Jews were taught that any action by any Jew reflects on all Jews—and on God. Marginalized anti-Semites have blamed Madoff on the Jews; mainstream America has not. The Jewish community has traditionally sought to be responsible for its needy and to condemn wrong behavior by Jews to protect themselves from backlash.

Jews should continue to practice their best values—and condemn the Bernie Madoffs of this world. In this case the Jewish community should not feel guilt!

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2009 January: Should the U.S. Have a Chief Rabbi?

Modern Orthodox

The idea of a chief rabbi is an illusion of a unified community. Where the office exists, no one is satisfied. In Israel, the position has been stained by protektsia and payoffs in the selection methods and by incumbents' personal corruption and embarrassing behavior. In addition to being largely irrelevant, Israel's chief rabbis have been typically indifferent to the country's moral crises and/or reactionary on such issues as women's equality, treatment of foreign workers and Arabs, or gay rights.

The office generally exists where the Orthodox are in control and the government ignores or mistreats the non-Orthodox (as in the former Soviet Union.) England's distinguished chief rabbi has won national recognition as a spiritual leader, but, hobbled by Orthodox disrespect for liberal Jews and pressured by the haredim, he has alienated Masorti and Reform Jews.

Another approach, exemplified by the Pope, shows how a respected religious figure's statements can send a powerful signal of the Church's relevance as a guide to life. Similarly, we need a spokesperson, a Chief Moral Operating Officer of American Jewry, who could articulate authentic Jewish opinion on the great moral and religious issues of the day. (For one brief shining moment—marching to Selma—Abraham Joshua Heschel attained this status.)

However, we would need some broadly based selection process, and I cannot conceive of a plausible scenario for such a process. Without a great transformation to unite the community, I can only say, dream on!

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2008 November: What is Your Favorite Jewish Book (other than the Torah and the Talmud)?

Modern Orthodox

Joseph B. Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man* makes the rabbinic classics (Talmud and halacha) meaningful to modern readers in brilliant and fresh ways. He articulates the Jewish tradition as a way of living modern life vitally and humanly and the rabbinic system as inspiring us to confront anxieties and integrate the dilemmas of existence in a positive way. Myriads of halachic details move from legal requirements to meaningful expression of psychological and moral states.

In this book, Soloveitchik opened my eyes to the way Judaism is, above all, on the side of life. He interprets the halacha as the affirmation of embodied existence (eating, drinking, creating, loving, etc.), the locus of experiencing true holiness, and he celebrates the central role of autonomous human judgment. *Halakhic Man* articulates the partnership of God and humanity and the love affair of the people of Israel and God as the key to the Jewish dream of perfecting the world.

Since I want to live a life that reconciles modernity at its best with the Jewish tradition at its best, I have loved the book ever since I first read it.

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2008 September: Does Politics Belong on the Bima?

Modern Orthodox

This question offers a classic case of on the one hand...and...on the other hand. On the one hand: Judaism asks us to live religiously in every aspect of life. The prophets challenged kings' moral failure, royal exploitation of the people and favoritism to the powerful and wealthy. Therefore, rabbis should discuss burning political issues, apply Torah principles to them and maybe even endorse (or reject) candidates.

On the other hand: Most rabbis know less about politics than well-informed analysts—who may be their congregants. So rabbis are likely to dissipate their credibility by indulging in political analysis.

Furthermore, religious interventions frequently harm the political process. Democracy depends on negotiations and compromises amid constantly changing conditions. Religious approaches tend to wrap issues in the mantle of absolute values and eternal, unchanging divine commandments, which block compromise. Religious interventions have led to extremist, sometimes violent politics. Who can forget how right-wing, religious rabbis denounced Israel's offer of territorial compromises and two important Orthodox rabbis spoke menacingly about the right to kill Israel's prime minister?

In the U.S., polarization, government gridlock and the culture wars of the past two decades reflect, in part, the evangelical intervention in American politics. Jews also worry that "Christianization" of American politics may roll back Jewish gains in becoming fully equal in American public life.

So on which hand should we act? Since it is illegal under American law for non-profit, tax exempt organizations to take part in politics, rabbis in synagogues should not be in politics.

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2008 July: Who Cares What Women Wear (Or Don't Wear)?

Modern Orthodox

Modesty is rooted in ethical communication and is the expression of relationship. The deeper the friendship, the more I reveal and share verbally. So it is with the body. "Letting it all hang out" may arouse a physical response, but it violates the ratio between relationship and revelation. In traditional halachic language, this behavior is called "uncovering that which is normally covered."

Modesty demands that one should speak and show the body based on the context of the relationship and social setting. This observation implies that dress for the beach is legitimately more uncovered than dress for the office or the synagogue. Modesty is not a matter of inches covered or related only to women. In a society that separates genders (like Muslim or Haredi communities), uncovering may be considered more invasive than in a gender-mixed society. In most traditional settings, modesty has metastasized into prudery, shame of the body and beliefs that women should be less visible and avoid public roles. A coed culture has a better chance to achieve normal social interaction and is thus less likely to turn females into objects of sexual exploitation. In either type of culture, the goal should be to set a tone of equality and reciprocal modesty that honors the other. A properly applied principle of modesty dynamically adjusts and nurtures human relationships; that is the Jewish ideal.

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2008 May: How Does Israel Help Jews be Jews?

Modern Orthodox

Although pro-Israel political action and fundraising dominate the agenda for American-Jewish continuity, Israel's greatest power—igniting the Jewish soul—remains underutilized. In Israel, Jewish history lives. The Wall is the incarnation of priests and prophets, of prayers and dreams. Contact with this culture confirms the Jewish identity of diaspora Jews, even the assimilated. I have seen countless individuals who thought they did not care instantly weep or dance there. Suddenly *am yisrael chai* is a living experience. Those who study Torah in Israel—even the Orthodox—find that they absorb Talmud and attain piety much more quickly than in the United States. The holistic Jewishness of Israel is like a hyperbaric chamber in which the patient absorbs far more oxygen than in a normal hospital room. Israel heals wounded American souls and restores visiting Jews' shriveled identities in a mysterious and powerful way. The Israeli experience proves the old Biblical and Talmudic claim that the souls of all Jews are intertwined as if they stood together at Sinai.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg
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2008 March: What does Judaism say about bullying?

Modern Orthodox

There should be no ideological differences among Jews when it comes to opposing bullying. The fundamental principle of Judaism is that every human being is an image of God. This means that each person has the intrinsic dignity of being equal and of infinite value and should be treated accordingly. The bully seeks to degrade the other. Therefore, bullying assaults Judaism's most sacred principle, targeting its most sacred object—a human being. The bully must be

confronted and stopped. Tactics—What is the best way to stop the bullying? Should the child or the parent confront the bully? Should the authorities or other parents be engaged?—can be debated. The most effective methods will depend on circumstances. All cases, though, given the real danger of permanent damage to a victim's self-esteem, demand swift action.

The bully—and everyone else—should be reminded that the Talmud considers shaming or humiliating a person in public is the moral equivalent to murder. Rashi points out that the face of an embarrassed person often turns white, as if the person's blood had been drained, or spilled. Stopping the bullying should therefore be considered the moral equivalent to *pikuach nefesh* (lifesaving), which takes precedence over 610 of the 613 commandments. The bully might also be reminded of the Talmud's statement that one who humiliates another person in the presence of others will be denied a share in the world to come. In other words, bullying is both physical assault and spiritual murder. It is beyond the pale by human standards and divine judgment alike.

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2007 October: What does Judaism say about psychiatry?

Modern Orthodox

One of the Bible's central teachings about humans is the unity of body and soul. The human being is a unitary self—not a union between a mortal, carnal body and a divine, spiritual soul at war with each other. In light of this unity, it's no surprise that treating the body affects the soul and mind even as illnesses (or strengths) of the soul affect the body. Similarly, emotions lead to bodily reactions; “good news makes one swell with happiness (literally: puts fat on the bone)” says Proverbs. It follows that the embodied, ensouled human can serve God in faith, thought, and song as in dancing, eating and bodily functions.

In Jewish tradition, the doctor is commanded to heal the sick, body or soul, and gets credit for a *mitzvah* in doing so. Judaism teaches that God and humans are in partnership. Therefore, the physician is not invading God's domain but rather does God's work. Using drugs to cure the body or to heal the mind is equally legitimate, so practicing psychopharmacology is just as much a *mitzvah* as any other type of medicine. Ideally, psychopharmacological drugs would neutralize any bad chemistry causing dysfunction in the body (as in schizophrenia and bipolar disorder), re-enabling moral responsibility and exercise of judgment. The same holds true for psychiatry. There should be no pejorative attitude toward mental illness or treating afflictions of the soul.

The only objection one could raise would be if the psychopharmacological drugs were used as a substitute for emotional rehabilitation. For example, Ritalin and other A.D.D drugs are

sometimes over prescribed. To treat the body in a way that overwhelms or silences the mind is wrong because to live fully is to operate through body and soul together. Jewish tradition makes the same distinction for drinking wine, a celebratory element in Jewish tradition, not getting drunk.

Questions have been raised about the scientific efficacy of psychoanalysis, but psychiatry's combination of drugs and emotional therapy has been proven again and again. In all these treatments, the physician is practicing the noblest calling of Judaism—to heal and save the highest form of life, the human being who is in the image of God.

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2007 June: What does Judaism say about being a workaholic?

Modern Orthodox

The Jewish tradition highly values work and human creativity. Work is a source of independence and dignity. Rabbi Soloveitchik says the Torah stresses God's Creation of the world to inspire humans to be like God—creating and building the world. The Talmud and Maimonides state that Torah study goes well with work. In Pirkei Avot, we are told that Torah with work makes you forget (read: prevents) sin.

Workaholism represents the danger of too much of a good thing. Whether driven by the joy of work, the desire to achieve or the worship of wealth, people tend to go overboard. The results often are destructive: neglect of family, abuse and deterioration of health. The Torah, however, has prepared a cure before the disease strikes. The medicine is Shabbat. One day a week, humans are commanded to enter a state of rest. On this day, the prohibition of creative labor means no change can be made in the material world. Wealth-making is to be put aside. People must shift rhythms from doing to being. The lessons are many: Savor life. Stop and smell the roses. Enter into relationships. Make love. Develop yourself. Improve your world. Enter into community. Commune with God.

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2007 February: What healing alternatives to modern medicine does Judaism offer?

Modern Orthodox

By teaching that the world is a unified creation of one Creator operating by natural laws, Judaism nurtured the development of science and medicine. The verse from Exodus v'rapoyerapay was interpreted by the rabbis as "he shall heal," i.e., as a commandment to use medicine to heal; thus, the doctor's scientific medicine becomes a mitzvah. Over the centuries, a disproportionate number of great rabbis have been doctors, Maimonides being the most famous. This contrasts with religions that consider sickness and health to be divine rewards or punishment for human behavior. By that logic, human medicine "encroaches" on God's realm.

Resorting to folk remedies or "religious" and "magical" cures not validated by clinical measurements in cases when mainstream medicine cannot cure goes against the grain of Jewish religion. I acknowledge that certain religious types, such as Hasidim, have often turned to rebbes and other miracle makers to heal them. But things like whispering charms over wounds or belief in astrology, which Maimonides denounced, often reflects pre-modern thinking. To the extent that alternative medicine appeals to religious belief to discourage following sound mainstream medicine, it violates the Torah's commandment "you shall guard [protect] your lives," as interpreted in Deuteronomy.

When alternative medicine represents thinking beyond simplistic materialist models to recognize the role of mind and spirit, then it is a welcome expression of Judaism's insistence that the human being is a body-soul unity. This insight that we must heal the whole person has been confirmed by research on how stress triggers a wide range of physical illnesses. Similarly, when alternative medicine grows out of the recognition of the limits of any one culture (thus, Far Eastern techniques of meditation or acupuncture may bring new medical insights to the West), this upholds Judaism's insistence that no culture should be absolutized. Only God is absolute.

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2006 October: Should Jewish children celebrate Halloween?

Modern Orthodox

This is not so much a halachic question; it is a public policy question. Do we want to prohibit or permit this activity? Historically, Orthodoxy has been suspicious of letting its youth celebrate American holidays for fear that this would lead to assimilation or adoption of "practices of Gentiles." When I was growing up Orthodox rabbis were critical of those who celebrated Thanksgiving, but as Orthodoxy has acculturated such attitudes have relaxed. One could argue for prohibition of Halloween because it is associated with witches and ghosts. Judaism has implacably opposed witchcraft or attempted communication with the dead since biblical times. Monotheism is the antithesis of magic. "There is none beside Him" (Deuteronomy 4.35), and no abracadabra tricks can manipulate God to get unnatural results.

That having been said, Halloween is almost entirely a product of American consumer culture, and there's more mockery than true belief to be found in the ever-popular costumes of witches and monsters.

My wife and I discouraged our children from trick-or-treating—partly out of fear of religious syncretism, but mostly because we did not want them to internalize American consumerist psychology and because eating a lot of candy is unhealthy. But I confess, trick - or - treating is popular in our neighborhood. In order to be good neighbors, we leave boxes of fruits, treats and candy goodies in front of the house with a sign inviting kids to help themselves to one item out of each box. We don't check if any of the kids are Jewish. Conclusion: If a Jewish child wants to go trick - or - treating for social reasons, it's not a big deal.

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2006 July: What is the best way to ask for forgiveness?

Modern Orthodox

The best way to ask for forgiveness is the hardest way; it is to acknowledge what you have done wrong to yourself, to God and to the person you have wronged, and then ask forgiveness. Maimonides stresses that confession (vidui) is the key to being able to turn away from the evil deed.

Psychologically, the sinner fears that he/she has gone too far and cannot turn back without undermining his/her position and self-respect. Therefore, to name the wrong act and to admit to one's self and to others what has been done wrong is liberating. This confession enables the person to turn away from the bad behavior and to turn to better living. One who covers up his

wrongdoing, (denies it or will not admit it, says Maimonides), will not achieve a full repentance. Maimonides cites the biblical verse “one who covers up sins will not succeed [in overcoming them].”

I would add that wronged persons need the admission and apology in order to regain their own sense of worthiness that so they will not blame themselves for what was done wrong to them. When they are addressed with this admission, they are more likely to forgive and to be restored.

Therefore, Maimonides says that in cases of interpersonal wrongdoing it is a mitzvah to openly state the wrong behavior as part of the apology—not so in sins between a person and God (ritual sins), where the confession should remain between God and the sinner.

Maimonides adds that if the injured party refuses to forgive, the sinner should repeat the apology again and once again. If the other still refuses, then the person who apologized is released from his obligation to make peace with the victim—and the injured party is acting wrongly.

One final note: where the wrong to the other person did actual damage (such as stealing from them), there must be restitution. Without making whole the damage, words are just words and have no efficacy between people; nor can words alone win God’s forgiveness.

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2006 June: How Should We View Unmarried Pregnant Women?

Modern Orthodox

In the past, the sight of an unmarried pregnant woman would likely have drawn disapproval. Premarital sex is prohibited in halacha. Therefore, the pregnancy would be a sign of disapproved behavior compounded by a lack of maturity, i.e., failure to use birth control. This would have damaged the marriageability of such a woman in the Orthodox world. Still, a child born to this woman would not have suffered any legal disability. Halacha does not treat birth out of wedlock as making a child illegitimate, i.e., a bastard {mamzer in Jewish law). Only a child of incest or adultery is classified as illegitimate (and unmarriageable) in Jewish law.

A remarkable change in social behavior is unfolding, due to the socioeconomic gains of women and the rise of professional/business women who are self-supporting. We are seeing a growing

number of single women who have decided they will mother a child as a single parent—and become pregnant.

The difficulty of a single parent raising a child must not be underestimated. Still, such a decision demands to be viewed very differently. The motives are honorable; the pregnancy represents love of life and of Jewry and this should be acknowledged and appreciated. Genesis (ch. 19, v. 3 lff.) relates the story of Lot's daughters who, after Sodom's destruction, believed themselves and their father to be the only survivors. They were so committed to humanity that each decided to have a child with the only surviving man—their father. They had to get him drunk and seduce him to do it. One of the children—Moab—became the ancestor of Ruth, ancestor of King David, ancestor of the Messiah. By their idealistic passion for life Lot's daughters turned incest and drunkenness into a force for human survival and redemption. (At least this is the interpretation of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and various classical commentators and Mdrashim.)

By analogy, a woman's commitment to life, children and the Jewish future expressed in deciding to become a single mother should be honored and supported. A technicality: poskim rule that they should preferably use a non-Jew's semen. They must keep a record of the donor to prevent their children from committing any future unintentional incest or entering any forbidden consanguineous relationships. (The semen donor father might sire children by other women. When the children grew up, they could meet and unknowingly marry prohibited relatives.)

The main point is: The community should be supportive of women so committed to having Jewish children that they are prepared to do it alone.

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2006 February: What does Judaism say about life after death?

Modern Orthodox

The Bible is overwhelmingly focused on this life. Humans are commanded to live the good life, here and now, in harmony with God and Creation. It remained for the Talmud to develop the limited references to a future life into a fullblooded statement of the immortality of the soul. The medieval Jewish tradition shifted the focus so that earthly life was viewed as fleeting years lived primarily to become worthy of the eternal blessing of Heaven (Gan Eden).

Modern liberal Jewish theology shifted the focus back to this life. Even Modern Orthodox figures like Joseph B. Soloveitchik stressed the centrality of this worldly life and religiosity, stating in his book *Halachic Man* that holiness means "the holiness of earthly here-and-now life."

The ironic result of this shift—intensified by the modern emphasis on biblical thought and the widespread ignorance of Talmudic and medieval sources—is that many liberal Jews have never heard any teaching about the soul, eternal life or existence beyond the grave. Often they have been taught that precisely this worldly emphasis constitutes Judaism's superiority over Christianity, which is portrayed as an otherworldly faith, anti-pleasure and anti-body.

Many liberal Jews are shocked to hear from traditional Jews that Judaism does, after all, teach immortality of the soul and offer the promise of eternal bliss with God and reunion with the beloved departed.

Practically speaking, what should a Jew believe? We should harness the blessings of modernity to keep us focused on the strand of classic Judaism that gives central importance to human life— fully embodied life. This tradition emphasizes *tikkun olam*. It follows the Talmudic dictum that a person will be judged for every (legitimate) pleasure in his life that he/she failed to enjoy.

At the same time, we need to break the tyranny of materialism and allow ourselves to accept the promise of eternal spiritual life. Can we know and describe the streets of heaven or the fires of hell? No. But we can put our trust in God that there is final justice, an ultimate balance in existence.

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