

Questions raised by Quora readers, related to Jewish practices, each followed by my response:

Is a blessing recited before eating non-kosher food?

You might think that Jews who eat food that is not kosher wouldn't even think about reciting a blessing, because they don't recognize God's role in the world. However, there are many Jews who do acknowledge God, but do not accept the ever-changing standards of what the various Orthodox groups consider to be kosher. And they might very well recite a blessing before using wine or cheese or other foods that are not accepted as kosher by their Orthodox friends.

Such a blessing is in no way disrespect of God, no matter if Orthodox folks so consider it.

Indeed, I wish that all Jews, and all people, would thank God more often.

But let's suppose that an Orthodox person has to eat non-kosher food, perhaps because of extreme hunger or perhaps for medical reasons. Should he recite a blessing? The answer I believe is yes. The fact that he is violating one commandment is not a reason for him to violate another. A similar question is whether a prostitute should go to the mikveh, and the traditional answer is yes.

How is the sacrifice of life (animal sacrifices) to a deity justified in Judaism?

The great 12th century Jewish philosopher Maimonides (also known by the acronym Rambam) suggested that God did not need or want such sacrifices, but that the Israelites 2000 years earlier were not mature enough to accept a religion that was sacrifice-free. God therefore ordained the sacrificial system for them and it continued, and worked, for almost 1000 years until the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 of the common era. After that catastrophe, the Jewish people worked out a relationship with God that doesn't involve animal sacrifices, and that has worked quite well for the past 2000 years. Orthodox Jews pray every day for the restoration of the sacrificial system, since such prayers were introduced when the Temple was destroyed. However, that aspiration is rather unrealistic ... at least from my perspective ... and is not shared by non-Orthodox Jews.

Can a Christian artist make a menorah for a Jewish friend? I'm hoping this would not be disrespectful in any way.

If I buy a menorah in a store, I have no way of knowing whether it was made by a Jew or a non-Jew, so there is certainly no reason why I cannot use a menorah made by someone who is not Jewish.

So your making a menorah for a Jewish friend is certainly not disrespectful.

But, you know, there are all sorts of people in the world. And so it is possible that your friend will not appreciate your efforts. I hope that your friend is not like that.

How can a shul experience be fulfilling if you don't understand Hebrew?

I'm not sure whether you are having difficulty reading Hebrew, or understanding the words, or making sense of the translation, or figuring out what's going on ... or all of the above. Of course, you can close your eyes and be carried by the murmurings around you into a meditative state. Or you can check out my prayer books at [Siddur Eit Ratzon](#) ... which address all the issues mentioned above and which you can use either at your shul's (synagogue's) service, or as a personal study guide; that will certainly help make your experience more fulfilling.

In Judaism, why is it a custom to show up to services late, instead of at the beginning?

Jews come late for services in part because the services are relatively long, though they are not boring if you understand what's going on. In the Rosh Hashana services, the shofar isn't sounded until relatively late in the service, and the Talmud asks, almost 2000 years ago, why that is. And their answer is basically that if they blew the shofar earlier in the service, many people would miss it. From this we learn that people were no less tardy then than now.

Then they ask a second question: if the shofar comes late because of people's tardiness, then why does Hallel come relatively early in the service? Why not make it later so that people won't miss it? Their wise answer is that we shouldn't penalize those who come on time!

Those of you who are familiar with the Rosh Hashana service will object and say that Hallel is not recited on Rosh Hashana. True, but that was not always the case. In about the 4th century it was rejected from the liturgy IMHO on very weak grounds. My machzor, Machzor Eit Ratzon, includes Hallel, as well as discussion on why it was eliminated and why that should not have happened. You can find it at [newsiddur.org](#)

Why is the number 18 so special in Judaism / Jewish religion?

While it is certainly true that the letters in the word "chai — life" add up to 18, that doesn't make 18 particularly special because the letters of every Hebrew word or phrase adds up to some number. If the word is a positive word like "chai" or "or — light" or "chesed — loving kindness" or "shalom — peace," then its number would be equally special. (Those numbers are 207, 72, and 376, respectively, and have no great significance.)

When I was a child in the 1940s and 1950s, a contribution of \$10 to any cause was a significant contribution for an ordinary person. Some unknown fundraiser in the 1950s got the bright idea of raising the level to \$18 and managed to convince people to contribute \$18 instead of \$10 by conveying to them that somehow their "life" would be enhanced if they contributed "chai — life."

That idea took hold. Several decades later, there was an attempt to increase the amount from \$18 to \$28 since that represented the sum of the letters in “koach — strength,” but that didn’t take hold, probably because people were attached to “chai.” What could be better than “chai — life”? Double chai! So now the standard contribution for an ordinary person is \$36, or sometimes triple chai, which is \$54.

What does the red string bracelet have to do with Judaism?

Wouldn’t it be nice if the red string bracelet were simply a scam and that Jews really didn’t believe in such nonsense!

Unfortunately, Judaism — like other groups — has been riddled with superstitious practices dating back to antiquity, because ordinary people, despite the insistence of our learned rabbis, have persisted in following superstitions, some of which have even become mainstream.

I suspect that the practice of placing a red string in a baby carriage to ward off evil is very old, much older than the modern-day scam artists who sell red-string bracelets. Certainly the rabbis of the time protested against the practice of transferring our sins to chickens, which is prevalent in Chassidic communities, or of casting our sins into rivers (tashlich), which was denounced as an idolatrous practice. Everyone covers mirrors in the house of a mourner lest the angel of death capture the souls of those in the household ... although they often give modern, that is, sanitized, interpretations of the practice.

In the same category is the notion that placing a mezuzah on the entrance to one’s house provides some sort of protection to the house and its inhabitants. The Torah has many opportunities to suggest a connection between the commandment to place mezuzot on our doorposts and the protection against the tenth plague provided by the blood on the doorposts of the Israelites in Egypt; however, it never hints at such a connection. That was invented by those who placed God’s name “Shaddai” on the mezuzah and interpreted it as an acronym that stood for “guardian of the gates of Israel.” The mezuzah is a reminder of God’s presence, not a guarantor of God’s protection.

Eminent rabbis have been historically unable to wean Jews away from such superstitious practices because, despite our commitment to monotheism, we still hold on to the notion that evil spirits exist independently of God.

In the Stone edition of the Talmud, published in the last 20 years, referring to the discussion in Tractate Pesachim of evil spirits, the learned commentators present very coherently both Maimonides’ 12th century refutation of the existence of evil spirits, and then the opposing view of Nachmanides in the 13th century. And then they surprisingly conclude that since the majority of medieval scholars agrees with Nachmanides on this matter, evil spirits do exist.

Wow! So it’s not surprising that many religious Jews are secret and unwitting Zoroastrians, who believe that there is a force of evil as well as a force of good — even though we insist that we are monotheists. The Talmud notes that if the prayer leader says

the word "modim" twice, then he is acknowledging and bowing to two powers, and so must be removed. Despite that clear ancient rejection of practical dualism, it still flourishes among us, red strings in baby carriages and all.

A person is Jewish by matrilinear descent, and a Cohen by patrilinear descent. How many Cohens are there who are not Jewish?

There are undoubtedly many Cohens who are Jewish who are not actually Kohanim (i.e., descendants of Aaron through a male chain). And there are undoubtedly many Levys who are Jewish and are not actually Levites (i.e., descendants of Levi through a male chain). How can this be?

Well, if someone's luck had run out eight generations back, he could move to another town and proclaim himself to be a Kohen or a Levite and achieve a privileged status upon arrival.

To accomplish this deception, he would have to be able to place his fingers in a specific format (which I am able to do even though I am not a Kohen), and could even take on a last name such as Kaganovicz or Levinoff (once all subjects of the kingdom were required to have such names).

If I can imagine doing that, then certainly there were many before me who imagined that scenario ... and carried it out successfully.

That would account for the observation (perhaps a fact) that there seem to be more Kohanim and Levites than you would expect statistically.

What percentage of many American Jews can read Hebrew (including those who can sound out words, but don't know their meanings)?

The one book that Jews hold in their hands most frequently is a siddur, a prayer book. But there are many Jews who go to a prayer service who cannot read Hebrew. An obvious solution is to provide a transliteration that presents the Hebrew using the letters that English readers know. However, most prayer books do not implement that solution. An exception is Siddur Eit Ratzon that is now used in over 100 congregations. Siddur Eit Ratzon is a traditional prayer book that I have created that has a complete transliteration, as well as a modern translation and commentary, in a four-column format. Although it is unconventional, it can be used in conjunction with any traditional prayer book. It can be reviewed and purchased at [Siddur Eit Ratzon](#) .

What is your favourite Torah verse?

Everyone's favorite Torah verse can probably be found in my book, Memorable Verses in the Torah, which is described at [memorableverses.com](#) Each of the verses comes

with comments and questions. Many of the verses are memorable, even if they wouldn't be anyone's "favorite". Together the memorable verses in the book provide an interesting overview of the Torah.

Why is the third prayer of the first day of Chanukah omitted the following days?

Actually, I say the third b'rachah (= blessing) on each day of Chanukah. I am very pleased every day to thank God "for keeping us alive, for sustaining us, and for enabling us to reach this moment."

I find that the tradition has been very restrictive on reciting this blessing, as is clear from the other responses to this question. The tradition only allows the blessing in circumstances that involve something new. I guess the rationale is that if you say the blessing too much, then it loses its special character. And that indeed is a risk.

But the same risk applies to every prayer. For example, we say a blessing before eating any food to thank God for the food that we are about to eat. Those blessings easily become routinized, since they are recited many times each day, and many people say them automatically, saying the words but not expressing the gratitude.

In reciting any blessing, what is important is not so much the words that are being said, but whether those words trigger in the person a sense of gratitude.