

QUESTIONS FOR THOSE EXPLORING JUDAISM

Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach

Welcome to the work that I do with those exploring Judaism. The time spent with those asking about Jewish life is among the most satisfying and fulfilling part of what I do – no matter where the conversations lead. To begin such exploration does not predetermine or drive any assumptions about an outcome. The most important part of this process is your feeling of having a safe space in which to explore, ask questions, and delve deep in an honest way.

The questions in each unit should be answered to the best of your ability. Please type your answers. At the completion of each unit, please contact Rabbi Feshbach for an appointment (michael.feshbach@gmail.com), and please send in the unit in advance by e-mail. At the meeting, bring the two copies of your answers to serve as the basis for discussion. You do not need to find *every* answer. If you are stumped or have trouble with something, bring it up during the meetings.

UNIT I: JEWISH BELIEFS

- 1) In what ways does Judaism differ from other religions? How do you feel about these differences?
- 2) Do all Jews have the same beliefs?
- 3) What do you think are some of the important beliefs in Judaism?
- 4) To what extent is the Rabbi a source of authority?
- 5) What are the four major groups in American Jewish life? How do they differ in their approach to Judaism? With which of these approaches do you feel comfortable and why?
- 6) What are the differences between all non-Orthodox branches of Judaism and Orthodox Judaism?
- 7) What is the Jewish attitude toward other faiths?
- 8) What does the word “Mitzvah” mean? What are the “Mitzvot”?

UNIT II: JEWISH LIFE

- 1) What are the most important rituals in the lifetime of a Jew? (i.e., B’rit, Marriage, Conversion, etc.) Describe these rituals in as much details as you can.
- 2) Describe the period leading up to and including the High Holy Days. What are the customs and observances associated with them? What are some of your experiences, if any, of the Days of Awe?
- 3) Describe the three Pilgrimage Festivals - Passover (Pesach), Shavuot and Sukkot (Simchat Torah). What are the major observances of each? What do you find appealing about each of these Festivals?

- 4) Describe the minor Holidays (Chanukah, Tu B'Shevat, Purim, etc.) and their customs. What memories/associations do you have with them?
- 5) Discuss the modern additions to the Jewish calendar (Yom Hashoah, Yom Hasmant).
- 6) Discuss the purpose and use of Hebrew names.
- 7) Learn the blessings for the Sabbath candles, bread, wine and "thanksgiving", in Hebrew and in English. Begin practicing the Shabbat blessings on a regular basis on Friday nights.
- 8) Begin exploring the meaning and some of the practices of Shabbat. In what ways can Shabbat observance enhance your life? What are some creative ways that you can make a distinction between Shabbat and the remaining days of the week?
- 9) Describe the major dietary laws. What besides "health concerns" might have been the purpose of these laws? Are these practices relevant to you today? Can one keep partially kosher? What about the dietary laws of Passover? Do they have a different meaning? Can they hold meaning for you today?
- 10) What is Tzedakah? How can Tzedakah be a part of your life? How can we balance our obligations to the local Jewish community, to Israel and to other communities and causes?
- 11) What is Tikkun Olam? What are the political implications of Tikkun Olam? What can we do to make this a better world?
- 12) How do you feel about the major ethical obligations of Jewish life? How do you feel about the role of religious ritual in your life?

**UNIT III:
PEOPLE OF THE BOOK: JEWISH LITERATURE**

- 1) Describe the Torah: What is it? What is in it? What is your view of the Torah (e.g. How did it come to be? What is its importance to you?).
- 2) What is the Jewish view of revelation? Is there a single view? How do you believe that God speaks to us?
- 3) Why do Jews refer to *Tanach*? What does it stand for? What are the three divisions of the Bible or *Tanach*?
- 4) What is the *Talmud* - and what are the two parts of the *Talmud*? What is *Midrash*? What is *Aggadah*? What is *Halachah*? What is the *Shulchan Aruch*? What are Responsa?
- 5) Read *The Chosen* (Chaim Potok) and/or *As A Driven Leaf* (Milton Steinberg). What are your reactions to the traditional Jewish lifestyles described in either/both book(s)? Is there room for dissent/intellectual exploration in Jewish life?

**UNIT IV:
JEWISH PRAYER**

- 1) What are the purposes of prayer? Which of those purposes are part of your spiritual life? Describe moments of prayer that you have had.
- 2) Why is the Hebrew language used for prayers? Try to learn at least the Hebrew alphabet — the consonants and vowels.
- 3) What is the *Siddur*? The *Machzor*? The *Haggadah*?
- 4) What are the basic elements of the worship service? State them in order. What are the basic themes of these groups of prayers? To which of those do you relate the most, and why?
- 5) Begin attending Shabbat and holiday services on a regular basis. (You define what is meant by the word “regular”). Please try to go to different synagogues representing different branches of Judaism. Write an essay describing your reactions to your experiences in services and at different synagogues.

**UNIT V:
JEWISH HISTORY AND IDENTITY**

- 1) Who and what is a Jew? What is meant by the term “covenant”? What is the Hebrew term for “covenant”? When does a Jew enter the covenant? What about girls?
- 2) When do our obligations as members of the covenant community begin? What is the nature of those obligations?
- 3) What do Jews need to “do” in order to be Jewish? What are “Jewish” acts?
- 4) Name three important Biblical personalities and tell who they were and what they did. Name three important Post-Biblical personalities and tell who they were and what they did. Name three modern Jews and tell who they are (were) and what they did.
- 5) Read *Night* (Elie Wiesel), *Mila 18* (Leon Uris), and/or another book on the history of the Holocaust. How have Jews been affected by the Holocaust? How has Judaism responded? What, in your opinion, are effective and appropriate ways of remembering the Holocaust?
- 6) What is anti-semitism? Have you ever felt or experienced anti-semitism? How do you feel you would react if you did have such an experience? What if it were directed toward your children?
- 7) Read *Exodus* (Leon Uris), *The Source* (James Michener) and/or some other book about the history of Israel. Write an essay about the history of the modern state of Israel, and your reaction to one of these books.
- 8) What is Zionism? Who was the founder of modern Zionism? When was the State of Israel established?
- 9) What is the relationship of the Jews of America to Israel? Do you think that you can feel a part of this bond or special connection?
- 10) Which are the chief Jewish communities in the world? What is their approximate size? What obligations and/or connections do we have towards other Jewish communities?

**UNIT VI:
MESSIANISM AND RELATED ISSUES**

- 1) Discuss Jewish beliefs about the Messiah. What is meant by the “Messianic Age?”
What do you believe about the Messiah and/or the Messianic Age?
- 2) Why did the Jews not accept Jesus as their Messiah?
- 3) What is the Jewish response to Christian claims regarding the coming of Jesus in the Bible? What is the Jewish understanding of the New Testament?
- 4) What are the essential differences between Judaism and Christianity?
- 5) What is the Jewish attitude toward Jesus?
Can you accept the Jewish approach to Jesus? Explain.
- 6) What do Jews believe about life after death?

**UNIT VII:
MY LIFE AS A JEW**

- 1) What is the Jewish attitude toward conversion?
- 2) Read *Choosing Judaism* (Lydia Kukoff). Write an essay responding to this book: In what way did this book apply to you? Are there other areas you wish you had covered.
- 3) What can human beings know about God? Have you felt God in your life? If so, how and when and where? How do these experiences relate to your sense of yourself as a Jew?
- 4) What brings you to Judaism? What ideas do you find most attractive? Which ideas do you find most difficult to accept?
- 5) Can you wholeheartedly accept Judaism and join the Jewish people? Explain.
- 6) Describe the sort of Jew you would like to be and the type of Jewish home you would like to establish. Specifically, what customs, holidays and observances do you plan on making part of your Jewish spiritual life.
- 7) Describe any plans that you might have to continue to study and learn as a Jew.
- 8) Do you feel obligated by and to certain *mitzvot*?
- 9) Do you feel bound to and part of the Jewish community?
- 10) Write a paragraph or two describing your thoughts on the occasion of your conversion to Judaism. (This might be in the form of a prayer you would wish to offer at the ceremony of conversion.)