

"For Jew and non-Jew alike, an encyclopedic source of information."

—*The Dallas Morning News*



"George Robinson speaks to many like-minded souls who . . . yearn for a stronger sense of Jewish identity and community."

—Diane Cole, *The New York Times Book Review*



"Excellent . . . A valuable, sensitive one-volume guide to Jewish practice."

—*Publishers Weekly*



"Outstanding . . . every Jewish family needs one for their home library."

—Sybil Kaplan, *The National Jewish Post & Opinion*

A Book-of-the-Month Club Selection

# Essential Judaism

A Complete Guide to  
Beliefs, Customs,  
and Rituals

George Robinson

ATRIA PAPERBACK  
new york london toronto sydney



**ATRIA** a division of:  
Simon & Schuster, Inc.  
1230 Avenue of the Americas,  
New York, NY 10020

Copyright © 2000 by George Robinson

Originally published in hardcover in 2000 by Pocket Books

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book  
or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information  
address Atria Books, Standard Rights Department,  
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

First Atria paperback edition September 2001

**ATRIA** *a division of* and colophon are trademarks of  
Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases,  
please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at  
1-866-506-1949 or [busines@simonandschuster.com](mailto:busines@simonandschuster.com).

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors  
to your live event. For more information or to book  
an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at  
1-866-506-5049 or visit our website at  
[www.simonandspeakers.com](http://www.simonandspeakers.com).

Manufactured in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Robinson, George. 1953.

Emerson's Johnson : a complete guide to beliefs, customs, and rituals / George Robinson.  
p. cm.  
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Judaism. I. Title.

BM4561 .R638 2000

296—dc21

ISBN 0783-671-03480-1

ISBN 978-0-671-03481-8 (pbk)

99-055288

To Margalit Fox,  
Martha Mehnich,  
Margaret Moers Wenig—  
women of valor.

And for Joel David Robinson and Lenora Miller Robinson—  
may their memory be a blessing.

if there is an *ishah midah* at a given moment if the couple doesn't touch in public, a source of controversy. The act of immersion is dirty or that a menstruating woman is unclean. However, a menstruating woman is considered ritually impure because she is having bodily fluids and a potential life.

At the completion of the full twelve days (known in Conservative observance) the woman immerses herself in the *mikvah/ritual bath*. Many couples say that the enforced separation makes their reunion on the twelfth night all the more satisfying, and such couples invariably celebrate by making love after the wife returns from the *mikvah*.

#### THE MIKVAH

The ritual bath or *mikvah* is one of the oldest institutions in the Jewish community. Archaeologists have unearthed *mikvoth* in Jerusalem thought to date back to the time of the temple, as well as others at Masada and even in private homes. In the Diaspora, every Jewish community tried to have its own *mikvah*. In modern Israel, virtually every town has one.

The halakhic requirements for the building of the *mikvah* are strict. The water must come either from an underground source such as a spring or (rainwater, melted snow, or ice. Spring water is considered purifying when it is flowing or moving, but in a *mikvah* that water remains the water must be stationary. In either case, the water cannot be collected by a human agency; it must fall into either a built-in or hewn-out pool or both. The pipes through which it then passes on its way to the *mikvah* must be free of cavities in which water can collect; such cavities piping must be made of softwood, stone, concrete, cement, asbestos, or plastic, none of which are materials that would affect sources of impurity in the biblical sense.

The dimensions of the *mikvah* are also specified. Translated into modern measurements, the *mikvah* must have a capacity of at least 201 gallons. Of course, a rabbinical supervisor is necessary in the building and running of the *mikvah*.

*Mikvoth* are always attached to public bathing facilities. Before you enter the *mikvah* it is imperative that you wash thoroughly. Immersion in the *mikvah* is only valid if not a spot of dirt comes between you and the water. However, you are not supposed to bathe immediately after immersion in the *mikvah*.

The *mikveh* is not only used by women completing a period of *niddah*. *Braverman* undergoes immersion as the symbolic completion of their conversion. Andas and a part of their entry into Judaism. Many Jews undergo immersion on the eve of their Kippur and just before the Sabbath. The *mikveh* is also used for purification of glass vessels for purposes of *kashrut*.

Herzin lies one of the explanations for this *miracle*. By encouraging a couple to exercise restraint to not make their marriage for a period of nearly two weeks out of every month, *loshon ha-mishchah* makes the times they are together that much more special, confers a holiness on the *miracle* of conjugal relations. It also lessens the chance of boredom setting in. The *halakot* is quite explicit on this issue, saying, "The husband becomes over-familiar with his wife and tired of her, thus the Torah prohibited her to him so that she may remain as beloved to him as she was on her wedding day."

It is possible that the rabbis had something else in mind as well. Women are usually most fertile in the middle of the menstrual cycle. Twelve days of abstinence means that a couple is likely to have sex on those days on which she is likely to conceive. The result is, as Rabbi Wayne Douck says, "Jewish birth control—in reverse."

#### KASHRUT/DIETARY LAWS

Up to this point, we have been primarily examining *mitzvot* that have an apparently rational basis, *mitzvot* whose purpose should be obvious to anyone. Moreover, there are largely *mitzvot* *be adam la-ihaveh mitzvot* between human. However, there is a large body of Jewish law that admittedly is harder to explain in such terms. One area of Jewish law and ritual that is probably the most familiar example of this category and the most problematical for many contemporary Jews is the dietary laws.

Professor Menachem Marc Kaliner, a contemporary commentator, refers to Judaism as "a religion of pots and pans in the eyes of those who derogate its concerns with actions." Undoubtedly, it was the laws that govern *kashrut*, the Jewish dietary laws, that he had in mind when he offered that phrase.

The laws of *kashrut* are—literally—laws of pots and pans. Also laws of silverware, glassware, refrigeration, sinks, and dishwashers. Not to

mention meat, fish, poultry, cheese, milk, and yogurt. Indeed, the laws of *kashrut* even have implications for objects that we don't normally associate with food at all.

The average American—indeed, the average American Jew—may look at a bottle of soda and say, “Why is this labeled kosher? What could be kosher or not kosher about a bottle of soda?” The average American Jew who doesn’t observe the dietary laws knows that the isn’t supposed to mix meat (*fleishig* in Yiddish) and dairy (*milchig* in Yiddish). But what is *pareve*? And why two sets of dishes, two sinks, even two ovens? The average American Jew knows he isn’t supposed to eat pork, shrimp, or lobster. But what about goat? venison? locusts?

#### KOSHER AND TREIF

The term *treif*, commonly used to indicate a food that is not permitted, is a Yiddish variant on the biblical word *treifah*, which actually refers to any meat that has not been killed according to the laws of *kashrut*. The word *kasher* actually means “fit” or “proper” according to Jewish law. If the fingers on my *suit* are not intact, it’s not a *kasher* *suit* and I have to get them replaced. If there is a mistake in the writing in the *sifrei Torah*, it’s not a *kasher* scroll. But how does that apply to food?

In Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:2–21, God tells the Israelites that there are certain categories of food that they should and should not eat:

- Among land animals, only animals that have cloven hooves and chew their own cud are permitted. Thus, the camel, the pig, the hare, and the rock badger are prohibited, but cows and goats are permissible.
- Among fish (actually sea creatures), only those that have both scales and fins can be eaten. Crustaceans, mollusks, and sharks, for example, are prohibited.
- Among birds, although no characteristics are enumerated, the Torah lists twenty-four species that are prohibited. Most of them appear to be birds of prey or cartoon-eaters like the vulture, the hawk, the owl, the osprey, and others. The permitted birds are chicken, turkey, goose, duck, and dove.

- Among amphibians and insects, anything that crawls on its belly is prohibited, as are winged swarming things, lizards, and rodents.

Needless to say, the products of non-kosher animals are themselves non-kosher. No camel’s milk, no vulture eggs. The notable exception to this rule is that one can eat honey from bees—according to the Torah, the real source of the honey is the flowers from which the bees take pollen.

The Torah refers to all permissible creatures as *chayim/chaiv* and the banned ones as *tamei/unchaim*.

The Torah prohibits the eating of any animal that has died a natural death. In addition, meat animals that are *lahav* must be slaughtered according to the rules of *shechitah/ritual slaughtering* (*Shechitah* does not apply to fish, only to meat and fowl.) In keeping with the *mitzvot* protecting animals from unnecessary suffering, an animal killed by *shechitah* is dispatched with a quick cutting of the throat that severs the trachea, esophagus, vagus nerves, carotid arteries, and jugular vein in a split second. The animal dies almost instantly and with no pain. Finally, all the blood must be drained from meat before it can be certified as kosher. This can be done by either of two methods, soaking and salting, or basting on a grill. Incidentally, all raw liver must be soaked; it doesn’t come “Kashereit,” that is, in compliance with the dietary laws.

But *shechitah* has a second purpose, one that takes us back to the ban on eating the flesh of animals that died a natural death. This method of killing makes it possible for the *shochet/ritual slaughterer* to drain the excess of its blood. It is forbidden by the Torah to eat the blood of an animal. The *shochet* incidentally, is more than just a kosher butcher; he must be knowledgeable in the laws governing *shechitah* as well as those concerning the conditions of an animal’s organs. An animal with damaged or diseased organs is *treifah*.

#### MEAT AND DAIRY

The prohibition against mixing meat and dairy has a rather more tenuous origin in Written Law than the ban on eating *tamei* and *treifah*.



There are literally hundreds of certifying groups in the United States and Canada doing each with its own standards. *Kashrus* For a current guide to kosher products, check [www.kosherall.com/index.asp](http://www.kosherall.com/index.asp) in New York State, a restaurant or food shop that is kosher must post a certificate from the certifying body (or rabbi), responsible for certifying its status in a visible place. Whenever you dine, if you find such a certificate posted, you are probably on safe ground.

[For further information please see Appendix 5, the Orthodox Union primer on *kashrui*.]

#### KOSHER WINE

Because wine is the product of vines, growing from the earth, one might assume that if it is pure it needn't be certified kosher. However, wine is unique among fruit products, no doubt because of its ritual importance in Jewish practice. Because ancient pagans used wine in their rituals as well, it was necessary for Jews to supervise every aspect of the winemaking process, from the growing of the grapes through the boiling and shipping.

Today, only wines whose production has been supervised by an observant Jew at all stages—planting, harvesting, winemaking, bottling, boiling—can be certified as kosher. Traditionally, observant Jews may even insist that wine be poured by a Jew.

Today, an increasing number of Jewish families are choosing to observe *kashrui*, including many Reform Jews. They are faced with a wide range of options. Of course, one can observe strict *kashrui*, eating only foods that have a *kashke* and that have been prepared in a kosher kitchen. Others observe "biblical *kashrui*," abstaining from those foods the Torah calls *unclean*, still others take that one step farther and eat only kosher meat. Some combine "biblical *kashrui*" with the separation of milk and meat. These days some Jews have chosen vegetarianism altogether, which moots the point. For many of them, this is a Jewish choice, expressing a commitment to the sanctity of animal life.

Why keep kosher? What is the rationale for this complicated set of *mitzvos*?

It has been argued that the animals that are *unclean* are bottom feeders, like snurp and clump, cartoon eaters, like the vulture, or just plain

filthy. Like the pig. Therefore, some reason, *kashrui* is a matter of health. Are the eating habits of goats appreciably more sanitary than that of pigs? Unlikely. In the modern world of government meat inspections, at least in principle, our foods are safe to eat, you are probably as likely to get salmonella from eating chicken or eggs as you are trichinosis from pork. So the health argument isn't convincing today.

An explanation by Edward L. Greenstein is intellectually more compelling. Greenstein says that the animals that one is permitted to eat are those that are herbivorous and which "fall within the categories that God created in the beginning: those that graze on the land, those that wing in the air, and those that flap in the sea." Prohibited animals, however, "walks in the sea, the pig does not chew its cud (so it doesn't graze). Seamounts are a sort of affront to God's taxonomy."

Some commandments are a little more complex. The Torah's concern with the humane treatment of animals "That doesn't explain the extensive set of rules regarding the mixing of meat and dairy dishes. What does a cream in your coffee after a steak at lunch have in common with this passage of Torah?

In fact, for the observant Jew, such explanations are not even necessary. One can search for the "reasons," it is an important part of making the Law and may give us the feeling that we are drawing near to the Eternal. But the observant Jew accepts the arbitrary nature of some commandments as the way things are. Why? Because God wants us to.

If that answer doesn't satisfy, consider this one. For a Jew who keeps kosher, every meal, every snack, every shopping trip forces her to consider the nature of what she is eating, the how and the why of it. And the consequences that creates goes far beyond the "how many calories, how many grams of fat" of the compulsive dieter. A *kashrui*-observing Jew is brought face-to-face with his belief in the Almighty every time he lifts a fork to his mouth or puts a box of cereal in his shopping cart to achieve that complete sense of connectedness to the Holy, an extra set of dishes seems a small price to pay.

Ultimately, this consciousness of the presence of the Ineffable is achieved by separating the world into the pure and impure, the sacred and the ordinary. The division between *kasher* and *treif*, the separations of *niddah* are like the *Hallelukah* blessing that clothes each Shabbat. We

**Editorial:** Greenstein, former professor of Bible at Jewish Theological Seminary now teaching at Tel Aviv University, offers a possible answer "in the initial act of creation, God established categories, classes of things; species like cats grow before Shor, the multi-yearling Biblical commandment and a student of Rabbi's, who suggested a ban on all hybrids," "Do not sow your orchard with two kinds [of itself], take the sum of the seed which you have sown and the produce of the orchard become connected." In short, by combining or crossbreeding species, humans usurp the act of creation by making something that the first Creator did not.

## NOTES

1. The quick answer to these questions is simply yes, turning on an electrical appliance is considered in the same realm as lighting a fire, so it is prohibited on the Sabbath because it is not visible to the human eye. Egg's DNA used in gene-splicing is not considered *chayim* (alive), unless a Talmudic practice rubbers that the Anglo-Americans of *min-hadim* *may* *not* *kill* *the* *few* *that* *are* *not* *of* *us* (where there is no brain activity, life is considered over (although this last issue is a source of considerable disagreement).

2. The answer to this question—who authorized a rabbi to issue rulings—is a simple

upon the next generation of the rabbinate. During the Roman occupation of Palestine,

3. Despite its sectarian, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the governing body of Reform Judaism in the United States, does hold its member congregations to certain standards. They rejected an application for membership submitted by a "humanistic" congregation in Cincinnati whose services rejected all mention of God to the extent that the *Shema* was actually omitted from their liturgy.

4. Ironically, one of the primary tenets of Modern Orthodoxy, that one can and should balance secular and religious studies, is a source of the movement's marginalization. The most promising scholars to emerge from Modern Orthodox institutions like Yeshiva

University are pursuing careers in the secular world, in everything from the sciences to business and politics. As a result, even YU's faculty has taken on a more ultra-Orthodox flavor; after all, it's the ultra-Orthodox professor that are turning out most of the Orthodox rabbinate today.

6. This positive attitude is circumscribed by an important proviso: traditionally, Jewish valorizes sex between a man and woman who are married to one another. To find a sex-friendly attitude towards gay and lesbian relationships, one must look to the Reform and Reconstructionist movements.

7. To offer one example of the interpretations that result from the inclusion of by-products and meat-derived elements, there has been considerable debate in the Orthodox community over the use of gelatin, since it uses meat by-products in its manufacture.

8. On the other hand, the twelfth-century Bible commentator Joseph Bekton, Storr argued that the entire passage has been misunderstood. He wrote that the word translated as "seethe" or "boil" actually means "to ripen or become mature." Taken in context with the first part of the sentence, about offering first fruits as a sacrifice to Adonai, he says, the correct reading of the sentence is that you will not allow a hind to mature from its mother's milk but will offer it to God while it is still young.

9. In one of the most convincing arguments, Maimonides holds that the observance of *kashruth* serves as a kind of discipline that "accustoms us to restrain both the growth of desire and the disposition to consider the pleasure of eating and drinking as the end of man's existence."

## CHAPTER 5

*In the Beginning:  
The Hebrew Bible*

## THE TANAKH

The *pentateuch* is more closely studied than the Bible, but everything in Jewish law and lore, belief and worship, proceeds from the Bible, especially from the first five books of the Bible, the *Torah*, the Five Books of Moses. The first five books of the Bible are also known as the *Pentateuch*, a word derived from the Greek meaning 'five pieces', and the *hamsa* (חמשה), derived from the Hebrew word for five.

The Bible a book with many names, as *such* a work that is potent in form and cosmic in scope. In the rabbinic literature it is referred to as *Ha Sifrut*/*the books*, a name that echoes its English name, derived from the Greek *to biblia* the book. From ancient Israel through the medieval period, Jews would also call it *Sifre HaKodesh* *the Holy Books* or *Kivrei HaKodesh* *the Holy Writings*. Today, it is commonly called the *Tanakh*, an acronym derived from the Hebrew initials of each of its three parts: as Jews divide the book: Torah, *Nevi'im* *the Prophets*, and *Ketuvim* *the Writings*. Occasionally it is called the *Mikra Proclamation*, because it is read aloud in public in the synagogue.

One thing Jews most definitely do not call it is "the Old Testament," an appellation applied by Christians in distinction from their Scriptures, "the New Testament." Such a label implies that the Hebrew Bible has been superseded by its Christian successor; in fact, the doctrine that