



## **TOLMM WEEKLY NEWSLETTER for 6-17-23 SHELACH LECHA**

### ***Ministry News***

***IF YOU HAVE A PRAYER REQUEST YOU WOULD LIKE PEOPLE ON THE LIST TO PRAY FOR YOU CAN SEND THEM TO US AT [TOLMM@ETZ-CHAYIM.ORG](mailto:TOLMM@ETZ-CHAYIM.ORG) OR BY TEXT MESSAGE TO 575 644-7706 AND I WILL SEND THEM BY EMAIL ONLY.***

Remember that you can support the work of Tree of Life Messianic Ministries with a donation made via PayPal or by check to PO Box 467, Organ, NM 88052. Your donation helps our continued outreach to inmates and the time it takes to put this Newsletter together.

**Donate**



**Tree of Life Messianic Ministries is an approved Giving Charity by PayPal. To donate go to [etz-chayim.org](http://etz-chayim.org) and click on the PayPal Link.**

**Tree of Life Messianic Ministries primarily focuses on its Prison Ministry and helping form groups in the prisons. TOLMM also seeks to help Home Groups and offers a covering for Home Groups and the combined experience of leadership**

from Rabbi Philip Hammond and Rabbi Mordecai Silver. Group leaders can receive recognition as Elders under TOLMM, which will help in an advisory role. Your support is needed for the Prison Ministry due to continuing rising costs. We now have an Affiliate in Australia.

## ***HOME GROUPS, CONGREGATIONS AND PEOPLE SEEKING FELLOWSHIP..***

Shawn Warren lives in Arizona. If you know of someone who is looking for a group in that area, please let me know and I will send the information to Shawn. Elder Shawn Warren is an Elder affiliated with TOLMM and helps with one-on-one correspondence with inmates in our Prison Ministry Outreach. He also encourages people to contact us about affiliating with TOLMM through Home Groups and our help to group leaders.

Gabriel Martinez has a home group in El Paso. If interested let me know and I will send him the information. Gabriel is an Elder affiliated with TOLMM as is his Home Group, Ohr Ha'Brit Messianic Torah Assembly.

There is a new Home Group in Las Cruces. For more information email [tolmm@etz-chayim.org](mailto:tolmm@etz-chayim.org).

Michael and Gayle Michelucci are forming a new Home Group in Idaho.

Rabbi Phillip Hammond has a Zoom Bible Study and a Erev Shabbat and Shabbat Service on Zoom Friday evening and Saturday morning at 11:00am. Rabbi Hammond is in Australia and the time difference would be 5:00pm Friday Mountain Time. Rabbi Hammond is looking into starting a men's group focused in the United States. You can contact Rabbi Hammond at [Philip@etz-chayim.org](mailto:Philip@etz-chayim.org). Rabbi Hammond is now affiliated with Rabbi Mordecai Silver and his ministry, Tree of Life Messianic Ministries. Check out Rabbi Hammond at <https://www.etz-chayim.org/australia-affiliate/>.

We thank you for your support. Blessings in Messiah Yeshua, Rabbi Mordecai Silver, Ph. D., and Rabbi Philip Hammond, Ph.D. and our team

## ***General News***

TO SEARCH FOR MY BOOKS ON AMAZON ENTER “**BOOKS BY RAV MORDECAI SILVER**”. MINE ARE AVAILABLE IN PRINT FORMAT ONLY. I HAVE TWO NEW BOOKS ON AMAZON: RAV SHA’UL AND REFLECTIONS ON TORAH. TO SEE MORDECAI’S BOOKS, GO TO: [HTTPS://WWW.ETZ-CHAYIM.ORG/SHOP-OUR-STORE/PRINT-AND-KINDLE-BOOKS/](https://www.etz-chayim.org/shop-our-store/print-and-kindle-books/)

FOR RABBI HAMMOND’S BOOK GO TO AMAZON.COM AS WELL.

CHECK OUT RABBI MORDECAI SILVER’S 3 YEARS OF VIDEO TEACHINGS ON THE TORAH PORTIONS AND FESTIVALS ON YOUTUBE.

WE HAVE 7 PRISON AFFILIATES THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES.

# **MESSIANIC TEACHING ON THE WEEKLY TORAH, HAFTARAH, AND APOSTOLIC SCRIPTURE PORTIONS...**



Rabbi Mordecai Silver [tolmm@etz-chayim.org](mailto:tolmm@etz-chayim.org)

## **MESSAGE FOR 6-17-23 SHELACH LECHA**

*Sh'lach L'cha – Send for Yourself*  
*Numbers 13:1-15:41*  
*Joshua 2:1-24*  
*Hebrews 3:7-4:1*

*Numbers 14:1-4 Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. And all the children of Yisrael grumbled against Mosheh and against Aharon, and all the congregation said to them, “If only we had died in the land of Mitsrayim! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! (Be careful of what you ask for) “And why is Adonai – the Lord bringing us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become prey? Would it not be better for us to turn back to Mitsrayim?” And they said to each other, “Let us appoint a leader, and let us turn back to Mitsrayim.”*

Isn't that always the easy way out? Get a leader for yourselves who will do what you want, not what God wants. If we would butt out and let God lead us; things would be a whole lot easier.

"The sky is falling!" they shouted. Well not quite, but when the ten spies who went to examine the Land of Israel brought back stories of mighty enemies, they threw a confident nation into sheer terror. It is almost inconceivable that a nation that saw a sea split, and Egypt humbled would cringe in terror -- because of reports of giants and fortified cities in their new country. The Midrash details the episode. Upon returning to the Jewish camp the ten spies dispersed among their own families and began to complain. "Woe is to us!" they cried. "Our daughters will be taken captive, our sons murdered, and our possessions looted!"

Neighbor to neighbor, the tales spread, and within hours, the entire nation was in a rebellious uproar, ignoring the positive reports that Caleb and Yehoshua brought back. They even besieged Moshe, demanding to return to Egypt.

The Torah details the Jews' reaction to the tales of gloom. Yet, it seems that it was not the tales of fortified cities or the sight of mutated-looking giant fruits or even the actual giants themselves that caused the Jews to lament. The way the story is related, the actual wailing and rebellion occurred only after an interesting detail. The spies described the giant men whom they encountered and the way they felt during that experience. **"And there we saw the sons of giants; we felt in our own eyes like grasshoppers next to them" (Numbers 13:33)**. Immediately, the next verse tells us, **"The entire assembly raised up their voices and wept that night, saying if only we had died in the land of Egypt or in the wilderness!" (Numbers 14:1-3)** It seems that the final words of the spies, **"we felt in our own eyes like grasshoppers next to them,"** set up this tragic and futile reaction. Why?

Let me share with you the following story:

Yankel, one of Warsaw's poorer folks, received a first-class train ticket from a wealthy cousin to visit him in Lodz. Yankel arrived at the station clutching his ticket tightly. He never took a train before and had no idea where to go. He spotted some well-dressed individuals and just knew he was not sitting with them. Then in the far corner of the waiting room he noticed a group of vagrants with packs on their shoulders, their eyes shifting back and forth. Yankel wandered toward them, figuring that their place was his. The first-class passengers began to board but the vagrants still waited. All of a sudden, the whistle blew, and the train began to move. The vagabonds quickly jumped

aboard the baggage car, Yankel following in pursuit. He crawled into the dark car and lay with them underneath a pile of suitcases, still clutching his ticket in fear. He endured the bumps and heat of the baggage car and figured that such was his fate until the door of the baggage compartment flew open and a burly conductor flanked by two policemen entered. They began moving suitcases and bags until they spotted poor Yankel and some of his newfound friends cowering in a corner.

The large conductor loomed over them and asked with a sneer in his voice, "can I see your tickets?"

Yankel looked up from his coat to see the officers staring at him. He emerged from the group, shaking, and presented the ticket that he had been clutching ever so tightly during the entire ordeal.

The conductor looked at it carefully and then began to laugh hysterically.

"Young man," he barked, "you have a first-class ticket! What are you doing here lying with these vagrants in the baggage compartment? When you have a first-class ticket, you ought to act like a first-class passenger!"

In Joshua 2:9-11 we read about what following God is all about:

***And she – Rahab said to the men, “I know that Adonai – the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away because of you. “For we have heard how Adonai – the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Mitsrayim, and what you did to the two sovereigns of the Amorites who were beyond the Yarden, Sihon and Og, whom you put under the ban. “And when we heard, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in anyone because of you, for Adonai – the Lord your Elohim, He is Elohim in the heavens above and on earth beneath.***

She believed in God more than the children of Israel did, more than some of us do today.

The Jewish nation had no fear of giant fruit or giant men. They knew they had leaders that could overcome any obstacle. After all, Moshe led them across the Red Sea. Yehoshua and Chur helped defeat Amalek. But when they heard the ten spies' - princes of the tribes -- claim that they felt like insects they knew that they had no chance to conquer the land of Israel. They had nothing left to do but cry. Because if you are holding the first-class ticket but act as if you are a second-class citizen then your ticket is worthless.

The giant fruit, fortified cities, and powerful giants - all tiny acorns compared to the power of the Almighty - suddenly loomed large. And the sky began to fall on a self-pitying nation that was led by self-pitying leaders. And with the falling sky, fell the dreams, hopes, and aspirations of a generation that once yearned to dwell in the land of their forefathers. The Jewish nation was left to ponder that message for 40 years in the desert and perhaps thousands of years in the Diaspora.

Listen to what it says in **Hebrews 3:8-4:1**

*Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tried Me, proved Me, and saw My works forty years. "Therefore, I was grieved with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.' "As I swore in My wrath, 'If they shall enter into My rest..." Look out, brothers, lest there be in any of you a wicked heart of unbelief in falling away from the living Elohim, but encourage one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened by the deceivableness of sin. For we have become partakers of Messiah if we hold fast the beginning of our trust firm to the end, while it is said, "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." For whom, having heard, rebelled? Was it not all who came out of Mitsrayim, led by Mosheh? And with whom was He grieved forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter into His rest, but to those who did not obey? So, we see that they were unable to enter in because of unbelief. Therefore, since a promise remains of entering into His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it.*

That is what happens when sons and daughters of the Living God, covered by the blood of Messiah Y'shua, with first-class tickets to paradise, think that they are tiny grasshoppers holding tickets to nowhere.

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We include a Traditional Torah Commentary and my Messianic Commentary. The reason for this is so you can see a Messianic Perspective and a Traditional Jewish one. Remember to use discernment in approaching Traditional Jewish teachings as they do not recognize Yeshua as the Messiah. There are various ideas in traditional Jewish circles about the Messiah and even that there is no

Messiah, the thinking in Reform Judaism. So, please be careful to balance the teachings.

We do not agree with the Jewish position on Yeshua, but Believers need to know the Jewish thinking on Yeshua and not buy into this thinking and forsake faith in our Messiah. For those who say they would never do this, we must beg to differ, because we have seen it over our lives as Jewish Believer's in Yeshua. We have been Believer's in Messiah Yeshua for decades. We have seen a lot and had many discussions with our fellow Jews and non-Jews who ultimately turned away from Yeshua because they steeped themselves in Jewish teachings. One does not come out of either traditional Judaism or Christianity and come into the Messianic walk, and then going back, or into, traditional Judaism. *There are many good things in Judaism but denying Yeshua as Messiah is not one of them.* Berachot (Blessings), Rabbi Mordecai Silver, Ph.D., and Rabbi Philip Hammond, Ph.D.

## **A TRADITIONAL JEWISH PARASHAH AND HAFTARAH COMMENTARY**



### **Parashat Sh'lach Lecha: Summary** **Numbers 13:1-15:41**

***Moses sends scouts to explore the Land of Israel; ten of them convince the people that it will be too difficult to conquer the land.***

After the Levites are appointed caretakers of the Dwelling Place for God and the Sanctuary is anointed, God says to Moses, "Send out men to explore the land of Canaan which I am giving to the sons of Israel."



Each of the tribes of Israel sent a leader for the exploration. Moses said to these explorers, "See if the land is good or bad, fertile or lean. Are the people strong or weak, few or numerous? Are the cities opened or fortified?"

Since it was the time for grapes to be in season, the explorers went as far as the Valley of the Grapes. They cut down a cluster of grapes and gathered pomegranates and figs. They returned from spying at the end of 40 days. They showed Moshe and Aaron and the entire community the fruit of the land and said, "We came into the land and it is indeed flowing with milk and honey. But the people that dwell in the land are too strong, and the cities are greatly fortified."

Caleb spoke up to silence the people, "We can go in and take possession of the land. We are able to do it." But the men who had gone with him did not agree and retorted, "We cannot go against these people. They are giants and we are but grasshoppers."

The entire community raised its voice and the people wept throughout the night. They railed against Moses and Aaron. "We would rather have died in Egypt than to have come here to this land to be fallen by a sword. Let us go back to Egypt."

Moses and Aaron fell upon their faces before the whole assembly of the community of the sons of Israel. Joshua, son of Nun, and Caleb, son of Yefunneh, both spies sent into the land, tore their garment in mourning and then said to everyone, "The land we explored was good land, very good land. If God is pleased with us, God shall bring us into this land and give it to us, a land truly flowing with milk and honey. We must not rebel against God. These people of the land are not to be feared, for they are our bread. Their protection has parted from them, for God is with us. We need not fear them."

But the entire community said to pelt them with stones until the glory of God appeared to all the Children of Israel in the Tent of Appointed Meeting. God said to Moses, "How long will these people provoke Me? How long will they put no faith in Me despite all the signs that I have performed in their midst? I will smite them with the plague and annihilate them."

Moses said to God, "The people of this land will hear that you are the God who brought us out of the land of Egypt and the God who steers the people with a cloud. What will they say if you kill us? Will they say that you were not powerful enough to bring the people into the Promised Land?"

"Therefore, let it be as You once uttered it, God, 'The Lord, slow to anger, abundant in kindness; Forgiver of iniquity and transgression who cleanses, but does not clean completely, recalling the iniquity of parents upon children to the third and fourth generations.' Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt."

God said, "I will forgive, but let it be known that all those who have seen My glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness and who have still chosen to spurn me shall not see this Promised Land. But My servants Caleb and Joshua were imbued with a different spirit and

remained loyal to Me. I will bring them into the land and their offspring shall hold it as a possession.

“As for the rest of you who scouted the land, I heard your murmuring of revolt against Me. Your corpses will fall in this wilderness and only your children will enter the land. But first your sons shall wander about in this desert for forty years, one year for every day the scouts were exploring. Then everyone shall know what it means to thwart Me.”

And so it came to be that the scouts who spread lies about the land died suddenly before God. Only Joshua, son of Nun, and Caleb, son of Yefuneh, survived.

God told Moses to instruct the Israelites that upon entering the land they are to give offerings to God and are to remember, throughout all generations, that strangers who enter their land shall be equal with them before God. There is one standard for everyone.

Moses continued with God’s instructions: In this land, you shall make a gift to the Lord from the first yield of your baking.

If you don’t heed these commandments, then the whole community must prepare for atonement. If an individual sins, then a personal offering must be made. Acts of inadvertence will be forgiven. But for the citizen or stranger who rebukes God, that person shall be cut off from his people. The person shall be cut off with his guilt.

Once the Israelites were in the wilderness, they came upon a man gathering wood on the Sabbath. When he was brought before Moses, Aaron and the community, God ordered the man to be stoned to death.

Then God said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to make fringes on the corners of their garments with a cord of sky-blue. Each thread shall remind you of the commandments of the Lord. They shall remind you to remain holy to your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God.”

## **Parashat Sh’lach Discussion Questions**

**1) Why do you think the people continue to not trust in God after all the miracles God has performed for them? Do you ever lose your trust in God? Why?**

**2) Why do you think it is important to have one standard before God for citizen and stranger alike? Do you treat people differently if they are strangers or are from a different culture or religion or country?**

**3) Why would gathering wood on the Sabbath cause a penalty of death?**

# Haftarah for Sh'lach Lecha Joshua 2:1-24

## *Two spies tour Jericho.*

In *Parashat Sh'lach* Moses sends 12 spies into the Land of Israel to gather information that will make the Israelites more enthusiastic about entering the Promised Land. The spies are also charged with scouting out the land for military purposes.

In the haftarah for Sh'lach, Joshua is continuing the mission that Moses began planning a military crusade to conquer the land. Joshua sends two spies into the city of Jericho to survey the region and assess the military options. The spies lodge with a prostitute named Rahab, who lives along the wall built around the city.

Somehow, the king of Jericho is alerted that there are Israelite spies in his city and orders Rahab to produce the men she is hiding. Luckily, Rahab is able to hide the men on her roof while her home is being searched. She successfully convinces the king that the spies have already left and can be caught if the king's men give chase.

Once the king's men are gone, Rahab goes up to the roof to speak with the spies. She tells them that she heard about the miracles God performed for the People of Israel, and she believes in the Israelite God. This is why she protected the Israelite men and turned against her own king. Then she demands that she and her family be spared when the Israelites attack Jericho and requests some kind of sign that to prove that her family will not be harmed.

The men promise to protect Rahab and her family and climb out of her window to safety. As they are leaving, they tell Rahab to leave a crimson cord hanging outside her window. The cord will mark her home as a safe house, and everyone inside it will be spared from harm, but anyone who ventures out of her house will be taking his life into his own hands.

When the spies return to the Israelite camp and report to Joshua they say, "The Lord has delivered the whole land into our power; in fact, all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before us" (2:24).

## **Spies and Cords**

There are obvious parallels between this week's parashah and haftarah, since both are stories of spies who are sent out to survey land that the Israelites have been promised by God. Much of the language used in the book of Joshua is very similar to the language in Numbers. However, while Moses sends 12 spies, and 10 of them come back quaking in fear of the giants they saw in the land, Joshua sent only two spies, who returned with a message of confidence.

Additionally, the structure of the Torah portion and the haftarah are very similar. The Torah reading begins with the spies being sent into Israel, and ends with the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, or fringed garments. God instructs the people to put fringes on the corners of all of their four cornered garments. The fringes are meant to be a deterrent for sin: "Look at it and recall the

commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not follow your hear and eyes in your lustful urge.” ([Numbers 15:39](#))

The haftarah also begins with spies being sent into Israel, and also ends with a symbolic string: the crimson cord that Rahab must hang out of her window in order to be spared when the Israelites attack. Like tzitzit, this cord will remind invading Israelites to curb their vengeful or lusty desires.



## ***From the Desk of Rabbi Philip Hammond***

### **LIFE IS WHAT IT IS ??**

#### **Democracy offers no stability!**

One of the most used words on the present political scene is ***democracy***. It was the so-called reason behind the “Arab Spring”. It is promoted as the answer to the “ills” of this present world, and is the system of government that the “Western Countries” operate under. There is little argument that this system has brought wealth and prosperity to most democratic countries. Yet we now witness the demise of these countries. The debt level of Western World countries is mind blowing, and if it was a private business that operated in this fashion it would have had to close its doors long ago. The attitudes and behaviour of people in the Western World is also on a downhill slide. The reliance on legal and illegal drugs is at an all-time high. Murder is almost an hourly occurrence in some countries, with

most experiencing close to one murder each and every day. Domestic abuse is rampant and whilst most is aimed at women and children, men are also abused. Civil disobedience is very high in many quarters and there are specialised riot police, swat teams, terrorist response teams and many other specialised units to handle the ever-growing violence in our societies. These behaviours are taking place under the “Democratic system”, so does “democracy” guarantee us the stability and peace its supporters claim?

I suggest we view the term democracy as a computer. Democracy only returns what people put into it. So, democracy as a system can change dramatically due to significant changes in people’s world views. Consider the following description given by Abraham Lincoln: **“Government of the people, by the people, for the people.”** Democracy is known as a system whereby the majority rule. This means that the decisions made by Government are according to the opinions and morals of the people at any given time, thus change and instability are very possible. For instance, the change of thought on homosexual relationships is vastly different to what it was 50 years ago. A vote for homosexual marriage 50 years ago would have been met with a resounding NO. The situation is very different within democratic countries today, where the vote is fast leaning towards a YES. Movies that would have been banned 50 years ago would be put into the PG category today. Imagine having men and women enter the same “rest rooms” 50 years ago. Anyone over the age of 50 will be able to list things that were illegal when they were children that are now legal. The morals of societies change and with this change goes stability.

Let us briefly look at an example of this shifting tide of morals. In Australia we have our leftist politicians insisting that a program called “Safe Schools” be implemented at every level of education including primary schools. The “authors” of this program describe it as follows: **“Safe Schools Coalition Victoria works with schools to tackle homophobia and transphobia, and to create safer educational environments for same sex attracted, intersex, and gender diverse students, teachers and families.”**

This program is introduced into our education systems as a program against bullying. Granted bullying is a problem, but this program fails to address the problem of everyday bullying. Instead, this program focuses on an agenda pushing transgender and homosexual lifestyles as completely normal and one that should be welcomed by all. The material found in this program and the

suggested links would be looked at as extreme adult material 50 years ago. The Australian Christian Lobby list some topics discussed within this program; they are:

***“Teach girls to bind their chests so their breasts won’t develop. Encourage students cross-dressing. Teach kids gay and lesbian sexual techniques. Encourage kids to use either boys’ or girls’ toilets. Integrate gender theory and sexual themes across all subjects.”***

Some of the material presented is very explicit and is far from appropriate in our schools let alone primary schools. At present our federal Government is against the program, but the State of Victoria has introduced it into the Victorian education system. This is an example of how changing morals can cause instability within a democratic system. Our children are confused and are caught in the middle of this change in attitudes.

History shows if people are left to their own devices on governing themselves, they will eventually end up in decay and destroy themselves. Democracy is not the answer to a vibrant, stable, and healthy society because democracy relies on the morals of the society, if the morals decline then the society declines. I dare say if ISIS held democratic elections within their “members”, then those members would democratically vote for the present system. So, in fact this could be called a democratic society.

People do not want to face the fact that the only system that guarantees a stable society is the system outlined in the bible. The answer for a stable, vibrant and healthy society is found within the instructions of the Holy One of Israel, not democracy.

Rabbi Philip [Yochanan] Hammond. PhD.

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# ***Insights into Judaism***



## **The Tattoo Taboo in Judaism**

***Body ink is a no-no, but it won't bar you from Jewish life.***

The Jewish world has a longstanding aversion to tattoos. Even among largely secular Jews, the taboo against body ink remains powerful — a disinclination attributed both to the tattooing of concentration camp inmates during the Holocaust and the myth that tattooed Jews can't be buried in a Jewish cemetery. As tattooing has grown increasingly mainstream in recent years, some Jews have even embraced it as a way to honor ancestors tattooed by the Nazis.

While some liberal Jews have taken a fresh look at the topic, across the range of Jewish thought and practice, tattoos are still overwhelmingly perceived as inconsistent with the teachings of Jewish tradition.

**Do tattoos violate Jewish law?**

Most rabbis say yes. Their objection traces to [Leviticus 19.28](#), which states: “You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead, or incise any marks on yourselves: I am the LORD.” The Hebrew phrase *k'tovet ka'aka* (כתבת קעקע), here rendered as incision, is also sometimes translated as “tattoo.” According to the biblical commentator Rashi, the phrase refers to a kind of permanent, un-erasable writing engraved on the skin.

There is some debate about the source of this prohibition, but many commentators see it as rooted in a desire to distinguish Jews from idolators, some of whose practices involved the marking of skin as a sign of devotion to pagan deities. As a result, some have suggested that the Torah's prohibition on tattoos is not absolute but applies only to those markings associated with idol worship. However, Orthodox, Conservative and Reform authorities all agree that Leviticus and subsequent Jewish tradition reject the practice of tattooing outright.

Within the Reform movement, there are some signs of a more lenient approach. While officially the movement's rabbinic leaders have rejected tattooing as “an act of hubris and manipulation that most surely runs counter to the letter and spirit of our tradition,” the rabbis admit that their verdict is “subjective and laced with ambiguity.” In 2014, Reform Judaism magazine ran a cover story on tattoos, in which several Jews described their motivations for getting Jewish-

themed body art. Rabbi Marshal Klaven, a tattooed Reform rabbi in Texas who wrote his rabbinical thesis on tattoos, argues that tattoos that affirm one's Jewishness and connection to Jewish tradition would not seem to be prohibited.

### Can I be buried in a Jewish cemetery if I have a tattoo?

This is so common a misperception that it has seeped into the wider culture, referenced by Larry David in an episode of "Curb Your Enthusiasm" and prompting even the New York Times to consider the question. It is totally false. Though some individual Jewish burial societies may decline to bury tattooed Jews, the practice does not appear to be a common one and there is nothing in Jewish law that calls for denying a Jewish burial to an individual with a tattoo. Even the remains of Amy Winehouse, the heavily tattooed British Jewish singer who was cremated (another violation of Jewish law) after her death in 2011, were interred in a Jewish cemetery in London.

### What about other Jewish rituals? Is having a tattoo grounds for exclusion?

No. Rabbi Alan Lucas, the author of the 1997 Conservative movement opinion on tattooing, asserts that those who violate the prohibition on tattooing should still be permitted to participate fully in synagogue life. As a rule, transgressing a particular commandment does not result in one's exclusion from synagogue life. While some traditional communities might find it unseemly for a member with a visible tattoo to lead services or read from the Torah, there is nothing in Jewish law that requires someone be excluded. "It's not different than a person who's in violation of any prohibition in the Torah," Rabbi Mark Dratch, executive vice president of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America, tells MJL.

### What about medical tattoos?

Medical tattoos are used to indicate the bearer's medical condition or to identify a location on the body for a medical procedure. For cancer patients, tattoos are sometimes used to indicate the proper alignment of radiation equipment. When a life is at stake, nearly all Jewish laws can be violated, a concept called pikuach nefesh. In cases where there are alternatives, such as using markers, the permissibility of these types of medical tattoos is a matter of some dispute. However, if a tattoo is required for a life-saving procedure, it is permitted.

Tattoos are also sometimes used following reconstructive surgery. After a mastectomy, for instance, doctors occasionally use tattoos to enhance the natural appearance of breast reconstruction. The Reform movement specifically exempted these kinds of procedures from their ruling opposing tattoos. Among Orthodox authorities, the legal ramifications of such procedures remain a source of debate, though there is support for the idea that radical disfigurement that impedes normal social interaction constitutes a kind of intense psychic pain that might justify suspending the prohibition on tattoos.

### Didn't the ancient Hebrews engage in tattooing?

There are a number of biblical references to marking the body as a sign of connection to God. Nili Fox, a professor of Bible at the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College, has



highlighted several biblical passages that mention body marking as signs of God’s covenant with the Jewish people, though she acknowledges these may be merely “literary devices.” Nevertheless, among defenders of tattooing, these references are taken as evidence that Jewish tradition is less hostile to tattoos than the verse in Leviticus alone would suggest.

Should I have my tattoo removed?

There does not appear to be a requirement that one who has a tattoo should have it removed, though some have suggested that removal could be seen as a symbolic act of rectifying the original transgression. However, certain methods of tattoo removal, including plastic surgery or the injection of dyes that have the effect of covering up a tattoo, may themselves be violations of Jewish law.

## ***PRAYER & SPIRITUALITY***



### **Mitzvah: A Commandment**

***There are 613, not just 10, commandments, or mitzvot.***

One often hears someone Jewish saying, “It’s a mitzvah!” usually referring to a charitable, beneficial act performed by another person. However, the Hebrew word mitzvah does not mean “a good deed” in that sense.

Mitzvah literally means “commandment.” In fact, Jewish tradition understands exactly 613 *mitzvot* (plural of mitzvah) to be derived from the Hebrew Bible. The 613 are listed in Maimonides’ *Sefer Hamitzvot* (Book of the Commandments), divided into “positive” (things one is required to do) and “negative” (things one may not do) commandments.

It is not simply a “good deed,” for example, to refrain from murdering or stealing. And similarly, the mitzvot that deal with feeding the poor, acting kindly to the stranger, or observing the Sabbath are much more significant in the Jewish tradition than mere divine suggestions on how to be good. Mitzvot are commandments, traditionally understood to come from God and to be intended for the Jewish people to observe.

Those of us who live in the Western world are often uncomfortable with the idea of being “commanded” to do something, because it seems to deprive us of the right to choose how we behave. In fact, the Torah itself says that when God gave the commandments, God declared:

**Behold, I have set before you the blessing [of observing the commandments] and the curse [the potential punishment for failing to observe the mitzvot] — therefore, choose life!**

It seems that even God recognized that the Jews had a choice in the matter — and was clearly hinting at the right choice.

But why should the biblical Israelites have bothered to accept and observe the mitzvot? After God rescued the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, God expected that the Israelites would in turn observe the mitzvot in eternal, loving gratitude for this redemption. Yet, gratitude only goes so far, especially when it comes to observing such commandments as keeping kosher (dietary laws) or Shabbat (resting and not working on the Sabbath day). For the past 3,000 or so years, every generation of Jews, rabbis, and scholars, has analyzed and argued about exactly why the Jewish people should continue to observe the mitzvot.

And it is not just 613 mitzvot that we are talking about! Even after the historical era of the Hebrew Bible, generations of rabbis continued to update, adapt, and generate new, more modern commandments — all understood to be derived from the original 613 in the Torah. Today, Jews no longer practice animal sacrifices or give agricultural gifts to a hereditary class of priests, yet there are modern mitzvot (often the subject of ideological controversy) that deal with questions relating to organ donation, the *kashrut* (fitness for eating) of organic fruits and vegetables, and interfaith relations. Mitzvot deal with every aspect of how one should go about leading a Jewish life.

### Why Observe the Mitzvot?

The Torah generally explains that the Jewish people should observe the mitzvot simply because God commanded us to do so, or because of the potential negative consequences that would result from non-compliance. Other thinkers have endeavored to prove that the mitzvot are all completely rational, logical actions which any moral and ethical people would welcome. Still others claim that the commandments actually improve us as human beings, refining us as upright and just people, or that doing God’s commandments actually has a cosmic effect upon the spiritual fabric of all creation. And some thinkers even reject the importance of asking this question entirely, arguing that the only legitimate reason for the performance of mitzvot is in order to obey God’s commandments and fulfill our part in the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

Some people observe the mitzvot because it helps them to identify and feel a part of the larger Jewish community, others because they believe themselves to be commanded to do so, and still others simply because it is pleasurable, a joy, to celebrate the Jewish holidays and home rituals. But whatever reason motivates someone to observe the commandments is, in Jewish

tradition, less important than the actual performing of the mitzvot themselves: One might say that the “deed” is more important than the “creed.” That is, how we behave in this world, towards our fellow human beings and the world we live in, is ultimately of more importance than what we may believe. In the final analysis, the mitzvot are a uniquely Jewish approach to living a holy life in this world.

**עֵבְרִי - Hebrew**

**Word (s) of the Week**

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי רַחֲמוֹם וְחַנּוּן

**Yehovah El Rah-hoom Vi-Cha-nuhn**

**Yehovah God Merciful and Compassionate**



**A Taste of Jewish Humor**

Jacob and John are walking to school one day and Jacob is describing his new PlayStation 2 to John. "Where did you get that?" John asked, "I got it last night for Chanukah," said Jacob.

"What's Chanukah?" John asked.

"It's the Jewish holiday where we get presents every night for eight nights to celebrate the festival of lights."

"Wow, I wish we got that!" John exclaimed.

The next day on the way to school John runs up to Jacob, curious to see what he got. He sees that Jacob is upset, "What's wrong? Where's your present from last night?" asks John.

Jacob holds up a ball of crumpled wrapping paper, "It was leftovers night."



## ***This is not your Bubbie's Chicken Soup***

### **Pastrami Puff Pastry Braid Recipe**

***Deli meats slathered in Russian dressing and wrapped in puff pastry -- now just a touch fancier.***

Are you a deli roll lover? You know deli roll – the beloved Jewish American dish where various deli meats and Russian dressing get all wrapped up inside puff pastry for a guilt-inducing Shabbat lunch dish. It's almost like a deli sandwich–knish hybrid.

I never grew up eating deli roll, but when I tried it at a friend's house many years ago, I simultaneously thought this is so unhealthy and yet I just want more. And so, it was just a matter of time before I worked on my own version.

This pastrami strudel braid is just a *tad* fancier than your average deli roll, with the sides cut and folded up to create a braid-like top. I brushed the top with egg wash and sprinkled on some

caraway seeds, but you could also add sesame seeds or poppy seeds (or nothing at all) if caraway isn't your thing.

## Ingredients

2 sheets puff pastry, thawed in the fridge for 2 hours and then left at room temperature for 20 minutes

1/2 lb sliced pastrami (can also use corned beef or a combination)

2/3 cup sauerkraut, drained

1/2 cup mayonnaise

3 Tbsp ketchup

1 Tbsp relish

dash worcestershire sauce

dash of hot sauce

spicy brown mustard

1 egg, beaten

caraway seeds (optional)

## Directions

Pre-heat oven to 400 degrees.

Line a baking sheet with parchment paper or silpat.

In a small bowl mix together mayonnaise, ketchup, relish worcestershire sauce and hot sauce. Add mustard if desired.

Remove each sheet of puff pastry and place on work surface. Make slits in the bottom and the top. (see video).

Spread thin layer of sauce on bottom. Top with 1/4 lb of pastrami. Add 1/3 cup sauerkraut.

Cut equal size and number of strips along each side. Fold strips up and across the filling, forming a "braid." (see video)

Repeat with other piece of puff pastry.

Brush each strudel braid with egg wash. Top with caraway seeds if desired.

Bake for 24-27 minutes, until golden on top. Allow to cool. Can be reheated when ready to serve.

*Yields 2 pastrami strudel braids.*

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