

WINNING JEWS TO CHRIST

A Handbook to Aid Christians in their Approach to the Jews

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE LAWS AND CUSTOMS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

The KITZUR SHULCHAN ARUCH (Condensed Code of Laws), the popular guide to Jewish living, starts out with the motto: **“I have set the Lord always before me”** (Psalm 16:8), and goes on saying that the consciousness of God’s omnipresence will assuredly keep the Jew from sin and indecency. It says that a man standing before a king will be very careful that his every action, every movement, every word be pleasing to his Majesty.

Thus, with this precept in mind, the life of the religious Jew is governed in all its phases, during all his waking hours. As soon as he awakens from his night’s sleep he recites: “I thank Thee, O eternal King, because Thou hast graciously restored my soul to me, great is Thy faithfulness.”

Then begins his service of God, not only by the daily prayers, in the morning and evening, and the various benedictions prescribed for the various sorts of food, and the various experiences, but also, almost every action of his, is to be performed punctiliously in accord with the tradition: What to wear, and how to dress; how to wash, when to wash; what to eat, when to eat and how to eat. Even his private natural needs, he is to satisfy according to prescription.

And most of his actions, whether of profane or sacred nature, are preceded and followed by a set of benedictions or some pious formula. This religious life, as if always aware of the presence of the King-Creator, is to go on incessantly during all conscious life — “from the cradle to the grave.”

Some of the Jewish customs and usages are based on some biblical precepts, and others came into Jewish life by certain historical experiences, and these, too, have been sanctioned by some passage, or word, in the Bible, which the rabbis have cleverly adapted. But some usages of doubtful origin, even if infiltrated from heathen sources, have been sanctioned by long years of practice. The popular saying is: “A custom breaks the law” — meaning that the observance of the custom nullifies the law (which it breaks) and is, thus, to be preferred. The custom is given the prerogative.

Present-day Jewry which is in a state of religious transition and perplexity has become skeptical about the traditions of the rabbis and fathers, including some old hallowed usages. Yet most of the people still cling to certain laws and customs purely from sentimental motives.

To these belong the rites or ceremonies of Circumcision, Bar-Mitzvah, Marriage, Mourning, Lighting of Sabbath Candles, Kosher, the “Seder” on the Eve of Passover and some others. Of all these only circumcision is built on and about the solid rock of divine command.

We shall try to acquaint our readers with the most important usages which are still generally observed, although less rigidly and with some minor variations by various groups.

CIRCUMCISION

The oldest and most sacred of Jewish rites is circumcision (*Milah*). It is the removal of the foreskin of the male organ by means of cutting. It is called *brith* or *brith milah*, or *brith Abraham*, i.e. the Abrahamic Covenant (see Genesis 17:9-14, and Leviticus 12:3). This rite has been preserved most faithfully all through the ages.

Originally every father actually circumcised his child, but in course of time every Jewish Community had a professional operator Mohel — Circumciser. This rite which is performed on the eighth day after the child’s birth is accompanied with various impressive ceremonies.

We wonder whether some of these ceremonies and recitations were not introduced by the early Christians who still circumcised their children at the synagogue. Many of these rites are symbolic of the Messiah and the New Covenant as recorded in the New Testament. When the child is brought in for circumcision the congregations call out: “**Blessed be he who comes in the name of God.**”

Then the child is placed on a chair which is called the “Throne of Elijah.” Elijah, according to the rabbis, is the “Angel of the Covenant” of Malachi 3:23. The “Mohel” recites a prayer which begins: “This is the throne of Elijah . . . For Thy salvation, O Lord, I have waited. . . .”

Then comes the recitation and benediction over a goblet of wine. The Godfather (*Sandak*) drinks of the wine, inserts a few drops of it into the mouth of the infant, and the remainder is sent to the mother. It is at this rite when the infant is given a Hebrew name, which will henceforth be used as legal or ritual name although it may be supplemented by an additional non-Hebrew name.

At the conclusion of the rite a prayer is recited wherein are the following significant lines:

“May the All-merciful, regardful of the merit of them that are akin by the blood of the circumcision, send us *His Messiah*, walking in His integrity, to bring good tidings and consolation to the people that is scattered and dispersed among the Peoples. . . . May the All-merciful, send us the Righteous Priest who remains withdrawn in concealment, until a throne, bright as the sun and the diamond, shall be prepared for Him, the prophet who covered His face with His mantle and wrapped Himself therein, with whom our covenant was made in life and peace. . . . May the All-merciful make us worthy of the days of the Messiah, and of the life of the world to come.”

Here the Messiah, the Righteous Priest, (even the Angel of the Covenant), is one and the same person—as Jesus was understood to be, by His early Jewish followers, and which modern Jews fail to recognize, although they have been reciting these and other “Christian” prayers and observing “Christian” rites, as on Passover Eve, for centuries.

Circumcision ceremonies usually conclude with a feast at home or with some “treat” of liquor and cake to the congregation after the morning service.

Girls receive their names about six weeks after their birth, on a Sabbath day, when the father is called to the Bemah in the synagogue (to be one of the eight persons) to recite the usual benedictions over a subsection of the weekly portion read from the scroll of the Torah. Then the father requests the precentor, or the “Gabbai,” to dedicate a special blessing to his new daughter who is now called by the name the father chooses for her. Whereupon the congregation responds with: “*Mazaltov*” (“Good Luck”).

(No ceremonies, no feasts follow the birth of a female child).

Many of the old customs that had been observed about child birth, especially during the first week after birth, have lately fallen into disuse because the people became aware of their superstitious nature.

PIDYON HABEN (Redemption of the First Born Son)

According to the Bible (Exodus 13:2,12-15, and Numbers 18:13-16), the first born male child must be redeemed on the thirty-first day of his birth. Exempt from this duty is the father who is a Kohen (See vocabulary) or a Levi, or if the mother is the daughter of a Kohen or Levi.

If the thirty-first day falls on a Sabbath or holiday the ceremony is postponed to the following day. The main feature of this rite of Redemption is the father’s presenting his child (usually on a silver tray) to the Kohen declaring his wish to redeem him for five shekels in accordance with God’s commandment. (The equivalent of five shekels in our currency is about \$2.50).

After the Kohen has received the redemption money he returns the child to the father, whereupon the father recites certain set benedictions. Then the Kohen holding the money over the head of the child recites:

“This is instead of that, this in commutation of that, this in remission of that. May this child enter into life, into the Law and the fear of Heaven. May it be God’s Will that even as he has been admitted to redemption, so may he enter into the Law, the nuptial canopy, and into good deeds. Amen.”

Then he places his hand over the head of the child and pronounces a blessing which contains also the priestly blessing: “**The Lord bless thee and keep thee, the Lord make His face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee, and give thee peace.**”

After the redemption there is a feast similar to the one following the ceremony of circumcision. Unlike circumcision which all Jews observe, “Redemption of the Son” is falling into disuse.

BAB MITZVAH

(Literally: “Son of Commandment” — “Man of Duty”)

One of the most favorite customs and practices is the “Bar Mitzvah” celebration. As the circumcision rite brings the male child into the “Covenant of Abraham,” thus making him a Jew, so the Bar Mitzvah rites, when he reaches the age of thirteen years, make him a religious, a responsible Jew.

He then becomes a full-fledged member of the Jewish community sharing with it all duties and privileges.

On the first Sabbath of his fourteenth year, at the morning service in the synagogue, he is called up to read a part of the weekly portion of the Torah and the weekly portion of the prophets (“Haftarah”). These are preceded and concluded by his reciting certain benedictions. The father who stands by calls out, “Blessed be He who has relieved (freed) me from the responsibility of this child’s doing.”

From that time on the boy has attained ritual maturity. He may now be one of a Minyan (a ten men quorum needed for “congregation” service). He may then lead the congregation in prayer, read the Torah and perform all religious duties which a mature Jew may perform. The ceremony at the synagogue is usually followed by festivities at home when the boy gives an address on some biblical or Talmudic theme, and gladly inspects the presents his friends and relatives have brought him.

Like most of the Jewish customs the Bar Mitzvah, too, has no biblical basis and there is no indication in the Talmudic writings that there existed such a practice. Its existence as a Jewish custom cannot be traced back further than the fourteenth century.

There is no doubt that the “Bar Mitzvah” came into being as a Jewish religious institution, as a result of Christian influences and corresponds to the rite of Confirmation in the church (See Dembitz, *Services in Synagogue and Home*, p. 263, and *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, p. 32).

Christian confirmation rites have had still more influence on the “liberal” or “Reform” Jews, who include also girls in the rites of confirmation. A girl celebrating such ceremonies is called Bath-Mitzvah (i.e. “Daughter of Commandment”).

This innovation is not in harmony with rabbinic law which does not expect women to perform religious obligations, and thus girls are not to be subjected to “Mitzvah” ceremonies. There are only three Affirmative Commandments which Jewish women are expected to observe. They are Challah (See vocabulary), Niddah and the Kindling of the Sabbath Candles.

But (we may say) liberal Judaism does not have to differentiate between male and female Jews, because neither is expected to keep the various ritual laws, and both sexes ignore them alike.

MARRIAGE

The age of marriage among Jews is usually the same as among their non-Jewish neighbors, although the Jewish code, “Shulchan Aruch,” states: “Every Jewish man should marry at eighteen, and he who marries earlier is more meritorious. No one, however, should marry earlier than thirteen years of age.”

The restrictions in selecting a spouse on account of affinity, chastity, religion are about the same as are among Christians, excepting that a Kohen (Aaronite, or priestly descent) may not marry a divorced woman (see Leviticus 21:6, 7,14). During the Middle Ages, up to modern times, marriages have been arranged by professional marriage brokers (match-makers — *Shadchan*). This profession is not altogether extinct. Even here in America, many a Jewish marriage was made possible by the “Shadchan,” although it may have a more modern name.

The nuptial ceremony is performed by a rabbi, under a canopy (*chuppah*), made of silk or satin, supported by four staves (one on each corner) and held by the guests (4). Sometimes a *tallith* (a praying shawl) is used instead of the silk covering. The act of marriage is called *kiddushin* (sanctification).

The main ceremony is the groom’s placing a ring, without stone, upon the forefinger of the right hand of the bride and saying: “*Thou art sanctified (consecrated) unto me by this ring according to the law of Moses and Israel.*”

The consecration by ring originated in medieval times, as a substitute for the coin by which marriages were originally consummated. The groom then places a glass on the ground and breaks it with his foot, after which the guests shout joyfully, “*Mazal tov — mazal tov*” good luck, good luck. The breaking of the glass is doubtless of some ancient pagan origin. It is interpreted as a reminder of the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem.

This ceremony is preceded by various recitations and benedictions. One of the benedictions which the officiating rabbi recites over a cup of wine, ends with: “. . . Blessed art thou, O Lord, who sanctifiest thy people Israel by the (rite of the) canopy and the covenant of wedlock.”

Both groom and bride drink some drops of this wine. Much time of the ceremony is occupied by the reading of the “Kethubah” or marriage contract, wherein the customary obligations of married life are specified, and in particular the settlement on the wife of a certain amount payable at her husband’s death or on her being divorced. The “Kethubah” is retained by the wife. This contract is written in Aramaic — the language of the Talmud and the Targums.

Bride and groom are expected to fast on the day of their marriage as a mark of their penitence for sins they committed up to that day, so that they may start together a God-fearing, pious life.

After the ceremony, which is usually conducted at the synagogue, a feast is held at home accompanied by set prayers and singing of customary songs — usually of a religious nature.

THE “GET” (Bill of Divorce)

The Jewish divorce laws are based on the Mosaic Law: **“When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man’s wife”** (Deuteronomy 24:1, 2).

According to this passage the right of divorce was granted to the husband with no provision of the same right to the wife. But the *Kethubah* (marriage contract) which stipulates a dowry in case of divorce tends to prevent the abuse of the husband’s privilege. Today the Jewish divorce laws are about the same as are customary in the Western world.

The later rabbinic laws governing divorce have, undoubtedly, been influenced by the principles expressed in the New Testament about the equality of rights of man and woman, husband and wife.

Like the *Kethubah*, the Get, too, is written in Aramaic, but the Get is handwritten on parchment, as are the passages in the *Mezuzah* and in *Tephillin*, as well as are the Scrolls of the Torah. The Get is always conducted in the presence of a *Minyan*, a religious quorum of ten men. The main features of the bill are the place, the date, the names of the parties, the signatures of the witnesses, and the phrases which express separation in unequivocal terms.

CHALITZAH (“Drawing Off”)

According to Leviticus 18:16; 20:21, and Deuteronomy 25: 5-10, a brother of the man who died leaving a widow but no children, is obliged to marry this widow. This is known as “Levirate marriage,” or in Hebrew: “*Yibum*.” If the brother refuses to marry the widow, she is to report the matter to the Rabbinate, which then calls the brother and in the presence of three judges, usually the Rabbi and chief officers of the congregation, the *Chalitzah* ceremony is performed.

The important feature of this ceremony is: The widow “draws off” the shoe of her brother-in-law, whereupon she spits into his face and calls out: “So shall it be done to the man that will not build up his brother’s house.”

In course of time the practice of Levirate marriage has become objectionable especially in Christian countries where polygamy was outlawed (by a decree of Rabbi Gershom Ben Judah, 960-1028), * so that only Chalitzah has to be performed to release the widow’s brother-in-law of his obligation to marry her.

*** Oriental Jews, in opposition to Ashkenazi Jews, don’t feel themselves obliged to practice monogamy and thus as their non-Christian neighbors may marry more than one wife.**

SOME OF THE RITES AND CEREMONIES (CUSTOMS) IN JEWISH LIFE CONCERNING DEATH

On hearing of the death of a relative the Jew is to recite “God has given, God has taken, Blessed be the Truthful Judge.”

At the death of a near relative, the rite of *K'ria'ah*, Rending of Garment, is performed as an outward sign of grief. Usually after the coffin is lowered into the grave, a cut, or tear, is made at the lapel of the outer garment. If for some reason the relative was not then at the cemetery, he is to rend the garment as soon as he hears of the death.

The *Chevrah Kadishah* (Holy Association) is an organization which every Jewish community has to care for the funeral rites. Their members are at the deathbed to recite with the dying person the *vidui* (confession), and after the death occurs they cleanse the corpse (*taharah*) and shroud it (*in tachrichin*) and accompany it (*l'vayah*) to the cemetery where they bury it with the customary rites.

Every Jew in the neighborhood feels it his duty to accompany the funeral procession, at least a part of the way, to “extend to the deceased last honor.” During the procession, collectors of free will offering go about chanting: “Charity saves from death” (Proverbs 10:2; 11:9).

Jews of priestly descent (*kohen*) are not allowed to come near the dead, nor enter the cemetery.

In the belief that the resurrection will take place only in the Holy Land, some Jews place some earth brought from Palestine under the body in the coffin.

The dead are usually buried shrouded in plain white linen, and in a plain board coffin. This simple attire and coffin is to emphasize the equality of all men in death (See Job 1:21).

The *Kaddish*, an old prayer, written in the Aramaic language, sanctifying the name of God, was adapted during the late Middle Ages (for some reason) as a prayer for the dead. The recitation of the *Kaddish* by the mourners at the services in the synagogue has, according to the rabbis, the efficacy of redeeming or, at least allaying the dead from suffering in Gehenom (See vocabulary).

It is recited by the mourners at the grave, and all through the mourning year (the eleven months after the departure) at the daily services. Then it is repeated on every anniversary of the death — the so-called *Yarzeit*. During *Yarzeit* as well as during *Shiva'a* a “soul-candle” is to burn at home, all night and day.

Mourning. The first seven days (*Shiva'a*) the mourner is confined to his home, where he is to sit on the floor. Since he may not leave his home, Jewish neighbors, friends or passersby come in to form a *Minyan* for the daily services. During the *Shiva'a* the mourner may not perform any manual labor or business transactions. During the “Seven Days” he is not permitted to wear shoes, to cut his hair, or shave or take a bath, nor anything that may afford him pleasure, not even to study sacred books, except those that arouse sadness and grief, as the book of Job and similar writings. During these days people come in to console him.

The usual formula of Consolation is, or starts with, “May God comfort you with all those who mourn for Zion and Jerusalem.”

Certain restrictions of mourning are continued through the first month (*Shlosim* — 30 days of mourning), and some restrictions go on for the whole of the first year (keep away from music and all forms of entertainment).

Another occasion of hallowing the memory of the dead, is the so-called *Yizkor* (“May He remember”), or *Mazkir Neshamoth* — a memorial service conducted during the public service in the synagogue on Yom Kippur, and on the last day of Pesach and Succoth.

Many Jews, especially women, even such as do not usually attend synagogue, are present at this Memorial Prayer. There are set prayers for various relatives. For the father, for instance, the prayer is: “May God remember the soul of our honored father (here comes his name and the name of the father’s father) who is gone to his repose, for that, I now solemnly offer charity for his sake; in reward of this, may his soul enjoy eternal life, with the souls of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, and the rest of the righteous males and females that are in Paradise; and let us say, Amen.”

Non-mourners leave the room while these prayers are recited and return when they are over. It is believed that the departed souls (of the near kin) are present in the synagogue at that prayer. Non-relatives might be harmed if present.

Those of the less-observant mourners, especially women, leave the synagogue soon after *Yizkor*.

(There is heart-rending weeping and sobbing during this prayer).

KOSHER

Kosher, means “fit,” “suitable.” In Jewish lore it refers to food which is ritually fit to be eaten. When food is not kosher it is *treif* or *treifa*, signifying “unfit” (taboo) for Jewish consumption. The laws governing the ritual fitness of food are called *Kashruth*.

Now this *Kashruth*, it may truly be said, is the center and circumference of modern observant Judaism. It occupies the greatest part of Jewish home life and practices, and it provides the greatest part of the income of the Jewish hierarchy.

Rabbis, Ritual Slaughterers, Kosher butchers, various supervisors (inspectors) make their livelihood by maintaining these laws. These laws, which are “innumerable,” have no real biblical foundation. Moses, the Jewish lawgiver, as codified in the Pentateuch, if he were to look at *Kashruth* would not be able to understand or recognize any of them as “Jewish.”

All this multitude of peculiar practices is built around the Scriptural commandment: “**Thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother’s milk**” (Exodus 23:19; 34:26, and repeated again in Deuteronomy 14:21).

The rabbis have made this kid stand for all kinds of meat-products, and its mother's milk for all dairy products, and nothing that comes from meat could be mixed with anything that comes from milk. The strict separation between the two involves not only separate utensils, as pots and pans, plates, knives, spoons, etc., but also washbasins, tablecloths and napkins. The extremely pious even have separate sculleries and ranges.

Thus every Jewish household has three sets of vessels; one set for meats and meat products, one for milk and milk products, and a third for neutral foods as fruit, vegetables and also fish. Besides these three sets, there are three separate sets for the Passover when nothing that had been used for or had touched unleaven bread could be used during the eight days of Passover.

After a Jew eats meat he is to wait at least six hours before he may eat any milk products, because, as the rabbis have figured out, it takes six hours before meat is digested, so if some milky food reaches the stomach before the meat is fully digested they may unlawfully mix there. Milk is supposed to digest within half an hour, so meat may be eaten half an hour after milk has been consumed.

Meat is considered as Kosher, not just if it comes from a Kosher animal according to Mosaic Law (Leviticus 11), but has also been killed ritually by a specially qualified *Shochet* (Slaughterer), and then passed scrupulous scrutiny of the flesh, to see if the animal was not diseased.

Then certain "unclean" parts must be removed before the meat is pronounced as Kosher. The Kosher inspector then affixes a seal indicating its fitness. But even then there are certain rigid requirements to be fulfilled to make the meat fit to be eaten. Every drop of blood is to be extracted from it. This is done by first soaking it in water for a certain specified time, then salt is sprinkled on it and so it is to stand for a specified time; then it is carefully rinsed and placed on a draining board or grate till it is thoroughly drained. Then only is it ready for cooking, and as said previously, in specially "meaty" ("fleishig") vessels. If some dairy products, or a utensil (let us say — a spoon) once used for dairy products happens to come in contact with the meat, then the meat as well as the vessels containing it are "treif" and ritually unfit for use.

The Kosher laws involve also various other practices and inhibitions; for example, bread is considered as Kosher only after a part of the dough from which it is made has been separated and ritually burned (see *Challah*). Another example: wine that a Gentile had touched is no longer Kosher.

Strict observance of *Kashruth* becomes rarer day by day. Yet this is still considered as the most important part of what is called Judaism. The other important part of Judaism is the heap of Sabbath laws, which, too, have only a faint basis in Scriptural Judaism, and which, too, are rapidly falling into disuse.

Take away these man-made food laws and Sabbath laws from "Judaism," and next to nothing is left of rabbinic Judaism.

MISCELLANEOUS

There are also innumerable customs connected with the various feasts and fast days, and occasions of various private or family events. Mention may be made here that special articles of food are being prepared for each holiday, as well as special food being provided for the Sabbath (*Chulent, Kugel, Gefllte fish*). (On Pesach — Kneidlach, matze-braten, and on Purim, Haman Tashen, etc.).

Another peculiar custom may be mentioned: The perpetual covering of the head. While the Jewish married woman must have her head covered for the sake of decency, the man, too, must cover his head for some unknown reason. This custom is not mentioned in ancient Jewish literature.

The Bible speaks of a head cover only for the priest as part of his official garb.

Yet the orthodox Jew considers bareheadedness as a serious breach of Judaism, so he is careful to have on a small skull cap, a “*cappel*” or “*yarmulka*,” when for some reason he has to take off his larger head-dress. With modern orthodox Jews the *yarmulka* has become the only outward sign and symbol of Judaism. Old-fashioned Jews still cling to their typically “Jewish” garb besides their untrimmed beard and sidelocks (*peoth*) which distinguish them as Jews, different than *goyim* (Gentiles).

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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