

Our Spiritual Compass

*Blessed are they whose ways are blameless,
who walk according to the law of the LORD.*

*Blessed are they who keep his statutes
and seek him with all their heart. —Psalm 119:1–2*

Since ancient times, when travelers relied on the stars and sun to navigate, our ability to plot a course has vastly improved. Today, cars can be equipped with GPS systems that allow you to input an address and then be guided turn by turn by a computerized voice of your choice. Smart phones also employ GPS technology to allow you to locate banks, restaurants, and gas stations, and to check out traffic as you travel the highways. Just plug in your location and all that information is at your fingertips.

No doubt new and even more sophisticated technologies will be developed to make finding our way even easier in the years ahead. But if you are looking for directions for life, the ultimate guidance system has been the same for thousands of years. For Jews and Christians alike, God's word *is* the definitive source of wisdom, hope, inspiration, and encouragement for every life situation.

Quite frankly, the Bible is, perhaps, the greatest point of commonality that we have as Jews and Christians. Beyond being a historical record of the nation of Israel and the Jewish people, the Scriptures have provided a spiritual compass for **both** Jews and Christians for thousands of years. Jews and Christians share a love and reverence for the *Tanach* (the Jewish Bible, or what Christians refer to as the Old Testament), which has guided both communities for centuries and served as the cornerstone of Western Civilization.

In fact, we more than likely agree that that key to preserving our biblical values—both in the home and in our society—is in studying God's Word. We cannot expect the next generation to exemplify and live out our biblical values if we don't live them out ourselves. As people of God, we need to reorient ourselves to our spiritual compass and immerse ourselves in continually learning God's Word.

Finally, we must pass our spiritual values on to the next generation. The Bible exhorts us to teach God's Word and laws diligently to our children. How do we do that? Again, the Bible is very clear: *"Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up"* (Deuteronomy 6:7).

We need to be absorbed in God's Word always, at every moment—whether we are in the car, at the mall, in our business, or at home. Then, by model and witness, we set the spiritual compass for our children in a way that they know is real and relevant.

My Prized Possession

*The fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever.
The ordinances of the LORD are sure
and altogether righteous.*

*They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the comb.—Psalm 19:9–10*

The question is sometimes asked: If your house were burning to the ground, what possessions would you grab before running to safety? Would it be your family photo album, your heirloom jewelry, the DVDs of your children growing up, or your computer laptop that has *all* your most important information? Whatever your answer may be to that question, undoubtedly you would grab the item (or items) of most value to you.

In Psalm 19, David reveals what is most valuable to him—God’s Word. In describing God’s “ordinances,” which are “sure and altogether righteous,” he says they are worth more than gold—even the finest gold—and sweeter to the soul’s spirit than the very best honey. No doubt this is what David would most likely rescue from the fiery flames.

In the Jewish tradition, we show how much we value God’s word by the way we treat the Bible. For example, we kiss the Torah if it falls on the floor; we bury it in a cemetery when it is old and torn; and we always treat the name and word of God with awe and respect.

This is the concept of holiness—what we call *kedusha* in Hebrew—that the Bible stresses. In fact, while the Bible tells us to do many things—not steal, observe the Sabbath, honor our parents, and so forth—in only one instance does it command us to a state of *being*—to be holy. In God’s instructions to Moses and the people of Israel, he says, “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2).

But what does this mean? To be holy means to be separate, set apart, different. In the Jewish view, the Sabbath is holy because it is separate from all other days. A synagogue is holy because it contains the Torah, God’s Word, which is holy. And although a Torah is but an animal hide, once we write God’s name and Word on it, it now becomes holy and needs to be treated as such.

So, how do you treat God’s Word? In what way do you “set apart” the Bible to show that it is different from other books in your home? How do you value and treasure this holy book from God? Consider how

you can reflect the psalm writer's words: *"The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold"* (Psalm 119:72).

The Highest Goal

*Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light for my path.*—Psalm 119:105

What are your goals? Maybe it's losing 10 pounds this year, or exercising five hours each week. Maybe it's to cross off a few items on your "bucket list." Or maybe your goals are more financially oriented—to save \$50 every paycheck, or to pay off your debt by the end of the year.

But what about your spiritual goals?

For the Jew, studying the Bible is one of the loftiest spiritual pursuits we can undertake. Our love for God is linked with our love for His Word. Each day we pray, "With an eternal love hast Thou loved Thy people, the house of Israel; Torah, commandments, good deeds, and laws hast Thou imparted to us. Therefore, O LORD our God, when we lie down and when we rise up, we will ponder thy laws and rejoice in the words of the Torah and commandments. For they are our lives and the length of our days and upon them we will meditate day and night."

Study of the Bible orders our daily lives and gives us the focus and inspiration that we need each day. It is the Torah (which literally means "teachings") that brings solace, inner strength, and spiritual fulfillment to the Jew, in good times and in bad. It is the Torah that guides our path, shapes our character, and links us with God. It is the Torah that enables us to truly know God.

By immersing ourselves in the sacred act of Bible study, we can come to better understand both the content and source of that divine Word. For this reason, Jewish education and the study of the Torah is one of the most important *mitzvot*, or religious duties, in all of the Jewish faith.

Simply put, it is our highest goal for our spiritual lives.

Psalm 119, the longest Psalm and longest chapter in the Bible, is a praise song and tribute to God's word. It is a wonderful meditation on the beauty of God's Word and how it helps us stay pure and grow in faith. Why not make it your goal to read through and meditate on Psalm 119 in the coming days? Write down all the many ways that God's Word is a lamp to your feet and a light to your path.

People of the Book

Oh, how I love your law!

I meditate on it all day long.

Your commands make me wiser than my enemies,

for they are ever with me.—Psalm 119:97–98

Sometimes a group of people gain a reputation for widely held practices or beliefs. For example, Southerners are known for their hospitality and friendliness, Midwesterners for being down-to-earth, and Easterners for their fast-paced, driven lifestyle. But did you know that we Jews, particularly Orthodox Jews, are known as the “people of the book”?

That reputation has been earned largely because of our long-standing belief that the Bible is eternally valid and utterly authoritative. We believe, like many of our Christian brothers and sisters, that the Bible is the actual embodiment of God’s word. We believe it was divinely transmitted and the primary source of God Himself. It is, in the words of the Jewish liturgy, “given to the children of Israel from the mouth of God through the hand of Moses.”

And even though it was given at a particular time in history, God’s word is valid for *all* time and in *every* circumstance. Further, we believe that the word of God is complete. Everything needed for life and our spiritual growth can be derived from it. Psalm 19:8 instructs, “*The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.*” God’s word literally gives us the ability to see—His will, His laws, and His ways.

Still, we sometimes allow excuses to keep us from studying God’s Word. We don’t have enough time to fit it in, or we don’t know how to get started. Or we fear we won’t be able to understand everything we read. But as God told the people of Israel, “*Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. . . . No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it*” (Deuteronomy 30:11–14).

As “people of the Book,” Jew and Christian alike, we really have no excuses: God’s word is clearly written in the Bible and evident in the world around us. It is not too difficult for us. All we need to do is obey.

What one step can you take today to earn a reputation as one of God’s “people of the book”?

A Reason to Rejoice

Praise the LORD.

*Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,
who finds great delight in his commands. —Psalm 112:1*

Everybody loves a party, especially when we have a reason to celebrate—the birth of a child, a marriage, a graduation or job promotion, a special holiday or birthday. But have you ever celebrated reading through the Bible?

Every year, we Jews celebrate *Simchat Torah*, which literally means “rejoicing in the Torah.” It is a celebration of the completion of reading through the Torah over the previous year. You see, every Sabbath in synagogues around the world, Jews participate in public readings of the Torah, which comprises the first five books of the Bible. We begin with Genesis Chapter 1, and finish with Deuteronomy’s closing words. When the annual cycle of readings is completed, it’s time to celebrate! And then we begin the annual cycle all over again.

And, indeed, it is a joyous celebration. All the Torah scrolls are taken out of the Ark and carried around the sanctuary seven times. There’s singing and dancing, and everyone is involved, from our eldest member to our children, who lead the procession.

Simchat Torah not only is a demonstration of love of God’s Word and our gratefulness to God for giving us the gift of the Bible, but it also is a reminder for us that learning and studying God’s Word never ends—it is a lifelong process because there is always more to understand. In fact, the Hebrew term for a great Torah scholar is *talmid chakham*, which means “wise student.”

But you don’t need to complete a set reading to rejoice in God’s Word. In Psalm 112, the psalmist gives us plenty of reasons to celebrate when we “delight” in God’s Word. Consider just a few of the reasons he gives: our children will be successful and an entire generation will be blessed (v. 2); we will enjoy prosperity and a reputation of righteousness (v. 3); we will not be fearful because we trust in the LORD (v. 4); and we’ll enjoy honor and influence (v.9).

Take some time this week to reflect on the benefits you have received from spending time in God’s Word. Celebrate the many reasons you have to rejoice!