



15

Shema Israel

Bible Correspondance Course



Life with God

What is Truth?

A strange question perhaps, yet one that expresses both our confusion and our skepticism regarding truth. Confusion, because with a multiplicity of religions and a diversity of beliefs around us we may genuinely wonder, “*Where is the truth?*” Skepticism, for it suggests that truth does not exist; in fact, there really is no objective truth.

The Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, answers the question clearly. “*Hashem, God is the truth*” (Jeremiah 10:10; literal translation). For the Bible then, truth does exist; truth *is* association with God Himself. In fact, truth, *Emeth*, in the Hebrew language, is one of the 13 attributes of God. It falls seventh in the list in the exact center of the 13 attributes listed in Exodus 34:6; literal translation, a passage that is recited in the liturgies of Rosh Ha-Shanah Yom Kippur (Jewish New Year, Day of Attonement).

If truth is identified with God’s character, it does not come from us but is to be found outside of us – in God. This recognition implies that in order to find the truth we should not approach it with the preconceived idea that we know what the truth is. Instead, we should approach the truth with a question, “*What is it?*” This is the very same question, in fact, the ancient Israelites asked when confronted with the *manna*, the bread of God in the wilderness. “*What is it?*” they asked, and the question gave the name to this heavenly bread, for the Hebrew word *manna* means “*What is it?*” The meaning of the word *manna* suggests an important lesson regarding how we should approach Biblical truth. We should approach it with the question: “*What is it? What is truth?*” We should approach it with the same humble and honest mindset as the ancient Israelites approached the *manna* in the wilderness, asking “*What is it?*” Asking the question from this frame of reference no longer suggests confusion or skepticism. Instead, it implies sincere questioning from one who expects a true answer from above.

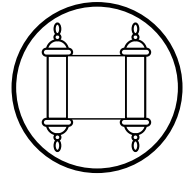
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BIBLE STUDY – Lesson # 15*

Life with God



notes

Choosing Life with God

Who can speak rightly about life with God? There are so many ways of living with God, so many religions. It is troubling that all these religions refer to the same God, the God of life, the Creator, and yet live so differently. How can we account for this multiplicity of beliefs? All the more, this claim to the “unique” God, far too often has degenerated into intolerance, inquisitions and crusades. This unique God is *my* God. Only *my* story is the right one. You have to do it *my* way. If not, I’ll kill you.

The first example of this way of thinking was expressed by Cain, who killed Abel precisely because his brother did not do it his way. Is there here a lesson on behalf of pluralism? Should we say yes to the many ways—even to the bad way, the wrong way? Paradoxically, the reason for this intolerance and for these many ways lies in the fact that religion has become a culture, a mere human expression of some vague wisdom. We have forgotten in the process that the best way, the only way indeed to live with God, is to let God live with us. The way to God is God’s way to us. So understood, life with God becomes an adventure, a journey, where we only know the one with whom we walk but we do not know where we will go.

**Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New International Reader’s Version of the Bible, Copyright 1998, by the Zondervan Corporation.*

1. What choice did God grant to Adam and then ultimately to Israel?

The Lord God gave the man a command. He said, "You can eat the fruit of any tree that is in the garden. But you must not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you do, you can be sure that you will die" (Genesis 2:16-17).

Today I'm giving you a choice. You can have life and success. Or you can have death and harm (Deuteronomy 30:15).

2. Why is life with God the choice for life?

You have the fountain of life. We are filled with light because you give us light (Psalm 36:9). (cf. Deuteronomy 30:20)

3. What way of life does the choice for life imply?

There is life in doing what is right. Along that path you will never die (Proverbs 12:28). (cf. Deuteronomy 30:16, 20)

- "Fish die when they are out of the water, so do people die when they are without the Torah and the Mitzwoth" (*Abodah Zarah* 3).

4. Why is ethics an important ingredient of our religious life?

You are a holynation. The Lord your God has set you apart for himself. He has chosen you to be his special treasure (Deuteronomy 7:6). (cf. vs. 11; Leviticus 22:31)

- “He who does a moral act associates himself with God in His creative work” (*Shabbat* 10a).
- “Judaism is not only ethical, but ethics constitutes its essence, its nature, its beginning, its middle, and its end” (*Midrash Tanhuma, wayishlah*).

5. Why is health an important ingredient of our religious life?

He said, “I am the Lord your God. Listen carefully to my voice. Do what is right in my eyes. Pay attention to my commands. Obey all of my rules. If you do, I will not send on you any of the sicknesses I sent on the Egyptians. I am the Lord who heals you” (Exodus 15:26). (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:19)

- “Respect your body as the receptacle, the messenger and the instrument of the Spirit” (Rabbi Samuel Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters of Judaism*).

6. Why is spiritual life a biological necessity?

When you send your Spirit, you create them. You give new life to the earth (Psalm 104:30).

- The Hebrew word *ruah* mean both “*the breath*” that refers to the principle of biological life and “*spirit*” that refers to the principle of spiritual life.

7. Why should we pray?

During the day the Lord sends his love to me. During the night I sing about him. I say a prayer to the God who gives me life (Psalm 42:9). (cf. Genesis 20:7)

- “Address your prayer to the Master of life and not to His servants; He will hear you in every trouble” (*Y. Berakot 9*).

8. How should we pray?

But they make themselves low in my sight. They pray and look to me. And they turn from their evil ways. Then I will listen to them from heaven. I will forgive their sin. And I will heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).

“When you pray, go into your room. Close the door and pray to your Father, who can’t be seen. He will reward you. Your Father sees what is done secretly. When you pray, do not keep talking on and on the way ungodly people do. They think they will be heard because they talk a lot. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need even before you ask him. This is how you should pray. ‘Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored...’” (Matthew 6:6-9).

- “If a man sees that he has prayed without answer, he should continue praying” (*Berakot* 32).

9. When should we pray?

May he live a long time! May gold from Sheba be given to him. May people always pray for him. May they ask the Lord to bless him all day long (Psalm 72:15). (cf. Psalm 32:6; Daniel 6:13)

- “Let not your prayer be a matter of fixed routine, but heartfelt supplication for mercy at the Divine footstool” (*Mishnah Berakot* 5.1).

10. Why should we study the word of God?

They aren't just useless words for you. They are your very life. If you obey them, you will live in the land for a long time (Deuteronomy 32:46-47). (cf. Proverbs 4:20-23)

- “A student of Torah is like a seed planted within a fertile lump of earth: if it sprouts, it grows” (*Taanit* 4).

11. How should we study the word of God?

“Don't be careless. Instead, be very careful. Don't forget the things your eyes have seen. As long as you live, don't let them slip from your mind. Teach them to your children and their children after them. Remember the day you stood at Mount Horeb. The Lord your God was there. He said to me, “Bring the people to me to hear my words. I want them to learn to have respect for me as long as they live in the land. I want them to teach my words to their children” (Deuteronomy 4:9-10). He replied, “Instead, blessed are those who hear God's word and obey it” (Luke 11:28).

- “The Torah gives life to him who makes use of its light” (*Ketubot*, III).

12. How can we reach the ideal choice of life?

Get rid of all of the evil things you have done. “Let me give you a new heart and a new spirit. Then you will be faithful to me. Why should you die, people of Israel” (Ezekiel 18:31)? (cf. Psalm 51:10-11; John 3:3-5)

13. What will God do for those who decide to choose life?

“This is the covenant I will make with Israel after that time,” announces the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds. I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God. And they will be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33). (cf. Ezekiel 11:19-20)

- “Repentance makes man a new creation; hitherto dead through sin, he is fashioned afresh” (*Midrash Tehillim* 18).

14. What symbolic act in Judaism and in early Christianity has signified this new commitment for choosing life with God?

By being baptized, we were buried with Christ into his death. Christ has been raised from the dead by the Father’s glory. And like Christ we also can live a new life (Romans 6:4).

- “One who sets his heart on becoming clean becomes clean as soon as he has immersed himself, although nothing new has befallen his body” (Maimonides, *Yod Mikvaot*, 11:12).

15. What are the promises that are associated with this choice of life?

I'm commanding you today to love the Lord your God. I'm commanding you to live exactly as he wants you to live. You must obey his commands, rules and laws. Then you will live. Your numbers will increase. The Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to take as your own (Deuteronomy 30:16). (cf. vs. 20)

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even if he dies (John 11:25).

Choosing Life with God¹



notes

The first word of God to the first man concerns a *mitzvah* (commandment). *The Lord God gave the man a command. He said, "You can eat the fruit of any tree that is in the garden. But you must not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you do, you can be sure that you will die"* (Genesis 2:16-17).

The Choice of Life

God made a gift of all the trees in the garden. Man could eat from all of them but one. The first *mitzvah* is then a gift, the grace of freedom. Man was free to choose among thousands of trees in the garden. Only one tree remained outside the borders of this grace, "*the tree of knowledge of good and evil.*" The consequence of choosing this tree was death, the opposite of life. It is significant indeed that at the end, as a result of man's eating from this tree, the text tells us that "*the way to the tree of life*" was now forever shut to humans (Genesis 3:24).

The story of this first human failure contains two lessons. First, man is not free to choose evil without consequences; he is not free to choose to ignore God's will. This observation tells us something about the Biblical understanding of freedom. Free is the one who stays within God's parameters. Free is the one who chooses to walk according to God's guidelines. To choose God is to choose freedom. One can argue further that the one who chooses evil loses

¹ Jacques Doukhan, "Choosing Life with God," Shabbat Shalom, Winter 2001.

his or her freedom to choose. For the one who chooses evil ends up being a slave to something else, and in the process loses his or her identity. Only with God, the Creator, are we able to find ourselves and fulfill our destiny. For as the rabbis used to say: “*Only he is master of himself who lives with God*” (*Abodah Zorah*, 5b).

The second lesson confirms the first. Outside of God, the Creator, the Provider of life, man is bound to die. Choosing evil leads to the loss of one’s life. And if we lose our life we cannot be ourselves anymore, we cannot choose, we cannot be free—simply because we do not exist anymore. The two lessons are therefore related; they are both concerned with life. The text of Deuteronomy that contains the last speech of Moses to Israel seems to be a commentary on this first page of Genesis. As Israel prepares to enter the Promised Land, Moses, who is about to leave this world forever, feels it necessary to remind them of the same great lesson of life: “*Today I’m giving you a choice. You can have life and success. Or you can have death and harm*” (Deuteronomy 30:15). In this passage Moses compares life with good and death with evil. A few verses further he gets more explicit and clearly identifies what good and life are: “*And you will love the Lord your God. You will obey him. You will remain true to him. The Lord is your very life. He will give you many years in the land*” (Deuteronomy 30: 20).

Biblical truth is now spelled out: loving God and obeying His voice amounts to “*life and*

length of days.” To choose God means to choose life. A Psalm of David elaborates on the same thought: *You have the fountain of life. We are filled with light because you give us light* (Psalm 36:9). The very fact that life is associated with light is an indication of how the ancient Hebrews understood the meaning of life. It was not just something to enjoy, it was not a passive state. Instead it was a dynamic way of life, a walk, a path. Light was then associated with the presence of God and more precisely with His directions on the path of existence: *Your word is like a lamp that shows me the way. It is like a light that guides me* (Psalm 119: 105).

In the Hebrew perspective life was found only in the light of God; outside of God is darkness and death. In fact, life with God was understood as a biological necessity. It is significant indeed that the very word that is used to express the idea of spiritual life is the word *ruah*, which means “spirit” but also means “breath.” That is for the Hebrew the very principle of life: *When you send your Spirit, you create them. You give new life to the earth* (Psalm 104:30).

Thus, the very fact that every human being has the *ruah*—we breathe, we are alive—qualifies him or her to be a spiritual being. This linguistic observation not only means that man owes his life to God. God gave man the *ruah*, the breath; God is his creator. It also implies a philosophy of existence. Humans exist only in relationship with God. Humans are spiritual, or they do not exist. This dimension, life with God, is not simply a response to spiritual needs, it is a biological necessity.

Choices in Life

Insofar as we decide to live with God, our life is henceforth conducted and nourished by the awareness of God's presence.

Prayers: Since God is alive and since He is the one on whom my life, my breathing, my biological survival depends, I am in great need to be in a relationship with Him, to be in some mode of communication, whereby He speaks to me and I speak to Him. This phenomenon is called prayer.

The people of the Bible and all their followers have found prayer to be a vital necessity. Prayer concerns my life, even my physical life, because it brings me in touch with “*the God who gives me life*” (Psalm 42: 8). The rabbis of the Talmud recommended to pray “to the Master of life” who “*will hear you in every trouble*” (*Y. Berakot* 9). This is why in Biblical tradition prayers accompany every moment of life: *May people always pray for him. May they ask the Lord to bless him all day long* (Psalm 72:15). Thus, prayer has been compared to the act of breathing. It is always there like breathing, like life.

Yet prayer is not natural. We don't always do it spontaneously. Therefore precisely because it is a dimension of life, it is not just something which should be practiced only in specific circumstances, on the occasion of a crisis, or a moment of trouble. Prayer should also be monitored and organized. Alongside the spontaneous prayers that follow the accidents and the needs of the believers,

the Bible witnesses to a regular program of prayer exercises. The prophet Daniel prayed three times a day (Daniel 6:10, 13). Even if we do not feel the need to pray, we should pray. In fact, this exercise will create and develop a familiarity with God that will have an effect on our daily lives and inspire our choices that ultimately fashion our existence.

Study the Scriptures: The study of the Holy Scriptures that tell the story of the God of Israel at work in the Universe, in the world, in Israel, and in the individual is also an important part of life with God. Exposed to these texts we will learn about the God of life. This lesson is given by Moses at the conclusion of his speech, as he completed the words of the Torah entrusted to him by God: *I finished speaking all of those words to all of the people of Israel. Then I said to the people, "Think carefully about all of the words I have announced to you today. I want you to command your children to be careful to obey all of the words of this law. They aren't just useless words for you. **They are your very life** [emphasis supplied]. If you obey them, you will live in the land for a long time..."* (Deuteronomy 32:45-47). This lesson is taught by the wise man to his disciple: *My son, pay attention to what I say. Listen closely to my words...They are life to those who find them. They are health to your whole body* (Proverbs 4:20-22). It may sound strange that the study of a text, a mere intellectual process, will bring life to its reader. Yet there is no charm in it.

It is not because we read these words and pronounce the right formula that magically we shall become healthy and more alive. It is not the sound of these words that will have an effect on us, but what they mean for us. Indeed these texts, the words of God, contain important instructions for our very lives. Therefore they require our utmost attention. The ancient Jews were acutely aware of this demand since they called the exercise of studying the Scriptures a *Derash*, which means “demand.” The text is under high demand. It’s investigated, it’s squeezed until it gives its juice, it’s searched, and its words will ultimately challenge us, shape us, and make us alive. For it is not enough to hear the words; to study them intellectually we must bring them into our lives. It is noteworthy that the verb *shama*, which means “hear” and introduces the great prayer of Israel “*Shema Israel*,” means also understand and obey. We have not heard as long as we have not understood, we have not understood as long as we have not obeyed. This principle shines through the Israelite response to God’s giving of the Torah: *naaseh venishma*, “*We will do everything the Lord has told us to do. We will obey him*” (or hear or understand, Exodus 24:7). Here the intellectual, spiritual operation of hearing, understanding, proceeds from the doing. It is the bringing of the words into our lives that will help us understand the impact and even the meaning of the Scriptures. The best way, the only efficient way to study and to understand the Scriptures is to run the risk of applying its words in our lives. To study the word means to live by the word.

Ethics: To choose life implies choosing

a way of life that is in conformity with God's law as the book of Proverbs states: *There is life in doing what is right. Along that path you will never die* (Proverbs 12: 28). Biblical religion is therefore not just a beautiful mystique, a profound wisdom, or a well-developed system of doctrines. It is not made of an extraordinary spiritual or emotional experience or an intellectual satisfaction. It is made essentially of concrete choices in the flesh of our existence. Thus, the requirement of holiness that is supposed to elevate us to a supreme state is not a call for leaving this world, this body, or other people. On the contrary, it is an appeal that involves us *with* this world, this body and others. It concerns our way of being, living, eating, drinking, and thinking, but also our way of behaving in society, of relating to our neighbor. Religious life is first of all ethical life. From the Biblical perspective, it is inconceivable to claim to be religious if one entertains unethical acts. Moral acts are a part of religion. As the Talmud points out: *"He who does a moral act associates himself with God in His creative work"* (*Shabbat* 10a). Inversely, immoral acts take us away from God and from religion.

All these requirements which call for difficult choices, often run against our natural inclinations and do not sound like music to our ears. They give the impression that religion is full of interdictions, full of "thou shalt not's," full of negatives. The God of the Bible appears to be a demanding and severe Judge who enjoins His servants to obey Him, and is ready to punish them if they don't. Indeed, religious people have

often witnessed to this God. Emphasizing the negative over the positive, they have given the testimony of a God who was closer to death and sadness than to life and happiness.

It is in fact the opposite. The God of the Bible is the God of life. To choose to live with Him should not lead to sadness and death, but on the contrary to life and joy. All the trees stand before our eyes. It is our duty to pick from them all and to taste from them and fully enjoy them. For they are the Creator's gifts to us. Yet God's big yes is accompanied by a very small no; just one tree over against the thousand trees is kept from our hand. The full enjoyment goes along with some reservation. This tension is described by the book of Ecclesiastes: *Young man, be happy while you are still young. Let your heart be joyful while you are still strong. Do what your heart tells you to do. Go after what your eyes look at. But I want you to know that God will judge you for everything you do* (Ecclesiastes 11:9). It is also interesting that the next verse associates the duty to enjoy life and to keep sorrow far from one's heart with the duty to resist evil: *So drive worry out of your heart. Get rid of all of your troubles* (Ecclesiastes 11:10).

A New Life

This is in fact God's dream for mankind: a holy people, a people that choose to live with God. Yet the question remains, how are we going to become holy and put away evil? How are we going to make it? The answer is simple: Choose life with God, choose "*to walk in His ways always*" (Deuteronomy 19:9)

or in Jeremiah's words, *Ask for the good path, and walk on it* (Jeremiah 6:16). The outcome of this choice is God's promise: "*I will walk among you. I will be your God. And you will be my people* (Leviticus 26:12). Ultimately, by walking among us God will provide us with the means to become His people. Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish said in the Talmud, "*If a man chooses evil, the opportunity is given to him, but God will not help him to do it; if a man chooses God, God will help to do it*" (Shabbat 104a). The Bible describes this life with God as a "new" life, a life that is ensured by God Himself. Choose to walk with Him, and He will walk with you. This reciprocal process of the Biblical covenant transpires in the whole Bible. One of the most eloquent illustrations of this principle is the case of the four Hebrews in the book of Daniel who choose to remain faithful to their God, choose to eat and drink, to live with God (Daniel 1). They followed the divine diet for ten days and as a result they became ten times healthier and wiser than the others. There is a connection between their work and their reward. Yet a few verses further we learn that this wisdom and this health were also a free grace from above. *God gave knowledge and understanding to those four young men. So they understood all kinds of writings and subjects* (Daniel 1:17).

David goes through the same experience. After he chooses to repent and to walk with God, he pleads: *God, create a pure heart in me. Give me a new spirit that is faithful to you* (Psalm 51:10). The Midrash comments on the Psalm, "Repentance makes man a new creation; although dead through sin he

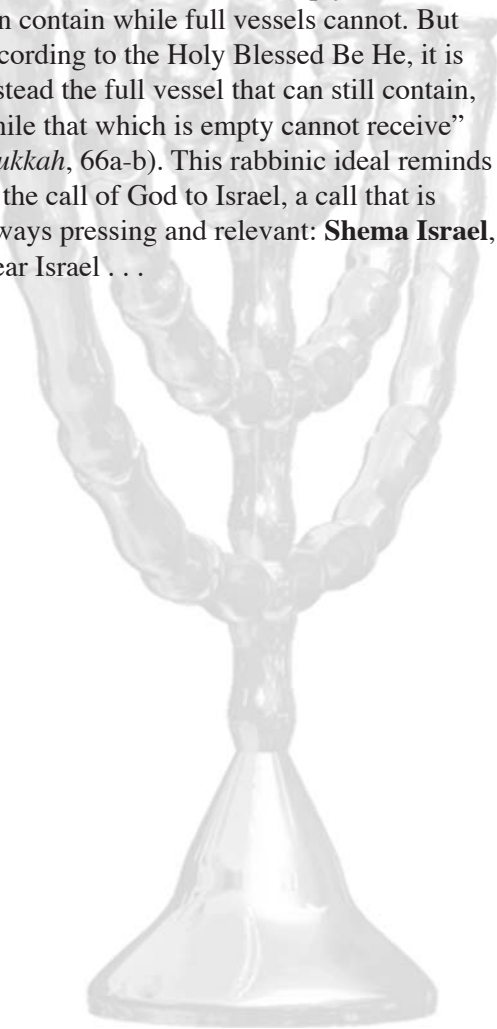
is fashioned afresh” (*Midrash Tehillim* 18).

This miracle is still repeated every morning when we wake up and bless God for resurrecting us from the darkness of the night and the unconsciousness of sleep. The lesson of this miracle is particularly present in the symbolic custom of the *miqveh* whereby the repenting believer plunges into the water, symbol of death and darkness (Genesis 1:2), to signify his or her decision to come out of the water as a clean and new creature. As Maimonides comments, “One who sets his heart on becoming clean becomes clean as soon as he has immersed himself, although nothing new has befallen his body” (Maimonides, *Yad Miqvat*, 11: 12). It is interesting that the same ideas are associated with baptism, as Paul explained: *By being baptized we were buried with Christ into his death. Christ has been raised from the dead by the Father’s glory. And like Christ we also can live a new life* (Romans 6:4). It is then ultimately God who will give us this new life. For only the Creator can do it.

What is Truth, Again?

Having reached the conclusion of the course does not mean that we reached the end of this study. We must always keep our question alive: “what is truth?” We should always be ready to learn. And the more we will learn, the more we will understand that there is still so much to discover and that the infinite lies before us. As scientist Isaac Newton put it “I seem to myself to have been like a child on the seashore finding pebbles and shells, while

the great ocean of truth lay undiscovered before me.”² The same paradox had struck the ancient Rabbis of the Talmud, “the way of the flesh and blood is not like the way of the Holy Blessed Be He. According to the flesh and blood the empty vessels can contain while full vessels cannot. But according to the Holy Blessed Be He, it is instead the full vessel that can still contain, while that which is empty cannot receive” (*Sukkah*, 66a-b). This rabbinic ideal reminds of the call of God to Israel, a call that is always pressing and relevant: **Shema Israel, Hear Israel . . .**



notes

אִישׁ שֶׁשָׁמַר
לְצִוֵּי יְהוָה
יִשְׁמְרֵם וְיִפְדֶּם
מִכָּל צָרָה

מסעי י"ז

"He who keeps instruction is in the way of life."

Proverbs 10:17