

When human beings stamp out coins, each one of them is identical. A Mishnah teaches that God similarly stamps out human being, but each one one is unique.¹ Even genetically identical twins raised in the same environment become unique individuals. This means that the impact you make on the world is unique to you. Mystical tradition teaches that there is some task that you and only you can do, and it is for that task that you were created.

In the ancient world, a sovereign ruler would have a signet ring or a seal that he or she would roll into hot wax dribbled onto a document or envelope. The imprint formed the unique signature of that ruler. As you think about the year ahead, I want you to think about the imprint that you make on the world. As you travel through your live, you make an imprint on the world based on the singular characteristics that you carry with you in the world.

The question I want you to ask yourself tonight, is ‘how does your imprint on the world reflect the Jewish nature of your soul’s signet ring, your Divine seal?’ How is your sense of yourself as a Jew, as a member of a Jewish community linked to other Jews, part of your mission in life?

The journey through our lives is a story with an end, and we don’t know exactly when that end will come. We encounter numerous challenges along the way. Loss of loved ones, physical afflictions, the decline of our bodies, job loss, financial hardship, and conflict. Through it all, we keep moving. Sometimes we cope well, other times we might start to collapse and need help to get back up again. In the back of our minds is a sense of who we are, why we are valuable, and why staying alive and engaged is worthwhile. It might be a sense of the family name, it might be the pride of building a career, it might be the joy of seeing yourself surrounded by a growing family, it might be time spent with friends.

Our Jewish sense of destiny is shaped by our foundational stories. Abraham, leaving his place of origin and family identity to claim his one place and sense of self. Israel, traveling through the wilderness to find a sense of shared destiny. In both stories, as well as in our personal stories, there is risk and faith. I want to explore the aspect of risk for a moment. In what ways are you willing to risk or even just inconvenience yourself for the sake of your Jewish identity, for the sake of that particular imprint that you can make in the world? How much are you willing to give up doing something that you want to do because of something that an external force, God, Torah, your covenant with the people Israel, is calling you to do?

George Carlin observed that anyone driving slower than him is an idiot and anyone going faster than him is a maniac. We might also observe that anyone observing less Judaism than me is an assimilationist and anyone doing more than me is a fanatic. I am balanced, with exactly the right amount of Judaism. This kind of stasis is commonly accepted as a perfect way to be Jewish. Each person decides exactly how much they are going to do, no more and no less, and asking for or inviting any kind of change can be seen as unwelcoming.

But a recent commercial featuring Tom Brady argues that even though he is the GOAT, greatest of all time (and by the way, goats are very important on Yom Kippur, see tomorrow’s Torah reading), he doesn’t think about himself as the best because he still wants to be better. The tag line of the commercial is, “The best are never done getting better.”²

1. Mishnah Sandhedrin 4:5

2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFZqk8k4QwQ>

Medical professionals, social workers, administrative professionals, hair stylists, teachers, pilots, HR professionals, mechanics, and athletes can not live in professional stasis. They need to grow, evolve, and change continually in order to keep their professional certification or their skills. Maybe we need to think of our Jewish practice as the equivalent of a profession, every changing and evolving to survive, with a desire to keep our skills at the top of our game, avoid stasis, continually learning and growing.

Hobbyists of all kinds, model train enthusiasts, puzzlers, cycling enthusiasts, runners, athletes, fitness buffs, cooks, movie enthusiasts, collectors of all kinds, constantly look forward to the next challenge, the next thing to do to keep themselves sharp and engaged and challenged. Maybe we need think of Judaism as a beloved hobby? What excites you, engages you, challenges you. What's your next goal? What's the next memory that you want to collect?

COVID accelerated a movement in North American Jewry to move Judaism out of the public space of community and into the private space of the home. It's easier to watch a live or pre-recorded service on a screen at home than travel to the synagogue to join in person. And as we watch the frequency of antisemitic incidents tick upward, COVID safety concerns are amplified by other physical safety concerns. For some, staying at home behind locked doors just seems smart. But that is not what Judaism asks of us. It has never been a private faith, to be practiced in one's heart and in one's home alone. The concept of minyan asks us to gather together. Passover, since its earliest Biblical descriptions, speaks of neighbors joining together to celebrate. The Sukkah asks us to move out of our homes for the celebration, and to rely on a modicum of God's protection. The central practice of Hanukkah is to place the lamps in a place which can be seen from the street, to publicize the miracle of Jewish survival and existence far and wide.

So while much of Jewish celebration happens in the home, if we Jews are to imprint our divine seal on the world, we need to leave the home and let our Jewish behavior happen in the public sphere.

Beyond today, what positive actions do you engage in which are an ongoing part of your life, that demonstrate that you are Jewish. What distinguishes you as a Jew, more than just the fact that you take time off in September for a holiday? What is just one more specifically Jewish mitzvah that you can do? I'm going to throw out about a dozen possibilities for you to consider, there are many, many, more possibilities, ways that you can imprint your Jewish signet on the world.

- Can you come to minyan once a week?
- Can you commit to saying the Shema in the morning and evening?
- Can you start putting on a tallit on Shabbat or tefillin on a weekday?
- Can you light Shabbat candles before Sunset on Fridays?
- Can you remove non-kosher meat and fish from your diet, or remove meat entirely?
- Can you learn to read Torah or do a Haftarah reading?
- Can you lead a Shabbat service?
- Can you review the weekly Torah portion?
- Can you learn a mishnah every day?
- Can you commit to joining our Shabbat service once a month, twice a month, or weekly?
- Can you join me for Zoom Torah study on Mondays, Wednesdays, or Thursdays, at 2:00 p.m.?
- Can you come to my Foundations for a Thoughtful Judaism Class on Sunday mornings?

- Can you be a part of our Shabbat minyan, weekly, biweekly, monthly?
- Can you refrain from eating dairy and meat together?

What is your soul's next mitzvah? What can you do to fulfill your mission in the world? Ahavas Israel has helped many people find their Jewish soul. As long as you are open to doing that one more thing, we want to help you. You don't have to be the GOAT, but you can still decide that you never done getting better at your practice of Judaism.