Introduction to What Is Halacha

"*Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.*" *Leviticus/Vayikra 19:2*

Halacha ("The Way To Go" or "Way to Walk") guides proper Jewish behavior in all aspects of life, each day of our lives--not just in civil laws or court situations. *Halacha* teaches us how to behave with our families, relatives, and strangers as well as how to fulfill our religious requirements between ourselves and God.

To fulfill our role as a holy people, we imitate God's actions. Examples are visiting the sick, welcoming guests, giving charity, refraining from creative activity on *Shabbat*, and promoting peace between husband and wife (*shalom bayit*).

The true reason for following *halacha* is because God commanded us to do so. We observe *halacha* to please our Creator and to become spiritually close to Him by doing His will and imitating His actions.

Like the word for the whole body of Jewish "laws," each rule of how to act is called a *halacha* (plural, *halachot*).

Where Do *Halachot* Come From?

Although you will find *halachot* on this site that were born only a few days or a few decades ago, the body of *halacha* has been around since before creation. "God looked into the *Torah* and created the world," says the *Zohar*, and so we find the *Patriarchs* followed *halacha* even before that great law book, the *Torah*, was given on Mount Sinai four centuries later.

Many *halachot* are specified in the Written *Torah* (Jewish Bible). These *halachot* correspond to fuller and more detailed *halachot* given orally (*Oral Torah*) to Moses on Mount Sinai to explain the Written *Torah* that he received at the same time. Many *halachot* could not be understood from the Written *Torah* without the *Oral Law* (for example, what should be written on a *mezuza* scroll?) and many common practices such as making *kiddush* or what *tefilin* should look like are to be found nowhere in the Written *Torah*.

Since the *Torah* applies to all generations, the *Torah* specifies that there be wise and learned people to decide how to apply *halacha* to the situations of the day. *Halachot* can be found in sourcebooks such as the *Mishna*, *Gemara*, their commentaries, *Shulchan Aruch*, *Mishna Berura*, and *responsa* (questions and answers originally sent by letter and now, occasionally, by email or SMS!) of later *rabbis*.

Sometimes a custom becomes a *halacha*, sometimes not. For example, the original *halacha* for *tzitzit* was that a Jewish *man* who wears a four-cornered garment must have *tzitziyot* on each corner. The custom, which has become universally accepted and now has the force of *halacha*, is that Jewish men wear a four-cornered garment in order to be able to fulfill the commandment of wearing *tzitziyot*. An example of a custom that did not become a *halacha* is that some men and boys wear their *tzitziyot* outside of their shirts and pants.

Levels of *Halachot*

In *halacha*, there are three levels of what to follow or observe. They are differentiated on this website by the following terms:

- “Must”: *Halachot* that are generally non-negotiable except in extreme situations;
- “Should”: Customs that have been accepted by the entire Jewish world (or major segments of it) and that may be overridden when necessary, sometimes even if not extreme circumstances; and
- “Non-Binding Custom”: Customs that are not universally followed and that do not need to be followed except by people who have the tradition to do so.

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