

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 mezuzah 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.