

The
**Year of Living
Biblically**

*One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible
as Literally as Possible*



A. J. Jacobs

author of The Know-It-All

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SIMON & SCHUSTER *New York London Toronto Sydney Praise for THE YEAR OF LIVING*

BIBLICALLY by A. J. Jacobs

"A. J. Jacobs has written about the Bible in a manner that is brilliantly funny but unerring, respectful, learned but goofy, deeply personal yet highly relevant. I am covetous and wish him smited."

--Mary Roach, Bestselling author of *Spook and Stiff*

"A book that is at one and the same time delightfully readable and profoundly memorable is a wonder! *The Year of Living Biblically* is exactly that. A. J. Jacobs has perceived the distinction between the wisdom of the Bible and its absurdities. It is a shame that so many of both our clergy and our politicians seem incapable of making that distinction."

--John Shelby Spong, Author of *Jesus for the Non-Religious* and former Episcopal bishop

"As a man incapable of developing any facial hair aside from a really amazingly crude moustache, I would have bought this book for the astonishing big beard chronicle alone. That *The Year of Living Biblically* grows, beardlike, into a long, hilarious, tangled, and ultimately moving story of spiritual growth is all the more astonishing. But why should I continue to be surprised at what springs from A. J.'s head? He is a brilliantly hilarious writer who truly lives up to that oft-misused adverb/adjective combination and then some. Plus: HE IS GOING TO HEAVEN. So how can you not afford to tithe your salary to his cause and buy this book?"

--John Hodgman *Daily Show* correspondent and author of *Areas of My Expertise*

"Seeing that most people violate at least three of the ten commandments on their way to work, even people who work from home--says a lot about the scale of A. J.'s feat. The fact that you need to buy six copies of this book to unlock the code to save all humanity . . . well, that's just pure genius."

--Ben Karlin, cocreator of *The Colbert Report* and coauthor of *America: The Book*

"Setting out to explore the consequences of strict adherence to biblical laws, A. J. Jacobs encounters a series of experiences that are as hilarious as they are thought-provoking. Along the way he teaches us both the fallacies of modern day religious fundamentalism and the joys of discovering the transcendent and timeless truths of faith."

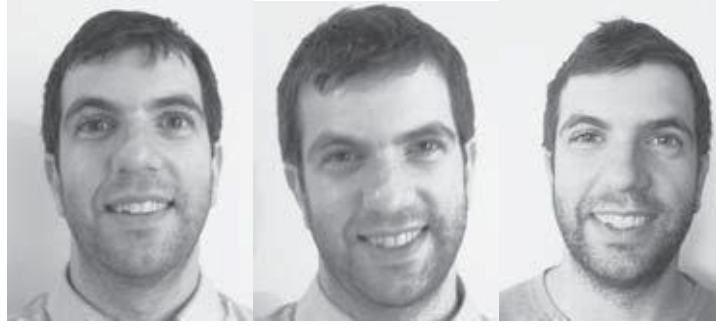
--Francis S. Collins, M.D., Ph.D., director, Human Genome Project, author of *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*

"Throughout his journey, Jacobs comes across as a generous and thoughtful (and yes, slightly neurotic) participant observer, lacing his story with absurdly funny cultural commentary as well as nuanced insights into the impossible task of biblical literalism."

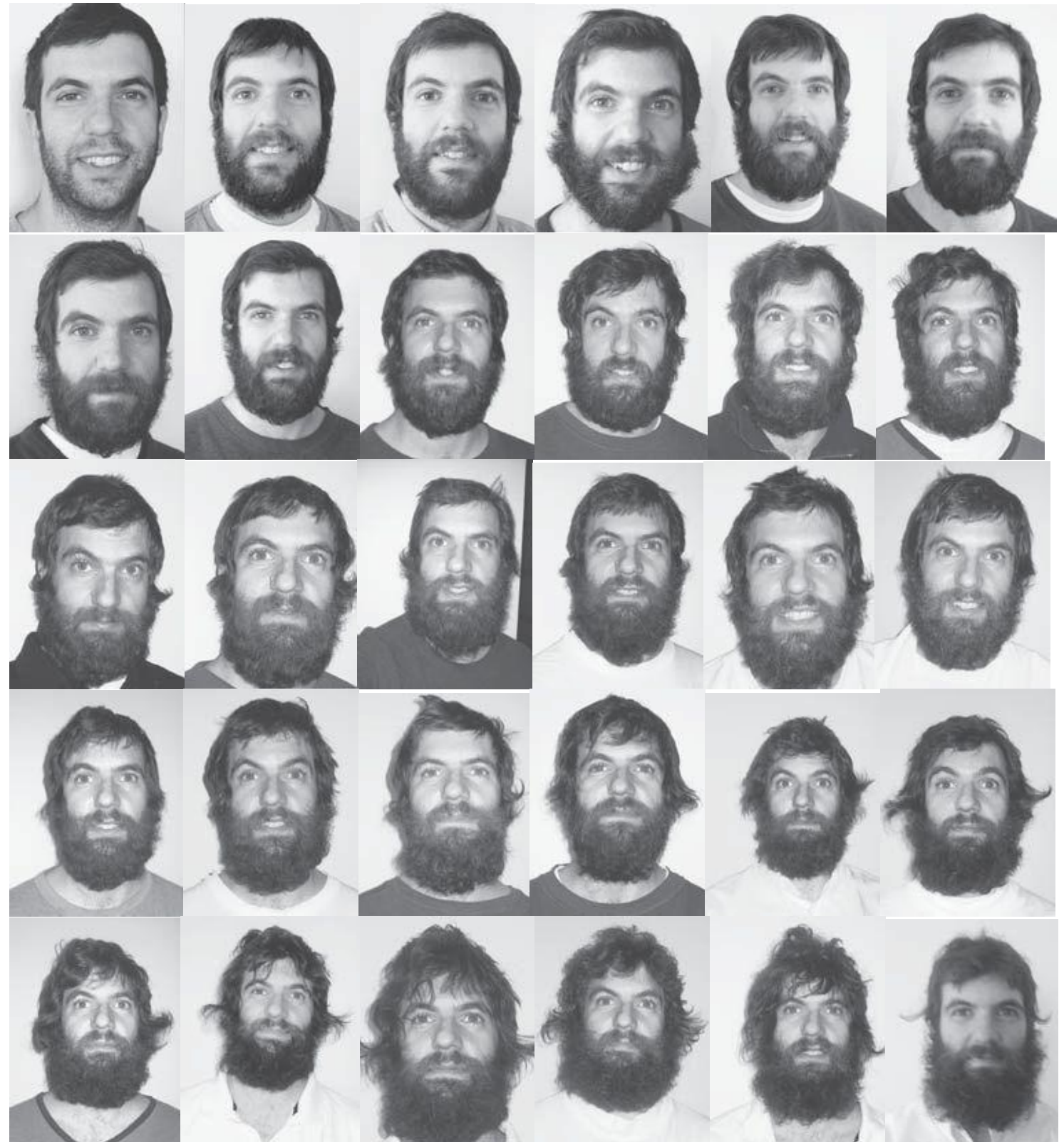
--*Publishers Weekly* (Starred)

"Impressive and often tremendously amusing. . . . The author's determination despite constant complications from his modern secular life (wife, job, family, NYC) underscores both the absurdity of his plight and its profundity. While debunking biblical literalism--with dinner party-ready scriptural quotes--Jacobs simultaneously finds his spirituality renewed. . . . A biblical travelogue--and funnier than your standard King James."

--Kirkus Reviews



ALSO BY A. J. JACOBS *The Know-It-All*





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The Year of Living Biblically



Introduction

As I write this, I have a beard that makes me resemble Moses. Or Abe Lincoln. Or Te Kaczynski. I've been called all three.

It's not a well-manicured, socially acceptable beard. It's an untamed mass that creeps up toward my eyeballs and drapes below my neckline.

I've never allowed my facial hair to grow before, and it's been an odd and enlightening experience. I've been inducted into a secret fraternity of bearded guys--we nod at each other as we pass on the street, giving a knowing quarter smile. Strangers have come up to me and petted my beard, like it's a Labrador retriever puppy or a pregnant woman's stomach.

I've suffered for my beard. It's been caught in jacket zippers and been tugged on by my surprisingly strong two-year-old son. I've spent a lot of time answering questions at airport security.

I've been asked if I'm named Smith and sell cough drops with my brother. ZZ Top is mentioned at least three times a week. Passersby have shouted "Yo, Gandalf!" Someone called me Steven Seagal, which I found curious, since he doesn't have a beard.

I've battled itch and heat. I've spent a week's salary on balms, powders, ointments, and conditioners. My beard has been a temporary home to cappuccino foam and lentil soup. And it's upset people. The other day, two little girls have burst into tears, and one boy has hidden behind his mother.

But I mean no harm. The facial hair is simply the most noticeable physical manifestation of a spiritual journey I began a year ago.

My quest has been this: to live the ultimate biblical life. Or more precisely, to follow the Bible as literally as possible. To obey the Ten Commandments. To be fruitful and multiply. To love my neighbor. To tithe my income. But also to abide by the oft-neglected rules: to avoid wearing clothes made of mixed fibers. To stone adulterers. And, naturally, to leave the edges of my beard unshaven (Leviticus 19:27). I am trying to obey the entire Bible, without picking and choosing.

To back up: I grew up in an extremely secular home in New York City. I am officially Jewish, but I'm ~~Jewish in the same way the Olive Garden is an Italian restaurant. Which is to say: not very.~~ I attended no Hebrew school, ate no matzoh. The closest my family came to observing Judaism was the paradoxical classic of assimilation: a Star of David on top of our Christmas tree.

It's not that my parents badmouthed religion. It's just that religion wasn't for us. We lived in the twentieth century, for crying out loud. In our house, spirituality was almost a taboo subject, much like my father's salary or my sister's clove-cigarette habit.

My only brushes with the Bible were brief and superficial. We had a next-door neighbor, Reverend Schulze, a kindly Lutheran minister who looked remarkably like Thomas Jefferson. (By the way, Reverend Schulze's son became an actor and, oddly enough, went on to play the part of the creepy priest on *The Sopranos*.) Reverend Schulze told great stories about college sit-ins during the sixties but whenever he started talking about God, it just sounded like a foreign language to me.

I attended a handful of bar mitzvahs where I zoned out during services and spent the time trying to guess who had bald spots under their yarmulkes. I went to my paternal grandfather's funeral, which was, to my surprise, presided over by a rabbi. How could the rabbi eulogize a man he'd never met? It was disconcerting.

And as far as childhood religion, that was about it.

I was agnostic before I even knew what the word meant. Partly, it was the problem of the existence of evil. If there is a God, why would He allow war, disease, and my fourth-grade teacher Ms. Barker, who forced us to have a sugar-free bake sale? But mostly, the idea of God seemed superfluous. Why do we need an invisible, inaudible deity? Maybe He exists, but we'll never know in this life.

College didn't help my spiritual development. I went to a secular university where you were more likely to study the semiotics of Wicca rituals than the Judeo-Christian tradition. And when we did read the Bible, it was as literature, as a fusty, ancient book with the same truth quotient as *The Faerie Queene*.

We did, of course, study the history of religion. How the Bible has been the force behind many of humankind's greatest achievements: the civil rights movement, charitable giving, the abolition of slavery. And how, of course, it's been used to justify our worst: war, genocide, and the subjugation of others.

For a long time, I thought that religion, for all the good it does, seemed too risky for our modern world. The potential for abuse too high. I figured it would slowly fade away like other archaic things. Science was on the march. Someday soon we'd all be living in a neo-Enlightenment paradise where every decision was made with steely Spock-like logic.

As you might have noticed, I was spectacularly mistaken. The influence of the Bible--and religion as a whole--remains a mighty force, perhaps even stronger than it was when I was a kid. So in the last few years, religion has become my fixation. Is half of the world suffering from a massive delusion? Or is my blindness to spirituality a huge defect in my personality? What if I'm missing out on part of being human, like a guy who goes through life without ever hearing Beethoven or falling in love? And most important, I now have a young son--if my lack of religion is a flaw, I don't want to pass it on to him. So I knew I wanted to explore religion. I just needed to figure out how.

The germ of the idea came from my own family: my uncle Gil. Or ex-uncle, to be exact. Gil married my aunt and divorced her a few years later, but he remains the most controversial member of our family. If the rest of my relatives are ultrasecular, Gil makes up for it by being, quite possibly, the most religious man in the world. He's a spiritual omnivore. He started his life as a Jew, became a Hindu, appointed himself a guru, sat for eight months on a Manhattan park bench without speaking, founded a hippie cult in upstate New York, turned into a born-again Christian, and, in his latest incarnation, is an ultra-Orthodox Jew in Jerusalem. I may have missed a phase--I think he was in

Shinto for a bit. But you get the idea.

At some point along his spiritual path, Gil decided to take the Bible literally. Completely literally. The Bible says to bind money to your hand (Deuteronomy 14:25), so Gil withdrew three hundred dollars from the bank and tied the bills to his palm with a thread. The Bible says to wear fringes on the corners of your garment (Numbers 15:38), so Gil bought yarn from a knitting shop, made a bunch of tassels, and attached them to his shirt collar and the ends of his sleeves. The Bible says to give money to widows and orphans, so he walked the streets asking people if they were widows or orphans so he could hand them cash.

About a year and a half ago, I was telling my friend Paul about Gil's bizarre life over lunch at a sandwich shop, and I had my epiphany. *That's it.* I needed to follow the Bible literally myself. I needed to do it for several reasons.

First, since the Bible requires me to tell the truth (Proverbs 26:28), I must confess that part of the reason is to write this book. A couple of years ago, I came out with a book about reading the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, all of it, from A to Z--or more specific, from a-ak (East Asian music) to UZywiec (a town in southern Poland known for its beer). What could I do next? The only intellectual adventure that seemed a worthy follow-up was to explore the most influential book in the world, the alltime best seller, the Bible.

Second, this project would be my visa to a spiritual world. I wouldn't just be studying religion. I'd be living it. If I had what they call a Godshaped hole in my heart, this quest would allow me to fill it. If I had a hidden mystical side, this year would bring it out of the closet. If I wanted to understand my forefathers, this year would let me live like they did, but with less leprosy.

And third, this project would be a way to explore the huge and fascinating topic of biblical literalism. Millions of Americans say they take the Bible literally. According to a 2005 Gallup poll, the number hovers near 33 percent; a 2004 *Newsweek* poll put it at 55 percent. A literal interpretation of the Bible--both Jewish and Christian--shapes American policies on the Middle East, homosexuality, stem cell research, education, abortion--right on down to rules about buying beer on Sunday.

But my suspicion was that almost everyone's literalism consisted of picking and choosing. People plucked out the parts that fit their agenda, whether that agenda was to the right or left. Not me. I thought, with some naivete, I would peel away the layers of interpretation and find the true Bible underneath. I would do this by being the ultimate fundamentalist. I'd be fearless. I would do exactly what the Bible said, and in so doing, I'd discover what's great and timeless in the Bible and what's outdated.

I told my wife, Julie, my idea, and warned her it might affect our life in a not-so-minor way. She didn't gnash her teeth or tear out her hair. She just emitted a little sigh. "I was kind of hoping your next book would be a biography of Eleanor Roosevelt or something."

Everyone--family, friends, coworkers--had the same concern: that I'd go native. That I'd end up as a beekeeper at a monastery, or I'd move into my ex-uncle Gil's spare room in his Jerusalem apartment. In a sense, they were right to worry. It's impossible to immerse yourself in religion for twelve months and emerge unaffected. At least it was for me. Put it this way: If my former self and my current self met for coffee, they'd get along OK, but they'd both probably walk out of the Starbucks shaking their heads and saying to themselves, "That guy is kinda delusional."

As with most biblical journeys, my year has taken me on detours I could never have predicted. I didn't expect to herd sheep in Israel. Or fondle a pigeon egg. Or find solace in prayer. Or hear Amish jokes from the Amish. I didn't expect to confront just how absurdly flawed I am. I didn't expect to discover such strangeness in the Bible. And I didn't expect to, as the Psalmist says, take refuge in the Bible and rejoice in it.

The Preparation

And he shall read in it all the days of his life . . .

--DEUTERONOMY 17:19

On the admittedly random day of July 7, 2005, I begin my preparations. I pull out a Bible that tucked away in the corner of my bookshelf. I don't even remember where I got it, but it looks like the Platonic ideal of a Bible. Like a Bible they'd use in a fifties Western to stop a bullet from piercing the hero's chest. On the front, it says "Holy Bible" in faded gold embossing. The tissue-thin pages remind me of my beloved encyclopedia. The black leather cover smells exactly like my parents' 1971 Plymouth Valiant. It feels good, comforting.

I crack open the Bible. The title page says, "This Bible is presented to . . ." and then, in handwritten bubble letters, the name of my ex-girlfriend. Huh. Somehow I had inadvertently pilfered my ex-girlfriend's childhood Bible. I hope inadvertently. It's been a decade since we broke up, and I can't remember. Regardless, that's not a good sign. At the very least, I need to return it when I'm done.

I've read bits and pieces of the Bible before, but never the whole thing, never straight through from Genesis to Revelation. So that's what I do for four weeks, five hours a day. Luckily, I'm used to marathon reading from my *Britannica* project, so it felt pleasantly nostalgic.

As I read, I type into my PowerBook every rule, every guideline, every suggestion, every nugget of advice I find in the Bible. When I finish, I have a very long list. It runs seventy-two pages. More than seven hundred rules. The scope is astounding. All aspects of my life will be affected--the way I talk, walk, eat, bathe, dress, and hug my wife.

Many of the rules will be good for me and will, I hope, make me a better person by the end of the year. I'm thinking of: No lying. No coveting. No stealing. Love your neighbor. Honor your parents. Dozens of them. I'll be the Gandhi of the Upper West Side.

But plenty of other rules don't seem like they'll make me more righteous at all. Just more strange, more obsessive, more likely to alienate friends and family: Bathe after sex. Don't eat fruit from a tree planted less than five years ago. Pay the wages of a worker every day.

And a good number of the rules aren't just baffling, but federally outlawed. As in: Destroy idols. Kill magicians. Sacrifice oxen.

This is going to be a monster project. I need a plan of attack. I need to make some decisions.

1. Which version of the Bible should I use?

The Bible I pulled from my bookshelf is called the Revised Standard Version, which it turns out is a well-respected translation, an offspring of the famed King James Version from 1611, but stripped of most of the "thee"s and "thou"s.

It's a good start. But it's just one of many, many versions--an estimated *three thousand* of them in English alone. One of my goals is to find out what the Bible really says, so I decide I can't rely on any single translation. I want to compare and contrast at least some of those three thousand.

I go to a Bible bookstore in midtown Manhattan. It's a huge WalMart-sized store with fluorescent lighting and a long counter of cash registers at the front. My salesman is named Chris, a soft-spoken guy with the body of an Olympic power lifter. He shows me tables covered with Bibles of all shapes and sizes, and linguistic slants--from the plain-spoken English of the Good News Bible to the majestic cadence of the Jerusalem Bible.

He points out one Bible I might want. It's designed to look exactly like a *Seventeen* magazine: A attractive (if long-sleeved) model graces the front, next to cover lines like "What's Your Spiritual IQ? Open it up and you'll find sidebars such as "Rebecca the Control Freak."

"This one's good if you're on the subway and are too embarrassed to be seen reading the Bible," says Chris. "Because no one will ever know it's a Bible." It's an odd and poignant selling point. You know you're in a secular city when it's considered more acceptable for a grown man to read a teen girl's magazine than the Bible.

I leave the store with two shopping bags packed with Scripture. But my buying spree isn't over. When I get home, I click on Amazon.com and get several Jewish translations of the Bible, and a half-dozen Bible commentaries. To be safe, I order *The Bible for Dummies* and *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Bible*--anything aimed at those with a sub-80 IQ.

That's not to mention the Bibles sent to me by friends. One gave me the waterproof Outdoor Bible so that I could study the Scripture even during floods and other Old Testament weather patterns. Another sent me a hip-hop version, where the Twenty-third Psalm reads "The Lord is all that." (The more traditional translation is "The Lord is my shepherd.")

In short, I've got the proverbial stack of Bibles, almost waist high.

2. What does it mean to follow the Bible literally?

To follow the Bible literally--at face value, at its word, according to its plain meaning--isn't just a daunting proposition. It's a dangerous one.

Consider: In the third century, the scholar Origen is said to have interpreted literally Matthew 19:12: "There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven"--and castrated himself. Origen later became a preeminent theologian of his age-- and an advocate of figurative interpretation.

Another example: In the mid-1800s, when anesthesia was first introduced for women in labor, there was an uproar. Many felt it violated God's pronouncement in Genesis 3:16: "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children." If Julie and I ever have another child, would I dare get between her and the epidural needle? Not a chance.

It's a good bet that, at some time or other in history, every single passage in the Bible has been taken as literal. I've decided I can't do that. That'd be misleading, unnecessarily flip, and would result in missing body parts. No, instead my plan is this: I will try to find the original intent of the biblical rule or teaching and follow that to the letter. If the passage is unquestionably figurative--and I'm going to say the eunuch one is--then I won't obey it literally. But if there's any doubt whatsoever--and more often there is--I will err on the side of being literal. When it says don't tell lies, I'll try not to tell any lies. When it says to stone blasphemers, I'll pick up rocks.

3. Should I obey the Old Testament, the New Testament, or both?

Many, perhaps most, of the teachings in the two testaments are similar, but some are significantly different. So I've decided to split up my quest.

I will devote most of my year--eight months or so--to the Old Testament, since that's where you find the bulk of the Bible's rules. The Old Testament consists of thirty-nine books that mix narrative, genealogy, poetry, and lots and lots of laws. The first five books alone--the books of Moses--have hundreds of decrees, including the crucial Ten Commandments, as well as some of the most seemingly atavistic ones about executing homosexuals. That's not to mention divinely inspired advice in later Old Testament books. The Proverbs--a collection of King Solomon's wisdom--offer guidance on child rearing and marriage. The Psalms tell you how to worship. I'll be abiding by everything. Or trying to. Being officially Jewish, I feel much more comfortable living and writing about the Old Testament. (Or, as many Jews prefer to call it, the Hebrew Bible, since *old* implies "outdated," and *new* implies "improved"). But in the final four months of my year, I want to explore--in at least some way--the teachings of the Christian Bible, the New Testament.

To ignore the New Testament would be to ignore half of the story. The evangelical movement and its literal interpretation of the Bible hold enormous sway, both for the good (they were powerful advocates for aiding Darfur) and, to my secular mind, the not-so-good (far-right fundamentalists are driving the creationism movement).

Naturally, there's the most famous of all Christian literalists--the conservatives in the Jerry Falwell/Pat Robertson mold. I plan to meet them later this year. But I also want to look at evangelic

groups such as the "Red-letter Christians," which focus on what they see as literal adherence to Jesus' teachings about compassion, nonviolence, and the redistribution of wealth.

It's debatable whether the New Testament even has a legal code--it depends on your definition of "law"--but it has many teachings that have been followed with varying degrees of literalness, from Jesus's "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemy" to the Apostle Paul's decree that men should have short hair. Frankly, I haven't hammered out all the details of my New Testament plan but hope to figure it out once I get my spiritual footing.

4. Should I have guides?

The Bible says, "It is not good for the man to be alone." Plus, I'm flying blind here. So over the course of a couple of weeks, I assemble a board of spiritual advisers: rabbis, ministers, and priests--some of them conservative, some of them one four-letter word away from excommunication. Some are friends of friends, some are names I stumbled upon in Bible commentary books. I'll be talking to them as much as possible.

Plus, I make a pledge to get out of the house. I'll visit a bunch of groups that take the Bible literally in their own way: the ultra-Orthodox Jews, the ancient sect of Samaritans, and the Amis among others.

My guides will give me advice and context. But they won't be the final word. The Bible will. I don't want to follow any single tradition exclusively. As naive or misguided as it may be, I want to discover the Bible for myself, even if it entails trekking down some circuitous paths. "DIY religion" as my friend calls it. Perhaps I'll find the beauty of a particular tradition fits me best. Or perhaps I'll start my own sect of Judeo-Christianity. I don't know.

As I expected, not everyone thinks my project is a great idea. My aunt Kate--who has remained an Orthodox Jew even after her divorce from the controversial Gil--told me I was, as our people say, *meshuga*.

I first floated the idea by Kate in early August. We were at my grandfather's house sitting around his big dining room table. Kate had just finished changing after a dip in the pool. (She won't wear a bathing suit for modesty reasons, so she plunged in with her long, black billowy dress, which impressed me. The thing looked heavy enough to sink a lifeguard.) When I explained the premise of my book, her eyebrows shot up to her hairline. "Really?" she said.

Then she laughed. I think part of her was happy that someone in our godless family was showing some interest in religion.

After which she got concerned: "It's misguided. You need the oral law. You can't just obey the written law. It doesn't make sense without the oral law."

The traditional Jewish position is this: The Bible--known as the written law--was composed in shorthand. It's so condensed, it's almost in code. Which is where the oral law comes in. The rabbis have unraveled the Bible for us in books such as the Talmud, which are based on the oral teachings of the elders. When the Bible says to "rest" on the Sabbath, you need the rabbis to tell you what "rest" means. Can you exercise? Can you cook? Can you log on to drugstore.com?

Without the rabbis, I'm like the protagonist of the early eighties TV show *The Greatest American Hero*--he found a bright red suit that gave him all these superpowers, but he lost the instruction manual, so he was always flying into walls.

Some conservative Christians were also baffled by my undertaking. They said I couldn't truly understand the Bible without accepting the divinity of Christ. They said that many of these laws--like the ones about animal sacrifice--were nullified by Jesus's death.

And I did start to have doubts. These were good points. I felt torn, anxious about my approach, my monumental ignorance, my lack of preparation, about all the inevitable blunders I'd make. And the more I read, the more I absorbed the fact that the Bible isn't just another book. It's the book of books.

as one of my Bible commentaries calls it. I love my encyclopedia, but the encyclopedia has spawned thousands of communities based on its words. It hasn't shaped the actions, values, death love lives, warfare, and fashion sense of millions of people over three millennia. No one has been executed for translating the encyclopedia into another language, as was William Tyndale when he published the first widely distributed English-language edition of the Bible. No president has been sworn in with the encyclopedia. It's intimidating, to say the least.

Fortunately, I got a couple of pep talks from two of my favorite advisers. The first was Reverend Elton Richards, my friend David's father, who just retired as minister of his Lutheran congregation in Des Moines, Iowa. He calls himself a "pastor out to pasture." I told him about the doubters.

"You just have to tell them that you have a hunger and a thirst. And you may not sit at the same banquet table as them, but you have a hunger and thirst. So they shouldn't judge you."

I love the way he talks. By the end, perhaps I'll be able to speak in majestic food metaphors like Reverend Richards.

I also had breakfast with Rabbi Andy Bachman, a brilliant man who heads up one of Brooklyn's largest synagogues, Congregation Beth Elohim. He told me a *midrash*--a story or legend that is not in the Bible proper, but which deals with biblical events. This midrash is about the parting of the Red Sea.

"We all think of the scene in *The Ten Commandments* movie with Charlton Heston, where Moses lifts up his rod, and the waters rolled back. But this midrash says that's not how it happened. Moses lifts up his rod, and the sea did not part. The Egyptians were closing in, and the sea wasn't moving. So a Hebrew named Nachshon just walked into the water. He waded up to his ankles, then his knees, then his waist, then his shoulders. And right when water was about to get up to his nostrils, the sea parted. The point is, sometimes miracles occur only when you jump in."

So I did. And here is what happened.



Month One: September

Fear God and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.

--ECCLESIASTES 12:13

It's the first day, and I already feel like the water is three feet over my head.

I have chosen September 1 to start my project, and from the moment I wake up, the Bible consumes my life. I can't do anything without fearing I'm breaking a biblical law. Before I so much as inhale or exhale, I have to run through a long mental checklist of the rules.

It begins when I open my closet to get dressed. The Bible forbids men to wear women's clothing (Deuteronomy 22:5), so that comfortable Dickinson College sweatshirt is off-limits. It was originally my wife's.

The Bible says to avoid wearing clothes made of mixed fibers (Leviticus 19:19), so I have mothballed my poly-cotton *Esquire* magazine T-shirt.

And loafers? Am I allowed to wear leather? I go to the living room, click on my PowerBook and open my Biblical Rules file. I scroll down to the ones about animals. Pigskin and snakeskin are questionable, but it looks like regular old cow leather is permissible.

But wait--am I even allowed to use the computer? The Bible, as you might have guessed, doesn't address the issue specifically, so I give it a tentative yes. Maybe sometime down the road, I could turn to stone tablets.

And then I stumble. Within a half hour of waking, I check the Amazon.com sales ranking of my last book. How many sins does that comprise? Pride? Envy? Greed? I can't even count.

I don't do much better on my errand to Mail Boxes Etc. I want to xerox a half dozen copies of the Ten Commandments so I can Scotch tape them up all over the apartment, figuring it'd be a good memory aid.

The Bible says, those with good sense are "slow to anger" (Proverbs 19:11). So when I get there at the same time as this wiry fortyish woman, and she practically sprints to the counter to beat me to the line, I try not to be annoyed.

And when she tells the Mail Boxes Etc. employee to copy something on the one and only functioning Xerox machine, I try to shrug it off. And when she pulls out a stack of pages that look like the collected works of J. K. Rowling and plunks it on the counter, I say to myself: "Slow to anger, slow to anger."

After which she asks some complicated question involving paper stock . . . I remind myself: Remember what happened when the Israelites were waiting for Moses while he was up on the mountaintop for forty days? They got impatient, lost faith, and were struck with a plague. Oh, and she pays by check. And asks for a receipt. And asks to get the receipt initialed. The Proverbs is a collection of wisdom in the Old Testament--say that smiling makes you happy. Which is actually backed up by psychological studies. So I stand there with a flight attendant-like grin frozen on my face. But inside, I am full of wrath.

I don't have time for this. I have a seventy-two-page-list of other biblical tasks to do.

I finally make it to the counter and give the cashier a dollar. She scoops my thirty-eight cents of change from the register and holds it out for me to take.

"Could you, uh, put the change on the counter?" I ask.

She glares at me. I'm not supposed to touch women--more on that later--so I am simply trying to avoid unnecessary finger-to-finger contact.

"I have a cold," I say. "I don't want to give it to you."

A complete lie. In trying to avoid one sin, I committed another.

I walk home. I pass by a billboard that features two well-toned naked people clutching hungrily each other's bodies. It's an ad for a gym. The Bible's teachings on sexuality are complicated, and

haven't figured them out yet. But to be safe, I figure I should avoid lust for now. I keep my eyes on the ground for the rest of the walk home.

When I get back to my apartment, I decide to cross Numbers 15:38 off my list: Attach tassels to the corners of my garment. Inspired by my ex-uncle Gil, I had purchased some tassels from a website called "Tassels without Hassles." They look like the kind of tassels on the corners of my grandmother's needlepoint pillows. I spend ten minutes safety pinning them to my shirtsleeves and hem.

By the evening, I'm bushed. I barely have the energy to listen to Julie talk about the U.S. Open--and even that conversation is fraught. I have to be sure to avoid mentioning Venus Williams, since she's named for the Roman goddess of love, and it would violate Exodus 23:13 (make no mention of other gods).

As I go to bed, I wonder whether or not I took a step toward enlightenment today. Probably not. I was so busy obsessing over the rules--a lot of which still seem thoroughly insane--that I didn't have time to think. Maybe I'm like a student driver who spends every moment checking the blinkers and the speedometer, too nervous to contemplate the scenery. But it's just the first day.

"Be fruitful and multiply . . ." --GENESIS 1:28

Day 2. My beard grows fast. I'm already starting to look a little seedy, somewhere between Brooklyn hipster and a guy who loiters at the OTB all day. Which is fine by me. I'm enjoying the hiatus from shaving. I may be spending all sorts of time on biblical duties, but at least I'm not wasting three minutes each morning in front of the mirror.

For breakfast, I grab an orange from the refrigerator. Food is going to be tricky this year. The Bible bans many things: pork, shrimp, rabbit, eagle, and osprey, among others. But citrus is fine. Plus, oranges have been around since biblical times--one of my books even says that the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden was an orange. It certainly wasn't an apple, since there were no apples in the Middle East of Adam's day.

I sit down at the kitchen table. Julie is flipping through the Arts & Leisure section of the *New York Times* trying to decide on a movie for Saturday night.

"Should we see *The Aristocrats*?" Julie asks.

Huh. *The Aristocrats* is the documentary about the dirtiest joke ever. It contains at least a half-dozen sex acts specifically banned by the Book of Leviticus. Julie could not come up with a worse suggestion for an evening activity. Is she testing me? She's got to be.

"I don't think I can. It doesn't sound very biblical."

"You serious?"

I nod.

"Fine. We'll see something else."

"I don't know if I should be seeing movies at all. I have to think about that."

Julie lowers her gaze and looks at me over the top of her glasses. "No movies? For a year?"

I'm going to have to choose my battles these next twelve months. I

decide I'll bend on this one for now--I'll phase out movies slowly, giving Julie a little grace period.

Things, after all, are kind of tense in our house right now. Julie had a hard time getting pregnant with our first child, as I mentioned in my last book. We did eventually succeed (we have a son named Jasper), but apparently, practice did not make perfect, because the second time around is just as much of an ordeal.

In the last year, I've been--as the Bible says--uncovering Julie's nakedness. A lot. Too much. Not that I dislike it, but enough is enough, you know? It gets tiring. Plus, Julie's getting increasing

frustrated with me because she thinks I'm micromanaging--always quizzing her about ovulation time and basal temperatures and her five-day forecast.

"You're stressing me out, and it's really counterproductive," she told me the other day.

"I'm just trying to stay involved."

"You know what? The more stressed out I am, the less chance there is that I'll get pregnant."

I tell her I want our son, Jasper, to have a little sibling.

"Then please stop talking about it."

So we're in this weird elephant-in-the-room phase where we're both thinking about having a second child, but studiously avoiding the topic.

This is especially hard for someone who spends as much time as I do reading and pondering the Bible. Fertility is one of the most dominant themes in the Bible--probably *the* dominant theme of Genesis. You believe some of the more modern biblical scholars, Genesis reflects a nature/fertility stage monotheism, an influence of the pagan sects. In fact, the very first command that God gives to Adam is "Be fruitful and multiply." It's the Alpha Rule of the Bible.

Now, if I were taking the Bible absolutely literally, I could be "fruitful" by loading up on peaches at Whole Foods Market and "multiply" by helping my niece with her algebra homework. I could scratch this commandment off my list in twenty minutes flat.

This hammers home a simple but profound lesson: When it comes to the Bible, there is always--but always--some level of interpretation, even on the most seemingly basic rules. In this case, I'm pretty sure that the Bible was talking about fertility, not math, so that's what I'll continue to pursue.

Conception was a huge preoccupation of the ancients. If you think about it, many of the Bible's most famous stories center on the quest to get pregnant. Abraham and Sarah probably had the hardest time conceiving of anyone in the Bible, if not history. At one point, the seemingly barren Sarah became so distraught, she lent her Egyptian handmaiden to Abraham as a concubine. That union produced Ishmael, the forefather of Islam. A few verses later, God and two angels visited Abraham and Sarah and announced that Sarah would soon be pregnant. Sarah's reaction? She laughed, presumably with skepticism. In her defense, she was ninety years old. But God fulfilled his promise, and the nonagenarian matriarch gave birth to Isaac--Hebrew for "he will laugh."

And then there's Rachel. Rachel and her older sister Leah were both married to the clever shepherd (and my namesake) Jacob. Leah was a procreation machine--giving birth to no fewer than six sons and a daughter. But Rachel remained childless and heartbroken. At one point she said to Jacob, "Give me children or I shall die!" Another time, Rachel bought some mandrakes from her sister--mandrakes are a Mediterranean herb once thought to be an infertility cure. But it was to no avail. Finally God "opened Rachel's womb," and she gave birth to Joseph, he of the multicolored coat.

There is an upside to the Bible's infertility motif: The harder it was for a woman to get pregnant, the greater was the resulting child. Joseph. Isaac. Samuel (whose mother pledged her son to God as thanks for the conception). These are some of the giants of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Yesterday I broke Julie's gag rule to inform her that if we do have another kid, he or she could be one for the ages. Which made her smile.

"I think that's true," she said. "Good things come to those who wait." Which sounds like a biblical proverb but is actually from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

You shall have no other gods before me.

--EXODUS 20:3

Back to day 2. Julie has a meeting, so I'm left alone with my breakfast orange, my list of rules, and my stack of Bibles. I've got a half hour before our son, Jasper, wakes up. Now seems a good time to embark on the more spiritual part of my quest: prayer.

As I said, I've always been agnostic. In college I studied all the traditional arguments for the

existence of God: the design argument (just as a watch must have a watchmaker, so the universe must have a God), the first-cause argument (everything has a cause; God is the cause of the universe). Many were dazzling and brilliant, but in the end, none of them swayed me.

Nor did a new line of reasoning I heard from my cousin Levi a couple of weeks ago. Levi--the son-in-law of my Orthodox aunt Kate--told me he believes in God for this reason: The Bible is so strange, so utterly bizarre, no human brain could have come up with it.

I like Levi's argument. It's original and unsanctimonious. And I agree that the Bible can be so strange--the command to break a cow's neck at the site of an unsolved murder comes to mind (Deuteronomy 21:4). Still, I wasn't convinced. Humans have come up with some astoundingly bizarre stuff ourselves: biathlons, turducken, and my son's Chicken Dance Elmo, to name a few.

In short, I don't think I can be debated into believing in God. Which presents a problem, because the Bible commands you not only to believe in God but to love Him. It commands this over and over again. So how do I follow that? Can I turn on a belief as if it flows out of a spiritual spigot? Here's my plan: In college I also learned about the theory of cognitive dissonance. This says, in part, if you behave in a certain way, your beliefs will eventually change to conform to your behavior. So that's what I'm trying to do. If I act like I'm faithful and God loving for several months, then maybe I'll become faithful and God loving. If I pray every day, then maybe I'll start to believe in the Being whom I'm praying.

So now, I'm going to pray. Even though I'm not exactly sure how to pray. I've never prayed before in my life, not counting the few perfunctory uplifted gazes when my mom was sick.

For starters, what do I do with my body? The Bible describes a multitude of positions: People kneel, sit, bow their heads, lift their eyes skyward, put their heads between their knees, raise up their hands, beat their breasts. There's no single method.

Sitting is tempting, but it seems too easy. I'm of the no-pain, no-gain mind-set. So I settle on holding my arms outstretched like a holy antenna, hoping to catch God's signal.

As for what to say, I'm not sure. I don't feel confident enough to improvise yet, so I've memorized a few of my favorite prayers from the Bible. I walk into our living room, stand in front of our brown sectional couch, hold out my arms, bow my head, and, in a low but clear voice, recite the passage from the Book of Job: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

It's a beautiful passage, but I feel odd uttering it. I've rarely said the word *Lord*, unless it's followed by *of the Rings*. I don't often say *God* without preceding it with *Oh my*.

The whole experience is making me uncomfortable. My palms are sweaty. I'm trying to speak with earnest intent, but it feels like I'm transgressing on two separate levels. First, I feel like I'm violating some sort of taboo issued by the agnostic high priests. Worse, what if I'm breaking the Third Commandment? If I don't believe the holy words I'm saying, isn't that taking the Lord's name in vain?

I glance at the clock. I've been praying only for a minute. I've promised myself I'd try to pray for at least ten minutes three times a day.

So I get back to work. I squint my eyes and try to visualize Him. It's a fiasco. My mind goes to a series of clichés: the Universe, aka the view from inside the Hayden Planetarium; a fog-shrouded Middle Eastern mountain; something akin to the multicolored special effects from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: Space Odyssey*, when the spaceship went into hyperspace. Pretty much everything but the guy in the flowing white robe and the basso profundo voice.

All I can say is, I hope I get better.

And it is possible I will. When I was in high school, I had a handful of what might qualify as quasimystical experiences. Surprisingly, none involved a bong. They would happen unexpectedly, and they would last only for a moment, about as long as a sneeze, but they were memorable.

The only way to describe them makes me sound like I'm leading an est seminar, but so be it: I felt one with the universe. I felt the boundary between my brain and the rest of the world suddenly dissolve. It wasn't that I intellectually comprehended that everything and everyone is connected, I felt it the way one might feel cold or carsick. The epiphanies would descend on me without warning: One came while I was lying on a blanket in Central Park's Great Lawn, another while I was riding the bullet train on a family trip in Japan. They were at once utterly humbling (my life so piddling and insignificant) and totally energizing (but it's also part of something so huge). The glow from the mental orgasms would last several days, making me, at least temporarily, more serene and Buddha-like.

For no reason I can think of, my epiphanies suddenly stopped around senior year of high school. Perhaps this year will give me the map to find them again. Or else make me conclude my brain was playing two-bit mind tricks on me.

Nor shall there come upon you a garment of cloth made of two kinds of stuff. --LEVITICUS 19:19

Day 5. I've made a list of the Top Five Most Perplexing Rules in the Bible. I plan to tackle a few this year, but I figured I'd start with one that requires neither violence nor pilgrimages. Namely, the ban on wearing clothes made of mixed fibers. It's such an odd proscription, I figured there was zero chance that anyone else in America was trying to follow it. Of course, I was flat wrong.

My friend Eddy Portnoy--who teaches history at New York's Jewish Theological Seminary--told me he recently spotted a flyer in Washington Heights advertising a *shatnez* tester. *Shatnez*, he informed me, is the Hebrew word for "mixed fibers." A tester will come to your home and inspect your shirts, pants, sweaters, and suits to make sure you have no hidden mixed fibers.

So today I dial the number, and a man named Mr. Berkowitz agrees to make a house call. Mr. Berkowitz arrives right on time. He has a gray beard that descends below his collar, large glasses, and a black tie tucked into the top of his pants, which sit a good six inches above his navel. His yarmulke is slightly askew.

Mr. Berkowitz clicks open his black American Tourister rolling suitcase. Inside, his tools: a microscope, an old canister with the faded label "vegetable flakes," and various instruments that look like my mother's sewing kit after a genetic mutation. He spreads them out on my living room table. Mr. Berkowitz reminds me of an Orthodox CSI. God's wardrobe detective.

He gives me a *shatnez* primer. *Shatnez* is not just any mixed fiber. Poly-cotton blends and Lycra-spandex blends--those are fine. The problem is mixing wool and linen. That's the forbidden combination, according to Deuteronomy 22:11 (the Bible's only other verse that talks about mixed fibers).

"How do you tell when something is *shatnez*?" I ask.

Well, you can't trust the clothing labels, explains Mr. Berkowitz. They're often inaccurate. "You have to look at the fibers yourself. All the fibers look different under the microscope," he says.

He draws me a diagram: Linen looks like a piece of bamboo. Wool is like a bunch of stacked cups. Cotton resembles twisted streamers. And polyester is smooth, like a straw.

I bring out a pile of sweaters, and he goes to work. He snips some threads off a black V-necked sweater and puts them under the microscope.

"See if you can tell," he says. I squint into the microscope.

"It's polyester," I say.

"No. Look. The stacked cups? It's wool."

He seems disappointed. Clearly I'm not a *shatnez* inspector protege. Mr. Berkowitz is kind, gentle, but persistently frazzled. And I wasn't helping matters.

Mr. Berkowitz makes some notes on a sheet that looks like a hospital chart. The sweater is kosher, he tells me. So is the next one I bring out.

"Look," he says, motioning to the microscope.

"Wool?" I say.

"No. Cotton."

Damn!

I bring out my wedding suit. This could be trouble, he says: Wool suits often have linen hiding somewhere in them, especially Italian suits, which this is.

Mr. Berkowitz gets out a tool that resembles a fondue fork and begins digging into various parts of my suit--the collar, the pockets, the sleeves--with something approaching ferocity. This suit is the only suit I own, and it cost me about one-third of my salary. I'm a little alarmed. I'm glad Julie's not here to see this.

"Is it shatnez?" I ask.

He doesn't answer for a minute. He's too busy with the microscope. His beard is squashed around the eyepiece.

"I have a strong suspicion this is linen," he says. The alleged culprit is some white canvas that was hiding under the suit's collar.

Mr. Berkowitz spins the fabric with his fingers.

"I'm sending it to the laboratory to make sure, but I am almost convinced it is linen." He tells me I have to put my only suit into storage, or get it de-linened by a tailor.

Mr. Berkowitz seems suddenly unfrazzled. He is relieved.

"It's joyous," he says. "If I save someone from breaking a commandment, it gives me a little high." He pumps his fist. "I never took drugs, but I imagine this is what it feels like."

His joy is infectious. I feel momentarily happy too, but then return to my baseline bewilderment.

"It's really that important not to wear linen and wool?" I ask.

"Absolutely."

"Are some commandments in the Bible more important than others?"

"All equal," he says. Then pauses. "Well, I can't say that. Not murdering is at a very high level. So are adultery and not worshipping idols."

He seems torn. On the one hand, all the rules are from the same place. The Orthodox Jews follow a list of 613 rules originally compiled by the great medieval rabbi Maimonides from the first five books of the Bible. On the other hand, Mr. Berkowitz also has to admit that homicide is worse than wearing an unkosher blazer.

Before Mr. Berkowitz leaves, I ask him the obvious staring-us-in-the-face question: Why? Why would God care if we wore mixed fibers?

The answer is: We don't know.

There are theories. Some say it was to train the ancient Hebrews to keep things separate so they'd be less inclined to intermarry. Some say it's an allusion to Cain and Abel's sacrifice--Cain offered flax to God, and Abel offered sheep. Some say that the heathens once wore the combination, and the Hebrews were trying to distinguish themselves from the pagans in any way they could.

Bottom line, though: We have no idea.

"This is a law that God gave us. We have to trust Him. He's all-powerful. We're like children. Sometimes parents have laws children don't understand. Like when you tell a child not to touch fire, he doesn't understand why, but it is good for him."

In Judaism, the biblical laws that come without explanation--and there are many--are called *chukim*. This is such a law. The point is, you can never know what is important in the long term. God might have a different measuring scale than us. In fact, some say it's *more* crucial to follow the inexplicable ones, because it shows you're committed, that you have great faith.

The notion of obeying laws that have no rational explanation is a jarring one. For most of my life, I've

been working under the paradigm that my behavior should, ideally, have a logical basis. But if you live biblically, this is not true. I have to adjust my brain to this.

You shall not covet. --EXO D U S 20:17

Day 6. After a day devoted to the obscure, I'm craving some good old-fashioned Ten Commandments to bring me back into the mainstream.

Since I break this commandment every day, I decide "You shall not covet" is most in need of immediate attention. This commandment is the final one of the ten, and the only one to regulate state of mind, not behavior. It's also arguably the hardest, especially in modern-day New York. This is a city that runs on coveting.

It's 2:00 p.m., and here's the list of things I've coveted since I woke up:

- * Jonathan Safran Foer's speaking fee (someone told me he gets fifteen thousand dollars per lecture).

- * the Treo 700 PDA.

- * the mental calm of the guy at the Bible bookstore who said he had no fear because he walked with God.

- * our friend Elizabeth's sprawling suburban front yard.

- * the George Clooney level of fame that allows you to say whatever you feel like, moronic or not.

- * the brilliant screenplay for the 1999 movie *Office Space*. (I sometimes have a weird fantasy that I could go back to 1997 with a videotape, transcribe the dialogue, and beat writer Mike Judge to the punch.)

Plus, ever since I became a father, I've been introduced to a whole new level of coveting. I'm not just coveting for myself, I'm coveting for my son. I'm trying to keep up with the Jones's kid.

Like with Jasper's vocabulary. I love the guy, but he's distressingly behind the curve in the speaking department. He communicates mostly by using eight different types of grunts, each one with its own meaning. I feel like the ethnographer who had to decipher the nuances of the twenty-three Eskimo words for snow. A medium-pitched grunt means "yes." A lowerpitched grunt means "no." A brief chimplike grunt means "come here now!" Jasper's a great walker and ball thrower, but words are those things I'm supposed to arrange for a living--they're not so interesting to him.

Meanwhile, his friend Shayna--three months his junior--knows words like *helicopter* and *cabine*. She's practically got her own blog. I covet Shayna's vocabulary for Jasper.

To sum up, I expend a lot of mental energy breaking this commandment. And I'm not even including "coveting" in the sexual sense--though I certainly did that with the woman in purple flip-flops on the street. Or the woman with the low-riding Calvins. Or . . . I'll return to that topic later since it deserves its own chapter.

The full anticoveting commandment reads like this: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's."

The ox and the ass aren't a problem in postagrarian Manhattan. But the phrase "anything that is your neighbor's"--that pretty much covers it all. No wiggle room.

But how do you stop yourself from coveting?

The word *covet* is a translation of the Hebrew root *hamad*, roughly equivalent to "desire" or "want." There are two schools of thought on what the commandment is preventing.

Some interpreters say that coveting in itself isn't forbidden. It's not always bad to yearn. It's coveting your *neighbor's* stuff that's forbidden. As one rabbi puts it, it's OK to covet a Jaguar--but you shouldn't covet your neighbor's Jaguar. In other words, if your desire might lead you to harm your neighbor, then it's wrong.

But others say that coveting *any* Jaguar is wrong, whether it's your neighbor's or the one at the

dealership. A moderate interest in cars is OK. However, coveting means that you are overly desirous of the Jaguar, you are distracted by material goods, you have veered from the path of being thankful for what God provides. You have, no doubt, fallen victim to advertising, the Tenth Commandment's arch-nemesis.

To play it safe, I'm trying to avoid both types of coveting.

Julie rejects one of my strategies--I asked her to censor the newspapers and magazines by ripping out all the ads for iPods and Jamaican vacations and such. Instead I've been forced to cut down my magazine consumption to a trickle.

But coveting material goods in ads isn't the big hurdle for me. My real weakness is jealousy of other people. The relentless comparison to my peers. Am I more successful than Julie's ex-boyfriend who invented a lighting gadget that fits over the page of a book so you can read it at night? It's been featured on the cover of the Levenger catalog, as my mother-in-law reminds me often.

If it's not the ex-boyfriend, it's someone else. And this type of coveting will never be assuaged. If by some crazy quirk or twist of fate or accounting error, I were to get J. S. Foer's speaking fee, then I would move right on to coveting Madeleine Albright's speaking fee. The Bible is right. Jealousy is a useless, time-wasting emotion that's eating me alive. I should focus on my family and, nowadays, God.

Of course, stopping an emotion is not easy. The prevailing paradigm is that we can't control our passions. As Woody Allen said when his affair with Soon-Yi Previn was discovered, "The heart wants what it wants." But I can't just give up--I need a new point of view. So I consult my spiritual advisor's board.

One recommended method is to tell yourself that the coveted car/ job/house/speaking fee/donkey is just not a possibility. A medieval rabbi--Abraham ibn Ezra--uses this example (he's talking about the sexual sense of covet, but you can apply it more broadly): When you see a pretty woman married to another man, you have to put her in the same class as your mother. She's off-limits. The very notion of her as a sex partner is repulsive, unthinkable, except to perverts and/or those who have read too much Freud. Or else, think of the woman as a peasant would a princess. She's pretty, but she's so far out of your realm, your admiration is abstract, not lascivious.

I try to do this with J. S. Foer's speaking fee. It's outside of my realm, I say. The strategy runs counter to you-can-do-anything-you-set-your-mind-to ambition, but maybe it's better for my mental health.

And then there's this tactic: If you're intently focused on following the rules of the Bible, you don't have time to covet. Not as much, anyway. You're just too busy. A couple of weeks ago, my daily coveting list would have taken up one-third of this book. Now I've trimmed it down to half a page. Progress, I think.

You shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. --LEVITICUS 23:40

Day 7. It's been a week. My spiritual state: still agnostic. My beard state: itchy and uneven--I've got these bald patches that look like crop circles made by tiny UFOs. My wardrobe state: I've traded my usual T-shirts and jeans for khakis and Oxfords because it feels somehow more respectful. My emotional state: strung out.

The learning curve remains crushingly steep. I continue to second-guess everything I do and say. I've noticed my speech has slowed down, as if I'm speaking English as a second language. This is because I mentally check every word before allowing myself to utter it. Is it a lie? Is it a boast? Is it a curse? Is it gossip? What about exaggeration? Does the Bible allow me to say "My friend Mark's been working at *Esquire* since 1904?" (He's been there a mere seventeen years). I censor about 20 percent of my sentences before they leave my mouth. The Bible's language laws are rigorous.

I'm poring over religious study books, desperately trying to get a handle on this topic and everything else. My reading list grows exponentially. Every time I read a book, it'll mention three other books I feel I have to read. It's like a particularly relentless series of pop-up ads.

I still read the Bible itself, taking it with me wherever I go. That Bible salesman was right--should have gotten that version of the Scriptures that's camouflaged as a teen magazine. When I read my Bible on the subway, I can feel the hostility emanating from the secular commuters. They look at me with their lips taut and faces tense, like they expect me to tackle them at any moment and forcibly baptize them.

In addition to the Bible, I also carry around a stapled printout of my rules, which I scan frequently. My original plan had been to pay equal attention to all the rules every day. This turned out to be impossible. That's like trying to juggle seven-hundred-plus balls. The brain can't handle it. I was too scattered.

So my revised plan is this: I will still attempt to follow all the rules simultaneously. But on any given day, I'll home in on a particular rule and devote much of my energy to that rule, while keeping the others in my peripheral vision.

How to choose the right time to focus on a particular rule? It's not a science. I've opted instead to go where the spirit takes me. I imagine a lot of factors will come into play: life's curveballs, moods, whims, logistics, my day job (I write for *Esquire* magazine, which I know will force me to confront the lust rules soon enough). And variety. I want to alternate obscure with mainstream, physical with mental, hard with easy. I need variety. I don't have the stamina to spend a month focused solely on the forty-five rules of idolatry.

With the humble is wisdom. --PROVERBS 11:2

Day 11. I'm going to take a bunch of biblically themed road trips this year, and today is my first into Amish country. It seems a good place to start. Not only are the Amish tied with the Hasidic Jews for the title of most easily spotted Bible followers, but they are also interesting in this sense: They strictly adhere to rules in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. For instance:

* Their famous facial hair is the result of the Old Testament's ban on trimming the beard. (The Amish do, however, shave their moustaches, because the moustache was thought to have military associations.)

* They refuse to pose for or take photos, since it would violate the Old Testament's Second Commandment: "You shall not make . . . any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath." This is why, if you click on an Amish website, you'll often see photos of the backs of their heads. (And yes, the Amish have websites; go ahead and chuckle if you must. To be fair, the Amish don't run the sites themselves. It's a third party promoting their woodworks and quilts.)

* Amish women wear bonnets in keeping with the New Testament's 1 Corinthians 11:5, which states that women's heads must be covered while praying.

* The Amish perform a foot-washing ritual in accordance with the New Testament's John 13:14-15, which says, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example . . ."

The Amish version of biblical living is combined with what's called the *Ordnung*--the traditions that have built up since the Amish origins in sixteenth-century Switzerland. The *Ordnung* is what dictates the Amish dress code and their ban on electricity.

Julie and I rent a car and drive down to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Julie may not be a huge fan of my project, but she figures she can at least take advantage of a road trip or two. Our destination is called Smucker's Farm Guest House. It's one of the few bed-and-breakfasts actually owned and operated by an Amish family. Most inns just offer some sort of vague proximity to Amish people. This is the real thing.

The trip takes four hours. Incidentally, I'm proud to say that I had absolutely no urge to make a double entendre when we passed Intercourse, Pennsylvania, which I see as a moral victory.

We pull into the driveway, and the first thing I lay eyes on is a woman in full Amish regalia.

ankle-length blue dress and a white bonnet-- wielding a gas-powered leaf blower. This isn't an image expected to see. She doesn't have a video iPod, but still. It punctures my Amish stereotypes right up front.

The woman--Anna--brings us to meet her father, Amos, the head of the household. Amos Smucker is tall, thin, and slope shouldered. He's dressed exactly as you'd imagine: black suspenders, straw hat, pants pulled high above his waist. His snow-white hair is shaped in the traditional Amish style: a modified bowl cut that curves over the ears and then angles down, becoming just a bit longer in the back.

I introduce myself. He nods, gives me a quiet "Hello," and walks us to our room. Amos talks slowly and carefully, like he only has a few dozen sentences allotted for the weekend, and he doesn't want to waste them at the start. I read later in the Amish book *Rules of a Godly Life* that you should "let your words be thoughtful, few, and true." By adopting minimalism, Amos has mastered those speech laws I'm struggling with.

I tell Amos that I'd love to talk to him about the Amish. He obliges. I wonder how sick he is of answering the same annoying questions from curious outsiders. At least I pledged to myself not to bring up *Witness* or that Randy Quaid movie about the one-armed Amish bowler.

We sit in Amos's kitchen--sparse, of course, with a wooden table and a three-ring binder that says "Journal of By-gone Years: The Smuckers."

"When did your family come over?" I ask.

"My ancestor Christian Smucker came over from Switzerland in the eighteenth century."

And yes, Amos is a distant cousin of the strawberry-jam Smuckers, though that branch is no longer Amish.

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"There were seventeen of us," says Amos.

"Seventeen?"

He nods.

"And where were you in the order?"

"I was the baby," Amos says. "Once my mother got me, she said, 'I'm done. I got what I wanted.'"

Did he just make a joke? I think so. Amos allows himself just the slightest, faintest wisp of a smile.

I explain the premise of my book to Amos. He stares over my left shoulder in silence. No reaction. From my brief visit with the Amish, I got the feeling that they are not enamored of talking about theology, at least not with the English, at least not with me. Best stick to more practical topics.

"Are you working now?"

"I used to be a dairy farmer, but I don't do so much anymore. I'm not retired. I'm just tired."

I think Amos just made another joke. You haven't seen deadpan delivery till you've seen the Amish.

"What's your schedule?" I ask.

"I go to sleep at eight-thirty or so, and wake up at four-thirty. I can't sleep after five. I was a dairy farmer, and that's the way my computer is programmed."

An interesting metaphor for a man who doesn't use electricity, I think to myself.

Amos drums his fingers on the table. He has amazing hands. Knotty, but somehow elegant, with thumbs that curve around like candy canes and practically brush up against his wrist.

We sit silently.

Finally, Julie asks if maybe he could show us the property. He nods. Our first stop is the garage. Amos owns three black buggies, all of them lined up against the wall, their red fluorescent triangles facing outward. His daughter Anna is polishing the middle one.

The garage opens into the stables, where Amos keeps his horses. He has two of them--they're beautiful and chocolate brown, and they trot over to greet Amos.

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