

Shoes: Stepping Between Earth and Holiness

Do you like to wear shoes? Shoes are worn on our lowest extremities. They should therefore be furthest removed from our minds.

Moreover, we essentially tread and step all over our shoes.

Yet most people own more than one pair of shoes. For many some, it may even be more than a few pairs. Our feet require all kinds of protection for different situations.

And then there is the decorative factor. We wear shoes for different occasions and for different times, and we find ourselves marking those occasions through our clothing, including our shoes.

When arriving back home, though, many prefer not to walk around with those same shoes they may have been happy to display out in public. Shoes tend to make many feel restricted or confined.

Interestingly, according to Jewish law and tradition, it is preferable that a person walk around with some separation between the foot and the ground. Even someone who is required by Jewish law not to wear leather shoes - such as a mourner, heaven forbid - should still wear a pair of socks, slippers, or something similar. The importance of wearing shoes is best recorded in the Talmud (Shabbat 129a): "One should always sell even the beams of his house (if necessary) to buy shoes for his feet." It is degrading, explain the commentaries, for a person to walk barefoot in public.

It was not so, however, when one was present in the Holy Temple in ancient Jerusalem. Everyone present was required to remove their shoes. A place of such holiness obligated its visitors to display their reverence by removing shoes.

So, what is it? Is wearing shoes in a holy location degrading, yet not degrading everywhere else?

The solution lies in an interesting detail of Moses' dialogue with the Almighty during his famous encounter at the burning bush on Mount Sinai. Before anything was discussed, Moses was commanded, "Take your shoes off your feet, because the place upon which you stand is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5).

A similar biblical incident occurs in Joshua 5:15. An angel visits Joshua, and instructs him to remove his shoes since the ground is holy.

Clearly, when the ground is considered holy, wearing shoes is a sign of disrespect. In all other

circumstances, however, going barefoot is a sign of disrespect.

And the difference is in essence the ground, the earth upon which we tread. Shoes provide a separation between a human being and the earth. Spiritually, a separation is necessary as a reminder to constantly be detached from "earthliness."

Our head, the seat of our intellect and our nerve center, remains high above the ground. As humans, our heads do not face the ground either, unlike most animals.

The lower extremities, on the other hand, are naturally close to the earth. Our lower dimensions may be dangerously close to the earth and its earthliness message. Shoes, or similar forms of separation, are therefore placed upon the lowest part of ourselves, maintaining a constant source of awareness of the danger lurking below: earthliness.

When in a holy environment, however, there is no need to separate between mankind and earth. It is in fact required that a person go barefoot, so as not to create any barrier or separation from something holy.

The wearing of shoes also plays a role in the exodus from Egypt. The Jewish people were then required to be ready to leave, including having "shoes on your feet" (Exodus 12:11). Similarly, in the messianic prophecy it is stated that the Almighty "will cause people to cross over (the Euphrates River) in shoes" (Isaiah 11:15).

In both exoduses - from Egypt and from the current state of exile - the idea of separation is emphasized. The exodus from Egypt and the freedom provided to us were for the purpose of traveling to Sinai and receiving the Ten Commandments and the Torah (Exodus 3:12). The Almighty told Moses to remove his shoes, for this place, Mount Sinai, was a holy location. It was the focus, the purpose, of the exodus from Egypt. It was as though the Almighty was saying: Until all of you return here, keep those shoes on. Keep yourselves separated from worldliness and earthliness while your mind is on the goal: the Torah.

Similarly, as the world becomes that much closer to the time of the final redemption, heralded by the messianic revelation, the best way for us to prepare is by reminding ourselves about that separation from earthliness, focusing instead on the Torah and its mandate.

May we very soon experience the time when we can "kick off our shoes" in order to experience the ultimate holiness. May it be speedily in our days.

By Rabbi Yossi Lew
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Biography

Moshe was born in Cordoba, Spain, on the 14th of Nissan (the eve of Passover) of the year 4895 (1135). His father Maimon, a direct descendant of King David, was a judge in the city's rabbinical court. His mother passed away when he was yet a small child, some suggesting that his younger siblings were born after Maimon remarried. At the age of thirteen, his family was forced to flee Cordoba when a fanatic Islamic sect took control of the city; the Jews were attacked by rioters and many synagogues were destroyed.

Moshe and his family traveled from place to place looking where to relocate. Not finding anything suitable in Spain, he and his father and younger brother, David, moved to Fez, Morocco, for five years. In 4925 (1165), he visited the land of Israel and then moved to Alexandria, Egypt. Later, he settled in Fustat, today known as Old Cairo, where he lived until his passing.

In Egypt, Maimonides was supported by his brother David, a merchant who imported diamonds from India. His financial support gave Maimonides the ability to devote himself to the study of Torah and to author his scholarly work on the Mishnah, the 2nd century seminal work on Jewish law.

Tragedy befell him when his father, wife and two of his sons died within a span of two years, starting in 4926 (1166). Several years later, in 4931 (1171), his brother David drowned when his ship sunk en route to India. Without the support of his brother, he began practicing medicine and struggled to support himself and his brother's family.

In his mid-fifties, Maimonides was appointed as a personal physician by a royal courtier and then to Saladin, the sultan of Egypt and Syria. His new appointments and duties gave him financial stability and more - albeit still very limited - time to devote to his writing.

His son and faithful student, Abraham, was his only remaining immediate family member.

Maimonides passed away on the 20th of Tevet of the year 4965 (1204) and was buried in the city of Tiberias in the Holy Land.

Scholarship

At a young age, Maimon personally educated his son and brought him to the revered teacher, Rabbi Yosef ibn Migash, known as the Ree Migash, a rabbi in Alusina, Spain (today known

PARSHAT SHEMOT

15 - 21 Tevet 5786
4 - 10 January 2026

Torah: Exodus 1:1 - 6:1
Haftorah: Isaiah 27:6-28:13;
29:22-23

PSALMS DAILY

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalms 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

SEFER HAMITZVOT

Negative Mitzvah 300 Flogging a Defendant more than He can Bear

A judge may not sentence a person (found guilty of an offense that calls for flogging) to be flogged even one lash more than his body can physically bear.

A person who is sentenced to flogging is given 39 lashes. However, no person is flogged until [a doctor] estimates how many lashes the defendant can bear - taking in consideration his age, constitution, etc.

Sacred material please do not desecrate

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as Lucene). Maimonides would later consider him his primary mentor.

In his mid-20s, he began authoring numerous volumes on the Mishnah, which he completed around ten years later. His intent was to assist those who could not understand the Mishnah's Hebrew and often cryptic text, and for that reason, the commentary was written in Arabic but with Hebrew lettering.

He then wrote a volume in Arabic called *Sefer Hamitzvot*, listing all of the 613 commandments. These volumes were later translated into Hebrew numerous times, once still in his lifetime.

Additional Works

Maimonides also authored the *Guide for the Perplexed*, or *Moreh Nevuchim*, a foundational work on Jewish philosophy; the *Letter of Martyrdom*, a letter to Yemenite Jews encouraging them in their difficult plight; and other letters (gathered together in *Pe'er Hador* and today published as a single volume). Maimonides also wrote an Oath for Physicians, and various medical texts are attributed to him.

Code of Jewish Law

Maimonides' magnum opus is his codification of Jewish law, which he called *Mishneh Torah*, or "second to the Torah." The fourteen volume work is a logical systematic codification of Jewish law.

Prior to Maimonides, in order to know Jewish law, one would have to learn the entire Talmud. And since the Talmud is itself as at times indecisive, often incorporating conflicting opinions on Jewish law, it was necessary to then study the various commentaries, which clarified the final law. The famed Rabbi Yitzchak Alfasi, known as the Rif (the teacher of the aforementioned Ree Migash) was the first to codify applicable Jewish law - as a commentary to the Talmud.

The difficulty was, however, that the Talmudic rulings - as well as the aforementioned commentaries - were not organized in a strictly encyclopedic, logical fashion, making research extremely taxing. For example, in order to study the laws of Shabbat by exploring the Talmud, one needs to search through tens of tractates.

Maimonides was the first one to index the entire body of Oral Law - both Talmuds, the various halachic Midrashim, later works authored by the Geonim, and even kabbalistic

texts - and compile it all in a logical and systematic fashion. The laws of Shabbat, for example, are all gathered in the third volume of *Mishneh Torah* (which is titled *Zmanim*, "Times," containing all laws pertaining to Shabbat and holidays) in thirty chapters, each divided into bite-sized sub-sections.

Maimonides codified the laws of Shabbat, holidays, prayer, dietary laws, and the laws that regulate the Jew's daily life. He also wrote a section on eating healthy, fitness, and mental health - teaching future learners that all our actions should be permeated with holiness and G-dliness. "The health and wellbeing of the body," he writes, "is part of one's service of G-d." The *Mishneh Torah* also incorporates the basics of Jewish thought and belief.

Another unique component of the volumes is that they are not limited to laws that pertain to our day and age, which constitute only a small part of the 613 biblical commandments, but also include laws that will pertain to the Messianic era, such as the laws of tithing, the Jubilee Year, and the Temple service.

In this area, Maimonides was more than a trailblazer; to this very day the *Mishneh Torah* remains the only work of this scope. No other work - authored beforehand or afterwards - covers the entire corpus of Jewish law. (Even the commentaries on Jewish law authored before Maimonides omit the laws that were not germane at the time.)

Maimonides also placed great emphasis on making his works available and understandable to all Jews, scholars and laymen alike. He also omitted sources, for brevity's sake, though later scholars compiled sources for every statement in the *Mishneh Torah*. Because of his unique style and clarity, he became known as "The Golden Tongue."

Since Maimonides, many subsequent scholars have analyzed every word and even letter in his volumes. They discuss at length why Maimonides chose to include certain laws, wrote one law before another, and why he chose to include laws in one volume but not the other. Some have speculated that the body of commentary on Maimonides' volumes could reach the same quantity as Talmudic commentary.

Daily Study of Maimonides' Works

In the spring of 1984, the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of righteous

memory, called for an innovative addition to the daily study schedule of every Jewish man, woman and child. He suggested that everyone study daily a portion of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*.

The Rebbe suggested a three-track system: three chapters daily, one chapter daily, or to study every day from the *Sefer Hamitzvot*. This suggestion was enthusiastically accepted by tens of thousands, bringing Maimonides' works to unparalleled prominence. Today, Jews across the globe celebrate at the completion of the cycle every year.

SHEMOT IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Shemot," means "Names" and it is found in Exodus 1:1 - 6:1.

The children of Israel multiply in Egypt. Threatened by their growing numbers, Pharaoh enslaves them and orders the Hebrew midwives, Shifrah and Puah, to kill all male babies at birth. When they do not comply, he commands his people to cast the Hebrew babies into the Nile.

A child is born to Yocheved, the daughter of Levi, and her husband, Amram, and placed in a basket on the river, while the baby's sister, Miriam, stands watch from afar. Pharaoh's daughter discovers the boy, raises him as her son, and names him Moses.

As a young man, Moses leaves the palace and discovers the hardship of his brethren. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, and kills the Egyptian. The next day he sees two Jews fighting; when he admonishes them, they reveal his deed of the previous day, and Moses is forced to flee to Midian. There he rescues Jethro's daughters, marries one of them (Tziporah), and becomes a shepherd of his father-in-law's flocks.

G-d appears to Moses in a burning bush at the foot of Mount Sinai, and instructs him to go to Pharaoh and demand: "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me." Moses' brother, Aaron, is appointed to serve as his spokesman. In Egypt, Moses and Aaron assemble the elders of Israel to tell them that the time of their redemption has come. The people believe; but Pharaoh refuses to let them go, and even intensifies the suffering of Israel.

Moses returns to G-d to protest: "Why have You done evil to this people?" G-d promises that the redemption is close at hand.

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Tuesday, 17 Tevet 5786 - 6 January 2026

1st NY Synagogue (1728)

In 5444 (1684), a group of Spanish and Portuguese Jews who had fled the Inquisition (see "Today in Jewish History" for Tevet 22) held a Rosh Hashanah service in New Amsterdam (later renamed New York), thereby founding congregation Shearith Israel ("Remnant of Israel"). On the 17th of Tevet in 5488 (1728), the congregation purchased a lot in Lower Manhattan to erect the first synagogue in New York.

Wednesday, 18 Tevet 5786 - 7 January 2026

Huna Killed (469)

The Exilarch ("Reish Galuta") of Babylonian Jewry, Huna Mori bar Mar Zutra, was executed in Pumpadita by order of the Persian emperor on the

18th of Tevet of the year 4229 (469 of the common era). Also killed on that day was Rav Mesharshia bar Pekod (the third Jewish leader who was arrested with them, Rav Ameimar bar Mar Yenuka, was executed two months later).

Thursday, 19 Tevet 5786 - 8 January 2026

Passing of R. Aryeh Leib Heller, Author of Ketzot Hachoshen (1812)

Rabbi Aryeh Leib Heller was the rabbi of the city of Stryi, in what is now Western Ukraine. His works—*Ketzot Hachoshen*, *Avnei Milu'im*, and *Shav Shemateta*—are known for their clear, logical analysis of Talmudic texts and ideas, and are staples that are studied in yeshivas throughout the world. He passed away on 19 Tevet 5573 (1812).

Friday, 20 Tevet 5786 - 9 January 2026

Passing of Maimonides (1204)

Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, Talmudist, Halachist, physician, philosopher and communal leader, known in the Jewish world by the acronym "Rambam" and to the world at large as "Maimonides", passed away in Egypt on the 20th of Tevet in 1204 (4965).

Shabbat, 21 Tevet 5786 - 10 January 2026

Shimon Born (1567 BCE)

Shimon, the second son of Jacob and Leah and the progenitor of the Israelite tribe of Shimon, was born on 21 Tevet (according to another opinion, on 28 Tevet), of the year 2194 from creation (1567 BCE), nine years after Jacob's arrival in Charan.