

1. **Talmudic demonology.** Abba Benyamin says, “If the eyes were given permission to see, nobody could stand up because of the demons.” Abaya says, “There are more of them than there are us, they surround us like dirt surrounds a pit.” One rabbi says there are a thousand demons on our left side and ten thousand on our right, and another says anytime you’re somewhere that isn’t that crowded but you feel squished, it’s demons squishing you. They say if you want to see demons, you should put a certain type of ash around your bed and in the morning you’ll see footprints, like chicken feet. Or you can get the placenta of a female black cat that is the firstborn of another firstborn black cat, burn it and grind it up, and put it in your eyes, and you will be able to see the demons. Rav Bibi did this and saw the demons and they harmed him, but other rabbis asked for mercy and saved him. Is this all nonsense, or are demons real? Did the rabbis truly believe in them, or were they just going along with common folklore because they knew they couldn’t combat it? One theory is that the rabbis knew if they didn’t take demonology seriously the people would just ignore them, so they tried to take it seriously enough but curtail it where it’s really not kosher. However, there probably was a time the rabbis did indeed believe in demons. They also used demons to understand internal psychological processes. For example, a biological force that acted within a person against their will, such as a sexual urge that the person didn’t want to feel, could have been explained away as “demon possession.” Of course, it is also possible that demons were real in the past, though today they are probably not. According to Chassidic legend the Baal Shem Tov, a great spiritual healer, got rid of the demons. Either way, while the sections of the Talmud that mention demons might seem strange, they don’t need to be reinterpreted. You don’t have to believe in demons, but there’s nothing wrong with believing that people used to believe in them, and at that time they needed to be taken seriously.
2. **The Divine Presence and Its relationship to us in the synagogue and in studying.** Abba Benyamin taught: “Prayer is not heard except in a synagogue, in the place where we sing. Singing is an essential part of davening. How do we know that G-d is found in the study hall? From the verse, ‘G-d stands in the congregation of the Divine.’ Even outside of the synagogue, the Shechinah will rest with a group of ten, and even with a group of three sitting as judges. How do we know that when two people sit together and study Torah that the Shechinah rests with them? ‘Then they spoke one with another and G-d listened’ (Malachi 3:16). We also learn from that verse that if you were thinking about doing a good deed but then something prevented you from doing it, the Torah considers it as if you had done it.” What does that last part have to do with the rest of the discussion? When two people study, often one is teaching and the other is passively listening. But even just the intention of listening is enough for this to be considered learning. What is Shechinah? A story is told of a Roman who came to the rabbis and asked how many Shechinahs there are. They replied by asking how many suns there are. Of course there is only one sun, but its light comes through windows everywhere differently. The source of the Shechinah is the One G-d, but its manifestation varies infinitely. If the Shechinah will rest with even one person, why is learning in a group any different than learning alone? Because the quality of learning is better with a group. The individual members can clarify things for each other in order to come to some consensus of understanding. One learning alone won’t learn as well. The excitement and group energy is also important. We are all recorded in two books: one individual and one communal. When you study by yourself, it gets recorded in your individual book but not in your communal book.
3. **When we wear tefillin, specifically *shel rosh*, the nations fear us.** If the nations think they can scare us, we won’t be afraid. We’ll proudly wear our tefillin and we won’t back down an inch. Our response to anti-Semitism has to be to go on proudly. We’re not going anywhere. Rashi and

Tosfot debate what makes the head tefillin so special. Rashi says it's the big *shin* and *daled* on the box and on the strap, two out of three letters of G-d's name.

4. **What is written in G-d's tefillin?** In our tefillin, we have the verse Shema Yisrael and the second paragraph of the Shema, the section about sanctifying the firstborn, and a passage about when we enter the Land. All sections have in common the idea of remembering our connection to G-d through the mitzvot. The tefillin are memory aids. The most important part of the tefillin is our declaration of G-d's unity and uniqueness. So what does G-d have in His tefillin? "*Mi ke'amcha yisrael, goy echad ba'aretz,*" and other verses about the unique status of B'nei Yisrael. Another example of how we know that Hashem has chosen to be in a special relationship with us is how the rabbis ended the blessing we say right before the Shema. "*Habocher be'amo Yisrael be'ahava*" – we bless G-d as the one Who chose us as His people with love. When we realize that G-d designated us to receive the Torah, His will and His gift, as a sign of His love for us, and that He redeemed us from Egypt to give us this gift, we come naturally to feel love for Him, and then we can say "*Shema Yisrael*" and "*ve'ahavta et Hashem Elokecha.*" And just like we put on tefillin to recognize this relationship we have with G-d, so does G-d put on His own tefillin to recognize our uniqueness.
5. **Does G-d get angry in shul?** Of course all descriptions of G-d's anger are metaphorical. But when G-d comes to shul and there's no minyan, He waits for a minyan and gets angry at all the people who did not show up. Rashi says He is the angriest when there are nine men. One way to understand this is that a minyan brings the Divine presence, similar to the holiness of the Beit Hamikdash. So delaying a minyan brings back to the forefront the lack of holiness that we must always endure until the coming of Mashiach.
6. **Shul etiquette.** It's ok to run to shul but not to run away from shul. Running away makes it seem like you didn't want to be there. Can you run from shul to a Kollel to study? There's a machloket. Where should you sit? You should have a *makom kavua*, a regular spot. But others say you don't need to have a *makom kavua*, you just need to have a place designated in your heart.
7. **Why is it important to be careful around Mincha?** Eliyahu Hanavi was only answered at Mincha. He was praying for two things: that fire should come down to his offering, and that the prophets of Baal would believe and stop arguing. Why is it significant that he prayed for two things and was answered at Mincha time? Usually you pray for only one thing at a time, so it was sort of a double miracle that Eliyahu's double prayer was answered. As to the time, Shacharit and Maariv both fit into the daily cycle, while Mincha does not. It's easy enough to pray when you wake up and before you go to sleep. But afternoon is different. In the middle of the day you're often preoccupied with other things. That's the hardest time to stop and pray. Eliyahu was telling us to be careful specifically then to pray. Despite all the distractions, you have to remember to make a space in your heart for G-d.
8. **Who is a wedding really for?** When you go to a wedding, and everything is amazing and there's a great wait staff working to make you happy, you might get confused and think it's all for you. But you have to remember that the wedding is for the bride and groom; you're there to make them happy. When you do things to make them happy, it's reminiscent of the Torah being given with great fanfare.
9. **How can you be taken seriously?** If you fear G-d, people will take you seriously. The Ramchal explains: when you're just taking care of yourself, nobody takes you seriously. But when you show that you can exercise restraint and stand for principles and not just for yourself, that's when other people will see that you're serious.
10. **G-d created the world and gave the Torah for our sake.** Maybe it's like a wedding, and we're the guests. He's making us all feel comfortable and giving us wonderful things, but we have to

remember that the wedding isn't just for our own enjoyment. The point is to celebrate our relationship with G-d.