i.

A vow is a promise to G-d, and, if spoken, becomes binding. Judaism forbids wasting time. Therefore, one must always be thinking.

Judaism encourages the act of questioning. For example:

If G-d is omniscient, what is the difference between a thought and an action?

If a vow is inevitable, why does G-d not simply possess our bodies and make us carry out his will?

If G-d is omnipotent and omnipresent, is there no divide between G-d and our thoughts?

If G-d is thinking us, are our actions his thoughts? Can we ever belong to ourselves?

Judaism forbids wasting time. Therefore, one must always be thinking or allowing oneself to be thought.

ii.

Intrusive thoughts are thoughts that become trapped in a mind, circling like flies. They bite, repeat, contradict what a person wants to be or believe.

(Scrupulosity: an obsessive moral guilt, from the Latin word
Intrusive thoughts are violent, sexual, sacrilegious, an annulment of oneself.
Priests shake with thoughts of worshipping the devil.
Pacifists dream their hands marked with blood.

These thoughts are not a problem unless one becomes distressed by them. Thinking about thinking the thoughts causes them to multiply.

iii.

Before the world, G-d was called EinS of: the absence of an ending.
Or he would have been called that had there been anyone to call him anything.

Before the world, the universe was a bowl of infinite light. Being made by an omnipotent Being, the light was limitless. Its particles vibrated with infinite speed. Its brightness would have burned away the senses had anyone existed to perceive it.

With no end, the light left no space for the world to exist.

So G-d created the void, using his omnipotence to dim his omnipotence.

This was called tsmi'tsum, reduction. Or more accurately: tsmi'tsumim, these reductions being plural.

Through tsmi'tsumim, G-d quieted his divine energy until it was almost imperceptible. The infinite world cooled into something our human minds could touch.

One tsmi'tsum more and nothing at all could exist.
iv.

Those with obsessive-compulsive disorder cannot distinguish between thought and action: an image-flash of harm violates the mind, identical to memory of murder.

How does one stopper a thought? And how to silence a fear of one's own possibilities? The misaimed knife, the unsnuffed candle;
certainty a room already burning.

The disorder appears to correlate with abnormalities in the medulla oblongata, the brain region which signals the call for shame, danger, fear, guilt, dread, and panic. If the medulla oblongata ceases to regulate itself, when an action is taken to alleviate distress, stress hormones will continue to flow.

Unable to find relief, a person becomes trapped repeating actions that promise safety or closure. They pray obsessively. They sanitize their hands until they crack. They avoid crossing streets. They avoid speaking. They go to their homes and lock themselves in again. Again. Again.

They withdraw from the world until they are almost imperceptible.

The disorder is not in action but in thought. Or not in the thought, but in thinking about the thought, allowing the thought, or avoidance of the thought, to control one's actions, unable to tolerate life with uncertainty.

Likewise, agoraphobia is not the fear of open spaces, but the fear of losing control in front of people in these spaces. Of spilling out of routine, and being seen for what one is.

v.
The right-wing Rabbi Wein says shame is essential to Jewish identity. “The only question that truly arises is what one should be ashamed about.”

He cites the need for humility, Jewish prayers for forgiveness, David’s desperate repentance before G-d. The Jewish philosopher Howard Adelman argues that guilt and shame are opposites. That guilt calls for change, and shame for avoidance.

While guilt is attached to an action, shame affixes to the essence of a person: being rather than doing wrong.

In the garden of Eden, Adam named the animals, his ambitions G-d like: through speech he shaped the world through what could be thought. Yet he could not name what went on inside him, nor look upon his wife, Chavah, as a complete being, another consciousness. Unaware of himself as discrete entity, he could not voice his loneliness.

When he bit into the fruit, he recognized the ache that had always existed: his position as fallible, embodied, separate, his inner world his alone. Chavah’s world hers.

None of this is sin, says Adelman. Chavah and Adam were not punished for their acts but for hiding them.

In Adelman’s view, sin is like shame: a negation of oneself.

vi.

In the Book of Judges, Yiptah vows to sacrifice his daughter. In English, Yiptah is called Jephthah, though Hebrew has no sound for “J” and no sound for “th.”
Yiptah was a military leader from the tribe of Menasseh, a tribe whose descendants have since vanished into the diaspora.

Somewhere there are people related to him, though they do not know it.

Yiptah vowed to lead the Children of Israel in battle against the Children of Ammon. He vowed that, if he returned victorious, he would sacrifice the first living thing to emerge from his house.

He led the Children of Israel in battle against the Children of Ammon. He returned victorious.

As he approached his home, his daughter ran out to greet him.

Yiptah tore his clothes and cried.

vii.

Judaism teaches that it is impossible for the devil to be G-d’s enemy. After all, G-d is omnipotent. Therefore, the devil must be working for G-d.

viii.

Statistics about obsessive-compulsive disorder are filled with voids and contradictions.

There is no brain scan capable of diagnosing mental illness. Therefore, diagnosis can only be based on self-reported thoughts and behaviors.

No person can fully enter the mind of another, so diagnosis is an act of faith. Doctors must trust that patients mean what they say and are able to communicate it.

It does not account for how shame silences shame.

ix.

In battle, we are told G-d went before Yiptah, an invisible fire, obliterating
all who rose before him.

If G-d did not approve of Yiptah’s sacrifice, why did he lead him to victory? Why did he not immobilize his daughter in the doorway? Why did he not speak out, or speak out in a way we could understand?

According to the Book of Judges, Yiptah’s daughter does not protest. She asks for two months to spend with her friends and in nature. She is a good daughter. She does not argue with her father or with the G-d who does not speak in this story.

The Book of Judges never gives her name.

x.

Some doctors hypothesize that obsessive-compulsive disorder is no single condition, but a spectrum of illnesses involving fixation: on body image, morality, rules, goodness, safety, hygiene, achievement, exercise, organization—in short, any psychic distress that results from a thought that will not leave.

Where does the line lie between idea and obsession faith and scrupulosity fixation and delusion our minds and ourselves?

At what point does a thought become an illness?

Diagnosis is made by the extent of distress as reported by the patient. Not the thought itself but its persistence.

Within the knots of a mind which threads can be pried away as disorder and which knot the core we call soul or self or consciousness?

Without the thoughts we build our lives around what are we left with? xi.

The binding of Isaac is central to Jewish identity.
The refusal to sacrifice a human life for divine honor. The message that giving up human life is not something that is asked of us.

A defining characteristic of Judaism is to value human life above unyielding moral code.

Human life is more holy than laws. This is why blood transfusions and surgeries are permitted, although it is forbidden to wound one’s body.

In the story of Yiptah, G-d’s voice does not roar. He does not turn the air stony or freeze Yiptah’s raised hand.

G-d does not appear at all except in Yiptah’s words, his daughter’s loyalty. In the story of Yiptah, G-d is both an absence and a thought that will not leave.

xii.

We do not know how Yiptah’s daughter spent her last free days, why she asked for exactly two months, or who she spent them with.

We are told she was remembered in annual ceremonies but do not know the rituals or why they stopped.

We are told only she was a willing martyr. Centuries later, Christian scholars applaud her as a role model for nuns, praise her unflinching fidelity how she willingly extracted herself from the world though it is Yiptah they bestow with sainthood.

xiii.

In experiences of obsessive-compulsive disorder, one fears that their fears are actually their fantasies. That one thinks of committing harm because of desire rather than anxiety.

One fear is that a person will act out the worst-case scenario to finally bring an end to the fear
of the worst-case scenario.
For example: hurting oneself
to alleviate fear of hurting oneself.

The mind runs over and over
its own sharp stones.
Punishing oneself
is morally consistent
with a fear of oneself:
the danger contained
by force if necessary.

To avoid contaminating others,
people who fear themselves may cease
to leave their homes.
They may cease speaking, touching
or allowing themselves to be touched.
They quarantine themselves
inside their thoughts.

They stop crossing the street.
They stop holding their children.

It is a gradual narrowing of the world.

xiv.

In the beginning, G-d created the void
to make space for the world.
In the beginning, G-d gave us his absence.

To those who believe in tsimtsum,
an absence of apparent miracles
is itself evidence

of G-d’s greatest gift.

xv.

The Book of Judges tells the story of Yiptah’s unnamed daughter
in a strangely neutral tone:

And it came to pass at the end of two months
that she returned to her father, who did with her according
to his vow which he had vowed

The words so clear
they bleach out detail:

a face turned directly
into limitless light,
features obliterated.

xvi.

“Israel” means “those who wrestle with G-d.”
Did anyone fight for the life of Yiptah’s daughter?
The author remains taciturn.

Some scholars say G-d refused to stop Yiptah,
so that Yiptah could be made an example
against rash vows.

Some say this story is intended to depict
the moral decline of the Israelites.
To show they had lost their identity.

Some say he did not sacrifice his daughter.
That the particle “ו” (veh) does not mean “and,” as in modern
Hebrew,
but “or.” That Yiptah had declared that whatever came to greet
him
would be either burnt as an offering or dedicated to G-d.

Today, Jewish scholars mostly agree
that Yiptah’s daughter was permitted to live,
though forbidden to marry,
and that she was kept
in solitary and perpetual confinement.
This is agreed to be adequate loss of a life.

Rashi believes Yiptah was punished,
afflicted with an illness which caused his limbs to rot
and fall to the earth. No one knows
where the pieces of him are buried
or when we walk over him.

xvii.

It is impossible to know the fatality rate of obsessive-compulsive
disorder.
Not only do many cases go un- or mis-diagnosed,
it is usually comorbid with other mental health conditions.
One cannot ask the reasoning of a person who has ceased to exist.

According to some mental health advocates,
it is unethical to refer to a person as having “committed” suicide,
as this language implies both crime and choice. Instead, one is supposed to say, “died by.”

xviii.

KolNidre is an Aramaic legal document spoken once a year as a prayer.

KolNidre means “all vows.” It opens Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which begins at night as Jewish days do.

KolNidre states: we renounce all vows we make between this and the next Yom Kippur. Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void.

Rabbis have gone on to clarify that this invalidation of vows only applies if one makes the vow without thinking of KolNidre. If one makes a vow insincerely, the vow is considered genuine.

In the 12th century, Rabbi Meir ben Samuel added the words, “We do repent of them all.” Both the vow and repentance must be intentional.

KolNidre has been protested by both Jews and gentiles. It has been held as evidence that Jews are untrustworthy. It has been viewed as a catalyst for reckless vows and impending corruption.

It continues to be sung.

KolNidre is sung three times, first almost a whisper. Then louder. Then louder.

Some sing it more than three times.

The congregation sings it over and over, again and again, to include anyone who arrives late.

xix.

According to Rabbi Moshe Leiv of Sassov disbelief can itself shape virtue; if we cannot turn to G-d for aid we become responsible for each other.

xx.
In religious communities, obsessive-compulsive disorder may present as perfectionism in prayer. Worshippers labour over hymns for hours, out of fear they have added, subtracted, or misspoken a word, fear they have slipped into indecent thoughts, fear they have lapsed into silence, fear they have ceased to concentrate, fear at that moment they do not believe in G-d.

Even in a group setting, prayer is private, less spoken than thought. Locked in a person, this compulsion is extremely difficult to treat.

Asked about this problem, the ultra-orthodox Rabbi Kanievski says one should simply read the prayer continuing on through possible errors. That this act is sufficient. Imperfection a form of faith.

xxi.

Yiptah’s daughter may have been named Seila or she may have been named Adah.

She may have been named something else entirely.

We do not know where she is buried, either.

xxii.

Judaism promises neither heaven nor hell. Biblical Jews spoke sometimes of Sheol, a holding realm for the dead, in which souls lose identity deep in the ground, regardless of how they lived on earth. Through witchcraft, the dead can converse with the living but this practice is forbidden.

Modern Jews reject these views. Some believe at the end of days eternal life will fill our bodies:
muscle and flesh will awaken our bones,  
and our veins will twine like vines  
to bind us back to our lifeblood.

The earth will open,  
and our loved ones pour forth  
back into our arms.

The ancient temple priests denied this.

The Kabbala speaks of reincarnation,  
Maimonides of souls as particles of G-d.  
After thousands of years, scholars continue  
to argue over heaven, hell, and nonexistence,

but Jews rarely prioritize these discussions.  
Ethical debates center on action over belief,  
this life over the next. The questions of how

we can live in this world  
as though it is enough.
Works Cited


