

What are “responsa”, you ask? Jewish legal literature since the year 1000 C.E. is in six basic forms: (1) Talmudic commentaries (think of Rashi or Tosafot, commenting on the Talmud); (2) Codes (think Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah* or Rabbi Karo’s *Shulchan Aruch*); (3) Cases (think *Piskei Din Rabbani*, the proceedings of the Rabbinical Courts in Israel); (4) Biblical Commentaries (think Rashi’s commentary on the Torah); (5) Books of Commandments (think Maimonides “Book of Commandments) and (6) Responsa, in Hebrew *She’elot U’teshuvot*, (think of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein or Rabbi Ovadia Yosef). Each of these genres of literature serve a slightly different purpose: Commentaries excel at providing a theoretical grounding of the legal rules in the Talmud and Codes excel at turning rules into black-letter law. Cases serve as a vehicle for resolving disputes (frequently about money) between parties. Commentaries on the Bible and Books of Commandments allow widespread review each week of various laws as they appear in the weekly portion.

Responsa are the vehicle of choice for addressing important and timely problems of Jewish law in the actual world we really live, which is sometime messy and complicated, with real people and practical needs. Responsa are – at many levels – the least theoretical and most practical of the six forms of Jewish law literature. Responsa live in the “here and now”, with the actual facts of life being lived in this time and this place forming a backdrop for every question. Responsa are also varied: They address both the profound and important – like extubating one patient to intubate another when ventilators are in short supply – and the trivial – like does one sing *Anim Zemirot* when worshipping alone. People ask questions and answers are written.